"Understanding Visual Culture"
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ABSTRACTS

Thursday, April 21, 2016

Method, Madness, Montage: Aby Warburg to A Beautiful Mind
W. J. T. Mitchell (University of Chicago)

Images not only exist within environments such as museums, books, monitors, and commercial displays. They also become environments in their own right, forming a spectacular surround of pictures, texts, and screens that constitutes a world of image operations, a kind of "iconoscape" in which many images may be viewed simultaneously. As "working environments" they range from Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas* to Andre Malraux's *Musee Imaginaire* to military situation rooms and forensic wall displays in police and spy dramas. Verging on a kind of iconomania, the "wall of images" is a form of method-driven montage that flirts with madness. Examples from art history, cinema, and forensic science will be discussed.

The Visible. Element of the Social
Andrea Mubi Brighenti (University of Trento)

In this talk, what I invite to inquire into is not so much *visibility* – understood as a relational and positional quality attributable to certain objects that are present in a social environment – as much as *the visible* – understood as the element in which social life itself unfolds. Here, 'element' should be understood in the same way in which air, water, earth, fire and æther were enumerated as elements by Aristotle. The visible, however, cannot be reduced to a physical notion since it is inextricably interlocked with the coming about of a type of life which we characterise as 'social'. Thus, my leading question is: what is – not the structure but – the *fibre* of the visible? Such 'fibre of the visible' includes (at least) structures, events, and individual objects. Whereas structures tend to represent a type of *hypokeimenon*, individuals bring them to light by embodying a series of events. There is a peculiarity in this movement towards the light, as social life is neither properly transparent nor opaque. Instead, it seems to be played out in a hyaline element, a *medium*, or *field*. Visibility, I argue, can be described as a relationship (a nexus or 'prehension' of structures, events and objects) that only make sense inside an element which contains both objects and their environments. This means that the difference between objects and environments is not ontological, rather, it is the difference between ways of *inscription* into the visible. Such 'ways of inscription' reinterpret the old notion of 'structures'. What is interesting, is that we may conceive a whole geography of the visible defined by moving fibred margins which appear to always be in a thriving state (a crowd state).

On the Logic of the Sensible. *Bildkritik* and Visual Semiotics.
Angela Mengoni (University of Venice – Iuav)

The relationship between the so-called *Bildkritik* – the branch of image theory developed in the German-speaking area by Gottfried Boehm - and visual semiotics was limited to a few remarks that paradoxically did not acknowledge the crucial questions on "How images generate sense? [Wie erzeugen Bilder Sinn?]" and "How do images work?" as common. Rather than focusing on the explicit 'representation' of semiotics in that tradition, the paper proposes to examine the heuristic approach to the image that characterizes both the analytical dimension of the *Bildkritik* and the semiotics of the image developed by the French generative semiotics. Taking into account the immanent approach of both traditions and some key-operators (such as 'iconic difference' and '*sémiotique plastique*'), the acknowledgement and articulation of an active sense-generating capability of the 'visual' will emerge as a common feature.

Reframing the Presence of Images
Luca Acquarelli (University of Lille 3, Gériico lab)

My contribution to this *boîte à outils* for visual culture tries to deal with the terms of "presence" and "frame" (and the derived verb "to reframe"). These two terms are at the heart of Louis Marin's image theory.
In his book *Portrait of the King* (1988), the French philosopher and semiotician takes the Eucharistic paradigm as a model for the political field, and he introduces the question of the presence in the images by analysing a number of Louis XIV representations. Marin studies various "representational signs" like pictures, tapestries, works by court historians, coins and medals, building façades etc. that are the very place of embodiment of the king's presence. He states: "to represent means to present oneself representing something". The frame and the "pathetic figures of framing" are one of the crucial elements of this representational presence.
Starting from this theoretical reference, my intervention tries to develop this topic by drawing on some contemporary French scholars who are using different approaches to the same problem. I will discuss it in relation to the issue of "image reframing", a cross-disciplinary theme that, especially over the last twenty years, has interested sociologists (remediation), semioticians (re-enunciation), art historians and philosophers.
I will refer to some case studies of image of political power, and then I will present a short analysis of a sequence of a movie by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, two Italian filmmakers who mostly work on found footages' *remontages*.

What Do Icons Want?
Marco Solaroli (University of Bologna)

Notwithstanding a few well-known empirical and theoretical investigations, the concept of "icon" has so far looked promising as much as elusive, even to the point of evanescence into common sense. We live surrounded by icons, but "iconic power" seems still ineffable. What is an icon? Why do icons matter? And most importantly, what do icons want?
This paper offers a comprehensive and critical assessment of the state of the art on the power of icons in visual culture, highlighting the underlying tensions and the fundamental issues at stake, focusing on the most recent theoretical debates (e.g. the

"iconic turn" in cultural sociology), and suggesting grey areas in need of further research and refinement. It aims to show that the category of "iconicity" can provide fertile ground for exploring connections and constructing dialogues among different strands in the social sciences and humanities that have so far developed almost independently of each other.

