

Iconography and Iconology as a Visual Method and Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Iconography is both a method and an approach to studying the content and meanings of visuals. Originally devised in the context of sixteenth-century art collecting to categorize the particular visual motifs of paintings, iconography was first modernized by the art and cultural historian Aby M. Warburg (1866–1929) at the beginning of the twentieth century (Schmidt, 1993; Diers, 1995; Forster, 1999; Rampley, 2001; Woodfield, 2001). It was further refined by art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), who popularized this method of visual interpretation in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s.

Warburg used the term ‘iconography’ in his early research, but in 1908 replaced this term with ‘iconology’, describing a particular method of visual interpretation (Schmidt, 1993: 24). Panofsky, a colleague of Warburg, published a seminal article (Panofsky, 1982) in 1932, introducing a three-step method of visual interpretation first labeled ‘iconography’, and later termed ‘iconology’. Panofsky himself did not give credit to his iconological

predecessor (Schmidt, 1993: 12), leading subsequent scholars to link the iconological method only with Panofsky’s name.

ORIGINS AND KEY READINGS

Before its modernization as a method in art and cultural history at the beginning of the twentieth century, iconography had been applied in the realm of art collecting, and was particularly inspired by the encompassing work of Cesare Ripa. Ripa’s book *Iconologia* first published in Italian in 1593, had nine editions; the second, published in 1603, was the first illustrated version (Eberlein, 2008: 184). The book had been translated into many languages; the first English edition was published in 1709, on the assumption that this visual handbook of emblems and their meanings had an international impact during the seventeenth century.

However, as late as 1876, iconology was still confined to the role of an ancillary tool to art history and art collecting (Warnke, 1980: 55). A popular German encyclopedia

of the late nineteenth century, *Meyers Konversations-Lexikon*, defined iconology in the following way:

Iconology, previously, according to etymology, the reference, listing and history of portraits of famous personalities in antiquity...currently is understood as the knowledge about attributes, emblems and symbols, with which gods, heroes and mythological objects of antiquity, and particularly Christian saints and idioms, are typically depicted. (Quoted in Warnke, 1980: 55; my translation.)

Iconology in its modern, more encompassing function as an analytical method of visual content analysis was first mentioned publicly by Aby Warburg in his pivotal lecture on 'Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara' in October 1912. He uses the term three times, and always in connection with 'analysis', thus turning 'iconological analysis' into the keywords of his presentation (Heckscher, 1967/1994: 114). Both the Schifanoia lecture (Warburg, 1912) and his article on 'Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther', published eight years later (Warburg, 1920), figure among the key readings on iconography and iconology. Further key readings in iconology are the study by Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl on Dürer's etching *Melencolia I* (Panofsky and Saxl, 1923), which was later edited in a larger volume (Klibansky et al., 1964). This applied example of iconological methodology traces the motif of *Melecolia I* – a female figure seated with her head resting on her right hand – through various cultural, religious and historical contexts, and applying a variety of different theories to explaining the 'travels' of both the motif and its meaning through time and space. In a similar vein, using iconology not as a method, but as a general approach, the historian Emile Mâle (1862–1954) has been credited for popularizing the term 'iconology' as early as 1927 (see Mâle, 1932; Heckscher, 1967/1994: 140). And the Dutch art historian, G. J. Hoogewerff (1884–1963), at the time oblivious to Mâle's usage of the term, gave a lecture in Oslo in 1928 with the title 'L'Iconologie

et son Importance pour l'Etude systématique de l'Art Chrétien'. Among the key readings, should be mentioned two works of historians who did not apply iconology as a method but used an iconological approach to study political and social history: the co-founder of the influential French school of historians – *Annales* – Marc Bloch (1886–1944) and his germinal book *Les Rois Thaumatourges* (1924), and Ernst H. Kantorowicz's (1895–1963) 'classic' study on *The King's Two Bodies* (1957).

As remote as some of these topics might appear to an audience of the twenty-first century, Warburg's topic of image propaganda during the reformation period was a reflection on his contemporary obsession with the visual propaganda of the First World War. This proximity between problems of contemporary reality, 'disguised' in the costume of scholarly findings on a previous period, is characteristic for iconographic-iconological research. The founding father of modern iconology was mainly interested in image transfers, visual migration, or, more poignantly, the mobility of visuals ('die Mobilität der Bilder', Warnke, 1980: 75) across time and space. Despite being grounded in history as a discipline, iconology's *problem orientation* (Warnke, 1993: 29) leads to a close link between the historic topic studied and problems in the contemporary reality of the scholar using the iconological method. This intrinsic connection between problems in the past and problems in the present makes this method highly attractive for social scientists dedicated to analyzing social and political reality. In addition, Warburg conceived iconology as a 'critical' method (Warnke, 1980: 58). This critical approach is also befitting the social scientific research agenda.

