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DOI: 10.25038/am.v0i20.324

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Artworks and the Paradoxes of Media-Transmitted Reality

Abstract: This article analyzes selected classic art that influences contemporary images. The basis of this study is an analysis of the transformation of long-established and internationally-recognized artwork through digital technology and social media. This investigation also highlights the symbolic meaning behind the representation and reproduction of media images concerning the political impact of global visual culture.

Visual culture consists of images of reality that are constantly being reconfigured. Thus, the visual arts develop consensually, based on democratic ideals and freedom of expression. Nonetheless, transgression occurs due to a lack of universal reference criteria and a dissolution of common human values. This situation explains why visual culture is often misunderstood and remains unassimilated. In addition, actual tragedies in life even become confused with art due to the fact that art so often closely imitates reality.

Visual arts, a significant area of concern for media outlets, involves deciphering the meaning of images that have been manipulated and instrumentalized according to particular political and ideological interests. The objective of the current proposal is to help people discern fact from fiction and to look at and understand society's emergence and relationship to democracy. Therefore, visual arts will be analyzed through a historical and iconological lens to investigate it as a form of communication and current social effects of political images.

Finally, it is also considered the artifice of images and the absolute reference values of human existence on visual arts in the face of technological progress and their effects on social networks.

Keywords: digital narratives; global image impact; media convergence; transformation processes; visual culture; political images.

Introduction

Representations recently viewed in global visual culture have appropriated the essential values of the human condition that at one time had been in the province of classic art. Many works of art and their themes allude to freedom of expression, ethics, and censorship. They appear in the embodiment of the rhythm of the metropolis where they are based. Instead of the socio-political meanings of images coming to the fore, they are, instead, contained in politics. One must be very careful not to misinterpret them.

This paper concentrates on the absolute reference values of human existence in visual culture in the face of mercantile injunctions and technological progress and the effect it exerts on international politics. Insofar as ethics and aesthetics can be questioned, is the media use of art a search for “innovation in the production of images” in the sense of positive and determinate power or simply the practical consequence of the diversity of modifications of creation? To provide insight into the relationship between art, media, politics, and the symbolic aspects of images, this paper is focused on the following questions: What is the context of the exploitation of tragedy as a boilerplate for everyday visual experiences? What are the true symbolic values that could communicate facts through images for international politics? If the effect of an image of violence, tragedy, horror, or destruction is true values can they be said to be absolute references of human existence?

These questions concern the awareness of freedom, respecting international norms, and the ethics of human rights. Images from different contexts and localities have, in general, exerted significant influence on the media in global and everyday social interactions regarding economics, politics, science, culture, and cultural diversity. Consequently, images are shown which stimulate ephemeral desires for pleasure-based the appearance of eternal youth, desires for consumer goods, and a longing for freedom. Thus, a visual analysis based on the symbolic aspects of the elements that constitute the imagery found in the media of a democratic society is essential, along with a review of values for quality of life and the politicization of individuals. Moreover, it is essential to highlight visual culture as an experience of aesthetics and an evolution of the capacity for reasoning and cognition based on the influence of signs and symbols in society and the media.

Reality and art transgressions

The exploitation of tragedy in visual experiences

Looking at the artistic achievements at the beginning of the 21st century, there is clearly a lack of meaning in guiding ideologies. A study of visual culture shows the development of this trajectory. However, it is necessary to take into account the ideologies that have given humanity a sense of socio-political participation and to also take into account the transformative images that have subverted the rigidities of the system. In this sense, visual culture has presented consensually-based democratic ideals based on freedom of expression since the beginning of the 20th century. However, currently, these forms of transgression have been transformed due to the lack of ethical reference criteria and the dissolution of values. This explains why visual culture is often not understood or assimilated. In some cases, real tragedies are even confused with art, because fiction so closely imitates reality.

For example, the global impact of the image of a photo taken by Burhan Ozbilici, a Turkish photographer from the Associated Press shows an armed police officer

shouting and gesticulating, moments after fatally shooting the Russian ambassador to Turkey at an art gallery in Ankara. This photo resonated with the people in the international media, and it was the “Photo of the Year”¹ by World Press Photo 2017.