In particular, the paper includes two major parts. In the first one ("Conceptualizing iconic power"), it offers a review of the interdisciplinary literature on icons and iconicity; in the second one ("Explaining iconic power"), drawing on empirical insights from global research on iconicity and visual-material culture, it outlines analytical strategies aimed at overcoming the flaws of different research strands while still benefiting from the strengths they all have, and it suggests future research paths to face the new digital scenario.

In so doing, the paper aims to develop a multi-dimensional analytical-conceptual framework, which might throw into further relief the dynamics of iconic power in the increasingly global and digital age, and the relevance of iconicity as a category for visual culture studies and, more widely, for social and cultural theory.

Friday, April 22, 2016

Photography: The Abundant Art
Robert Hariman (Northwestern University)

Photography has long been criticized for excessive reproduction that creates an image world capable of displacing more authentic relationships, and anxieties about the deluge of images have been magnified further by the comprehensive use of digital technologies. Although such concerns are not wholly misplaced, the concept of excess distorts understanding of photography and public spectatorship. By reframing photography as an abundant art, one can move beyond traditional debates in photography theory to consider how photography offers distinctive resources for thinking about modernity, sustainability, and the common good. In place of an antidemocratic social contract by backed by assumptions of scarcity, photography offers a mode of enchanted seeing that offers a profound relationship with the world, and a model for democratic association on behalf of the abundant life for all.

The Iconic Image on Social Media: The Death of Aylan Kurdi
Farida Vis (University of Sheffield, Visual Social Media lab)

Mainstream, online news and social media alike have been replete with images of refugees since last summer. Images of people continuously on the move; marching through the countryside (on their way to different European countries), of desperate people at sea on small and dangerous dinghies, of small children both dead and alive, of people crawling through razor wire and trying to board packed trains are all widespread. Images and coverage of moments of intense solidarity with refugees, on the one hand, and of implied links to terrorism on the other, above all in the aftermath of the Paris and Brussels attacks in November 2015 and March 2016, have also been common. One iconic image of a dead Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, lying face down on a Bodrum beach in Turkey captured the world's attention in September 2015. This presentation takes as its starting point a report published by the Visual Social

Media Lab in December 2015 entitled *The Iconic Image on Social Media: a Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi* (Vis and Goriunova, Eds, 2015). The report sought to better understand the widespread response to a set of iconic images that were used in different ways, but all reached substantive visibility via social media and beyond. The presentation will look at how Twitter in particular played a crucial role in how this image was shared across 20 million screens in the space of just 12 hours. It will also consider the need to develop interdisciplinary methods that allow researchers to deal with three significant challenges when researching social media images (Faulkner, Vis and D'Orazio, forthcoming): the challenge of volume, of specificity as well as the challenge of the image itself. The iconic images of Alan Kurdi are a productive starting point to address such wider research challenges also.

- Vis, F., and Goriunova, O. (Eds.) (2015), 'The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*'. A Visual Social Media Lab Rapid Response Report. Available from http://visualsocialmedialab.org/projects/the-iconic-image-on-social-media
- Faulkner, S., Vis., F., and D'Orazio, F. (forthcoming). 'Analysing Social Media Images: The case of the death of Aylan Kurdi, *Sage Handbook of Social Media,* edited by Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick and Thomas Poell.

The Meanings of Crowd: Terror, Security, Politics
Daniele Salerno (University of Bologna)

As the iconic frontispiece of *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes seems to suggest, Politics is the government of crowds. The definition of what a (moving or not) gathering of people in a public place represents is actually pivotal in the life of a political community (who are they?; How many are they?; What are they claiming for? Who do they stand for? are the questions often heard and discussed in those occasions). This happens for an "ordinary" protest in a city square as well as for riots, disorders and political revolutions.

The paper will analyze the semiotic construction of crowds in visual texts taking as example the most recent "problematization of crowds" in public debates. The aim of the analysis is to describe the process of politicization and depoliticization of crowds in such representations.

On the one hand, the paper will analyze risky and at-risk crowds in what has been defined by some commentators as a "European security crisis". In 2015 and 2016 the crowds of refugees travelling across the Balkans have been visually represented as risky crowds that can threat the continent (e.g. by hiding terrorists) and have to be regulated and even kept outside Europe; after the terrorist attacks in Paris and the declaration of the state of emergency, gatherings are forbidden in France, in continuity with a certain conceptualization of crowds as at-risk of terrorist attacks.

On the other hand, the paper will analyze the crowds as political subjects. In the representation of the Iranian Green movement (2009), the Arab Spring (2011) and the Occupy and Indignados movements in Europe, the US and Israel (2011-2012), crowds seemed to re-emerge in order to claim back sovereignty as "People" and revolutionary subjects.

The paper will analyze different and alternative strategies of representation of crowds as well as practices of resistance that are put in place in order to allow the visualization of crowds when people are forbidden to gather.