The origins of iconography and iconology as well as their developmental path can only be understood if the transdisciplinary atmosphere of the early twentieth century in Europe is taken into account. Scholarly history since then has seen a long period of disciplinary specialization and professionalization, which

is still pervasive today. However, in the early days of modern iconology Warburg and his contemporaries crossed disciplines easily, Warburg himself being fiercely opposed to any form of disciplinary boundary keeping ('*Grenzwächtertum*' or '*grenzpolizeiliche Befangenheit*'). Thus, influences on Warburg's iconology are manifold (Gombrich, 1970; Syamken, 1980), ranging from the works of the Swiss cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897), to the historian Karl Lamprecht (1856–1915), who introduced a psychological approach to the field, and the philologist Hermann Usener (1834–1905), who introduced Warburg to the field of comparative religious studies, as well as the German classical philologist Franz Boll (1867–1924), who familiarized Warburg with the history of astrology. Other influences on Warburg's iconology were coming from the natural sciences and psychology, including Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) biological approach to explaining human emotions. For Erwin Panofsky, the sociology of knowledge, conceived by the Hungarian-born Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) was an inspiration in further developing the iconographic-iconological method (see Mannheim, 1952). In turn, Warburg and Panofsky influenced many prominent scholars in their time. To name just a few, the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), who actually wrote parts of his most prominent book on the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in Warburg's library (Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg), the German literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius (1886–1956) built his topological research on Warburg's pathos formula, and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was influenced by Panofsky's findings in developing the sociological category of '*habitus*'. Another scholar should be mentioned here: the German film sociologist Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966), who extended the application of iconology to moving images. His exceptional study *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) demonstrated how iconography can be fused with sociological

analysis, reaching tentative explanations of the Nazi regime's ideological foundations. Panofsky, who was in regular contact with Kracauer after both had emigrated to the United States, was highly interested in iconological film analysis. His 1937 study on *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*, published in the volume *Three Essays on Style* (Panofsky, 1997) can be considered the first iconological contribution to film analysis.

However, these disciplinary crossovers were interrupted and remain difficult to trace from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. They deserve much closer scrutiny than can be applied in the context of this contribution. For both students, and scholars who want to dig deeper into iconographic-iconological methodology, the compilation of key articles on the issue in German, edited by Ekkehard Kaemmerling (1987/1994), is a prerequisite for understanding the origins and intricacies of iconology as a method. The legacy of the iconographic-iconological founders is to apply iconology as a critical, analytical and transdisciplinary method with a bifocal perspective – focusing on the visual aspects of contemporary problems in politics, society and culture, reflected in the lens of thorough historical comparison.

ICONOGRAPHY AS A METHOD

Iconography can best be described as a qualitative method of visual content analysis and interpretation, influenced by cultural traditions and guided by research interests originating both in the humanities and the social sciences. In its *Warburgian sense*, iconography/iconology is therefore an interdisciplinary comparative method, focused on the 'visual interval' (Rampley, 2001), both temporal and spatial. Iconography/iconology is based on the critical analysis of visual and textual sources, and their original contexts (Grittmann, 2007: 134; see also Woodfield, 2001).

At heart, iconology is a forensic method. Iconology at its best can take on the form of a detective story, in which various threads are woven together to gain a full picture of a given period and its visual reproduction (see Baxandall, 1972; Warnke, 1984, 2007; Bredekamp, 1990, 1999, 2007). The visual material is treated as evidence supporting a particular hypothesis on the meanings that the visuals elicited in their original context. Visuals are treated as historic sources on culture, politics, society, life at a given time in the past. As historic material they also bear witness to visual forms of expression in the present, and can thus illuminate both past and present communication processes.

Panofsky (1982: 40–41) distinguishes between the first step, pre-iconographical description, the second step, iconographical analysis, and the third step, iconological interpretation. This differentiation is only a theoretical model. For the scholar applying iconography/iconology, the method is an integrated process with no distinct stages (Eberlein, 2008: 179); it has the holistic goal of achieving an encompassing interpretation of the meanings of the analyzed visuals.

