Chapter 7
From Works to Living Means of Communication – The Digital Image and the 'Iconic Turn'

Wolfgang Ullrich

I. The Democratization of the Image Tools

In the long history of images, a new epoch is just beginning. Although printmaking techniques, photography, film and television have already significantly changed in recent centuries, digitization and the Internet, smartphones and social media have led, within two decades, to upheavals on a scale that far eclipses anything we have seen before.

The most striking innovation is that technologies used to produce and distribute images are no longer exclusive, instead, today many people have access to them. Although smartphones and computers, Internet access and image editing programs are costly and require a developed infrastructure, i.e., although they are not freely available to everyone, it makes a qualitative difference whether – as in previous cultural history – only a small minority of people take pictures and an even smaller minority can publish these pictures, or whether everyone who does not completely refuse digital and telecommunications technology is able to both produce and publish pictures.

Even those who had the technical means to produce pictures, such as pens, paints and paper, quickly reached the limits of their abilities and were unable to realize their ideas. Without clear talent, many people also lost the desire to try further as image producers. In addition, there were always only a few places where pictures could be shown to a larger audience. Even professional and highly talented image makers often had little opportunity to make their works publicly visible.

With photography and more developed reproduction methods, the situation improved and led to the production of postcards and especially, illustrated books. Increasingly, more people could take respectable pictures. Hence, photo albums, which until the early 20th century contained almost only pictures taken by professional photo studios, gradually included more and more photos taken by amateurs. Professional image makers also reached a much wider audience as they could no longer circulate just

one original, but equally countless reproductions thereof. Nevertheless, image-making remained defined by experiences of scarcity and, as a result, exclusivity. Still, every exposed negative, every photographic print, every print costs money.

Those days are over. Whether you take a few or many pictures, it does not matter financially. Moreover, today many people take countless pictures as image editing programs and applications almost exclude the possibility of creating bad pictures. Rather, as image quality is at least partially decoupled from the talent of those producing the images, the difference between professionals and amateurs is becoming blurred. In addition, the time required to produce an image has been minimized. The software allows images to be made ready for publication in a matter of seconds and to be changed just as quickly, almost at will. Social media has also created an infrastructure that allows the distribution of a vast number of images, communicating and marketing them from a harmless 'like' among friends to a viral hit throughout the entire social network.

For the first time in cultural history, a generation is growing up where the exchange of images is just as unhindered and just as natural as the exchange of words. It is therefore justified to diagnose the 'Iconic Turn' and claim that knowledge and world views are now increasingly generated, grasped and communicated via images.[1] At least, the logocentrism that has long prevailed undergoes relativization.

This is all the more true because images become more versatile, i.e., they are less defined by a binding form. If, due to the use of various filters and programs, one can articulate oneself with images as quickly, variously and smoothly as with language, then there is no reason not to assign them many functions that could previously only be performed with spoken or written words.

The fact that once an image was made, it could at most be painted over, retouched, or censored in the pre-digital era may have given it the merit of permanence and thus the status of a work, admired at best. However, this situation was too inflexible for changing communication methods and expressive ambitions. Moreover, the material basis of traditional images – be it wood, paper, or celluloid – was too cumbersome to organize their exchange across larger spaces quickly and easily. In contrast, in digitized form, images have now become nimble in every respect. They can be varied, reformulated, recombined, and used situationally, as well as simultaneously at any place in the world.

---

1 For detail, see Maar/Burda (2005).

II. From Analogue Images to Forms of Orality

While images were previously as stable and fixed as language in the form of writing, they are now increasingly analogous to forms of orality. Digital images can be as spontaneous and fleeting as spoken words. However, they do not represent the first appearance of oral imagery. Rather, we can already see natural oral imagery in every facial expression and gesture.[2] To converse with someone is never just to talk, but also to see the facial expressions the other person shows and the gestures which accompany said the words. It means expressing oneself not only with words, but through continuous changes in facial features as well as posture. Even if this dimension of articulation is usually called body language, it actually consists of images, or at least of forms of expression that are accessible to the eye and can be visualized.

