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Contested Images: Iconographical approaches to the MENA-region

Perrine Lachenal and Georg Leube

This special issue of META: Middle East, Topics and Arguments, engages with the methodology of iconography, an area that was originally developed in the study of art history and material culture. In these traditions, iconography is used to reconstruct the meaning of depictions, buildings and other material artifacts, and it does so by integrating the elements of a given representation into its broader historical and cultural context. Ideally, iconography thereby becomes a means of reconstructing both the original aims of the producer of a message, and the ways in which that message was received by its original audience.

In this volume of META, we argue that this approach can and should be adapted to fields transcending the frame of art history and material culture in order to allow iconography to become relevant to the greater field of Social and Cultural Studies

as a whole. We see iconography, or the synchronistic study of the combination of discrete elements in spatially and temporally bounded areas, as a powerful tool in reconstructing the relationship between the sender and the receiver of a message by focusing on the semiotic context, or Language of Forms (Formensprache), in which communication takes place. By focusing especially on the permeability between different repertoires, the performativity inherent in any act of social communication and the technology underlying the mobilization of semantically charged elements, we aim to explore some of the most promising dimensions in which we believe iconographical approaches can be fruitfully employed in Social and Cultural Studies.

Keywords: Iconography, Art History, Poststructuralism, Visual Culture

Grappling with images I: Iconography as an Art Historical Concept

If one does not enjoy the painter's art, he is unjust to the truth and wisdom, which also inspires poets. For both, poets and painters, contribute equally to the deeds and the renown of heroes. He also does not appreciate proportion, by means of which art touches reason. (Philostratus, *Imagines* I, 1, 2).

From its inception in classical antiquity, the tradition of iconography or a *description of the semantically relevant parts of pictures* operated on two distinct levels. The proper description of pictures was formalized in a rhetorical discipline that established a firm set of rules and techniques. Iconography thereby formed the equivalent of what, nowadays, would most likely be defined as a methodology. Iconography thus is more than the simple attempt to talk about pictures and understand their meaning; it is also a methodological approach and a rhetorical standard that governs the way in which the analysis of pictures is to be verbalized.

This verbalization of the description of pictures, statues or other ensembles of semantically charged signs is categorically dependent on cultural traditions. If Philostratos privileges, in the preface to his collection of descriptions of pictures, interpretation over technical description

by reversing the logical sequence of a description of details and proportions, and then follows this with attempts to decode the truth and wisdom inspiring the artist, he is motivated by rhetorical concerns. His employment of the rhetorical device of *hysteron proteron* or “the later before the first” lays open the dependence of iconographical methods, and other methodologies, on cultural traditions: Where we would probably insist on the “natural order” of description preceding interpretation, Philostratus is part of the rhetorical splendor of the “Second Sophistic”. In his application of the *hysteron proteron* rhetorical device, he also follows the accepted norms of his times by privileging truth and wisdom over mere technicalities such as proportion.

The bipartite structure of the term iconography, combining the verbalization of pictures with a methodological standard, continues to this day. Just as not every verbalization of pictures amounts to an iconography, the methodology of iconography can be applied to ensembles of semantically charged signs other than pictures.

The modern methodology of iconography was, nonetheless, developed mainly on the basis of pictures by Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky. The latter decisively formalized the method of verbalizing pic-

tures in his classic “Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art” (51-82). In keeping with epistemological concerns of his time, Panofsky aimed to establish a standard of methodological rigor by clearly separating description from interpretation. According to him, the description of pictures needs to follow a tripartite structure. The first two steps are the description of the elements, defined as the “pre-iconographical description” by Panofsky, and the identification of subject matter, which Panofsky sees as the iconography proper. The latter transcends the mechanical description in so far as the elements described in the first step are now integrated into their cultural background.

In Panofsky’s famous example, the “male figure with a knife” described in the first step is iconographically revealed to represent St. Bartholomew (Panofsky 54). This is then followed by the third step in Panofsky’s methodology, concerned with intrinsic meaning or content and is “apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion” qualified by one personality and condensed into one work” (Panofsky 55). Panofsky differentiated this third step from iconography

proper and designated it: iconology (Panofsky 57).