To this day, Panofsky's three steps constitute the core of iconology as a method. These three steps form the 'Act of Interpretation'. Each of the three acts has a different 'Object of Interpretation', each needs different 'Equipment for Interpretation' and follows a different 'Corrective Principle of Interpretation'.

Pre-iconographical description focuses on the primary or natural subject matter, which is usually the 'world of artistic motifs'. Iconographical analysis is concerned with 'conventional subject matter' – culturally shared visual signs and connotations – and thus 'the world of images, stories and allegories'. Iconological interpretation aims at unraveling the 'Intrinsic meaning or content constituting the world of "symbolical" values' (Panofsky, 1982: 40).

The 'Equipment for Interpretation' changes from (1) mere practical experience and familiarity with depicted objects to (2) knowledge

of literary sources to finally (3) 'Synthetic intuition', 'conditioned by personal psychology and "Weltanschauung"'.

Panofsky's (1982: 41) reference to the German term *Weltanschauung* not only hints at his personal root but also reveals a primary influence on his thinking – fellow emigrant and eminent sociologist Karl Mannheim. In 1923, Mannheim published an article in German on 'The Interpretation of "Weltanschauung"' in which he not only defines *Weltanschauung* as the 'global outlook of an epoch' (Mannheim, 1952: 33) but also hints at an interpretation method involving three levels of meaning ('objective', 'expressive', and 'documentary') as well as 'objective correctives' of interpretation. Panofsky adapted Mannheim's sociological method of interpretation to suit the needs of art history. Both sociology and art history are interested in understanding and unraveling how individuals as well as groups of people make sense of cultural artifacts and how, in turn, the visuals shape cultural belief systems at a given time.

To phrase the actual steps in iconography/iconology more practically: iconographic research uses an inductive and subjective sampling strategy. The intuition of the respective researcher is part of the method. She or he uses her or his particular fascination and interest in certain motif types to get an overview of similar motifs, both in contemporary and past visual production, often transgressing different types of media. The most prominent iconologists each created their own visual archive, collecting, combining and constantly assessing and tagging the collected visuals: from Warburg's 'Zettelkästen' (postcards with notes and visuals attached to them, sorted according to categories he designed and relabeled according to his changing research interests) to Warnke's impressive Political Iconographic Archive, or William S. Heckscher's filing cabinet with all kinds of clippings (see Schoell-Glass and Sears, 2008). Tagging, indexing and archiving are essential parts of the iconological research process. Scholars collect visuals and

categorize them, thereby constantly sharpening their analytical understanding of the studied visual topic. In the ideal typical research process, scholars, through collecting, retrieving and comparing relevant sources, gain both expertise and an overview of the studied visual material. The early collecting stage of Panofsky's three-level analysis began with the so-called pre-iconographic description. This is the attempt to describe each visual in a most neutral way, avoiding too early attributions of meaning. After most of the selected visuals have been described in this way, simultaneously paying attention to details by comparing the visuals to each other, the next step – iconographical analysis – is reached. Note that in a real research situation these two steps would go hand in hand. Being in the field, or in the archive, scholars would collect all available visual, textual and maybe even oral sources thought to be relevant for unraveling the meaning(s) of the visuals they are interested in. The visuals are then analyzed in the light of all available sources, attributing meanings to the analyzed visuals related to their original temporal and spatial context. Both pre-iconographical description and iconographical analysis require deep immersion in the visual material, related sources and contexts. But the 'crowning' step is the last one in Panofsky's scheme – iconological interpretation, which usually requires several years of scholarly immersion and research. Only very few studies fulfill these high expectations. More often the outcome of a hurried iconographical analysis is just an assembly of pictures with similar motifs. However, if practiced in a sound and thorough fashion, the method gives access to processes of meaning construction and meaning attribution of particular groups and motifs of pictures. Methodologically Panofsky's method has been further improved and adapted to suit mass-mediated visuals. The most far-reaching methodological contribution originates in media pedagogy, transferring the mass aspect of the topic studied to the method itself: Pilarczyk and Mietzner (2005) call their

method 'serial-iconographic photo-analysis'. They devised this method with a particular view towards research questions arising in the social sciences and in pedagogy. Following a sociological approach, photography is considered to be a 'social practice' (Pilarczyk and Mietzner, 2005: 81). Accordingly, research fields to which serial-iconographic photo-analysis is applied focus on interactive behavior and social roles as, for example, in researching the 'habitus' of teachers in school or the 'mise en scène' of gender in photography.