6:00 AM - 20 Dec 2017

Figure 1: Photo by Burhan Ozbilici, “photo of the year” by World Press Photo 2017, in *The New York Times* Cover, December 20, 2016 [retweeted], printscreen by Christiane Wagner’s iPhone

It is challenging to find the true meaning of this image and to resist the influence of the power relationships resulting from the domination and the injustice of globalized structures. As Bourdieu stated, “Legitimate works thus exercise violence which protects them from the violence which would be needed if we were to perceive the expressive interest which they express only in forms which deny it.”²

¹ “The story, and particularly the World Press Photo-winning image [2017], quickly went viral, but Ozbilici says he didn’t think about ‘how people might distribute it on social media, or how they might use it.’ ‘I didn’t pay any attention to that, and I was trying to do my work,’ he says. ‘The assassination was, of course, political, but I am not about this, I am only a journalist. I am trying to record, to document, to witness history.’” Diane Smyth, “Burhan Ozbilici wins the World Press Photo of the Year,” *British Journal of Photography*, February 13, 2017, <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/news/2017-02-13/world-press-photo-announces-winners-2017-contests>, acc. October 12, 2018.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 139.

Art has always depended on knowledge, learning, and the ability to transmit and express spontaneously or intentionally what is perceived in the environment. Art is the reproduction (*mimesis*) of balance, reflection, understanding, patience, happiness, joy, love, compassion, beauty, and goodness together with imbalance, irrationality, pain, unhappiness, desperation, and horror. Whether good or evil, we perceive these feelings in the visible universe and connect them with our personal experiences. The results of this entanglement with artistic expressions grant creative productions and their symbolic values a greater dominion over our environment. Bourdieu says of this that, “specifically symbolic violence can only be exercised by the person who exercises it, and endured by the person who endures it, in a form which results in its misrecognition as such.”³

Generally, political images – whether photography, classic artwork, illustrations, or propaganda posters – act as instruments of analysis, producing emotional reactions and messages for the citizens of a society. In addition to generating responses to the central questions of this research concerning freedom and citizenship and respecting international norms and ethics for human rights, this image rather than opposed to abstract quantitative data or interview transcripts.⁴

The technical and symbolic aspects of images on the impact of international politics

The foundations of social and cultural production and reproduction allow access to systems of social structures, and thus uncovers the motives and causes relevant to the functioning of the mechanisms of image production and reproduction. Since images in the context of socio-cultural reproduction go beyond borders, it is necessary to get into a reciprocal correspondence with the relationship between social structure, *habitus*, and *praxis*. The notion of *habitus* and *praxis* is a “generating (and unifying) principle of reproductive practices of objective structures”.⁵ It refers to the aesthetic experience, perceptions, and learning processes, as well the interpretations, judgments, and behaviors that are conveyed and inculcated during to the individual and collective unconscious through socialization and imagery production and reproduction. As Bourdieu in *The Social Institution of Symbolic Power, Censorship and the Imposition of Form* has stated:

Symbolic creations therefore owe their most specific properties to the social conditions of their production and, more precisely, to the position of the producer in the field of production, which governs, through various forms of mediation, not only the expressive interest, and the

³ Ibid., 139–40.

⁴ Ralf Bohnsack, *The Interpretation of Pictures and the Documentary Method* [64 paragraphs], Forum: Qualitative Social Research 9, 3 (September 2008), <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1171/2591>, acc. November 20, 2018.

⁵ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Editor’s introduction.

form and the force of the censorship which is imposed on it, but also the competence which allows this interest to be satisfied within the limits of these constraints.⁶

Thus, the paradoxes of reality as transmitted by the media are seen by considering, on the one hand, that the individual can choose and select information consciously and, on the other hand, that the media can control and configure communication of the dominant reality. For example, the media and social networks can converge on the recent and essential phenomenon and give it a twist that essentially turns it into “fake news.” The concept of truth is complex, which is why there is much analysis of the difference between facts and opinions in the social sciences. Therefore, in terms of visual art, we must be aware of analyses based on finding the fundamental visual elements for the true values of the human condition through artistic achievements within a social context.

The visibility of the ‘true values’ as absolute references of human existence

True values as absolute references of human existence that are an exploration of the eternal struggle for victory, justice, and freedom, through seeking to protect our liberty. They challenge humankind’s fundamental ideologies at every level. The notion of freedom is philosophical, and therefore, through aesthetics, we can apply it to artists and the artwork itself. We consider liberty the main concept and victory the secondary concept to position in regard to the possible freedom, relating this to the dichotomies of truth and reality through the images associated with the eternal struggle for justice and freedom, maintaining the fundamental liberties at every level of human history and, mainly, on the comprehension of our own evolution in relating to the notion of freedom.