Seeing the City in Digital Times: Going with the Flow
Gillian Rose (Open University)

Digital technologies of various kinds are now the means through which many cities are made visible and their spatialities negotiated. From casual snaps shared on Instagram to elaborate photo-realistic visualisations, digital technologies for making, distributing and viewing cities are more and more pervasive. This lecture will suggest that cities and their inhabitants are increasingly visualised through a mobile fluid 'digital visuality', which is evident across many visual practices. This digital visuality has a number of manifestations and implications, and the lecture will argue that these are best understood by materialising images in order to map their flow and embed them in those practices. The lecture will elaborate this claim by examining the uses made of digital visualisations in the processes of designing urban redevelopment projects and imagining smart cities. It will conclude by suggesting that critical accounts of digital visuality should focus less on readings of images and more on considering the (geographically-specific) flows and frictions of images.

The Cultural Icon: Material Culture and Cityscape
Dominik Bartmanski (TU Berlin)

Cultural icons are ubiquitous but their prevalence is not necessarily fully understood as a systematic phenomenon that goes well beyond standard media effects. They are intricate significatory assemblages whose efficiency as socially shared meanings cannot be decoupled from the affordances and entanglements of their material existence. Tactile things and evocative images are wrapped in and made fully efficacious by social narratives and discourses. But the reverse is also the case: our discourses derive great part of their efficacy from the experiential significance of tangible stuff. There's elaborate phenomenology to every semiotics. Local conditions matter and interfere with or inflect broader meaning structures, not just reflect them. Iconic material culture and its embeddedness in contemporary cityscapes provide a series of empirical clues that inform and advance sociological understanding of how icons work. Drawing on my own research regarding architectural icons as well as other iconic objects nested within urban environments, I present a range of observations conducive to developing cultural sociology of material symbols.

How to (Un)build an Urban Memoryscape: The visuality of Material Memory
Francesco Mazzucchelli (University of Bologna)

The "obsession for commemoration" (Nora, Ricœur) that pervades our epoch is well epitomized by the growing importance acquired by "memory sites". On the one hand, the sacralization of monuments, memorials and "places of memory" testifies to the process of "heritagization" which characterizes today collective memories (often in struggle and competition among them for the "colonization" of memory sites which sometimes can be real semiotic battlefield). On the other hand, the contemporary "cult" of memory has converted landscapes into memoryscapes, spaces punctuated by traces of the past: as pointed out by many scholars, remains, evidences, material remnants of the past have acquired a pivotal role in the process of production of cultural memory and representations of the past (see, among others, the research of Rudy Koshar). Both these aspects show how collective memory is more and more

founded on materiality, which fulfills today a partly new narrative function in memory narratives and discourses - one could talk of an "epistemic turn" in contemporary cultures of commemoration: from the era of the witness (Wieworka) to an era of "material traces as witnesses" (see for instance the notion of "evidence of things" by Ian Hacking and its use by Eyal Weizman in his studies on forensic aesthetics).

My talk will sketch a possible semiotic approach to the materiality of memory which moves from the concept of externalization (Leroi Gourham), rethought in a semiotic perspective. If on the one hand collective memory imagery is increasingly shaped by materiality and visuality, on the other hand material and visual components of memory narratives should not be seen simply from the perspective of a representational logic (as pointed out by Gillian Rose and Tolia-Kelly) but still they can be intended, in their semiotic dimension, as "formed" materiality and visuality, which may express narratives and connect with other semiotic process, manifesting the interconnections among different "discursive domains".

For instance, it could be interesting to look at how a material trace (belonging to the discursive domain of archaeology or history) enters the "discourse of memory" and it is then converted in a sign (text?) of memory. I will tackle this issue in the first part of my talk: drawing on Patrizia Violi's notion of indexicality of "trauma sites", I will comment some examples of restoration and "architectonic treatment" of war ruins and traces of destruction, to argue that the process of memorialization (specifically of heritagization of material remnants) can sometimes be framed as a process of iconization of the trace/index, that is, an amplification of the iconic features (also in a Peircean sense) of the trace/index to be monumentalized. In a way, oversimplifying the question, it could be said that heritagization converts materiality in visuality.

The second part of my talk will deal with the question of the role played by material traces in urban practices. Starting from a research which I conducted years ago about the transformation of some cities in Western Balkans after Nineties Yugoslav wars (which looked both at architectonic reconstruction as practice of rewriting of the palimpsest of the city and at the changes in some urban practices and in the perception of the city by its citizens), I will briefly compare some aspects in the post-war reconstructions of Sarajevo, Mostar and Belgrade, with the aim of pinpointing some examples of how memory narratives conveyed by material traces of the pasts (and their transformations) can connect to other kind of processes (e.g. the different strategies of "competing" reconstructions in Mostar do not only "represent" but above all provide a semiotic "anchoring system" to the internal division of this post-conflict city).