

Title	Challenges of hermeneutical image interpretation : visual segment analysis as a way to explore visual meaning
Sub Title	
Author	Breckner, Roswitha
Publisher	慶應義塾大学大学院社会学研究科
Publication year	2021
Jtitle	慶應義塾大学大学院社会学研究科紀要 : 社会学心理学教育学 : 人間と社会の探究 (Studies in sociology, psychology and education : inquiries into humans and societies). No.92 (2021.) ,p.(65)- 79
JaLC DOI	
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Notes	特集 慶應義塾大学とウィーン大学の間での社会学のグローバルな提携にむけて
Genre	Departmental Bulletin Paper
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN0006957X-00000092-0065

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Challenges of Hermeneutical Image Interpretation

Visual Segment Analysis as a Way to Explore Visual Meaning

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In present societies we see a growing relevance of images in almost all social areas, such as everyday life communication in social media, in popular culture, in political communication, science and advertisement – as just to name a few. In order to include images in sociological analysis of various phenomena, concepts for understanding the specific ways of how meaning is created by images are needed as well as methodological approaches for systematically interpret and analyse pictorial expression.

In my paper, I first would like to address general challenges connected to image analysis and give an insight into a recently developed approach to visual analysis that is rooted in the Sociology of Knowledge and Hermeneutics, and which I call Visual Segment Analysis. It aims at further developing those strands of Interpretive Sociology, which initially were mainly based on linguistic theories and methods of interpreting language and texts. I will elaborate on the methodological underpinnings and procedures of analyses which I will also concretely show using the example of the analysis of a photo by Helmut Newton.

Key words : visual segment analysis, image theories, interpretive sociology, procedures of hermeneutic image interpretation

Introductory remarks¹⁾

Pictures do not speak, they show (Boehm, 2007). Imageries as for example in social media, art, advertisement and increasingly also in politics arise from a predominantly pictorial communication. Nevertheless, we also speak and write about pictures to assure ourselves of their meaning, to express, share, fathom or assert it. For the ideas and imaginations that arise in our minds by viewing pictures must leave our heads in order to become socially relevant. Then, in certain social contexts—e.g. in scholarly reasoning like this one—, images also become the object of a verbal or written communication.

Since pictorial meaning arises primarily in the act of seeing (Merleau-Ponty, 2003), it is bound to

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sensual perception—not least also through synesthetic processes, in which images can be perceived as warm or cold, sounding or still, soft or rough. At the same time, concepts and different kinds of stocks of knowledge, whether they are constituted by language or in some other way, enter into visual perception with which we make sense of it and also direct it.²⁾ Images are thus created in symbolisation processes that are related to our bodily and affective experience and at the same time include cognitive-conceptual cognition (Langer, 1979³⁾; Cassirer, 2002). According to Langer, this interrelation forms a web of meaning in which images, language and other forms of expression and symbolisation are interrelated in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, pictures have specific characteristics. They do not consist primarily of words, sentences or sounds (even if these can be part of pictures), but of colours, lines, forms in specific arrangements within a composition on a material medium of various kinds (flat, plastic, with or without frames, soft, hard, etc.) and different textures (paper, wood, canvas, screen, display, wall, body, and many more). Therefore, pictures are also meaningful and symbolic beyond linguistic articulation, even if pictorial meaning and its connotatively connected semantic content very often is interwoven with linguistically present, partly implicit and partly explicit statements. The potential meaning of images can become effective far below the consciously perceived message, in that experience and meaning contents suddenly are called up, updated or generated as a new point of view in a pictorial-associative way without intentional attention.

