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Special issue  
Visual motifs

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Introduction

## Visual motifs and representations of power in the public sphere

Media images representing the different centres of power and the public sphere are often articulated with visual motifs drawn from cinema, painting, and other iconographic traditions. Rather than distancing images from their traditional sources, the expansion of social media has underscored the importance of the user-spectator's experience with the forms of self-representation of the various holders of power: politicians, business leaders, the judiciary, law enforcement, and social movements. Our hypothesis is that there is an organized set of motifs for representing typical situations in public life that depend on the spectator's prior knowledge of these staging models, which constitute fertile ground for the analysis of their ambiguity and their communicative and political effectiveness.

The objective of this special issue is to open up dialogue and interaction between film and visual arts scholars and researchers in social and political communication with the aim of identifying the core principles of the system for the self-production of images of power that characterises our times.

As Carlo Ginzburg points out in *Fear, Reverence, Terror: Five Essays in Political Iconography*, in every image the current political narrative coexists with a background that is at once historical, religious, and iconographic, conveying the emotional content and the codes for expressing power, which often survive from one era to the next. The article on political iconography that begins this special issue explores this relationship between the appeal to the emotions made by images and what Aby Warburg referred to as *Pathosformeln*, the formula of gestures

to express passion, in the context of contemporary political campaigns, often based on evoking the afterlife (*Nachleben*) of gestures of the past that express enthusiasm, fear, or rage.

Images of power have been re-appropriated by social media in the form of memes, GIFs, and mashups. Along with the dissemination of visual motifs themselves, their contemporary reinventions by *prosumers* on social media platforms are a source of interest. There is a significant tradition of studies in political iconography based on the seminal work of Aby Warburg and developed by authors like Erwin Panofsky, Horst Bredekamp, Monica Centanni, Georges Didi-Huberman, Christian Joschke and Patrick Boucheron, as well as the aforementioned Carlo Ginzburg. Their attention to the central role of visual motifs in the construction of the public space converges with the explorations of numerous theorists in other fields, such as: art theory and criticism (Boris Groys, Hito Steyerl, Harun Farocki); political philosophy (Giorgio Agamben); film studies (Nicole Brenez, Alain Bergala, Emmanuelle André); photography theory (Ariella Azoulay), social semiotics (Theo van Leeuwen), cognitive iconology (Ian Verstegen) and production studies (Banks, Caldwell, Du Guy, Thompson and Burns), with attention to the degrees of consciousness and control over the images produced, whether in film and photojournalism or in the praxis of news reporting, television documentaries or online productions.

Social media and transmedia integration into the formulas of public and political communication and the work of the traditional media urgently require new explorations of the ways these visual motifs are disseminated, in order to analyse the mechanisms for the

production of images of power and the visual constants that connect them. The object of study is a process of collective negotiation of the visual where film and art is not so much a destination as a gateway to different screens and new formats, which the lockdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have only served to accentuate.

In this context, and in view of the markedly contemporary awareness of the emotional use of images in the new public sphere of what Franco 'Bifo' Berardi calls semio-capitalism, and the mutations of cognition and sensibility produced by networking, neuromarketing, and necropolitical phenomena, this issue brings together a series of empirical studies and substantiated theoretical approaches that very clearly contribute to the development of an understanding of the ways in which power and the public space are staged, how their images are interpreted by the public, and what mechanisms are used for the appropriation and reinvention of iconographic sources.