Although systematic, iconography as a method is also highly subjective, raising questions about the validity of the interpretation of results.

ICONOGRAPHY AND ICONOLOGY

Many researchers use both terms interchangeably. But in Warburg's and Panofsky's understanding, iconology as a method went beyond iconography. While the iconographical analysis only constitutes the second of three steps in the interpretation process, iconology is the ultimate goal. Panofsky (1982: 31–32) pointed to the difference between the two, hinting at the etymological origin of both terms. Iconography's suffix 'graphy' is derived from Greek '*graphein*', meaning to write, thus stipulating that this is a merely descriptive method, aimed at an objective and neutral description and classification of depicted motifs. Iconology, on the other hand, relates etymologically to the more encompassing concept of '*logos*'. Thus, Panofsky concludes, 'Iconology... is a method of interpretation which arises from synthesis rather than analysis' (1982: 32). The 'synthetic intuition' that is necessary according to Panofsky's method is the crowning of the analytic process. While iconography has few prerequisites and is associated with the first, descriptive step, iconology comes last as the third step, and is based on thorough research of visual and textual

sources and their verbal condensation in the form of a contextualized interpretation.

While iconography contends itself with identifying types of visual motifs and attributing particular meanings to them, iconology uses the visual objects not simply for the sake of gaining more information about the visuals themselves; the visuals are treated as sources and evidence for wider social, political and cultural analysis of the time in which the visuals were produced and used.

ICONOGRAPHY AS AN APPROACH

Iconography in the Warburg tradition operates with complex concepts and understandings of the visual. Warburg himself enlarged the scope of art history by including ‘any visual image’, regardless of its artistic quality. This meant that press photographs and other forms of mass-mediated imagery could be considered appropriate objects of study for art history. The concept of iconography is closely linked to the German language. The key term of the German iconographic tradition – *Bild* (image, picture, visual) – cannot be fully translated into English (for more details on image etymology see Müller, 2007). For every material image there are mental images corresponding to the material image. But not every mental image takes on a material form (see Table 15.1). Warburg was only interested in those visuals that have both dimensions, leading to the hypothesis that the material images can be used as sources to learn about the mental images of times past.

In the second half of the twentieth century, iconology became the foremost art historical method, particularly in the Anglophone countries. This almost dogmatic position of the method elicited criticism mainly directed at its elitist attitude that only the ‘initiated’ scholars with a humanistic education could be using this method and approach properly (Eberlein, 2008: 185). The popularity of Panofsky’s method redirected the focus of

the applied iconological method away from the originally more encompassing definition of Warburg. Instead, the method stayed within the realms of art history, confined to the expert analysis of artwork.

Scholars outside of art history have appropriated the terms iconography and iconology to denote not a method, but an approach. The most influential work in this respect is Mitchell’s *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*. He takes the word ‘iconology’ literally, aiming at ‘a study of the “logos” (the words, ideas, discourse, or “science”) of “icons” (images, pictures, or likenesses)’ (Mitchell, 1987: 1). Van Leeuwen (2000) connects Panofsky’s approach with semiotics in the tradition of Roland Barthes. Other works limit themselves to Christian and Pagan iconography: i.e. the classification and analysis of figures, poses, gestures, garments, colors, objects and symbols that denote religious stories and theological concepts in European art and antiquity (Kopp-Schmidt, 2004; Büttner and Gott dang, 2006). This strand of art historical research focuses exclusively on artwork and limits its findings to the merely descriptive, iconographic level. Another strand of art history follows a more encompassing approach under the umbrella of the Warburg-based *Bildwissenschaften* (Bredekamp, 2003), reconnecting to Warburg’s original practice of extending iconology to any kind of visual, and not just ‘high art’. Political iconography fills the gap created by the dissolution of a general visual covenant at the beginning of the twentieth century. Secularization and individuation as well as an increase in individual freedoms of visual expression have turned modern and contemporary art into a system of its own with no intention to relate to problems of general importance. This gap, from the perspective of political iconography, is filled by visual mass media that bear witness to contemporary social, political and cultural processes. Art history is still a valid source for the visual patterns, but political iconography extends its scope also to mass-mediated visuals like cartoons and press photographs.