For Imdahl (1994, 1996), pictoriality is an important place of sense-making, which in this way is only possible through images. “The central topic of the iconic is the image as a mediator of meaning, which cannot be replaced by anything else.” (Imdahl, 1994, p. 300, translated by the author)⁴⁾ Imdahl’s approach aims to understand the imagination created by images in an act of seeing. He conceives the pictorial sense as a link between extra-pictorial references to objects or texts and inner-pictorial formal-aesthetic qualities, between object or text references and the constellations, perspectives and compositions inherent in the image. The pure pictorial sense, which can only be grasped through a seeing view, which brackets the recognizing gaze, arises when elements such as lines, colours, perspectives, axes, scenic constellations are transformed by a composition into a definable view. With compositional connections of pictorial elements, meaning emerges in the visualisation of phenomena such as light, intersections, the simultaneity of contradictions, fragmentation and connection. In other words: For Imdahl, the specificity of pictorial meaning is not primarily constituted by the various representational references to external objects, events, texts, but by the compositional form of an image. He illustrates this with minor changes in a composition, for example, in changing the positioning of central figures in relation to one another or to the margin of the picture, which creates a different pictorial sense (see exemplary Imdahl, 1994, p. 303). Using nonrepresentational modern painting as an example, he also shows that pictoriality develops meaning by pictorial valences or effects within a picture frame. Also according to Gottfried Boehm (2007), pictures show something in a simultaneously and at the same time successively perceived presence and relation of lines, forms, colours on a picture plane, thereby potentially creating meaning beyond references to the existing material world.

Nevertheless, images also unfold multiple external references. They can mimetically depict objects

by similarities, but also without any similarities by means of coded pictorial signs to represent or refer to situations, states, abstract concepts, etc. Or they are connected with them indexically, i.e. materially, also without having to be similar to them, like scars on the skin that are pictorially connected with a certain event without depicting it mimetically. Photography takes on a special role because it is both mimetic and indexical and is usually embedded at the same time in multiple coded sign references (Peirce, 1983, pp. 64–67; Barthes, 1999).

In its function as a medium of communication, pictorial sense is determined not least by the specific use of images in different social worlds. An image only becomes an image when it is viewed by someone somewhere. Without seeing, which always takes place in certain contexts (e.g. in exhibitions, when looking at family photo albums, when communicating in social media, etc.), a material object would not become an image in the sense of a meaningful form anchored in materiality and at the same time in imagination. The capacity of subjects to see an image as an image is required for pictorial meaning to emerge.

Social-theoretical considerations, such as those of Alfred Schütz (1962), can be applied here. In Schütz's perspective, sense is constituted within the framework of various worlds of meaning, such as the world of everyday life as "paramount reality" or the "finite provinces of meaning" such as science, religion, art, etc. These worlds of meaning, however, cannot be sharply separated from one another. Rather, they mutually form horizons that transcend the respective world of meaning, in relation to which the formation of meaning is open in principle. The respective contextual horizons, in which a specific pictorial sense emerges, are themselves not manifestly visible, but only present in an appresentative way. The visible and the non-visible, the relevance, but also the limits of socially shared knowledge in the horizon of the unknown and the foreign become constitutive for the formation of meaning and significance in this perspective that is based in phenomenology.

Finally, the image can act as an augmentation of reality. Here the function of the image as an indexical or mimetic shadowing of extra-pictorial realities is virtually reversed. In this perspective, it is not the image that shows something of a reality that is constituted independently of this image, but the image determines what reality is. This happens, according to the diagnoses regarding a pictorial or iconic turn (Mitchell, 1990, 1994; Maar/Burda, 2004; Alexander, 2012), increasingly through the omnipresence of images that structure our views and knowledge to such an extent that we perceive as reality only that which presents itself to us in the form of images (see exemplary Böhme, 1999, p. 111 ff.). According to these views, images are thus not only media for representing a reality created independently of them, but are themselves creators of reality in the production of perspectives and pictorial references for action orientation and generally for developing an attitude towards the world.

In the diversity of the world of images and their respective ways of viewing them, there are different pictorial forms that generate meaning in different ways, which in turn are not mutually exclusive. Rather, images can perform or be assigned different functions at the same time. However, what is shown and can be seen varies between image genres (art images, snapshots, advertising images, etc.), media types (photos analogue, digital, filtered, black and white, coloured; paintings in oil or watercolour; drawings in

pencil or charcoal; collages in paper or with objects, with or without text; memes, renderings, comics, X-rays, MRIs, etc.) and qualities of a picture (being a print, copy, an original painting, etc.). The yield of image analyses in social science research contexts will depend on which kind of symbolisation processes and contexts and thus which possible potentials for meaning are addressed and explored. It is crucial not to determine these in advance, but to make them the object of investigation.

