

## **Images as Agents in Digital Public Spheres**

Workshop by Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt &

International Sociological Association's Research Committee/ RC 57 Visual Sociology

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Workshop Report

### **Opening remarks**

The workshop started with the welcoming of the Dean of the Faculty, Alexander Onysko, followed by the introductory remarks of Anna Schober-de Graaf. This introduction session stressed the following points: Political agency of images in digital public spheres and the necessity of studying them from multiple angles. The ambivalent structures and cleavages in the public sphere serve the emergence of friendly communities but also the interests of hate groups. Digital images in public sphere have the potential both to become part of a friendly discourse and hate speech. In terms of contemporary image-making practices, network communities understand and position themselves as countercultural, while being connected to contemporary art world. The workshop aimed to address and bring together wide range of disciplines engaged in image-making and visual culture.

### **Keynote speech: Photography, Form, and What Matters**

*Robert Hariman (Northwestern University Evanston)* attributes images a decisive role about our attitude in relation to public sphere. Our attitude shapes towards images shapes our work. Approaching the community aesthetically three attitudes come salient in visual culture studies: Critique, admiration, and enigma. Admiration leads to general critique, as Deleuze suggested. While, admiring to the beauty and form, the long-prevailing notions and contested terms in discussions on aesthetics, critics of photography increasingly detached themselves from admiration, which also echoes a division between nature and culture. Enigma, on the other hand, which refers to a large part of human consciousness, has been also left behind. Photograph is not a copy but an analogy that resonates through allegories. Even the most enigmatic photographs are related to human nature, which we became alienated to. The abundance of photography in contemporary digital times contributed to this process. The original photograph or the "good" artistic one is not in demand but the quantity of photographs. Searching for the beauty in a queer kid, in a prison, in a process of trauma and the like are transformative experiences that locates and changes relationships in communities.

## **Session 1: Visual activism / Political image making**

*Xénia Farkas* (Corvinus University of Budapest) paper had the title “Visuals of Politics: Visual Political Communication on Social Media Platforms at the Hungarian Elections 2010”. The paper drew attention to the growing importance of digital media images in political communication, and in Hungarian political context in particular while asking: 1) How do Hungarian politicians and parties represent themselves visually in social media in the period of campaigns? 2) What kind of visual political communication strategies can be identified on Facebook and Instagram among Hungarian political actors? 3) What are the differences and the similarities between the usage of Facebook and Instagram? Following a mixed methodology combining social semiotics, qualitative content analysis, and multivariate regression models, 4141 social media posts including images and captions from 2010, 2014, and 2018 election campaigns were analysed. Sharing of results was followed by a discussion on the impact of images on the society and the creation of other images, populism as a political style and the imagery develops around it, and the relation with popular culture.

*Sugandha Seghal* (Jawaharlal Nehru University) paper was titled “Rise of Feminist Digital Counter-publics: A study of social media visual content in contemporary India”. It conceptualised female body as a site of corporal protest and suggested a shift from streets to digital environment. The images became the banal domain of feminist activism. The guiding questions of the study were: 1) What is the role played by the activist image in these feminist counter-publics online? 2) What role does the digital visual play in the formation of ‘counter-public discourse?’ 3) How do we historically explain the emergence of these visual fields of everyday feminist protest in the digital age? Seghal argued that image-based social media feminism in young, urban India is an important transformative juncture in the recent history of feminist activism(s) in the global South. Looking into various works of Instagram artists the paper discussed the presentation of the female body by feminist counter-publics online. Exploring corporeality through images that accentuate bodily taboo functions, the study suggests that the site of circulation of these works and the networked and interactive structure of counter-publics have a democratising potential for digital activism. The paper triggered a discussion on the feminist movement’s positioning of itself as counter-culture since the 1960s and making of public and counter-public online, as well as consideration of hate speech against the Instagram activist images.