An indirect analogy to the World Press Photo-winning image (2017) referenced above is the composition of visual elements related to the representation of the concepts of victory and freedom shown in the period of Classical Antiquity, the Hellenistic period,⁷ in the image of the Goddess Nike (“victory” in Greek)⁸ and depictions

⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁷ “The Greeks represented concepts such as Peace, Fortune, Vengeance, and Justice as goddesses at a very early date. The victory was one of the earliest of these incarnations. She is a female figure with large wings that enable her to fly over the earth spreading the news of victory, whether in athletic competition or battle. She is a messenger (*Angelos* in Greek) who sometimes uses a trumpet to make her message better heard. As she flies, she brings the victor the symbol of victory – a crown, fillet, palm, trophy of arms, or naval trophy. [...] Victory is an extremely decorative figure who appeared widely in Greek art from the Archaic period (sixth century BC) onwards. She is found in a multiplicity of forms – statues, reliefs, vessels, coins, and terracotta or bronze figurines. Such figures followed the stylistic evolution of Greek art, undergoing constant development. As the Victory of Samothrace shows, the figure still featured in spectacular works of art in the Hellenistic period.” “Winged Victory of Samothrace 220–185 B.C.,” http://musee.louvre.fr/oal/victoiredesamothrace/victoiredesamothrace_acc_en.html#seq_8, acc. November 8, 2018.

⁸ Nike of Samothrace, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Greek original by the sculptor of Rhodes derived from type Winged Victory of Samothrace circa 220–185 B.C., http://musee.louvre.fr/oal/victoiredesamothrace/victoiredesamothrace_acc_en.html, acc. November 9, 2018.

of the Goddess Eleutheria (literally, “freedom” or “liberty” in Greek) and the Roman goddess Libertas. In this sense, some works of art are representative of concepts that are essential to human existence. The evolution of these representations through a process of knowledge, reproduction, transmission, interpretation, have shaped Western culture, and they have provided *mimesis* of the essential values of humanity. The term, *mimesis*, refers to art as an imitation of nature and a representation of reality.

Tragedy, as the main conception of art, prevailed for many centuries was one of the first formal examples of *mimesis*. From Antiquity to the Middle Ages, the conception of reality and its representation is established, according to Erich Auerbach (1946), by the Odyssey and the Bible. While the real and the quotidian are often in Homer’s work, the Bible offers more interpretations. The use of daily facts as art represent signs of a superior advent, with symbolic and esoteric characteristics that are still appropriate for the medieval mentality. The Judeo-Christian religion and ethos were strongly related to everyday life and family, thus setting the stage for the sublime tragedy that marks the categorical rupture with Antiquity in the sense of *mimesis* in its literary conception of reality.

Reflections on art in the West, up until Romanticism in the 19th century, are presented through interpretation of the theories of beauty and *mimesis*, finding renewal and a point of reference in the philosophy of Aristotle, as revealed in his *Poetics* (c. 335 BC), as embodying the highest achievement of tragedy and in contradiction to the ideas of Plato.⁹ In presenting *mimesis*, Aristotle showed his refusal to separate the intelligible world from the sensible world, associating pleasure with the artistic imitation of nature. For Aristotle, art is beneficial in all its forms – both for the individual and society. For Plato, the sense of *mimesis* was to be found in the figurative arts; for Aristotle, *mimesis* was a representation of a feeling, equivalent in importance in artistic works to the meaning of *catharsis* in tragedy. Regarding the aspect of *mimesis* embodied in *mime*, Aristotle’s reflection extended to the art of dancing (similar to, and originating in, the imitating of animals). In this sense, the art of the *mime* deals with identification through the transference of personality.¹⁰

In short, the theory of *mimesis* etymologically presents its meaning in ancient Greek with distinct purposes of interpretation in Latin translation. Adding this to the values of the Middle Ages, which signal the passage from the use of the term *mimesis* to *imitatio*, *imago*, the image of God and associations with all segments of the sacred. In the 14th century, the expression *imitatio Christi* illustrated this transformation well. This term embodied the idea of man created in the image of God, conveying in the term *imago* not only the sense of copying but also that of analogy. From its Latin meaning, the Italians developed the theory of *imitazione*. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the period of the Renaissance, Aristotle’s theory of *mimesis* referred to painting in imitation of nature. In opposition to this theory, however, the French adopted the philosophy of Aristotle, *mimesis*, which has prevailed in European thought since the 17th

⁹ Aristotle, *Poétique*, translate by J. Hardy (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).