To summarise: Images can become an interesting social scientific object of analysis under all the aspects mentioned: as an indexical reference to an extra-pictorial reality, also in the sense of a trace (Barthes, 1981, Benjamin, 1977; Didi-Huberman, 1999); as a coded ensemble of signs (Barthes, 1999); as an iconic form (Imdahl, 1994); as an object of communication; or as an artefact (Froschauer/Lueger, 2007). In order to do justice to the complexity of these possible interrelationships, methodologically elaborated approaches are required. The aim of the presented approach in this article is to hermeneutically open up the complexity in the constitution of pictorial sense in specific social contexts. I would like to show, by means of an image analysis, in which way different inner and outer pictorial references (Raab, 2012) are interwoven and how they can be reconstructed in a methodical way.

1. Methodological principles and procedures of Visual Segment Analysis

The methodological principles that underpin the approach to be presented are essentially based on concepts such as case reconstruction in interpretive sociology (see, for example, Oevermann et al., 1987; Rosenthal, 2018; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014) as well as on ways to explore pictorial meaning developed in art studies, especially those of Max Imdahl (1994, 1996). Hereby a central methodological challenge remains, namely to grasp the coincidence of simultaneity and processuality of seeing (Grave, 2014). It is therefore important to capture what we perceive simultaneously, multi-dimensionally and at the same time processually in seeing, in an analytical attitude necessarily also via language, in a way that the specificity of the pictorial is not completely lost. This endeavour follows the assumption that images, despite the simultaneity of their overall appearance, are also structured in a process of seeing by highlighting and resetting certain elements, which is mainly led by shifts in perspective, particular constellations and compositional relationships (Imdahl, 1994). The various image elements do not appear indiscriminately before the eye. Rather, perception opens up a picture by allowing the eyes to “wander” or “jump” over the picture and thus to set relevance. In doing so, perception produces—as was assumed, for example, by Rudolf Arnheim—a structuration which combines the various elements into a whole Gestalt in order to recognise something or to allow the interplay of the elements to have an effect (Arnheim, 2000, pp. 45–92; Rosenberg et al., 2008). Hereby the view follows one’s own perceptual preferences, iconographic-iconological configurations already canonised as such, and what presents itself as a genuinely pictorial form of meaning in the concrete materiality of the image.

As already indicated, according to Imdahl, the scenic choreography, the perspective projection and above all the planimetric composition are central dimensions in which the meaning of the image unfolds. Imdahl regards the picture as a force field in which various field lines and their valences interlock. Field lines result from the arrangement of figures, gestures, movements and objects that structure the

picture surface in a meaningful way (Imdahl, 1996). By analytically drawing initially invisible field lines, implicit compositional references can be made visible. Perspective projections and scenic choreographies appear in a field line system in a determinable connection, in which specific potentials for meaning can be recognised in a non-arbitrary way. In other words, the field analysis of the picture surface should make it possible to approximately determine its meaning through its internal organisation by means of composition. With this concept, Imdahl has not least created a methodological basis to which a social scientifically oriented approach can refer, as has already happened in other approaches (cf. in particular Bohnsack, 2005; Raab, 2012).

With regard to the analytical handling of the simultaneous presence of perceptual impressions as well as their structuring in the process of seeing, I would like to propose a procedure that starts with attempts to observe and document the perception process and then focuses on the successive identification and analysis of segments and their relations in order to be able to reconstruct in detail the indexical, semantic and symbolic references connected with them while the whole of the picture with its specific thematisation emerges as a Gestalt. The aim is to understand how the relationship and organisation of various elements results in a picture as an overall composition with its partly determinable and partly indefinite horizons and potential for meaning.

