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Visual Culture Revisited

German and American Perspectives on
Visual Culture(s)

Herbert von Halem Verlag

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Preface

Every book has a history. Usually it is part of this history that editors have to pedal late contributors to hand in their texts, to find a good publisher, and to correct the manuscripts. Of course, this also applies to the book at hand. In 2003, conversations and discussions about and around visual culture led a Polish and several German academics to establish a network of interdisciplinary scholars. We had met at the Fulbright American Studies Summer Institute 2003 for Young University Teachers in Amherst, Boston and New York as representatives of a number of different fields, namely philology, social sciences, media and cultural studies, philosophy, theatre studies, art history and art. Soon, we were joined by several American scholars and the idea was born to organize the conference *Visual Culture Revisited. German and American Perspectives on Visual Culture(s)*.¹ Generous funding from the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung in Cologne, Germany, enabled us to meet at the hospitable John F. Kennedy Institut für Nordamerikastudien at the Freie Universität Berlin in April of 2005.

This book features the articles based on the papers and challenging discussions at the Berlin conference. Its existence rests in large measures with the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, to which we are again deeply indebted for generously subsidizing the printing costs. Regarding its content, the present collection of articles speaks to the multifaceted reactions that found expression in the different approaches to answer the questions

1 We realize that the conference title did not give due credit to our Polish minority: Dear Janusz, please accept our belated but heartfelt apologies!

that both guided and challenged us during our days in Berlin and the United States: Can we define visual culture in terms of general features, or are we bound to deal with visual cultures in the plural? How do different disciplines conceive of and represent divergent concepts of visual culture? How do they approach the phenomenon? Which impact does visual culture have on the notion of a collective memory? Furthermore: To what extent do visual media reference each other? Which commonalities, which differences between the various media should be highlighted, and what are the respective analytical consequences?

The pop star Rod Stewart once wrote in a song that »every picture tells a story.« As the articles in this book exemplify, visual culture is in no way a singular phenomenon. Instead, there is a plurality of pictorial representations – from the sitcom to illustrations in children’s books, from cartoons to holograms. In this respect Stewart’s insight has to be complemented: Every type of image, every type of representation tells a different story. Furthermore, the articles published here challenge the naïve notion that there exists a uniform visual culture. Despite what a logocentric critique of images continuously insinuates, the visual dimension of cultures is ideologically not simplistic and definitely not homogenous. Rather, this dimension is itself – in the terms of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony – a contested field, a fact rendered visible in images of ›the Other‹ and pictures of Native Americans, for example. On one side, they are adopted by advertisers as exotic ingredients, while on the other side supplying a countercultural memory. Similar antipodes exist in respect to the location of images, as can be seen in the analysis of museums as institutions: *What an image shows, where and in what context it is shown* is also reason for argument and conflict.

In five chapters – *The Production of Knowledge in Visual Culture*, *The Politics of Pictures*, *Imaginary Discourses – Discourses of the Image*, *Visual Challenges to Institutions*, and, finally, *Image, Identity, and Alterity* –, arguments and conflicts that these different discourses procure are pictured, examined, and analyzed. Within this scope, topics range from concrete case studies to reflections on the scholarly discourse of the ›iconic‹, ›pictorial‹ or ›imagic turn‹, which has affected the debate since the 1980s. The articles deal with the question of which visualities prevail in mainstream culture and which are *subsumed* in notions of counter culture. They focus on the main paradox of visualization: enabling to comprehend the incomprehensible by visual means – to visualize the invisible. They apprehend the challenges

that institutions are facing which highly depend on visuality, such as museums and theatres, and examine ways that have emerged to comprise recent media. And they altercate with a phenomenon that is too often suppressed in discourses on globalization: There is a clash within the visual, mirrored in the images that each of us carries in his or her head, adjusted in the collective memory: ›The Other‹ does not necessarily vanish when depicted as either exotic or folkloristic duplicate of ›our Own‹. Different sources – be they hegemonial or marginalized – provide for divergent depictions, controversial approaches and challenged concepts.

As an enduring theme, controversy and challenge characterize all sections and articles of this book. This illuminates why it makes sense to talk about just *one* visual culture in spite of the plurality of different types of images. Images do not stand for themselves, and they also cannot be understood by themselves, instead they are included in (partly contradictory) practices. This holds true for both illustrations in and the layout of an underground journal and for the form and arrangement of mainstream tv. And this is the specific *aspect* of visual culture. With this credo, corroborated by our articles from divergent disciplines, this book takes a critical stance toward a more simplistic media theory as put forth, for instance, by Vilém Flusser, but also of attempts in the new German *Bildwissenschaft*. We are critical of such media theory because it is built on a *determinism* of media producing pictures instead of an understanding that conceives of such media mainly as a *condition*; and we are critical of the German *Bildwissenschaft* because its semiotic and phenomenological descriptions marginalize the (always also political) aspects of acting with and through pictures.

The articles in this book provide not only a panorama of visual culture as an assortment of simultaneous and intersecting practices but also highlight the manifold references illustrating the complex embedment of visual culture in a historical perspective. In other words, without the knowledge of the ›God's eye‹ metaphor there is no understanding of the political dimension of satellite photos, without Christian iconography no insight into the function of war photography. Insofar this book represents a plea for the practice that has been at the heart of this project: interdisciplinary work combined with transgressing the border between so-called ›high‹ and ›low‹ culture – in both directions.

Finally, an intricate part of this book's history is the editors' experience that cooperation neither has to be built on a hierarchical structure

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nor relies on one particular place for its central coordination. Amazingly, whenever something had to be done someone was always there to do it. The time of this wonderful experience unfortunately – at least for now – is over. What stays with us is the deep insight that the idiom ›I got the picture‹ by no means is the last word, but rather marks only the beginning of new research.

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