*M. Ragıp Zık's (Free University Berlin) paper was titled "From collective framing to connective appropriation: Activist photography across Gezi Movement and Anti-Coup Resistance". The paper argued that a comprehensive analysis of images of social conflict can offer a richer understanding of framing in social movements. Also, a comparative research across two opposing political circles across longer periods that go beyond the street protests could offer insights about how visual frames are constructed while having unreconciling political stances. The paper was guided by the following research questions: 1) What kind of narratives do images in Gezi and Anti-Coup produce, attend, and negotiate, and how? 2) Do similar images, visual patterns and symbols appeal to distinct political positions? 3) Do Gezi and Anti-Coup attend to similar visual repertoires? Having analysed 146 photographs from a time period of five years by combining visual grounded theory with social semiotics and iconology, the paper presented five visual master frames that emerged from the process. It also suggested that the digital environment of visual master frame construction involves a connective logic of action, which makes visual activism a networked practice. The presentation was followed by a discussion on the methodology and the role of master frames both as constructive and disruptive agents in political processes.*

## **Session 2: Hyperimage / Hyperscreen**

*Isabel Hartwig's (Free University Berlin) presentation had the title "Restaging Art History – Intervisuality in Social Media Photography". It conceptualised the *tableau vivant* photographs on social media platforms as a site of intervisuality and palimpsest, referring to the production of digital images based on earlier ones. Examining the 257-photograph corpus of the artist Jeff Hamada's project called "Remake", in which he invited people to restage the works of art. Engaging in a heuristic approach, the paper looks into the spatial relationships between the artwork and the stager, as well as the physical space the photograph taken and the digital space it is circulated. Some of the artworks are staged without the original work visible in the image. With the help of social media, such practices help disseminate the artworks to wider audiences. While artworks are taken out of the white cube, online images refer to an inter-medial space due to the mediacy of the online circulation. The restaging also works as a moment of *punctum* as it urges to stop and stare. Instead of copying the model, the paper argued that these images deconstruct the integrity of the artwork and indicate a gap. The discussions that followed the presentation focused on oscillation factor regarding these images and Deleuze's concept of *time-image*.*

*Gerrit Höffener's (Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt)* presentation held the title “Hyperimage. Cultural analysis about the motive of the bearded woman”. The study proposed to use hyperimage as an art education tool in order to go beyond the established canon that focuses on great masterpieces and take the plurality of images into consideration. Using hyperimage of the “woman with beard” as an example, the paper argued that it can be configured as a symbol of knowledge that can deepen the references in the individual images, while being a hub for different media, genres, and narratives. Examining 11 various images with Conchita’s (Wurst) photograph in 2012 Eurovision Song Contest as the key image, the paper discussed that a curated pedagogical dialogue space can transcend the mere function of display and trigger discussions on the multiplicity of meaning-making. The discussion followed the presentation focussed on the making of the hyperimage, didactics of art, and the ethics around the images.

### **Session 3: Image Technologies / Pictures as Witnesses**

*Erec Gellautz's (Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt)* paper was entitled “Networked images on display”. It argued that networked images did not only became pervasive but also a central part of artistic practices and in art exhibitions. The paper is part of a research project that pursues the following questions: 1) How are works presented that focus on the networking character of images? 2) In which institutional and ideological contexts of the exhibition are they embedded? 3) How are digital spheres and the exhibition space connected? 3) What new / expanded modes of perception and reception does the art exhibition open up as an aesthetic, ideological and social space for the phenomenon of networked images? 4) How are the dispositives of networked images negotiated in the exhibition displays? Going through examples of projects such as Erik Kessels’ *24HRS in Photos*, Marc Lee’s *Pic-me*, and Adam Basanta’s *A Truly Magical Moment*, the paper discussed the spatial relationship between the digital and the physical and the loss of affordance features while transforming from one to another. Based on the preliminary results, the paper argued that such works indicate a change of status and constitution of the image object. The following comments and questions addressed deliverability of the contemporary image, continuity and rupture in visual media, and the change networked image brings to the social fabric.