“Only when someone struggles to discover the order of a complicated composition does he experience within himself something of the shaping process in search of the final image. Intuitive perception conveys the experience of a structure but does not offer its ‘intellectual’ analysis. For that purpose each element of the image must be defined independently. Its particular shape, size, and colour are established in isolation, after which the various relations between the elements are explored one by one. The intellectual mode of cognition must sacrifice the full context of the image as a whole in order to obtain a self-contained description of each component. This is the scientific method, which contents itself with an approximation of the true phenomenon but gains analytical exactness. The method is as visual as direct perception, but it must draw a fence around each of the elements and consider them in succession rather than in a synoptic overview.” (Arnheim, 1980, p. 177)

The analytical procedure is divided into different steps. They address different dimensions of the gestaltlike constitution of pictorial meaning in the awareness that in the perception of a picture the successively addressed references and connections can take place simultaneously (see in detail Breckner, 2010, pp. 286–296).

2. Dimensions of a photographic image

First I will show you a picture and ask you to observe how you grasp it while looking at it. What do you see first, what do you see successively, and what immediate, even emotional and/or bodily impression does it leave on you?

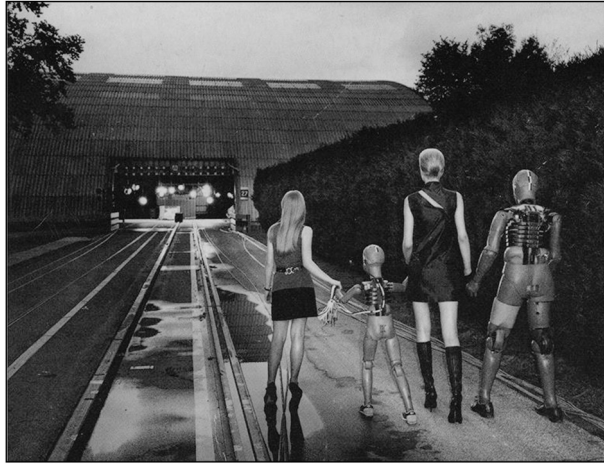


Figure 1. For reasons of interpretation and dramaturgy, the copyright and source of this picture will be mentioned later.

2.1. Documentation of first perceptual processes and segment formation

Documenting and reflecting perceptual processes and noting the first impression are the first steps of a methodical image analysis using visual segment analysis. This is initially done by drawing directly on a copy of the picture the way in which the eyes move over the image, how we successively and simultaneously capture different elements as well as the whole image. We thus use a pictorial medium of reflection before the first impressions are articulated verbally. These steps are of particular importance because they attempt to grasp the immediate effects of images before they are embedded in discursive explanatory contexts and thus contained. Then these individually made drawings and noted first impressions are compared with drawn perceptual processes and first impressions of others. Group analysis is one of the basic principles of interpretive analysis, which is also indispensable in image analysis.

The documentation of my perceptual process of this picture looks like the one shown in Figure 2, drawn without any creative claim.

First I saw the left figure of the group that I identified as a girl, then my look jumped to the taller figure identified as a woman. I immediately saw the small, male-connoted robot between them, then the large one on the right, and at the same time the group of figures as a whole, before my look fell on a detail—probably a bunch of keys—between the hands of the two smaller figures, connoted as ‘children’. Afterwards my look jumped to the lights in the entrance, captured the rails running towards it and the building around it. Only at the end I marked the embankment with the tree on the right, the tree on the left and finally the sky.

The sequential order in which the looks move across the image and individual elements are perceived cannot be captured objectively in this way, but the movements of the hand with the pencil used to draw gives an indication of how the look wanders and jumps across the picture, focusing on certain elements.



Figure 2. A drawn perception process. Image edited by the author

Immediately afterwards, the first impressions, including those of an emotional and corporal nature, are described and written down without being analysed. The endeavour here is to find ways of verbal articulation that opens up possible meanings of the picture and do not already reduce them in a conclusive interpretation (see Breckner, 2012). These very first impressions are also exchanged within a group.

