

IMAGES ARE NOT INNOCENT



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An image considered valuable in one culture may be regarded as offensive in another, explains **Marianna Michałowska** from the Institute of Cultural Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

What is “visual culture”?

MARIANNA MICHAŁOWSKA: I am inclined to understand the term as it was construed by the visual culture researchers of the 1980s, such as Hal Foster, Victor Burgin, and Rosalind E. Krauss. They argue that images are manifestations of how the social reality is constructed visually. Visual aspects of imagery are determined by visual culture, and so are other cultural phenomena. William J.T. Mitchell points out that visual culture goes beyond the study of images and includes a variety of everyday practices of seeing and presenting, including what is not mediated by any medium. The products of this process, namely images, movies, and photographs, are all aspects shaped by local visual cultures. Mitchell even writes that there are no strictly visual media. In this way, he wants to stress that media are inextricably linked to language, scents, and experience. In turn, Nicholas Mirzoeff, author of the book *How to See the World*, says that the study of visual culture is a search for ways to understand the world, and above all to imagine what is inaccessible to the human eye, such as views of distant galaxies and the inside of the human body. Our ability to make sense of the world is based on the images formed in our imagination.

How we perceive the world may be determined, for instance, by our cultural background. Does the same apply to images?

Images created in different cultures reflect different perceptions of the world, as is amply demonstrated by post-colonial thought. It turns out that the Western European approach has taught us to perceive cultures in a distinctive way. Let me give you an example. *A Passage to India*, a 1980s movie directed by David Lean, is a screen adaptation of a novel by Edward Morgan Forster. It portrays India from the colonizer's perspective, as a world where everyone has a strictly defined role. The writer created a critical portrait of the British Empire. We could compare this exam-

ple to the contemporary Indian crime series *Suzhal – The Vortex*. It shows the cultural context from the inside, from an indigenous perspective. It has some characteristics of a Bollywood production, but it is also similar to the now-popular genre of social drama. If we compare these two productions, we can see how India is depicted depending on the point of view. The former is sepia-tinted and filtered through sunlight, heat, and dust, creating the impression of nostalgia and yearning for a bygone world. The latter is predatory, literal, and violent, directing our attention to traditions and systems of values that are different from the ones we know. This tells us a lot about how we perceive worlds different from that of the European culture through the lens of imagery.

There is no doubt that encoding and decoding the meanings of images varies depending on the region and the culture. But it is worth noting how this is changing together with the globalized culture. Some images have become global in nature, chiefly as a result of global franchises, although different cultures localize and perceive them differently. Messages considered valuable and dominant in European culture may be rejected or even banned by non-European cultures.

Have images replaced words in the contemporary world?

This is a myth. Images do not function independently; they are closely linked to the whole of the cultural context. Today, it is important for us to be able to correctly interpret the messages conveyed by images without disconnecting them from that context. Visual literacy is a rapidly developing sub-field of research into visibility, visual processes, and practices. It deals specifically with the ability to read and understand visual images. Concepts emerging within this trend include visual perception, visual communication, visual language and thinking, as well as education in this field. Importantly, this takes into account both the



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biological factor, namely the structure of the organ of sight, and cultural processes, so how images are received is not reduced to cultural issues.

One especially important problem within visual literacy is the study of communication mediated by the new media. How do we communicate when we send images, such as emoticons and MMS messages, or when we post images on social media? What are the consequences of such communication? At the traditional level, this also means knowledge about how to construct an understandable visual message. Good examples include signs at airports, designed to be understood by people from very different cultures. The sending of MMS messages, memes, and photos also raises the issue of visual language related to message creation. Images in such messages convey a wide variety of meanings and emotions.

What is the role of images in education?

Visual messages are now gaining particular importance in education. Unless we have the skills needed to create and above all properly decode images, their senders will be able to manipulate us however they want. This is related to having certain control over how we protect ourselves against manipulation. For this reason, the educational aspect is extremely important because it allows us to be free, independent of the images that we are constantly being bombarded with. We should remember that we have used visual communication methods since the dawn of time, or at least since the Paleolithic, not to mention

antiquity. Imagery both organizes knowledge and conveys symbols.