POLITICAL ICONOGRAPHY

Largely unnoticed by the non-German-speaking academic community, a 'New Warburg School' emerged in the early 1990s. The driving force behind this 'Warburg revival' is the German art historian Martin Warnke, who, together with his Hamburg collaborators, initiated the renovation of the still-existing original Warburg-Haus that hosted the famous research center established by Aby Warburg – the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (K.B.W.). Warnke, inspired by Warburg's image collection, recalibrated the iconological method to the topic of politics in its widest sense, creating an approach of his own labeled 'Politische Ikonographie' – 'Political Iconography' (Warnke, 1994). Warnke's work is based on his collection of approximately 500,000 image cards, which are archived and accessible for researchers in the reopened Warburg-Haus in Hamburg. Due to the lack of translation, the international impact of this 'New Warburg School' has been limited.

A selection of political iconographic studies will be presented below to illustrate the scope and potential of this method. Applications of political iconography can be found in different disciplinary contexts, ranging from art history to communication science, from anthropology to history.

Martin Warnke's Gerda Henkel lecture (Warnke, 2007) illustrates the uses of political iconography in scrutinizing the question of political leaders' zeal for creating something new. Bereft of an artistic way of expressing their ideas, they force their 'visions' on a whole political system which they want to form according to their own creative, or – more often – destructive impulses. Warnke analyzes the opposing stereotypes of statesmen and artists. He gives an array of examples of more or less haphazard attempts of rulers and politicians from the seventeenth century to US-President Bill Clinton, who immersed themselves in artistic activities. The clumsy drawing of French

King Louis XIII (Warnke, 2007: 48) is an example for the long-standing tradition of drawing and painting in the education of European royals. In this context, another pivotal study by the historian Peter Burke (1992) has to be mentioned – *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* – analyzing the public image-making of the French king and the role visualization played in the power politics of his time. Warnke concludes his lecture with several sketches by Adolf Hitler, who, before his rise to politician, dictator and mass-murderer, had unsuccessfully attempted to become an artist. Warnke's iconological brilliance is in the far-reaching consequences of his analysis that good political practice and the quest for artistic genius are an ominous connection.

The connection between artistic creativity, and here it is the capacity to draw, and scientific genius is explored in Horst Bredekamp's groundbreaking study on *Galilei the Artist* (2007). Coining the term of 'the drawing intelligence' ('*zeichnerische Intelligenz*' Bredekamp, 2007: 6), Bredekamp suggests that Galilei achieved his revolutionary insights only because of his early developed capacity and practice of drawing. The study is the third part of a trilogy of previous books on the philosophers Thomas Hobbes (Bredekamp, 1999), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (Bredekamp, 2004). Galilei's early drawings inspired him to question the papal dogma. What the scientist could see and depict himself was not a static flat moon, but three-dimensional and changing. Galilei's capacity to visualize his own impressions were tantamount in convincing him that he was right, and the Church was wrong, even risking his own life by sticking to his findings. Bredekamp's study of all the original drawings of Galileo and his in-depth research of all accessible textual and visual sources is a good example of an iconological study that took years to complete, but that opened a completely new aspect on the contingency of visual production shaping intellectual and popular knowledge. This inner connection between political thought and its visualization was the topic of Bredekamp's previous

study (1999) on Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. An icon of political thought, the frontispiece of Hobbes' book, prepared by Abraham Bosse, published in 1651, is analyzed in detail, including all further copies. It is the link between this material epitome of the state and its absolutist ideology – the relationship between the *Abbild* and the *Denkbild*, material and mental image – that intrigues Bredekamp, and which, in turn, makes this iconological study intriguing to read.

From a practical point of view, any corpus of mass-mediated images can serve as a field for applying a political iconographic approach. US presidential campaigns, for example, show a long-standing tradition of political visualizations. In conducting an iconological project, the first step is to define the most relevant visual expressions in a current campaign. This can be political commercials on online websites, the press photographs of political magazines like *Time* or *Newsweek*, or the footage of the televised presidential debates. Once the type of visuals that are at the center of the study are identified, all available visuals in the relevant time period have to be sampled: for example, all online commercials of all candidates in the primary elections; all issues of *Time* magazine in the main campaign; or all televised presidential debates. Once the material is secured, these visual sources need to be properly referenced and assessed, including the time and place of publication, the name of the photographer or image designer, the format of the debate, etc. The research question needs to be implemented into an iconological research design. Depending on the thrust of the question, particular visual motifs will be selected from the full sample. If the research question tries to position the 2008 presidential contest in the historic context of visual campaign strategies, the typology developed in a previous study (Müller, 1997) would be applied to the new sample, looking for the way in which the candidates were portrayed in the respective medium. Were the main contestants in the primary campaign – Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and John McCain – portrayed as

