Introducing

Introducing

Testimonies of the coming: Images of revolution as seismographs of change

Testimonies of the Coming: Images of Revolution as Seismographs of Change

Revolutions are visual affairs. As "sudden, qualitative and fundamental transformations," they not only alter societies, both internally and externally, but also their image cultures.[1] Revolutions and their relatives – uprisings, revolts, reforms – rely on visual politics; movements aimed at radical social change suppress some images while inventing and celebrating others. Visual inventions and interventions in moments of political change thus create new visual imaginaries by extending, editing and confronting existing images, or by erasing and overthrowing them. In the presence of a revolutionary moment, the *bild* reveals its unique potential to be a repository of the past and a resource for the future at the same time.[2] The writers and researches presented in this book consider images to have agency, to be more

---

1   Hobsbawm, Eric: *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848*. London: 1962, p. 29.

2   The German notion of "das Bild" encompasses the English terms of "picture," the physical presence of visual information, as well as "image," the imaginative dimension of the visuality. See: Davis, Whitney: *Visuality and Virtuality: Images and Pictures from Prehistory to Perspective*. New York: 2017, p. 7.

than mere representations, more than signs that make meaning, more than passive objects of admiration. We follow the hypothesis that images act and react, that they create affect and call us into action. We, the editors of this book, ask how images intervene within historical processes, how they make history and form the memorialization thereof, therefore also creating its future.

Tremendous social change can be sparked by what appears at first glance to be a minor change in an image: a brush stroke, a cartoon figure placed in the right moment, a digital edit. To understand the impact of these changes, it must first be understood that images can communicate political visions of potential futures to the portion of a population illiterate in regards to text – but not to images – and are therefore used in revolutionary times. In this way, all utopian language draws on visual references, conceivable because of their graphicness, a tendency that is also reflected in figurative language. The activist Steve Biko took this approach in describing his vision of a South African future: "The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face."[3] Similarly, Thomas Sankara, the first president of the Republic of Upper Volta, conceptualized his idea of a new, independent country by re-baptizing Burkina Faso as 'the land of the upright people.' Sankara's life and work are illuminating examples of creating new images in order to secure a revolution and to visually create what Ernst Bloch dubbed, in his writings on utopia, the "not yet."[4] Sankara created images that had been previously unthinkable: the president on a motorbike, in the smallest car, wearing military gear or a workingman's outfit. Sankara inserted images into a void that had been created by the colonial deprivation of a society. As Sankara's visual politics show,

3 Biko, Steve: *I Write What I Like.* Chicago:1978, p. 47.
4 Daniel, Jamie Owen; Moylan, Tom: *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch.* New York: 1997.

images take over public communication in times of political uncertainty and instability, and they operate as acts of speech. These images shout, insinuate, whisper, follow rhetorical strategies and invent new poetics. They cross borders of visual language and commodity, yet much like language, they can never be completely decoded. Rather, they are read and understood in many different ways, making them simultaneously open and directed.

Images, we argue in this volume, are testimonies of the coming. They state something that is yet to come but, because of their phenomenology, is also already there. Images bear a creative value that points to the shifting core elements of culture and society, such as the conception of time – thus referring to the etymological meaning of revolution as something that revolves, returns, rotates – as well as to the utopian, the not yet here.[5] Taking the former value, images create a theoretically endless archive that feeds our cultural memory and encompasses everything that was visible before and can now be revisited and activated within revolutionary moments. The concepts of "archive" and "cultural memory" are referred to here as those developed by Maurice Halbwachs, Karl Mannheim and Aleida Assmann, and were adapted to our subsequent work with and about images.[6] According to the historian Gerhard Paul, the constant repetition and the practice of interpictorial referencing contribute to the production of cultural memory; what we remember is not the event as such but rather the image thereof.[7] The latter value of the revolutionary image is linked to its anticipatory potential to imagine the not yet. In this respect, it is argued that images are a form of "concrete utopia," as they enable us

---

5   Hobsbawm 1962, p. 29.

6   Halbwachs, Maurice: *On Collective Memory.* Chicago: 1992; Mannheim, Karl: *Wissenssoziologie: Auswahl aus dem Werk*. Munich: 1964; Assmann, Aleida: *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses.* Munich: 2006; Assmann, Jan: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis.* Munich: 2005.

7   Paul, Gerhard (ed.): *Bilder, die Geschichte schrieben: 1900 bis heute.* Göttingen: 2011, p. 7.

to think about and imagine a future.[8] It is the anticipatory characteristic of images that makes them so important in moments of societal change, because they are able, we believe, to hint towards – or even reach into – the future.