¹⁰ Christiane Wagner, “Art and Reality,” *Revista Cultura e Extensão USP* 14 (2016): 41–51.

century, and from this French conception, the Germans developed their reflections on *mimesis* [*Nachahmung, nachmachen, kopieren, nachbilden*] from the 18th century onwards.¹¹

Thus, employing iconography, and its technical and material possibilities favor its expressive function. In this sense, all the recognized values of human experience and motivation were no longer related to the polytheistic culture of Ancient Greece. In this specific case of the image as an example, the representation of Nike (Goddess of Victory) by an image of the Victory of Samothrace is transferred to the images related to the biblical characters,¹² when Victory is transferred to the images of messengers of God or angels, for example, Archangel Gabriel, 6–7th century AD, Kitio (Cyprus), Palagia Aggeloktisti monastery and the artwork of Carlo Braccresco, *The Annunciation* and, in Renaissance, *Cinquecento*, of Sandro Botticelli, *The Annunciation*, 15th century.

In images from the Hellenistic period, the composition of the symbolic meaning of victory and freedom gain added political and religious themes. An example of these features is found in the composition of the World Press Photo-winning image 2017 referenced above. In respect to this, we can make an analogy to the composition, *The Triumph of Samson* by Guido Reni (1612).¹³ Reni's paintings primarily deal with the themes of Bible stories and Greek mythology. According to the historian Klaas Spronk, *The Triumph of Samson* can be seen as a mixture of mythological scenes, characterized by a focus on the proportions of the human body.¹⁴ He added the visual references of Greek antiquity to the symbolic values of the Romans to create images that were representative of the experience of victory and of freedom consequently transferred to biblical characters. The reference used by Reni is the statue of the Apollo of Belvedere (currently in the Vatican Museum) which underscores the reference to

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² "Angels holding globes and crosses stood close to God as representations of his power and glory. However, although angels owed part of their role to Greek and Roman representations of Victory, their image was rather different. Early Christian depictions of angels show them with a halo and dressed in male garb typical of Antiquity – a long, wide-sleeved tunic covered with a pallium, or long cloak, worn draped diagonally across the chest or thrown over the shoulders. They were winged messengers who came down from heaven to announce God's will to mankind. Angels only began to wear female garments in the late medieval period, when the draped cloak was no more than a small drapery worn like a shawl and the tunic became an elegant tight-sleeved gown with a high waist. The artistic popularity of antique models during the Italian *Quattrocento* meant that angels began to resemble female Victories, although the Christian context leaves no doubt as to their identity." "Winged Victory of Samothrace 220–185 B.C.," http://musee.louvre.fr/oal/victoiredesamothrace/victoiredesamothrace_acc_en.html#seq_8, acc. November 8, 2018.

¹³ "Samson is the highest expression of that idea of balance, beauty, and harmony that inspired Guido Reni. To portray him, the painter studied a pose that draws on the classical model of the statue of the *Apollo of Belvedere* today at the Vatican Museums. The filter of ancient beauty annuls all traces of suffering and fatigue over the struggle he has just undertaken. Instead, there is a greater naturalism in the bodies of the Philistines, piled on the ground, bloody and tragic, left in the shade, sharply contrasting with the luminous quality of the victorious Samson." "Winged Victory of Samothrace 220–185 B.C.," http://www.pinacotecabologna.beniculturali.it/en/palazzo_pepoli_b/81-the-collection/room-24-guido-reni-the-divine/2823-samson, acc. November 8, 2018.

¹⁴ Klass Spronk, "The Looks of a Hero: Some Aspects of Samson in Fine Arts," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik M. M. Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 197–209.

concern for the anatomic representation and image of the human body in its balance of proportions.

For a representation of the concepts of victory and freedom, any attempt at verbal description becomes as complex. How to represent victory and liberty? Many of the images that search for these representations since Classical Antiquity have created a personification of 'freedom' and 'victory' as female characters related to the patriotic themes. In ancient Greece there was the Goddess of Liberty, Eleutheria, with the Romans, it was – Libertas. In France, freedom is personified by Marianne, in England by Britannia, and in the US, the figure of Columbia is the hallmark of liberty. The configuration of these personifications maintains similar attitude expressions of freedom characterized by particular symbols and body postures. Likewise, they are associated with the characteristics of victory found in the image of the Greek Goddess of Victory (Nike), and the image of the Roman Goddess Victory.



Figure 2: *Victory of Samothrace*, Louvre, Paris; photo by Christiane Wagner.