common people or rather as heroes? Which political ancestors were invoked by the different candidates? What kind of visual symbolism was alluded to? The first stratum of Panofsky's three-step method – the pre-iconographic description – sharpens the attention to visual detail. All images in the sample need to be described as neutrally as possible. A result of these in-depth descriptions is the growing expertise of the researchers, who immerse themselves in the visual data and become alert to subtle similarities and differences. This visual expertise is then carrying the analysis to the next stage – the second stratum in Panofsky's method design – the iconographical analysis, including now contextual information in order to create a typological set of categories that characterizes the various images in the sample. These typological descriptions enable the scholar to compare the various images and find similarities and differences among them, which will, in the third step – the iconological interpretation – be synthesized and reflected on in the larger socio-political and cultural context in which the campaign is taking place. Ideally, the iconological method will enhance the understanding of the subtle messages and ideas conveyed through the visual presentations of the candidates, and thus implicitly allow identification of the expectations raised by the winning candidate on which his or her presidency will be tested.

Similar research into campaigns in Russia could build on existing literature on Soviet iconography: the political poster in pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union is the topic of a study that uses an iconographical approach, though not iconology as a method. The historian Frank Kämpfer (1985) first explored the theory of political posters, developing a classification scheme of his own (Kämpfer, 1985: 131) that is more informed by semiology than by iconology. In his case study on Russian and Soviet image language he is able to decipher the complex messages and intricate principles that made political posters highly successful propagandistic communication tools. The 'fate' of

Kämpfer's relevant book, shared by most of the aforementioned German-language publications, was that it has gone unnoticed by international academia. The excellent study by Victoria E. Bonnell (1997) on the same topic, *Iconography of Power. Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, is oblivious to Kämpfer's earlier categorizations, which would certainly have been helpful to her endeavor.

Five more German scholars and their publications shall be mentioned: Rudolf Herz (1994) used political iconology as a method to research the public image of Hitler created in his time. He researched the production background, finding that the key to the success of Hitler's image was a strict limitation to one personal photographer – Heinrich Hoffmann – who controlled every single photograph of his employer that was shot and published. Not the visual motifs or the impressiveness of Hitler's personality, but the complete and total image control exercised are behind the *Führer-myth* created by the Nazis. Herz succinctly co-edited a volume comparing the Hitler image with images of contemporary leaders, Stalin, Mussolini and Roosevelt (Loiperdinger et al., 1995). Ines Kampe (1998) analyzed the images of Germans in the period following the Second World War, applying the iconographic method to photographs. In a similar attempt, aimed at an explanation for the transformed image of Germans in France, Ulrich Hägele (1998) scrutinized the national image from an anthropological point of view.

One of the most promising studies in the field of political iconography is a complex qualitative–quantitative method developed and devised by Elke Grittmann (2007) in her communication-oriented study of photojournalism and press photography (see also Grittmann and Ammann, 2009; Ammann et al., 2010). Methodologically, she combined qualitative political iconography with quantitative visual content analysis, coming to a complex evaluation both of the visual types of press photographs and their contextual production and selection structures.

From the vantage point of visual history, Gerhard Paul (2008) has edited two volumes on iconic images from 1900 to 2007. The individual contributions are written by prominent scholars in their respective fields. They cover the iconographic history of each motif and explain the meanings these (photo)graphic icons have taken on in various contexts. In this respect the two volumes are a treasure trove of iconological research. Paul's edition demonstrated that at the beginning of the twenty-first century the combination of visual interpretation as a method and political pictures as a topic appeared to see a revival, reflecting the need for explanation of visual phenomena like the terrorist instrumentalization of visuals, the publication of torture images at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (Eisenman, 2007), or the controversy about the publication of Muhammad cartoons (Müller and Özcan, 2007; Müller et al., 2009). In these studies, the most neutral description technique proved to be particularly fruitful when applied to a group of participants coming from very different cultural backgrounds. Participants with a Muslim background already described the images in a different way to Western participants. Little details like the depiction of sandals on one Muhammad portrait invoked negative meaning attributions to the image which were absent in the descriptions by participants from a Western background. Particularly for one Turkish participant, the visual verbal association with the term 'sandal' was relevant, since the term 'sandal' in Turkish is used in a derogatory way to insult a person as an uneducated and backward-oriented Muslim. Political iconography as a method appears to be particularly promising if applied in a way to test intercultural differences in visual meaning attribution.