Influential as Panofsky’s methodology remains, his approach has been criticized as too schematic. While his reification of a language of forms, which could be applied almost mechanically to previously described elements of a depiction, appears to problematically simplify the complex reciprocal relationship between artist, viewer and cultural context, it is necessitated by Panofsky’s methodological concern to clearly divide an objective description of the subject matter from subjective interpretation. In his example of “a male figure with a knife”, the identification as St. Bartholomew appears entirely unproblematic notwithstanding the possibility of a complex or even mutually contradictory interplay of different “iconographical” repertoires in any given representation. At the same time, the interpretative third step, that which Panofsky proposes to define as iconology, also needs to be grounded in factual argument and is therefore not as subjective and detached from the “mechanical” study of cultural context as Panofsky suggests.

The most “open” approach to iconography, which also underlies much of this volume’s experimentation with what we see as iconographical approaches, is pre-

sented by Krautheimer in his magisterial "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture'" (first published 1942, post-scripted German translation 1988). In this article, his inquiry into the semantically charged parameters of a pre-modern perception of architecture enables the interpretation of a group of hexagonal, octagonal and round buildings across medieval Europe as architectural copies imitating the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. This demonstration of the decisive role of cultural context in establishing the semantic equivalence of hexagonal, octagonal and round structures in medieval Europe serves to de-objectify Panofsky's second step of iconography and opens iconographical methodology to the interpretation of the interplay of any finite number of semantically charged elements in general.

In a postscript dated 1987 in the German translation of his article, Krautheimer stresses the possibility of accommodating multilayered and even mutually contradictory interpretations within iconographical methodology. Where Panofsky aimed to objectify the relationship between the artist and the culturally charged iconographical repertoire in a one-sided process of artistic appropriation, Krautheimer admits the ultimate impossibility of dividing between the

continuation of tradition unchallenged by artistic intervention, conscious emulation of tradition by the artist, artistic intervention and later interpretation (Krautheimer 194). This methodical skepticism "opens" the iconographical investigation by admitting a great deal of tentative experimentation, which is especially relevant in the study of societies and cultures outside the narrow scope of Western academia. Rather than attempt a "definition" of otherness, iconography thus serves as a method that enables tentative readings of semantically charged ensembles, and describes possible contextualizations without necessarily claiming supra-cultural objectivity for its suggestions.

Grappling with images II: A poststructuralist pictorial shift in the Humanities?

For a long time, the history of art remained the primary discipline for engaging with depictions, and other fields of research were reluctant to seriously involve themselves with art-historical methodologies such as iconography. If images appeared in academic works, they served as illustrations for reinforcing verbalized scientific demonstrations. Academic works used images to strengthen the aesthetic appeal of given research, but the images themselves were not an item of interest in and of themselves. It was only in the course of

a growing weariness of essentialist truths in the sixties and seventies of the last century that pictorial sources, with all their inherent ambiguity, were firmly integrated into the mainstream material being employed in inquiries in the wider field of Social and Cultural Studies.

Roland Barthes is one of the main intellectual actors of this shift. His work constituted a decisive invitation to social and human scientists to explore paths that they had previously avoided, putting images at the forefront of the analysis. In his essay, "Rhétorique de l'image" of 1964, Barthes explains that an image is made up of a complex and meaningful "architecture" or "system" of signs. His stimulating semiotic approach explored the action of "reading" images, taking into consideration the "upstream" and "downstream" processes conditioning any such endeavor.

When someone speaks, not only are the words which are said important, but how they have been chosen and how they are pronounced by the speaker, and what is heard and eventually understood by the interlocutor, are all significant (Barthes "Rhétorique", 48). Similarly, anyone who wants to engage in the analysis of images should pay attention not only to what is visibly in front of them, but also what these images convey and what they were meant to convey (Barthes "Rhétorique",

40). Any one image simultaneously carries multiple messages and Barthes makes a clear distinction between “linguistic” (in case there are words in or around the image), “denotative” and “connotative” messages. Denotation, or the “denotative”, refers to the “literal” message of the image, visible through exhaustive descriptions of figures, materials, shapes, colors, lights, typographies, etc. Connotation, or the “connotative”, refers to the interpretation of the denotation, the contexts and the ways through which image meanings are produced, transmitted and perceived. In a previous essay called „Le message photographique“, published in 1961, Barthes stresses the vain nature of the project that isolates the denotative message. There cannot be any pure form of denotation, he warns: any image is immediately understood through cultural and historical categories and language (Barthes “Message”, 136). Images are polysemous, Barthes argues, and there is something fundamentally uncertain in the messages they carry (Barthes “Rhétorique”, 44). Michel Foucault, who also played an important role in this epistemological shift, investigated this ‘polysemousity’ further. In considering the plurality of messages contained in images, he tried to decipher the nature of the link between the act of

depicting and that which is actually depicted – in other words between “signifiers” and “signifieds”. While looking at the famous painting of René Magritte, Foucault builds on the classical theme of truth and on the issues of imitation and resemblance. His evocation of a “subtle”, “uncertain” and “insistent” link between image and reality remains highly stimulating to academic research to this day (Foucault 30).