Doing Future Through Images

The research project Revolution 3.0 investigates the entanglement of aesthetics and politics in situations of radical social transformation, the processes of images turning into icons, and the traveling of images between different media, spaces and times. We focus on the lasting radical power of images and the seismographic power of icons as they predict and announce social change. Due to their persistent presence, images are part of visual memory cultures. They are enmeshed in thriving socio-political movements and recent medial transformations.

So what do we consider an "image" in this book? Drawing on the work of image theorists like Horst Bredekamp and Nicholas Mirzoeff, we consider every entity that is visually perceptible as an image. Images are distinctive from their media surroundings by what Gottfried Boehm called the "iconic difference" – a tension and play between the visible and the invisible.[9] The necessary act of seeing and interpreting is inherent in this concept, and it is important to notice that the act of interpretation is not one of the viewer/reader alone; the image itself also acts. In the context of effective images during revolutionary struggle and mobilization, a concept termed *Bildakt* (act of the image) by Bredekamp is particularly helpful.[10] He describes how distinctive images act in transmedial and transmaterial spheres, disengaging themselves from their original mediums and attaching to other

---

8   Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge: 1995; Muñoz, José Esteban: *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: 2009.
9   Boehm, Gottfried: *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen: Die Macht des Zeigens*. Berlin: 2008, p. 19.
10   Bredekamp, Horst: *Der Bildakt*. Berlin: 2015.

media. As such, they gain a certain independency and a life of their own. During this transformative process they might also gain new meaning or develop coalitions with other images, creating new pictorial milieus. When applied here, our definition of images therefore focuses on images as agents and mediators.[11]

From the start of our joint research endeavors until the present moment, we have dissented from the outlook that images merely testify to revolutions and radical social change. Instead, we argue for the active role of images, stating that images hold an inherent power, that they are performative constructs comparable to acts of speech. In this understanding, we combine perspectives from both the pictorial turn and the performative turn.[12] Future-making, in our reading, is not a continuous evolution towards a predefined objective, but it is rather a performative act.[13] We therefore apply the terminology "future-making" to a method that we find useful in analyzing and describing visual strategies and tactics for a desirable – or perhaps by all means avoidable – existence in time and space. Following Bredekamp, we argue that images recurrently develop a presence that lends them the ability to be more than inanimate objects. Relating this to the study of images, we ask: How does visuality contribute to the creation of an alternative time-space configuration?

Our broad definition of the image enables us to look at video stills, paintings, photographs, drawings and corporate symbols with the same rigor. For our book *Revolution 3.0*, we looked at these visual imageries in different media and genres within the arts and film as well as popular culture. In this conceptualization we bordered an understanding of images that art historian Aby Warburg first put forward in

---

11 Ibid.; Bredekamp 2015; Mitchell, W.J.T: *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: 1995.

12 Curtis, Neal (ed.): *The Pictorial Turn*. London and New York: 2010; Bachmann-Medick, Doris: *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*. Berlin: 2016, p. 73.

13 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble*. London: 1999.

the 1920s: He compiled cut-out images from advertisements, newspapers and other formats, which were not considered art during his time of work, but Warburg's interest in the "afterlife of antiquity" and the image's transcended visual power led him to the conceptualization of the "image formula," later termed the "pathos formula" by Erwin Panofsky.[14] The pathos formula describes the affective power of certain ,formula' of style in images. An example would be the gesture of the raised fist, which without a particular context needed stands for political revolt. This is of particular interest in the digital age, where there is always the ability to create yet another new image from an established icon with the help of a smart phone and freeware. In this project we thus explored visual material that ranged from updated versions of images in anticolonial archives to verbal and visual blog entries that interweave different periods within global history to images from fashion magazines and their archives as well as images from contemporary African and diasporic sci-fi imaginations.

Central to our investigations were diachronic and transcultural filiations within visual culture in the *longue durée* related to Africa as a continent and a figuration. Here, images were of major importance during the liberation movements and revolutions in the "short 20th century,"[15] and these images have their repercussions in today's political struggles as well as in the digital sphere. The imageries developed in Africa during this period are situated in the predetermined visual representations of a continent somewhere between projected dystopia and utopia. Contemporary visions draw on the pool of images and texts provided

---

14 Warnke, Martin in collab. with Brink, Claudia (eds.), Warburg, Aby: *Der Bilderatlas: Mnemosyne. Gesammelte Schriften II.1*. Berlin: 2008. Johnson, Christopher D.: *Memory, Metaphor and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*. New York: 2012; Klibansky, Raymond; Panofsky, Erwin; Saxl, Fritz: *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*. London: 1964.