While being thoroughly grounded in Western European research traditions, recent research demonstrates an increased interest in non-Western applications. Although many of the publications apply iconology without any deeper knowledge of its theoretical and methodological roots – while some (Bonnell,

1997; Grant, 2007) reference Panofsky, none of the authors seems to be aware of the Warburg tradition – these are valuable contributions to both the applied field of iconological research and, particularly, to the interdisciplinary appeal of iconography and iconology as visual methods (Boeckl, 2000; Didi-Huberman, 2002, 2003; Grant, 2007; O’Kane, 2007).

ICONOLOGICAL CONTEXT ANALYSIS

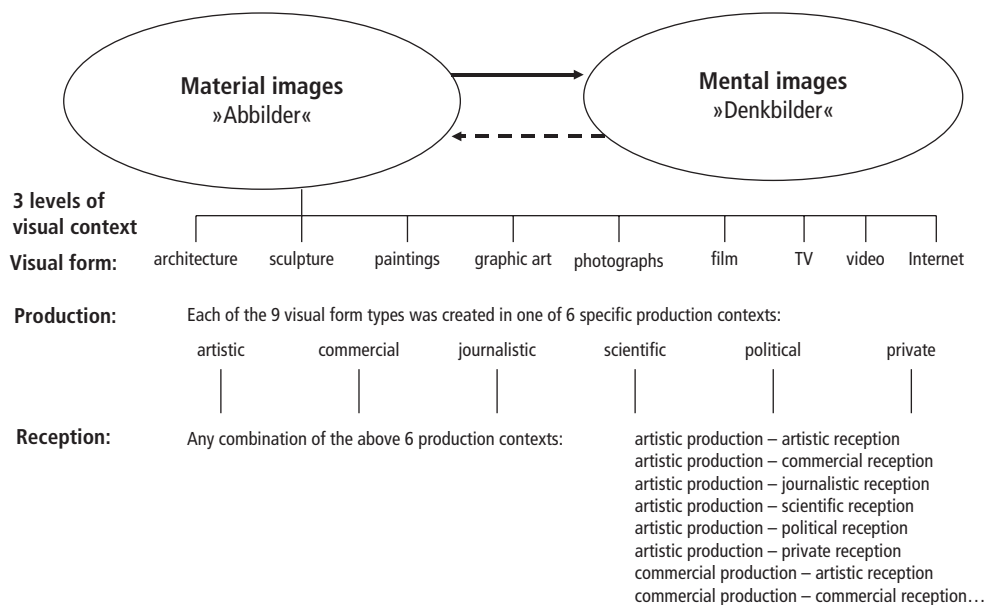
Influenced by communication science, a further methodological development of iconology – Iconological Context Analysis – has been suggested, adding the context dimension to the historic analysis of the motif (Müller, 2003: 22; Kappas and Müller 2006: see Table 15.1).

Three types of visual contexts can be distinguished: (1) the form, motif or ‘gestalt’ of the visual; (2) the production context; and (3) the reception context. Visuals analyzed with Iconological Context Analysis can take

on diverse forms, ranging from architecture, sculpture to graphic art (for example, caricatures), photography, film, television, video and electronic images. On the first context level – the ‘form’ or ‘gestalt’ level – iconology in the Warburg–Panofsky tradition can then be applied, helping to unravel the historical development of the depicted motifs. For the second level of context analysis, communication research traditions are helpful, particularly when the scrutinized visuals originated in a journalistic production context. Six ideal types of production contexts can be distinguished: the artistic (for example, paintings); commercial (for example, advertising); journalistic (for example, press photography); scientific (for example, brain scans); political (for example, campaign advertising); and private (for example, wedding photos).

Each of the six production contexts follows a different logic and has a different structure. Both inner logic and structure influence the form and the meaning of the visual product. Artistic production usually focuses on a single producer – the artist. It is

Table 15.1 Context analysis in visual communication research



her or his professional experience, skill and ultimately the individual's satisfaction with the final product that is relevant for both the form and content of the artwork.

In a commercial production context, on the contrary, the client who commissioned, for example, a poster advertising sportswear, plays an important role in shaping the end product. If the client is not satisfied with the visual drafts for the poster, a team of advertising experts and visual designers will try to accommodate their wishes. Also, both the client and the ad agency have to take the consumer into account when creating the visual. On top of client and consumers, commercial visual producers also have to keep their competitors in mind. Thus, the influences on the shape and the message of the commercially produced visual are manifold.