In the collection of articles that reflect on these questions, this special issue confirms many of the points touched on in the hypothesis outlined above. Indeed, the analysis of visual motifs related to iconographic memory has been used as an instrument to gain a better understanding of the systems of self-representation of power. An example of this is the widespread use of emotive gestures by politicians in media images, analysed in an article here that explores the iconography of emotive formulas in politics, from the handshake to the kiss, which, as Bredekamp points out, are always associated with strategies of power and submission. Similarly, the article on the visual imaginary of economic power analyses the forms of representation of a realm of power that typically represses efforts to represent it; as Giorgio Agamben suggests in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, economic power, as an earthly hierarchy of control, has generally kept to the shadows. Another of the articles included here explores the creation of images by the Spanish Crown, through a unique approach and based on a theoretical framework of public relations that enriches the iconography: the analysis of nearly a thousand public ceremonies organized by the Royal Household of Spain serves to map out a system of dialogic communication between the Crown and its subjects, sustained on the protocol of scheduled ceremonies.

This representation of contemporary power and its dissolution is the focus of the article analysing the television series *Years and Years*, with the aim of presenting its images as an iconography of the present that reflects the social malaise, the humanitarian disasters, the economic crisis or the loss of home life in a paraphrase of the famous Jameson quote cited by Mark Fisher, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism." This series belongs to an aesthetic trend in contemporary television that portrays a model of society in which the apocalypse, the end of the world, has been transformed into a permanently deferred end time. The political vision through artistic representation is also the main focus of the article analysing the visual ideology of Josep Maria Sert's murals in the Rockefeller Center, a reading of Jacint Verdaguer's poem about Atlantis that relates it to the values of capitalism, the utopia of progress, and the celebration of individualism.

In this special issue's proposal to analyse the forms of contemporary power, the current pandemic makes its presence felt in a significant number of the articles selected. This unprecedented situation provides an opportunity to reflect on the reformulation of the visual motif of police violence in public spaces, with the identification of three new variables: the witness-gaze, the protest-gaze, and the lynching-gaze, which are used to enact and intensify the forms of public control and surveillance. The pandemic also offers new readings for the iconography of the corpse in the public sphere, a central theme of another article, raising the ethical dilemma of which types of images of bodies and death are displayed and which are not, in a genealogy of the motif that also extends to expressions of grief and mourning. On this same question of the iconographic effects of COVID-19, another article analyses the new aesthetic of representation for the figure of the scientist, as personalities that have turned

into community leaders due to their omnipresence in the media, assuming a political and referential role.

As noted above, it is not only power that participates in its own staging, as its presence generates alternative forms of expression that call it into question, inverting its codes with the aim of creating critical spaces of freedom. The article on urban art in Madrid since the late 1990s takes a sample of 15 artists to show the centrality of this type of art in criticism of the political system, in a study that combines field work with iconographic analysis. Similarly, an analysis of fourth-wave feminism through Instagram posts for International Women's Day reveals the expressive role of colour, and of linguistic and iconic signs in the creation of graphics representing cyberfeminism. On the other hand, through the idea of sublimation and appealing to what Didi-Huberman has referred to as "phenomena of under-representation" of groups and peoples, the analysis of blogs produced by African American communities demonstrates how the iconographic construction of social media can support instruments of communication against racial oppression that can give a voice and credibility to marginalised groups through digital language.

The forms of representation of right-wing extremist movements are also the focus of a number of the articles featured in this issue. An article analysing audiovisual productions by major political parties of the extreme right in Europe investigates their forms of propaganda and reveals the genealogy of the visual motifs on which they are based, as a reconstruction of the aesthetic system created by the propaganda films of the Third Reich, but also with forms of glorification of the leader evocative of post-modern "sword-and-sandal" films. Another of the articles analyses the parodic reconstruction of Francoist Spain's No-Do newsreels in the Catalan comedy TV series *Polònia*, with the objective of satirising the extreme right in Spain through the re-appropriation of the visual motifs of Francoism and the destruction of its rhetorical strategies.

And finally, another article explores the paradox of the partnership between power and the contemporary prosumer's forms of representation on social media through an analysis of Bolsonaro's presidential campaign based on memes produced by the campaign itself: a series of memes targeting political adversaries, feminism, racialized individuals and poverty. In this case, an expressive instrument normally associated with movements that criticise power through humour is used by power itself to impose its message legitimising hate.

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