The extent to which facial expressions and gestures are understood as natural oral images is also shown by the fact that cultural practices aimed at concealing faces can be interpreted as a form of image prohibition. Interpreted in this way, people affected by such a practice are then perceived as having their expressive possibilities curtailed. A part of their orality is erased.

Though there are always efforts to suppress people in their free articulation, conversely, writing and fixed images may have had their origin precisely in the desire to somehow capture what a particularly valued person says and expresses. The liveliness, which would otherwise be completely absorbed in the respective moment, was to be preserved, perhaps even condensed in the fixation. However, this only succeeded at the price of not being able to react to changing circumstances with what had once been recorded. The texts and images could still be interpreted, the captured moment could be recapitulated again and again, but all hermeneutics ultimately served to console was oneself over the absence of any dialogue.

III. Aby Warburg's "Pathosformeln"

It was Aby Warburg's great theme to reconstruct how facial expressions and gestures were visualized in antiquity and individual facial expressions and postures, by visualization. Above all, he demonstrated that while facial expressions and postures are by no means completely immobilized by their

2 For detail, see Belting (2013).

fixation, they can be effective. Warburg researched how a strong gesture in a picture can also trigger strong affects and reactions in recipients, but above all, how other image producers can be influenced by the gesture. By image producers focusing on one visualized body expression and creating variations, they simultaneously contribute to the image becoming a fixed pictorial pattern. Warburg called such patterns – ultimately, i.e., fixed gestures and facial expressions – "pathos formulas" (*Pathosformeln*).

He formulated this concept in contrast to the long-prevailing understanding in antiquity, at least since Winckelmann, that the Greeks had embodied above all 'noble simplicity' and 'quiet grandeur' (*edle Einfalt* and *stille Größe*) in their pictorial works. Warburg, on the other hand, points to the "pathetically heightened facial expressions" (*pathetisch gesteigerte Mimik*) of many depictions, by which the artists of the Renaissance were influenced.[3] Using the motif "Death of Orpheus" as an example, he shows how a pathos formula originating from antiquity became effective anew in Mantegna, Dürer and others in ever more variations and how it was transferred to other subjects, thus confirming itself as such in the first place.

If pathos formulas were originally based on oral images, but then fixed, the new digital techniques allow them to be brought to life again. To the extent that it becomes possible to adapt any image instantaneously to a situation, a purpose, an expressive interest, and to use it purely as a medium of communication, an existing formula is filled with new life. After about two and a half millennia, there is finally a clear answer to Plato's criticism, which is another impressive sign of the epochal change that is currently taking place. At the same time, Warburg's theory deserves new and additional attention, because thanks to digitalization it has become much easier than ever before to express the affectation caused by an image again in the form of images. Thus, pathos formulas also find all the greater resonance. They can become even more striking formulas as much as they can be adapted and used even more variably.

If people exchange themselves with ever new variants of the images that have become available, thus reacting to images with other images, their use does not create any new works, i.e., nothing that has the claim to be completed and removed from time. As often as the fixation of facial expressions and gestures towards pathos formulas might have already related to an idea of artwork, the images that result from the vivification of pathos formulas are limited to communicative functions. They have as little the

3 Warburg (1906) 55.

character of works of art as when someone contorts his mouth or makes a defensive gesture with his hands. For the most part, they also come from people who have no concept of a work of art at all. For this reason, images produced and shared in social media should not be measured by the complexity of works of art, but by their communicative function. Perhaps this communicative turn must first be learned, since – contrary to language, where it is self-evident that most of what people say every day in their conversations is not suitable for literary prizes – for the longest time there were no oral traditions with images. In other words, we'll have to adopt the habit of no longer regarding the many users of visual material in social media as bad or half-artists, but to accept that they deal with images with varying degrees of differentiation, but increasingly in a way similar to the use of a native language.

