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The Continued Relevance of the Icon: A Comment on the Symposium

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The Continued Relevance of the Icon

A Comment on the Symposium

by Marita Sturken

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What does it mean to think about icons and iconicity in the age of digital circulation? At a time when images circulate through complex circuits at rapid speed, when the traditional gatekeepers to image circulation have been relegated to the past, when new avenues of image circulation via social media have upended the concepts of networks, and when the capacity to transform, remake, mashup, and parody iconic images in an instant has been enabled by digital technologies, we might ask, what is the status of the icon? Has the social role of the iconic image been irrevocably changed?

As engagements with the question of the iconic image, these essays wrestle with these broader questions of the icon's status from many different perspectives, in particular in relation to how different fields/disciplines, such as sociology and visual culture studies, address and understand the icon. Provocatively, these authors address what it means to think of the iconic image within new kinds of theoretical paradigms. They consider the work that icons do in the context of digital circulation – when do icons anchor meaning in effective ways, and when do they float untethered to meaningful contexts? These essays address the question of how, when icons reproduce and self-reproduce, their meaning and impact can be analyzed, if not empirically evaluated.

Despite the contemporary context of accelerated circulation, in which the barrage of images from which to sort and select one's visual terrain has grown exponentially, we can still say that iconic images matter. Indeed, I would argue, that they

matter even more. They matter because they offer a shared terrain of meaning that remains enormously important. They matter because they are, in this digital world, sites of reinvention and creative play. They matter because they are a key site for political engagement. Perhaps, we could even say, their importance to the practice of alternative politics is even more crucial today. In the context of global social movements, brutal violence, and political upheaval throughout the world, enormous political repression and disempowerment, and vast social inequality, alternative political movements need the power of the shared meaning of an icon in order to make any possible intervention. This may seem simple; clearly, as these essays show, it is not – the challenges of a shared icon (whether for brand managers or for social movements) are enormous. Yet, the stakes in shared meaning have never been higher.

We might look at the deployment of icons in relation to what is probably the most pressing issue of our time, that of climate change and global warming. In the emerging global awareness of the impending crisis of climate change and global warming, the polar bear has emerged as an icon of the endangerment of the earth. So, what does it mean to *see* the polar bear in this moment in time? Whereas the environmental movement deployed images of the earth in its early iconography, in an attempt to convey a sense of the connectivity of all humanity, the image of the globe has since taken on many meanings related to global capital. As an icon, the image of the earth from space now floats into many different and contradictory meanings, less a symbol of peace and global unity than an icon of global connectivity via communication technologies and networked capital. The polar bear has emerged as its replacement as a signifier of the threat of climate change. The image that has emerged as most iconic is the photograph of a polar bear clinging to a dwindling ice floe, which came to easily signify a sense of vulnerability (it looks both desperate and mystified) and the signification of melting ice as an indicator of change. Polar bears signify cold – any cold swim is referred to as a polar bear dip – and cold nature; polar bears live in icy landscapes where, by implication, humans do not. So, the polar bear's endangerment operates as a key signifier of the problem of the global climate getting warmer, with the visualization of ice melting as a crucial sign of global distress.

Yes, we can argue, icons are reductive, they reduce complex meanings down into simplified and easily repeatable and replicable symbols that can circulate without causing a ripple in the social fabric. But, we could also argue that there are moments when that reductiveness serves an important function in the creation of a global icon. The polar bear resonates in the broad swath of the world where polar bears do not live. Climate change is an enormously difficult and challenging concept to rally political movements around – it is abstract, it demands long-term thinking, and it seems to be “elsewhere.” Yet, the polar bear translates that elsewhere to somewhere

among us. A polar bear is easily translated into a cuddly stuffed animal version, both a source of comfort, like a teddy bear, and an animal who is vulnerable and in need of human intervention. (Never mind that actual polar bears are quite fierce.) In the recent protest marches for climate justice around the world, the polar bear was prominently featured, on posters, logos, even in costumes – an icon for a global movement. One of the key memes of the September 2014 Climate Justices marches was an image, courtesy of the NYPD, taken during an Occupy action the following day, of a polar bear (i.e. a protestor in polar bear costume) being arrested in New York City.

We need our shared icons, we need the labor they produce to create shared meaning, we need the powerful way in which they create a sense of shared-ness. They are a crucial factor in the production of alternative imaginings, counter-strategies, and a key element in the ways that shared meanings and values can lead to hope.

Sturken, *The Continued Relevance of the Icon*

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Marita Sturken is Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. Her work spans the fields of cultural studies, visual culture, American studies and memory studies, with an emphasis on the relationship of cultural memory to national identity and issues of consumer culture and visual culture. Her most recent publications include *Tourists of History: Memory, Consumerism, and Kitsch in American Culture* [Duke University Press, 2007] and *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (with Lisa Cartwright) [Oxford University Press, 2009, 2nd ed.].