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Icons, Intensity and Idiocy: A Comment on the Symposium

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Icons, Intensity and Idiocy

A Comment on the Symposium

by Gillian Rose

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The current moment is one in which the production and circulation of images is immensely larger, more extensive and more frequent than ever before. We are all familiar with the numbers of videos uploaded to YouTube and photographs to Snapchat; or, rather, we may not remember the exact number but we know them to be, simply, huge. Our Facebook feeds are full of images; your tweets are more likely to be retweeted if they include a picture; we carry vast family albums on our mobile phones. The notion of the “icon,” however, insists that not all of the images in this pictorial deluge are equivalent; as Hariman and Lucaites say in their essay in this journal, “while most images seem dispensable, icons stand out.” This special issue offers a rich commentary on the conceptualisation of icons understood in this way, and on methods for studying them.

As Bartmanski explicates so well, sociology – and indeed, much of the social sciences with the exceptions of anthropology and geography – have for a long while been suspicious of images. This suspicion has disappeared at least in part over the past twenty years, and visual culture, visual sociology and visual research methods are all now lively and vigorous fields of discussion and debate: this special issue is witness to that shift. Given that weight of long-term disciplinary indifference, however, the question of why has this change occurred is an interesting one [Rose 2014.] The answer from sociologists is that they are simply responding to the changed contemporary circumstances to which this commentary has just referred: social life is now so saturated with images, iconic or otherwise, that we just have to pay them attention.

That attention has been deeply shaped by the theoretical currents dominating the social sciences now. Primary among these – and evident in all the papers here – are concerns with practice, materiality, and emotion. My comments will focus on these three areas.

First, though, it is important to emphasise that the body of work on “iconicity” is a particularly strong and focused contribution to understanding what role a certain kind of image is now playing in relation to the social. Its strength is precisely the careful attention it pays to just how a particular image gains social traction through its connection both to discursive frames and to structures of feeling. The focus on just one sort of image – the iconic image – is vital, I think. Visual production is now so pervasive that it is not possible to theorise about “images” in general: they are too diverse, they do too many things, they appear in too many places, they are embedded in so many different social practices. So focusing on one specific kind of image, defining its specificity and examining its particular effects, seems a crucial conceptual move.

Empirically, the papers here focus on the sorts of images that have constituted icons for decades: photojournalism and logos. Magaudda explores the fascination with Apple’s branding and suggests how it is enacted through a range of social practices, including marketing campaigns and their reframing, while Pogliano and Kurasawa examine the creation of photographic icons in newsrooms. There is a necessary and important emphasis in these papers on social practices of different kinds, and the ways in which images are embedded in these. However, Pogliano’s ethnographic study of newspaper editors making decisions about what photographs (and cartoons) to use also implicitly raises an important question about the widespread turn to “practice” as an explanatory category, in my view. While I share the conviction held by both Pogliano and Kurasawa that ethnographies of practice are vital to understanding how images work and create effects [Degen et al. 2015; Rose 2012], ethnographic work with professionals who work with images also raises very directly the question of the role of taste, intuition, judgement – I’m not sure what to call it – of those professionals, who look at an image and have a “gut reaction” to it. In the case of the newsroom, there are the photo editors who just “know” which is the image to go for; in the case of, for example, an architect’s office, a visualiser looking at a digital render of the architect’s design will make endless adjustments to the image to get it looking “right.” What are we to make of these creative subjects, making their judgement calls? Clearly, much of their judgement is, as various contributors to this special issue make clear, shaped by professional training (hence the photo editor’s horror of a cameraphone snap) and by historical precedent or “conventions.”

The emphasis on practice, however, particularly when inflected by Actor Network Theory and its interest in the agency of technologies and devices, has created a

certain uninterest in the human subject. This is an important absence, it seems to me, particularly in relation to understanding the professional production of the powerful images that now surround us asking us to shop and play. Understanding the labour of producing iconic images needs to theorise the subjectivity of creative labour, I think, as a process of evaluation, experiment and synthesis by *reflexive* subjects [Taylor and Littleton 2012], as the ethnographies here demonstrate very well.