I immediately had the feeling of being drawn into the picture. Curiosity, restlessness and irritation were present at the same time. It was not clear what the depiction is about: beautiful women, a family on the way to (no)where? The rails, which run towards an indefinable opening, unfolding a pulling effect? Is it about the relationship between men and machine? About women and men? About past and future? All this is possible—it remains open at first glance. Anyway, it is clear that the whole picture, with its contrasts and grey tones, seems to be skilfully staged.

When comparing recorded processes of perception of this picture in mainly student method seminars at the University of Vienna, it became clear that the group of figures, the tracks and the background, which could not be clearly determined at first, were identified as essential pictorial elements. The degree of detailed perception of pictorial elements differs, i.e. whether the group of figures is seen as a unit or whether the individual figures are perceived in greater detail, or whether individual parts of the body such as the heads, trunks, arms, legs or feet are perceived in greater detail. The order in which individual elements of the picture are grasped, i.e. the way in which the eyes move or jump over the picture (or how this process is captured in drawings), also varies. It is, however, consistent that it is not a linear sequence of glances that captures the picture (for example, from left to right or up and down), but rather that there is a constant jumping back and forth between different elements within the picture frame and that the picture as a whole can always be present at the same time.⁵⁾

Other viewers of the picture articulate impressions such as the picture is strange, enigmatic, uncanny

or creepy. In contrast, it was also described as being superficial or smooth. On the other hand, the impression was shared that the picture unfolds a pulling effect, draws in and—if one follows this perception—creates uneasiness. A skilful staging was also noticed, and irritations were formulated regarding the constellation of figures. Should it represent a family? And if so, why so? The dominating grey tones and black and white contrasts were also mentioned as striking. As possible themes that could be the subject of this picture, the gender relationship, a relationship between man and machine, family, future, or the like were named as well.

After this initial documentation and exchange of perceptions and impressions, a formal description of the image follows, focusing on the main objects and, above all, on the image structure and composition. Concerning this picture we can describe that we see a group of figures consisting of two female-connoted humans and two male-connoted robots. Two 'adults'—a female human being and a male robot—are connected by hands to two 'children'—a girl human being and a boy robot—who appear to be of different ages due to their different sizes. In the body constellation, humans refer to robots and vice versa, but not human to human or robot to robot. We also see a street and rails, puddles, a building (probably a hall), cables, a slope with grass and bushes, two trees and sky. There is dim daylight. The backs of the legs, especially the visible skin of the female figures, are particularly bright; probably two spotlights are placed behind the figures, where most likely the camera position is located. We see reflections in the water and bright spots of light in the entrance to the hall.⁶⁾

The image composition is remarkably clear and at the same time intricately structured. The group of figures is placed on an extended foreground, which is divided into the area of the road and rails as well as the overgrown slope and hedge. The middle ground is divided into the outside view of the building and the glimpse into a lighted inside. The entrance connects foreground and middle ground. A piece of sky forms the background. What lies behind the building is not visible. Striking are the strong lines of perspective that lead to the vanishing point at the entrance to the hall. The latter is not centrally located. The photographer and thus the perspective with which our gaze enters the picture is located laterally in front on the left side. This creates two centres within the picture: the group of figures at the front right and the entrance to the hall at the top left. The lines of perspective, also as field lines, largely determine the planimetric structure, whereby the vertical axes of the figures and their horizontal connection through the hands form another angle.

On the basis of the recorded first attentional focuses as well as the first formal description of the image, a segment formation is finally made, which guides the further analysis, but also can be changed in this process. With regard to this image, segments and their possible meaningful connections were determined approximately as shown in Figure 3.

The analysis starts with a segment that is considered relevant for the whole image. Following the abductive interpretation procedure (Oevermann et al., 1987), all possible views and possible contexts in which a segment could make sense are listed before moving on to the next segment. After this is also initially described and interpreted in isolation, both segments are viewed together and new perspectives are developed from their constellation. The previously created interpretations are checked to see



Figure 3. Segments as starting point for the interpretation of individual elements of the picture and their connections, successively forming a Gestalt

whether already formulated views can be confirmed, modified or rejected. In this way, all segments are successively interpreted individually and at the same time in different constellations. Compositional variations can also be made (cf. Imdahl, 1994) in order to be able to grasp more precisely the meaning of the placement of segments within a pictorial order.