The journalistic production context is also a team context characterized by a high degree of labor division. Press photographers, press agencies, cartoonists, editors, writers, publishers and readers play a role in the selection and production process of visual journalistic products. For press photographers, the major question will be which photo sells to the newspaper or newsmagazine? They do also have their competing colleagues and their respective visual styles in mind, when shooting on location, but the major goal is to sell the image. Of course, journalistic routines, expertise as well as journalistic ethics, also play a role in the journalistic production context.

The scientific production context resembles the artistic more than journalistic context, since, at its heart, there is the freedom of the scientist to decide on the publication or non-publication of the visual. Typically, scientific visuals have the goal to visualize invisible phenomena like, for example, ultrasounds, X-rays or magnetic resonance images. In addition, charts and maps visualizing a certain process or theory can be considered as scientific visuals.

The political and the private production contexts seem, at first, to follow a different logic, and in fact in many cases these contexts

overlap with one or more of the other contexts. Still, political campaign visualization, despite its commercial implications, has a different goal than maximizing profit. Political posters and TV commercials aim at getting parties and politicians elected. They communicate on a different level to the ordinary commercial product and pursue a specific strategic goal, usually limiting the visual message to the election deadline, while commercial visualization, and branding in particular, has to pay attention also to the long-term effects. The private production context has seen a steep increase since the mass impact of digitization. In contrast to the huge future potential of this production context, academically speaking this steadily growing realm of image production is still under-researched. Just imagine your own private photos on your hard disk, but also pictures of catastrophes where an amateur happened to shoot pictures that later appear on the front page of a yellow press newspaper. The omnipresence of picture-creating technology will increase the availability of privately, non-professionally produced visuals. Here, the production history of the Abu-Ghraib torture images has to be mentioned. These photos, shot with a digital camera, were originally meant as 'trophy shots' for private consumption, very much like a sick variant of pornography to document the 'great time' that the torturers had while humiliating their victims. Only when this private production context is taken into consideration can be explained the insane smile of one of the female police officers, who is depicted beside two corpses showing signs of having been tortured to death. Both for analyzing the intended and the later attributed meanings of visuals, knowledge about their production and reception contexts are crucial.

The first stratum of visual context analysis focuses on compositional traditions across different types of media and different types of contexts. The second stratum – production context analysis – pays particular attention to the constraints and production routines in the

six different contexts. For example, the influence of the client on the actual form and style of the picture is much stronger in the commercial production context than in the artistic, where, since the twentieth century at least, a client typically only comes in after the artwork has been completed. This is different in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes or in commissioned artwork for public display, where the political and ideological demands already come into play during the production process.

At the reception level, context analysis becomes even more complex, since, in theory, a mixture of all six ideal contexts is possible. When aiming to analyze the reception context, iconology as a method reaches its limit. Experimental designs, informed by psychology and communication science, have to be integrated in order to test the actual reactions of different groups of people towards the visuals at stake.

The intention of iconological context analysis as a method is to unravel the meanings of mass-mediated visuals and contexts, both in terms of the history of the material motifs and their immaterial associations and elicited emotions.

SUMMARY AND GUIDELINES

Iconology is a qualitative method aimed at the interpretation of visual content. Rooted both in art history and sociology, the method has the potential to better understand and explain the meanings of contemporary mass-mediated visuals. As a method, iconology is inductive, subjective, critical, analytic and transdisciplinary in its thrust. The holistic approach, intrinsic subjectivity, and cultural focus on Western traditions are both iconology's strengths and shortcomings.

Some guidelines for applying iconography/iconology as a visual research method:

- Begin by researching and collecting the visual material you are interested in.
- Base your research on a problem-oriented research question which you refine and improve throughout the research process.
- Once you have an overview of the visuals, begin to classify them into different types. Create your own categories, labels and tags and reference each visual and textual source properly.
- Describe prototypes of visuals that appear to be important for your research in a most neutral way, paying particular attention to details and differences in form and style. Document your descriptions and compare them with one another.
- In the iconographic analysis, bring together visual and verbal sources, attributing meaning or clusters of meaning to individual pictures or to whole picture categories, thereby developing your hypothesis.
- Read and write about the visual production context, its structure and function, as well as potential changes. How does the production context influence the form and the intended meanings of the studied visuals?
- Which meanings do or did the visuals have in their particular reception context?
- Lastly, and most importantly for an iconological interpretation: What information do the studied visuals convey about the social, political and cultural context in which they were produced and perceived?

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