Two things are currently substituted for human subjectivity in the current theoretical moment, it seems to me. One is “the emotional” or “the affective.” Several of the papers in this special issue explore the importance of emotion and affect in understanding iconic images. Hariman and Lucaites, Bartmanski, Kurasawa and Maguadda all emphasise that an image can become iconic because it condenses a number of culturally-resonant themes or because it generates powerful emotions (or both.) However, both in these essays and elsewhere, I wonder if enough attention is being paid to precisely what kinds of emotions are being generated, what forms they might take, their intensity, their ambivalence, their translation into forms of social action. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the current emphasis the ‘emotional’ and the ‘affective’ is that they are often discussed in very general terms, with very little attention paid to the complexities of human subjectivity. The aesthetic creativity of a visualiser or an architect or a photographer, for example, is not simply a question of “emotions” or “affects,” quite apart from the possibility that it might involve something we would want to call “reason” [Barnett 2008.]

In the absence of such a theorising of human reflexivity as part of what happens to images, not only are “affect” and “emotion” made to stand in for human subjectivity, but so too is “materiality.” Indeed, Bartmanski is typical in paying careful attention to the materiality of the image as a way of understanding how its sensory material affordances generate its emotive impact. Here again, however, I would urge some theoretical caution. The conflation of the material and the sensual (and often the visual too) is very common at the moment. It is evident in a number of approaches to new media, for example, where the agency of nonhuman digital devices is located in their materiality and in an unmediated, nonrepresentational relation to the human body. I agree that the materiality of an image is crucial to its social effects. In fact, once again, I think much more attention should be paid to the materiality of images, especially as so many images now are digital; how an image file is materialised through a range of other software and hardware is never straightforward, now, and can be far more diverse than many of the papers here pay attention to. After all, an image in a twitter feed does not demand the same attention as an image on the front page of a print newspaper; these distinct materialisations of images are inherent in the contemporary visual economy (as Kurasawa comes closest to acknowledging),

and they are often accompanied by quite different, routinised ways of seeing. And if we pay attention to those multiple materialisations and their associated ways of seeing, we will find that, while they are always, *senso stricto*, affective, they may very well not be emotional in the slightest. Indeed, some iconic images are very precisely designed to express a truth claim based on rational logic: think about the Peters map projection, for example, which aims to better represent the size of the less developed world.

Moreover, more thought is perhaps needed about what counts as “emotional.” Is boring an emotion? Can there be a boring icon, therefore? Is the emphasis on how icons entail strong, expressive emotional responses a consequence of the literature on icons tending to focus on already-existing powerfully resonant images, rather than on a quality inherent to them? The icons discussed in these papers, at least, tend toward the serious, the weighty, the challenging. Their power is understood in relation to important social and cultural frameworks. However, as Hartley [2012] has recently vigorously argued, a lot of social and cultural life is actually pretty silly. It’s about play, joking, joshing around, which can also be about experimenting, debating, mucking stuff up. Icons may not always be serious, either in their “surficial” subject matter or in relation to the issues they refer to in their “depths.” They can be idiotic [Goriunova 2013.] Indeed, digital practices and platforms may be generating an entirely different kind of icon: the viral icon. Viral icons are those online images that gain millions of hits, and should perhaps be understood less as resonant symptoms of social and cultural discourses and more as ludic play and experimentation, often silly but, in the prominence they gain, no less iconic for that.

Here, I agree with Kurasawa that the notion of a “visual economy” is productive. Remembering that an “economy” can be composed of very diverse forms of distribution and exchange, with all sorts of consequences, thinking about how images travel in a visual economy can address the complexity of image creation, circulation, materialisation, display, encounters with different ways of being seen. Understanding the visual economy as a geographically-dispersed network of both flows and pause-points means engaging with images in different forms travelling around the network, materialising in specific places, in specific social contexts, being bought and gifted and archived, trashed and altered, with the work of interpretation and/or feeling happening at every point. This approach gives a further layer of richness to the important question of how some images come to “stand out” in the immense visual economy of today.

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Gillian Rose is Professor of Cultural Geography at The Open University. Her research interests lie broadly in the field of visual culture, particularly on visuality as a kind of practice, done by human subjects in collaboration with different kinds of objects and technologies. She is also interested in innovative ways to produce social science research, especially using visual materials. Her recent research includes working with architects and digital visualisers on a UK Research Council funded project *Architectural Atmospheres*, which follows from the research project *Urban Aesthetics*. She is the author of *Visual Methodologies* [Sage, 2012, 3rd ed.] and *Doing Family Photography. The Domestic, the Public and the Politics of Sentiment* [Ashgate, 2010.] She blogs at <https://visualmethodculture.wordpress.com/>