Even science makes use of visualizations – examples include formulas, charts, diagrams, and maps. For this reason, we should stress that when we talk about imagery, we should not limit ourselves to just artistic images. In the world of visibility, art is essentially a niche. In his book *What Do Pictures Want?* W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that images have a hidden agenda, though he clearly means not images as such, but their senders, who want something from us. Images play on emotions, they persuade us to do something. Billboards, for example, are especially powerful. This leads to the emergence of cultural movements like “adbusters,” who destroy and paint over ads on billboards as a sign of rebellion against corporations and unwanted ideological messages. But the images themselves are not to blame, they are held hostage by their users. Iconoclasm results not from something images do, but from the actions of those who use them as messages.

What are your main research interests?

My interests stem from the study of photography, from the combination of its theoretical and practical aspects. I’m interested in seeking answers to questions about the cultural significance of photography as a medium that has transformed not only Western European culture, but also global culture. For example, it is worth bearing in mind that photography appeared in Japan as early as the 1840s and became an important part of Japanese culture.

A painting being used as a backdrop for action, Tamás Péli, “Birth,” *Documenta Fifteen*, Kassel 2022



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This research area is related to how photography transforms the world, which is discussed for example by the scholar Steve Edwards. He writes that we can't go back to the world "before photography," because this medium has given us access to a world we would not otherwise be able to see. It's also interesting to note that we think the world is actually like what we see in photographs, whereas they in fact show us quite different dimensions of time and space. For example, quite a few of the stars we see in telescope images actually died a long time ago. The transformation brought by photography cannot be undone.

Although I find research into photography important, on a daily basis I focus more on the relationship between technological media, their use, and environmental education. This trend is developing very rapidly, and artists are more aware of the social and cultural role that art plays in popularizing scientific knowledge. I find it extremely inspiring to see how artists and scholars work together. We can look at this collaboration from two perspectives: on the one hand, researchers are looking for ways to communicate knowledge in such a way that it is accessible to laypeople. How can we explain something that is understood by experts? How do we take this knowledge beyond the laboratory? On the other hand, there are such trends as art & science or art@science, involving close encounters between scientific and artistic research. As Monika Bakke writes, science and art have different tasks, so artists do not want to replace scientists, but they can sometimes become "translators" of the complicated language of science.

How do attitudes to images change over time, for example in Poland?

They are certainly changing because the world around us is changing. This evolution can be observed in two fields: analyses and studies of visibility, which go beyond the tradition of art history. One group of visual culture researchers has emerged who study specifically how images change within culture and how they change culture. How did they function in the past, both the distant and the recent past? This group includes Iwona Kurz, Krzysztof Pijarski, Karolina Le-

wandowska, and Maciej Szymanowicz, among other scholars. As for the second trend, I'd describe it as educational and action-oriented. It is represented, for example, by the "Archeology of Photography" Foundation.

Completely new fields of research are emerging, too. For example, Magda Kamińska of the Institute of Cultural Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University, studies the culture of memes. Her example shows very well that researchers want to keep abreast of what is happening in visual culture. Since viewers sometimes use images in a way that detaches them from words and contexts, visual culture researchers place growing emphasis on the need for education. Although young people are technically savvy recipients of this culture, they often lack the competence to decode images correctly and safely.

In the 1990s, the philosopher Vilém Flusser wrote that it was important to become immune to media messages. He referred to programmers as sorcerers who use modern magic, so we must be aware of this magic if we want to remain free from its influence. In contrast, Ariella Azoulay is a very committed researcher who has introduced the term "civil imagination," meaning awareness of responsibility for the use of an image. Examples include situations in which a photographer captures the image of a person who is suffering. The question is, how can this act affect the person? What are the consequences of this photograph for that particular individual? Also, what is the context in which the photograph will be used? Azoulay is opposed to trends in which it is argued that people with cameras or smartphones can photograph anything without any consequences for themselves or others and, for example, publish such images. It is not true that images are innocent. While they are neutral until they are used, they are not innocent, because they are always part of how they will be used. In my opinion, this is a very important issue regardless of the culture in which such images were produced. In such situations, they become open to abuse.

INTERVIEW BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PhD

Further reading

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Bakke M., *Bio-transfiguracje* [Bio-transfigurations], 2012.

Mirzoeff N., *How to See the World*, 2016.

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