Figure 3 and 4: O. Benndorf and K. von Zumbusch, *Reconstruction of the Victory of Samothrace* (1875–1880), Berlin University.



Figure 5: *Libertas*, the Roman goddess of freedom.



Figure 6: *Marianne Statue*, Place de la République, Paris, France.



Figure 7: *Statue of Liberty under construction in Paris, ca. 1884*, Frederic Auguste Bartholdi's U.S. Patent, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_de_la_Liberté,_en_construction.jpg



Figure 8: Guido Reni, *The Triumph of Samson*, 1612; Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna.



Figure 9: *The New French Constitution* (1791), © Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz,¹⁵ *German History in Documents and Images*, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC (www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org).

¹⁵ “Allegorical depictions of the French Revolution were popular in pro-revolutionary propaganda. This 1791 engraving from the series *Sechs grosse Begebenheiten des vorletzten Decenniums* [Six Great Events of the Last Decade] (1792) shows a triumphant female personification of the newly promulgated French constitution towering over the fallen representations of the defeated *ancien régime* – the aristocracy (the lion with the fractured coat of arms and insignia), the monarchy (the crowned figure with the broken sword), and the clergy (the crouching figure on the right). Set against the backdrop of the rising sun, the upward-gazing female allegorical figure represents the dawn of a new era; she holds up the *bonnet rouge*, the symbol of the revolutionary Jacobins. Copperplate engraving by Daniel Chodowiecki (1726–1801), 1791.” “The New French Constitution (1791),” http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image_s.cfm?image_id=2940, acc. November 20, 2018.



Figure 10: “Worker and student demonstration from Republique to Denfert-Rochereau, 11th arrondissement, Paris, France, May 13th, 1968, photos by Bruno Barbey. From the book *May 1968 – At the Heart of the Student Revolt in France*, as witnessed by Bruno Barbey. *British Journal of Photography*. Published on May 17, 2018.” acc. November 19, 2018, <https://www.bjp-online.com/2018/05/may68/>



"Erklärung der Vielen"

"Man kann nicht mehr wegschauen"

 TEILEN

Text: Saskia Trebing Datum: 9.11.2018

Interpol

Figure 11: *Monopol Magazine's* photo and news broadcasted by social media about the demonstration against racism and far-right political presence, which highlighted the monument Siegessäule (The Victory Column), in Berlin city, October 2018, Berlin; printscreen by Christiane Wagner's iPhone



Figure 12: *Der Spiegel* Cover, February 4, 2017. “Der Spiegel does not want to provoke anybody,” Klaus Brinkbaumer, *Der Spiegel* editor-in-chief and the executive editor of *Der Spiegel* Online, told Reuters, adding that the media outlet is actually ‘defending democracy’ in ‘serious times’; printscreen by Christiane Wagner’s iPhone



Figure 13: *Le Génie de la Liberté*, Augustin Dumont, 1833. Photo: Domaine public

The history of art and literature have shown effective modes of influencing the configuration of images which impose the perception of their meanings and methods of structural or semiological analyses. Therefore, art as a symbolic commodity exists as such only for those who hold the means to decipher and appropriate it.¹⁶ An image remains subject to a variety of interpretations, especially when shown without textual references because we will first realize it as an aesthetic experience before we move on to an understanding of the full meaning of the image. In this way, one considers that the definitions are restricted to a specific realm of cognition or common sense, due to judgments based on subjective values is significant concerning in terms of the polysemy of the image, especially given an immense diversity of values for image interpretation. As Bourdieu stated, the instruments of knowledge and communication are “a structuring power only because they are structured”, in *Symbolic Power and the Political Field*. He also went on to explain that:

Symbolic power is a power of constructing reality, and one which tends to establish a gnoseological order: the immediate meaning of the world (and in particular of the social world) depends on what Durkheim calls logical conformism, that is, ‘a homogeneous conception of time, space, number and cause, one which makes it possible for different intellects to reach agreement’.¹⁷

By analyzing the current artistic dynamics through aesthetics and iconology and contextualizing image production, techniques, and means prevailing in the epoch it was created, discernment of ideological discourse becomes a fundamental of coming to a significant answer about how the feeling of freedom arises and encourages respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. That is what the revolution was about, to leave the old for the new. That is the motivation and momentum for innovation, change, and victory.

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¹⁶ Cf., Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

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Article received: May 14, 2019
Article accepted: July 6, 2019
Original scholarly paper