2.2. Results of the segment analysis

According to my analysis, two aspects are central to the formation of this picture. I will continue to present the interpretation in a result-oriented manner focusing on the scenic constellation of the group of figures and the perspective focus on the entrance to the hall as vanishing point.

Scenic constellation

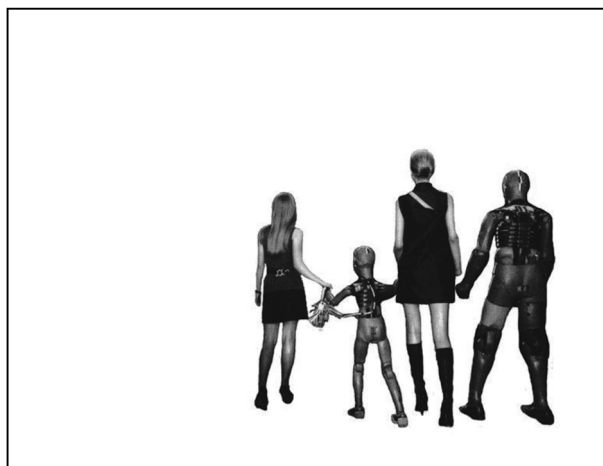


Figure 4. Scenic constellation of the figures

On the one hand, the depicted bodies can be read as signs of a social interaction (Figure 4)- e.g. by perceiving the constellation of figures as a family. At the same time, this way of seeing is irritated by the non-human robot puppets or avatars. We see a possible-impossible family configuration, by holding hands a demonstrative togetherness despite the differences in 'being', challenging the differentiation between 'human' and 'non-human'. All figures are walking but signal different 'speeds' through the different body inclinations. Gender roles are confirmed on the one hand by the physicality of the female figures: beautiful feminine body shape, naked skin, pretty clothes—all in all they appear attractive, especially in contrast to the almost unclothed, somewhat clumsy-looking male robots. At the same time, this classically gendered representation is counteracted by the fact that the female figures are depicted as larger, 'in front', 'leading', 'goal-oriented'. It looks as if they are even pulling the adult male robot behind them or taking him somewhere where he is reluctant to go. The latent eeriness of this process emanates above all from the way the photographic perspective is designed.



Figure 5. Perspective and vanishing point

The rails lead to an entrance that shows points of light, but in the indeterminacy of what happens there, opens a space that only takes shape through our imaginative activity (Figure 5): We can imagine the entrance to a warehouse. Against the background of our historical repertoire of images, the idea of a concentration camp with a crematorium is also evoked associatively, especially by the rails, which are reminiscent of the icon of the gate of Auschwitz. The slope bordering the scene and the transverse building reinforce the impression of directionality, inevitability and the unknown 'behind the curtain.'

Overall interpretation

Although the picture (Figure 6) is a photograph, it is more of an image than a photographic representation of an actual social situation with predominantly mimetic or indexical references. On the one hand, its

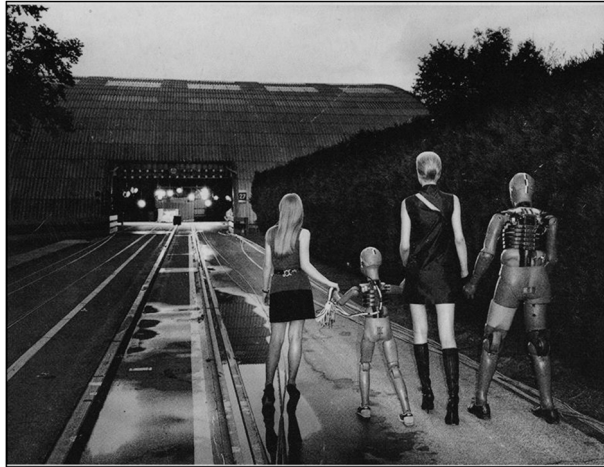


Figure 6. Overall picture

meaning is fed by the indexical references that are also present here, such as the rails, the rain puddles, the constellation of female persons and robot dolls. They point to a concrete, in this case highly staged photographic situation. At the same time, however, the meaning of the photograph is fed above all by the connotatively evoked imaginative horizons, beginning with the idea that a family is represented in the constellation of figures that is challenged by the unclear distinction between 'human' and 'non-human', and extending to the undefined, even eerie place to which the entire scene is actually oriented as a vanishing point.