From the seventies onward, research in Social and Cultural Studies began vigorously engaging with fields previously considered minor or marginal. The growing interest in iconographical perspectives brought a fresh approach to academic research and new light on classical topics of the humanities (Dezé 13-29). Iconography as a useful tool for various fields of research has been enriched and refined via extensive interdisciplinary exchanges. Works by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists, and philosophers across the board confirm that images should be considered social practices and “collective actions” (Becker 767). Such iconographical approaches address, as Barthes suggested, not only images but also the ways in which these images are created, materially produced, socially used and symbolically vested.

Images are social performances that take part in the production of individuals, bodies and subjectivities.

A particularly informative example of iconographical approaches fruitfully employed in previously marginalized fields is gender. Gender is largely performed and produced via images, as the 1976 pioneering research of Erving Goffman regarding women's and men's portrayals in advertisements reveals. Magazines' pictures, he argues, provide performative messages about gendered roles and hierarchies, relying on processes of naturalization and “ritualization” of subordination (Goffman 84). Judith Butler goes beyond the idea of “roles”, which might be superficially connoted, to assert that gender is nothing but a performance and that images are part of a social script, constantly producing and actualizing gender differences (Butler 528).

In social and political sciences, the flourishing production of papers regarding social movements and iconographies demonstrates the relevance of iconographical approaches. Many works argue that iconography is not only concerned with pictures or paintings, but that it can integrate a wider scope of material objects including stickers, posters, t-shirts, stamps, placards, and flyers. All these objects are intimately linked to “discourses” of contes-

tation through which reconfigurations of power are formed (Dézé 17). Subtle performances of image art can be seen as forms of contestation and resistance in certain political and historical contexts – consider women's patchworked “arpilleras” during and after Pinochet's repressive rule of Chile (Adams 29-52).

The recent revolutions in North Africa and West Asia provide other examples of the relevance of considering images as social “discourses” and as means to communicate, inform, serve or contest existing or projected social orders. By extension, images can be a performance of identity and collective memory; these images are naturally contested, censured, corrected and sometimes even destroyed. Since the Arab Spring of 2011, fierce battles have been taking place on the murals of major cities across the MENA-region. For instance, the contestation between civilian activist artists and the government over images on the public walls of Cairo reveals the reconfigurations of identity, memory and power (Abaza). The creation and destruction of images has played a major political and historical role throughout human history. In the 8th century, during the rule of the Byzantine Empire, the ban and destruction of religious images and icons was reason enough to start wars. For a modern-day example, con-

sider Denmark in 2005, when the controversial comic representations of the Prophet Muhammad led to violent mobilizations all over the world.

Presentation of META8 Iconography

The particular aptitude of iconographical approaches in contextualizing and grounding vigorously contested fields of academic inquiry beyond the “mere” interpretation of images is demonstrated by **Tobias Akira Schickhaus** in his contribution to the META section of this volume. By following the strictly defined steps of Panofsky's iconographical method in his analysis of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, this article turns “the gaze of the researcher back onto himself” and seeks to show how Said's image of the Orient as a “fierce lion”, his geographical construction of a coherent “Orient” and his repetition of a discourse of “othering” the Orient are all firmly and exclusively grounded in a Western tradition of scholarship. Paradoxically, Said's *Orientalism*, ostentatiously setting out to emancipate the Orient from external domination, emerges as a work firmly grounded in Western Orientalist tradition, thereby, replicating the biases and structural imbalances of the discourse it critiques.

The work of Islamic archaeologist and art historian Scott Redford, by contrast, does

indeed engage with material remains, including images of eagles, princes and dragons from Medieval Anatolia. His work, however, transcends the frame of strictly iconographical approaches in an integrated discussion of material and written remains of the Seljuks of Rum. When we contacted Professor Redford to ask for the illustration contained in this volume, he accordingly replied that he did not “think of himself as an iconographer” and stated that he was interested in what we would “do” with his scholarship. While we are certain that **Philip Bockholt's** presentation of Professor Redford's work in our CLOSE UP-section is up to any academic standard, we hope to compellingly show how it is precisely Professor Redford's adaptation of art historical methods in combining diverse source materials that prefigures the interest of this issue in iconographical approaches.