IV. Selfies and Emojis

It is certainly no coincidence that the first image forms to emerge in social media, which have become as widespread as they are prominent, are still based directly on human facial expressions and gestures. These images are selfies and emojis.[4] In both cases, the aim is to express an emotional state as quickly and succinctly as possible. With a selfie, you show whether you are momentarily happy, proud or lonely. You can also report where you are, who you are with, what you are doing. An emoji is like a codified selfie reduced to the expression of feelings and in turn signals the current state of mind. By combining several emojis, a more differentiated mood picture can be drawn. In addition to the emojis, which in turn characterize the "pathetically heightened facial expressions" (*pathetisch gesteigerte Mimik*) Warburg was interested in, and which can thus also be described as particularly formulaic pathos formulas, there are other emojis that reproduce certain hand gestures or consist of objects from everyday life, making it possible to depict standard situations with them.

Moreover, on the one hand, there are apps that allow their user to convert selfies into emojis. In this conversion process as well, one might recognize a consolidation of pathos formulas. On the other hand, other apps are used to change one's facial expression. Thus, if the mood or the occasion and type of communication has changed, one does not even need to take a new selfie. Rather, it may suffice to just manipulate an

4 For detail, see Ullrich (2019); Rebane (2021).

already existing selfie as desired. Above all, it is possible to heighten an emotion inherent in a facial expression and to intensify it in a signal-like, striking manner, not least with the aim of also triggering strong feelings and corresponding reactions in the addressees. The same happens through other effects that have gained considerable importance in recent years. For example, numerous apps offer filters that can be used to change the character of images, add certain elements, or alienate them. It is popular, for example, to mix photographic and graphic image parts with each other. The resulting cartoonish overdrawing not only makes it easier to communicate in a witty and fun way, but is also suitable as the theme of the conversation itself.

V. The Vivification of the Images: Memes

However, many more types of images than just selfies are caught up in the maelstrom of vivification. In recent years, the term "meme" has become established for all types of motifs that circulate quickly and generate numerous variants, i.e., which are a living expression of emotions.[5] The term was taken from Richard Dawkins, who coined it in 1976 as an evolutionary biologist. Unlike a gene, a meme is not biologically inherited information, but is grasped and passed on via cultural artifacts. Memes are contents of consciousness, such as ideas or image patterns that bear an imprint on many people at the same time or one after the other. Thanks to the etymology, "meme" (from Latin *memoria*, Greek *mneme*) also recalls Aby Warburg, or more precisely, his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which is dedicated to several of the pathos formulas he identified, and which contains diverse variants of their visualization, variants that usually originate from different centuries and genres.

As much as memes are thus pathos formulas of digital image culture, they also encompass images from the pre-digital era and not least works from art history. In this way, these images and works of art in turn experience a vivification. This vivification, however, means much more than just an acceleration of the speed at which new variants, translations, and parodies of models occur. Whereas traditionally images were themselves mostly created with a claim to create a work, within the logic of social media, it is much more a matter of quick-wittedness and repartee. Recognition is gained by those who create and circulate a witty, cheeky, absurd

5 For detail, see Von Gehlen (2020).

or provocative image as quickly as possible. From the perspective of a representative of classical high culture, who prefers to interpret complex works by great artists rather than analyse everyday dialogues by average people, most of these pointed meme variants seem ludicrous or obscene, and more so when they are based on works from the canon of art.

VI. The Application of Social Media Tools to Classical Artworks

But even apps that primarily serve to transform facial expressions from selfies in a codified way are now being applied to figures from the art history canon, who appear thus suddenly as laughing or being in a bad mood. They are given donkey ears or wear glasses, surrounded by wreaths of flowers or pop-cultural accessories. Often this is no more than a gag, and it is mainly a matter of using the new possibilities of image processing arbitrarily, be it out of curiosity or of boredom. However, these transformations of existing image material are just as much an expression of the need to set something in motion that was previously immovably fixed. Still and thus lifeless images are being transformed into something that is moving and alive.

This happens all the more when works from art history are digitally animated, i.e., when figures suddenly turn their heads or change their facial expressions, which is now also possible without too much effort. One is led to believe that one can see the events before or after the moment captured by the artist. Some people get their hopes up that in the future it will not only be possible to see one or two seconds, but that significantly longer sequences will be brought to life.