This picture therefore bears manifold thematic potentials. Its meanings refer to femininity and masculinity in dichotomous gender relations, to contrasts regarding 'feminine-elegant beauty' versus somewhat clumsy 'technical masculinity' and, on a further level of abstraction, to questions of technological development and its consequences for social forms of life. Moreover, it raises the question of human life in general by detaching the concept of life from its bodily anchored anthropological self-evidence. Furthermore, it poses the question of whether 'unworthy life'—here in the form of robots—is 'disposed of'. The connotative references to a genocide, of which the rails to Auschwitz are an icon, let us even ask if that history will reach into the future in a paradoxical way.

These thematic references emerge in different ways in different contexts of use of this image. Depending on whether the picture is to be seen in a fashion magazine, in a magazine on the development of robots, in a book dealing with Bruno Latour's theory of the co-construction of the world between people and things, or in an exhibition that refers to the history of genocidal extermination of humans by humans, hinting at it with a reversal of the destruction of robots by humans. Further contexts, namely the caption and the person of the photographer, also shifts the meaning and reinforce different horizons. The caption on the back of the postcard I worked with somewhat cryptically reads "Fashion 'Going Home', American Vogue, France 1997"⁷⁾ (Newton, 2000). It emphasises the fashion aspect. The

biographical background of the photographer Helmut Newton, who grew up in the Berlin bohemian milieu of the 1920s and who had to flee to Singapore in 1938 because of being Jewish, makes the reference to the icon of the Gate of Auschwitz seem no longer entirely absurd. After ending up in Australia, from the mid-1950s Newton repeatedly came to Europe and also to the USA to work for Vogue, settled in the beginning of the 1960ies in Paris and finally in the 1980ies in Monaco and Los Angeles (cf. Newton, 2002).

However, the various thematic potentials (cf. also Seitter, 1993) do not arise only in the respective contexts of use, but are already inherent in the expressive form of the picture. The social as well as the media context is indeed part of the formation of the overall pictorial gestalt, and is constantly carried along in the interpretation process as a hypothetical variety of possible contexts. Thus, the pictorial contexts of meaning do not primarily emerge in an extra-pictorial context, but—so the assumption—in a relationship between a picture as a material object with which something is to be seen by someone in a specific horizon of meaning in a particular social world. In this sense the image is a screen between the outer world and ourselves (Kentridge, 2014). In other words, the question of what is seen in an image in which social, milieu-specific and cultural contexts depends on the cognitive and affective references that emanate from it on the one hand, and those that arise in the viewer when looking at it in a certain context on the other. Whether the potentially possible image references are realised or not in a certain context by the view of a certain person ultimately remains an empirical question.⁸⁾

3. The glory and misery of methodical image analysis—a conclusion

How are the possibilities and limitations of interpretative methodological image analysis in social science research contexts to be assessed? I would like to discuss this question on the basis of some reactions that have accompanied me in the course of the presentation and application of visual segment analysis in teaching contexts with students and in lectures at conferences. I will not hide that they touch on my own ambivalent position concerning an understanding of methods that is on the one hand too unsystematic and on the other hand too systematic or even objectivistic. I see it as a challenge to reflect on what methods make possible, but also where their limits are and what they even make impossible.

In my experience, a methodical approach makes it possible—not only in the case of pictures, but especially here—to discover and make visible something that would not be available at the first and second glance, because it is not consciously perceived or/and because the pictorially perceived cannot easily be transferred into an articulable form. A methodical approach makes it possible to transfer the vision of people who are relatively untrained in image perception—and this includes us social scientists if we do not draw on knowledge other than from our own discipline—from an idiosyncratic impression into a discursively accessible and negotiable statement. A method makes it possible to learn to look closely at images and to recognise their latent messages and effects—in my opinion an essential competence for dealing with the world of images. With regard to evocative, mostly highly gendered, sometimes also racialized advertising images or political iconographies, the decoding and deconstruction of the effects

of such images is still necessary in an enlightening sense.