*Ioan-Daniel Mihalcea's (University of Bucharest)* paper had the title “Photographic agency and the mediations of precarity”. It explored the potential role of documentary photography in developing a reflexive space. The paper is part of a larger PhD project that pursues the

following questions: 1) How can landscape photography act as an agent of entering in a dialectics of seeing society? 2) What does it mean when we look at this type of images? 3) What is the relation between these images and the spectator? 4) What is photography telling differently and how does it contribute to the visual construction of the social field? Going through Ioana Cirlig and Marin Raica's photo book *Post Industrial Societies*, the paper discussed the role of photography from three different perspectives. First, its function as signing a civil contract involving the camera, the subject, and the spectator. Second, photographs have the capacity both to document reality in terms of realism and to offer an aesthetic experience in terms of imagination. Third, the articulations of invisible (social) tensions in photographs can lead to asking moral questions, while providing space for affective encounters and public displays of emotions. The discussions after the presentation addressed the importance of critical investigation of the narrative in the photograph and the role of public images in creating reflective spaces without romanticising or dramatizing. Following Benjamin's conceptualisation of the ruin, it was mentioned that there is a high potential for a critical encounter in such photographs.

*Lisa Stuckey's (International Research Center for Cultural Studies Vienna)* presentation had the title "With(-drawing) publicity: leaked images at the witness stand". The paper conceptualised spies as first-degree witnesses and source of documentary raw material. It argued that the promise of uncovering functions through the interaction of street presence that is linked to a documentary use of media and secret procedure that is linked to a forensic use of media. Examining the works of the University of London based agency Forensic Architecture, this paper asked, "what new ambivalences emerge, when a highly institutional agency processes the leaked material so it can become an image at the witness stand?" The presentation focussed at the intersection of the outcomes of the Forensic Architecture's work which are both an interest of contemporary art institutions and of legal investigations. The discussion followed raised questions about the past and present institutionalisation of the spy figure, the process of evidence-making and the modalities used within, the bridging role of the spy figure across these modalities, the recent whistle-blower cases, and Castoriadis' concept of imaginary society.

### **Keynote speech: For an Ecology of Care beyond the Wasteocene**

Related to her ongoing research project on "Ecodata-Ecomedia- Ecoaesthetics", *Yvonne Volkart (Academy of Art and Design FHNW Basel)* discussed the role of technology for

establishing a culture of sensibility. Focusing on the images as ideological and aesthetic forces and the technology's use of images for what is unknown, she asked, "what do ecomedia and images narrate?" The examples of artists using technology in their works addressing wasteocene and ecological action showed that sharing and caring become new values of the time, while reminding us about the feminist opposition to nature and culture dichotomy. The past and future come together in the present of the artworks, where human and non-human division is questioned. Volkart discussed that the use of technology can increase the affective potential of establishing plural relationships. Communication becomes meaningful when we have feedback and empathy and collective temporality not only between humans but also when non-humans included. Staging waste aesthetically and presenting affective relations between human and non-human can challenge established understandings of participation. The following discussion addressed issues such as cybernetic theories starting in 1960s, material body vs. immateriality, eco-feminism of 1980s and 1990s, techno-eco-feminism vs. performativity, thinking the Deleuzian concept of "becoming" for human co-beings such as animals and insects, the loss of shared utopia vs. presence of shared dystopia, and aesthetic surplus and idea of excess.

### **Session 3: Historiographies / Archival Practices**

*Faime Alpagu's (University of Vienna)* presentation title was "Ambivalence of Photography: Photography of a "guest worker" Woman". The paper aimed to reveal the complexity of the interaction between dimensions such as here/there, now/then, private/official, written/visual, to establish a differentiated view of the visual representation of migrants/migration by contributing to an innovative development of methods in migration research, and to offer a long term perspective on (labour) migration by taking the biography into account. The guiding question of the research was "how are the migration experiences narrated in different time references (1960s/70s/80s vs. now) and materials (photos/letters/interviews)?" The study followed a mixed methodology merging sequential analysis, visual segment analysis, biographic case reconstruction, and figurative hermeneutics. A comprehensive analysis of past and present photographs of a migrant woman showed that the tensions around spatial and emotional tensions, as well as the visibility issues regarding the self creates ambivalent meanings in the photograph. Comparing photographs against other available data can help better understand migration phenomena, particularly in the light of a temporality. Discussions followed the presentation addressed the interpretation of the photographs from different perspectives, and the important of taking biography into account while looking at the image.