As it is likely to become, in the near future, even easier and thus even more common to modify and animate images, it will also become even easier to use them to convey moods or messages. Those who already use a variation of Munch's "The Scream" to communicate a political or private event and express their own emotions will soon have further opportunities to express themselves orally in the form of images. The technical oral images complement and enhance the natural oral images, so that, in the future, facial expressions and gestures will be externalized as a matter of course. Instead of just looking serious or signalling contempt with a gesture, every movement will be recorded by a camera at the same time and linked at will with predefined image patterns which are no longer limited to just emojis. In this way, every gesture can be transmitted to any place in the world in a matter of seconds, both individually and depending on the addressee. Every gesture can be picked up, amplified and exaggerated

in an image. New techniques of expression are to be expected, resulting in a culture in which, now more than ever before in history, the expression of effects and attitudes is becoming an important and differentiated cultural technique.

VII. ...and The Future? – Consequences for Authorship and Copyright

People who are gifted at presenting themselves pictorially and who were previously unaware of their talent will suddenly become prominent, while other talents – such as verbal articulation skills – will lose relative importance. Overall, however, the fact that a great many people will articulate themselves in various digitizable formats – not only by way of images, but also by way of, e.g., sounds – is a dramatic expansion of expressive possibilities. This development leads to a democratization of attention opportunities, but at the same time to a profanation of traditional forms of expression and design.

However, insofar as oral images are no longer works, no copyrights apply – or should apply[6] – to them. As original and witty as an oral image may be, it will not be considered a work and will not be linked to a particular author. Just like a new idiom, a neologism, or even a joke immediately detaches itself from its author, animated images become common property when they are well received. They can no more be patented or placed under copyright protection than a certain facial expression.

Of course, there will be many cases of doubt. Artists, in particular, who do not close their minds to the digital possibilities and who create new images or image variants, may on the one hand still want to see themselves in the tradition of creators of works who are appreciated, protected and honoured as authors. However, on the other hand they will know that their impact and success will be measured by how often their postings are re-blogged, reposted, re-commented and varied. The artist and theorist Brad Troemel not only posits the equation that the more famous an art image becomes, the less its author will be attributed to it, but also makes it clear that in times of social media, art is perceived "not as a commodity so much as a recyclable material". In this way, however, art also "is rein-

6 However, for the current debate on copyright issues with regard to user-generated content, see Dreier (2019).

troduced into everyday life", thus having a completely different and even more important role than before.[7]

It is foreseeable that some artists will become absorbed in developing ever new image variants, while at the same time producing saleable post-Internet art with works materialized from them. Their primary measure of success, however, will be less the amount of money they make from these sellable artworks than the number of viral hits, i.e., the number of postings that become common property. Other artists, however, may still aim to create images that resist usability and vivification, i.e., that do not break away from their creator. In all cases, however, the fact that a rich oral pictorial culture exists for the first time will have a repercussion on art. Just as literature has always grown, not least out of everyday language, which is conversely refined and expanded by it, so visual art will in the future also feed on an oral culture. As much as it has so far been primarily related to its own tradition, and for that reason alone has tended toward forms of exclusivity, it will now benefit from the fact that images are used millions and billions of times every day during live digital communication.

References

Belting, Hans (2013): *Faces – Eine Geschichte des Gesichts* (München: C.H. Beck 2013)

Dreier, Thomas (2019): 'Bilder im Zeitalter ihrer digitalen Kommunizierbarkeit', in: Dreier, Thomas, *Bild und Recht – Versuch einer programmatischen Grundlegung* (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2019) 188–199

Maar, Christa/ Burda, Hubert (2005): *Iconic Turn. Die neue Macht der Bilder* (Köln: Dumont 2005)

Rebane, Gala (2021): *Emojis* (Berlin: Wagenbach 2021)

Troemel, Brad (2013): 'Art after Social Media', Art Papers (Juli/August 2013) 10–15

Ullrich, Wolfgang (2019): *Selfies* (Berlin: Wagenbach 2019)

Von Gehlen, Dirk (2020): *Meme* (Berlin: Wagenbach 2020)

Warburg, Aby (1906): 'Dürer und die italienische Antike', in: *Verhandlungen der 48. Versammlung deutscher Philologen und Schulmänner in Hamburg vom 3. bis 6. Oktober 1905* (Leipzig 1906) 55–60 (online available at http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2011/1630)

7 Troemel (2013) 13.