However, methodical approaches to images are not limited to this function. They are accompanied by the methodological challenge of not completely losing the specificity of pictorial symbolisation and perception in linguistic articulation as the still central medium of sociological communication. For the linguistic articulation of implicit effects of images can also destroy them, which in the case of artistic images, for example, also leads to the destruction of the work of art. But even in the case of profane images, their disenchantment leads to the legitimate question of what is then left of the image as a specific symbolic form if we try to completely translate them into language. This challenge is, in my opinion, methodically not to be solved in principle, but rather generates openness that constantly drives us to new interpretations. My concern is to find ways of dealing with the challenge of transforming pictorial impressions and potential meanings into linguistically articulated interpretations in a way that opens up the view for the complexity of sense-making by images and not to reduce it to what is manifestly visible or sayable.

If I were to draw a conclusion from my work so far it would be as follows: The application of the developed method makes it possible to make implicit effects explicit, especially sensual perceptions of images bound to emotions and bodily involvement. Their articulation, however, must make use of a language that is capable of letting the (sometimes magical) power of images emerge. Even if we intend to intentionally destroy it in a critical sense, we have to 'understand' it by following our bodily resonance in a reflective way. In the course of an interpretation, it is usually possible to arrive at sociologically relevant, sometimes theoretically creative and surprising insights. This encourages the use of a method as a tool to open up new insights. Experience also shows, however, that using a method very strictly can descend to mind-killing mechanics if it is assumed that, as recipe, it automatically leads to a good meal, or rather that simply following the individual steps of analysis literally leads to a good analysis. In my opinion, it is always necessary to find a balance between systematic knowledge acquisition and non-systematisable openness and creativity, between determinable and indeterminable meaning and horizons of sense-making.

Notes

- 1) The German version of this article was first published in Pfadenhauer, M. & E. Scheibelhofer (Eds.). (2020). *Interpretative Sozial- und Organisationsforschung. Methodologie und Methoden, Ansätze und Anwendung in Wien*. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Verlag, pp. 179–196.
- 2) The hen-or-egg-problem in the sense of 'what comes first: perception or interpretation/understanding' is pointless because both are permanently related to each other in a process and also change mutually.
- 3) Langer tries to avoid the old division between emotional and rational understanding of the world. She understands symbolisation processes as interdependencies between sensual-concrete modes of perception, affective involvement and abstract thinking, including conceptual constructions and the formation of categories.
- 4) „Thema der Ikonik ist das Bild als eine solche Vermittlung von Sinn, die durch nichts anderes zu ersetzen ist.“ (Imdahl, 1994, p. 300)
- 5) These small-scale empirical observations are supported by experimental studies on image perception using

so-called eye-trackers, i.e. technical devices with which the sequence of looks can be recorded (Rosenberg, Betz, Klein, 2008; Engelbrecht et al., 2010). However, the riddle of simultaneous and at the same time successive perception has not yet been solved (see Grave, 2014).

- 6) This description could be further detailed. In this first access, however, a rough grasp of the picture elements perceived as significant is sufficient. In the analysis of individual segments, further details are then explored and included in the interpretation. If the description is too detailed at this point, the transition to interpretation is usually difficult.
- 7) This could be followed by further interpretations of the temporal and social contexts of creating and publishing this image, as well as of the medium of the postcard and the marketing of Helmut Newton's photographs in a renowned art publishing house, which I cannot follow further due to lack of space. It should only be noted that a genre attribution as fashion or art photography is thwarted.
- 8) This also applies to the plausibility and comprehensibility of social science image interpretations, which are both context- and subject-bound. In my opinion, the crucial question regarding the generalisability of interpretations cannot be resolved with an overall answer, but must be shifted to the respective discourses in which the rules for plausibility and comprehensibility are negotiated and determined.

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