*Margherita Foresti's Westfälische Wilhelms-University Münster*) paper was entitled: "Images between false narration and documentation: Ammar Al Beik's *The Sun's Incubator*". The paper conceptualised Ammar Al Beik's movie *The Sun's Incubator* on 2011 Syrian protests within Arab Spring context as a falsified narrative through Deleuze's concept of *time-image*. The movie followed a non-chronological account of the protests along with the story of a family. A narrative analysis of the movie shows that it is a heterogenous account of events that cross and divert. Unlike the features of a conventional documentary as suggested by Sigfried Krakauer, this movie focuses on subjects, suggests a multifaceted reality, and delivers multiple truths. The following discussion highlighted points such as the application of Deleuze's notion of *time-image*, the power of the false narrative, alienation vs. falsification, presence of the body, and role of historiography in relation to moviemaking.

#### **Session 4: Visual Media and Society / Questions of Ethics**

*Orsolya Bajusz (Corvinus University of Budapest)* presented a paper entitled "Current Debates on Biotechnology and the Role of the Visual" that investigates the visual media interventions in the public debates around biotechnology in Hungary. The paper argued that these debates represent a struggle in between two knowledge regimes: 1) connecting the rejection of genetically modified products to the neoliberal world order, 2) contemporary debates on robots conflate an imaginary future with the present. The images take part in these debates as seen in three case studies that are the advertisements of Malyvavirag Foundation, images produced within the GMO debate in Hungary, and the visual production of Docler Media, a virtual reality company. Being at the beginning phase of the research, the project asks the following questions: 1) Are the mechanisms identified in the literature present in other cases, or are they specific to a given technology or context? 2) How is visual material involved in biotechnology grounded in a materialist, political ecology-based approach? 3) What broader ideological layers do these images have? 4) What are the political connotations of these images affecting an intersubjective register such as moral axioms, identity elements, coping strategies? The following discussion pointed out to the topics of building overarching narrative in between three case studies, accentuating the interesting parts of case selection, and relationship between the genre such as text and image.

*Stefanie Bauer's (Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt)* paper was entitled "Narratives in online health communication: A qualitative content analysis of YouTube videos and user comments on the topic of food intolerances". The study aimed to find out if the topic of food intolerance

affects the society and where do people get informed about it. It conducted an online survey with the participation of 829 people, plus an analysis of German YouTube videos by vloggers and comment sections of these videos. The outcomes showed that 61% of the people used the Internet to get informed. Only 53,1% visited websites of medical doctors. On the other hand, 49,7% visited blogs dealing with the topic and 9,8% watched at least a video about it. The analysis of videos also revealed that emotional qualities of communication were important, and this was mirrored in the comments section. The discussion highlighted the importance of bridging different genres of information, including the way that information is synthesised, and the possibilities of going beyond the taboo topics on such online videos about health.

*Cezara Nicola's (University of Budapest) paper was entitled "Assessing the Significance of Technoetic Aesthetics: The Self in Digital Contemporary Art". The paper aimed to examine the human activity in the ubiquitous digital, especially in contemporary art, looking at the way identity and issues of the self are transferred and function within digital means. The guiding questions of the paper are part of a larger project that ask: 1) How is the digital self understood and defined in terms of contemporary art practices? 2) To what extent is technoetics able to describe the changes in the way both the artist and the art decipherer experience an artefact? 3) How do the technologic structures or scientific principles informing a work of art translate into visual prompts or image production? 4) Can we assume and ethically accept the notion of consciousness as emerging directly in the digital realm due to the intersection and blurring of organic and non-organic factors in the artistic process? To address these questions, the paper turns to British artist and theorist Roy Ascott's concept of *tecnoetics*. Examining his works and other conceptualisations such as *telematic arts*, *cybernetic art*, and *syncretic art*, the paper concluded that identity is projected not only upon the artworks produced by specific artists, but it also reflects in the associations created by art observers. A second conclusion that concerns the speed is that the development of identity is performed a great deal quicker and with much more impact in the digital realm. The discussion followed the presentation pointed out to the change in the contemporary research and theorising around the digital and the former position of Roy Ascott in such debates, the developments in artificial intelligence field in relation to the social, and linking historical figures with the actual conceptualisations of the digital and the new media.*

*For more information about the Visual Sociology Research Committee visit: <https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/research-networks/research-committees/rc57-visual-sociology/>*