15 Enwezor, Okwui: *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa*, *1945–1994*. Munich: 2001.

by the visual archives of revolutions and liberation struggles, which are then remixed, re-interpreted or repeated in different mediums, such as painting, photography and audiovisual media. In the course of our project, we therefore navigated between the disciplinary fields of *Bild-wissenschaft* ("image studies") as developed in a German academic context and the Anglophone visual culture studies, as the performative component of images became increasingly important. Is there a pathos formula for images of revolution? What does a revolution look like? In order to approach the recurrence of certain processes across time and space and in different media, we delved into the pathos formulae found within the iconography of politics, such as state funerals and independence ceremonies, and how these tactics are revisited today.

Images as Time Travelers and Their Media

As we moved forward, we became increasingly interested in the re-appearance of images from a different time and context than the one in which they are used in today. Visual culture, we argue, reworks the relations of space and time, and in the context of our interests, the temporality and mobility of images was key. Images unfold in multiple temporalities through various media and a relationality between these different times and spaces is created; the relations between the moments of producing and consuming images were thus central in the project. These relations can manifest in temporal differences (when images from the past reappear in contemporary discourse), spatial differences (as in the "transnational flow" of images) and medial differences (such as the transmedial transfers of images), all of which can be intersectional.[16] They are cross-cut by practice: Images are contraposed, layered, merged as collage, edited, cut and reframed. We analyzed these cultural techniques, particularly those emerging

---

16 Hannerz, Ulf: *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning.* New York: 1992, p. 239.

in the digital age, and the continuous (re-)production of images in the virtual space. We asked: Is there a time slip between different so-called time zones (such as the before and after of a moment dubbed "historical") in which "new" images have the potential and power to arise? Are there moments in which the complex net of hyper-visuality and intermedial references can interfere with a "new" visual regime, so that a new aesthetic takes over?

We believe that the movement between different times is one of the most important elements of an image's capabilities. Images have the ability to make culturally-built temporal distinctions permeable, which is best studied in the transcultural and transmedial movement of iconic figurations. In our research, a number of icons – also called "supericons" by Paul – constantly reappeared, such as the highly commercialized image of Che Guevara.[17] Reflecting on icons stirs questions about the visual elements that are essential for the transcultural and transmedial transfer. In the original sense of the icon, an image closely resembles the referential person so that the image can also represent the absent person in a religious, mainly orthodox, context. In a transfer process, the ethical and/or symbolic meaning of the icon is also conveyed to the new context. But contrary to the religious context, icons in a political, social or medial context are reduced to their visual core elements, which transport the meaning. The icon of Che Guevara, for example, is based on a photograph made in 1960 by Alberto Korda and is sometimes reduced to only his beret, which indexes the political orientation of any wearer. Through this, the core meaning of the revolutionary impetus is turned into a symbol dissociated from any historical context or individual person. The reduction of meaning in a symbolic picture or an icon explains the image's transcultural, transmedial and transtextual usage, often cited and referred to in completely new contexts. The image of Angela Davis is another

---

17   Paul, Gerhard (ed.): *Das Jahrhundert der Bilder: Bildatlas 1949 bis heute.* Göttingen: 2008, p. 322.

example; her depiction moved from FBI wanted posters to the realm of pop art and screen-printed posters.[18] The examples of Guevara and Davis, two of the most mediatized icons in popular culture, also show the transmedial component of images' movements. These images went from photographs to abstracted prints, the messages were translated into songs and poetry, and their appearances constantly changed. This sense of movement can be translated to the icons of African revolutions.

Visual cultures, expressed in public spaces like the street or internet, stipulate change by the mere presence of an icon. In Burkina Faso, this could be graffiti or T-shirts bearing the image of the assassinated first president that thus carry Thomas Sankara's presence in(to) the streets of Ouagadougou. The presence of an image, of a face, intervenes with the time of its resurgence and references values connected with its initial context – a vague but effective core element of revolutionary myth. Similar to visual icons of political leaders, slogans can also gain iconic status: photographer Jürgen Schadeberg documented a writing on a wall that read "We won't move" in Sophiatown, a now iconic suburb of Johannesburg. The graffiti was immortalized as part of the image production that fought against the forced removals of Sophiatown in the 1950s, understood as an assault against humanity within the greater context of the whole of apartheid South Africa. When asked what revolution looks like, many people in South Africa refer to Schadeberg's image. The resistance against the forced removals did not succeed in this instance – Sophiatown was bulldozed – but still, the graffiti was there on the wall, on a camera's film, in a magazine. Today, the image is reproduced in visual cultures of the web as well as on the street in urban spaces.

---

18 Marks, Ben: "Trailing Angela Davis, from FBI Flyers to 'Radical Chic' Art," in: *Collectors Weekly*, published on 3.7.2013. URL: www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/angela-davis-from-fbi-flyers-to-radical-chic-art/. (Last accessed January 29, 2019).