Our FOCUS-section features four contributions that demonstrate the adaptability of iconographical approaches by engaging with widely different fields. **Joachim Ben Yakoub** embarks on an iconological analysis of the Tunisian Revolution of 2010 / 2011. By focusing on the contested mobilization, subversion and re-imagination of the Tunisian flag, this contribution follows the controversial negotiation of in- and exclusion among Tunisian society up to

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currently works as a Post-Doc researcher as part of the 'Re-Configurations' research network at the CNMS (Center for Near and Middle-Eastern Studies) at the Philipps-Universität of Marburg, Germany. Her research addresses revolutionary iconographies in Tunisia and Egypt, including gender and social class perspectives. It focuses on emerging memorial places, taken as platforms upon which larger political debate are played out, and deals with the democratization of the production of martyrs images and popular representations of martyrdom. Perrine Lachenal obtained her PhD in Social Anthropology in 2015 from Aix-Marseille University, France. Her thesis is an ethnographic study conducted between 2011 and 2012 in Cairo on self-defense classes for women that have emerged in recent years in Egypt. **email:** plachenal@mmsch.univ-aix.fr

the constitution adopted in January 2014. In shifting from a symbol of an essentially Islamic state to an explicit marker of the exclusion of Islamist and Salafi groups that opposed the "constitutional compromise" of 2014, the Crescent- and Star-symbolism of the Tunisian flag illustrate the fundamental "openness" of any semiotically charged image for reappraisal and subversion.

In her analysis of the iconography of Coptic protests following the so-called "Maspero Massaker" of 2011 in Egypt, **Yosra El Gendi** describes the attempts of Coptic demonstrators to appropriate the visual heritage of Pharaonic Egypt and place it at the heart of the modern Egyptian state. By ostentatiously claiming Pre-Islamic and Pre-Christian symbols as part of their iconography of mourning and flying the Egyptian flag side by side with the Coptic cross, the demonstrators attempted to subvert the dominant narrative of Egypt as an Islamic state. By laying claim to the Pharaonic heritage, their protests instead advocate the notion that modern Egypt still embodies traditions from Pharaonic times, especially through its Christian Coptic minority.

Drawing attention to the strong cultural ties of Islam as practiced in the Balkans to the MENA-region, **Gianfranco Bria** and **Gustavo Mayerà** explore the significance

of an 'Alid iconography in Albanian Bektashi Islam. By focusing on the specific setting of post-communist Albania, recovering from the state-sanctioned atheism of Enver Hoxha, this contribution shows how the existence of an Islamicate visual iconography of venerated icons serves to strengthen the perceived alliance between religious actors spanning confessional divides. At the same time, the specific materiality of iconographical emblems allows for identification and appraisal of different external actors who are attempting to influence this visual revival of Albanian Bektashism. In this way, the authors show how Albanian Bektashis, through their employment of venerated icons, posit their visual sphere both in relation to inner-Albanian discourses of religion in post-atheist society and in relation to the Islamic world at large.

In turning to the contested urban topography of Jerusalem's Old City, **Thomas Richard** demonstrates the particular importance of spatial contextualization in iconographical discussions. Due to the outstanding touristic appeal of Jerusalem, the urban topography of its Old City becomes a contested ground on which both Israeli and Palestinian actors attempt to entangle international visitors in their narrative of the town's heritage. As visitors to Jerusalem expect to find an Oriental

town, both sides iconographically lay claim to an Oriental visual heritage in their attempts to establish a hegemony over the urban topography of Jerusalem, and in doing so, frequently laying claim to the same repertoire of images that the other side bases their contesting claims on.

This essential openness of an iconographical vocabulary for contesting claims and valorizations is explored in **Ömer Fatih Parlak's** ANTI/THESIS-article, which describes the antagonist images of "the Turk" in Early Modern ludic culture. By identifying three mutually contradictory strands of "images" of the Turk in 15th to 18th Century European playing cards and board games, this article demonstrates how competing narratives of the Turk as a biblical enemy, a symbol of stagnation and bad luck, a knightly figure on a par with contemporary Christian rulers and even a guide to the player's personal fortune could exist simultaneously in the iconographic repertoire of games.

This volume of META concludes with two contributions that are not directly connected to the topic of iconography. **Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu's** OFF TOPIC-article engages with the "explosion of meanings" surrounding the idea of martyrdom in contemporary Turkish politics, while **Steffen Wippel** critically appraises two new monographs that engage with

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the town of Tanger, Morocco, for META's REVIEW-section.

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