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The Culture of Visuals and the Visuals of Culture

Abstract: This article offers the premises for an analytical reflection on how we look at images today, while questioning the role they have in our understanding of contemporary culture. We will discuss different visual culture aspects based on relevant case studies from advertising, branding, journalism, and art, arguing that the image is prevalent in today’s media culture, with our perception shaped by its structural lecturing rules (in the detriment of other content formats). Since contemporary culture is constantly and arbitrarily build on a subjective and consciousness perspective, we are witnessing on the cultural identity definition of our existence through image-reading patterns, text-looking solutions, and video-lecturing directions, as a multimodal subjective information-processing reaction to the spectacle of this intense digitalization of the society.

Keywords: visual communication, visual culture, media, visual arts, text and image, social media.

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Cultura vizualului și vizualitatea culturii

Abstract: Acest articol oferă premisele unei reflecții analitice asupra modului în care privim imaginile astăzi, chestionând, în același timp, rolul pe care acestea îl au în înțelegerea și formarea culturii contemporane. Vom discuta aspecte ale culturii vizuale pe baza unor studii de caz relevante din publicitate, branding, jurnalism și artă, argumentând că imaginea este predominantă în cultura media de astăzi, percepția noastră fiind modelată de regulile sale structurale de lecturare, în detrimentul altor formate de conținut. Deoarece cultura se construiește în mod constant și arbitrar pe o perspectivă subiectivă conștientă, asistăm la definirea identității noastre culturale prin modele atipice – citim imaginile, privim textele sau lecturăm videourile – ca reacție subiectivă multimodală de procesatori de informație la spectacolul intensei digitalizări a societății contemporane.

Cuvinte cheie: comunicare vizuală, cultura vizuală, media, arte vizuale, text și imagine, social media.

Introduction

In this article, we will reflect on the way we look at and see images today, on how we receive image culture in its abundance, or about how this understanding of the image resonates with the context of extreme digitalization. We will observe how the contemporary image becomes prevalent in the media and how it comes to define the very cultural identity of the visual. We discuss visual culture and images in culture, both as visual resources and as mutually constructed components of visibility and how our understanding is built on their manifestations. In the spirit of the poststructuralist discourse of the society of spectacle (*Debord, 1983*) and the technologically reproducible image (*Benjamin, 1969*), invoking the semiotic dissociation between connotation and denotation (*Barthes, 1985*), we will also call on the studies of Lev Manovich, Ana Peraica, and James Elkins, who talk about the contemporary culture of information processors, or about visibility or composite image built arbitrarily in the consciousness of contemporary visualization. We will then argue how the image is prevalent in today's media culture and how our perception is shaped using it, based on case studies from advertising, branding, journalism, and art, domains where visual communication can be approached and studied sequentially and structured.

Results

The Culture of Visibility

While introducing the visual culture and the notion of the image (as a content format, as a type of communication), we are considering the concept of society and the spectacle of simulacrum (*Baudrillard, 1981*), and the different policies of representation as they are deduced from the various manifestations of the image in contemporary media. Visual studies insist on the evaluation of representation policies, the analysis of the concept of gaze as a metaphor for the manifestation of the object of desire, along with fetishism and voyeurism. At the same time, visibility brings reflections about the reproduced and mixed image, a symptom of electronic media where democratic access to resources has been the subject of debate since the beginning of the Internet. Discussions about visual culture today look at those aspects of culture expressed in visual images, as they are approached by a multitude of academic fields that study this subject: cultural studies, art history, critical theory, philosophy, media studies and anthropology, etc. They overlap with film studies, invoke psychoanalytic theories, discuss sexual studies, queer theory; involve the media, television, film, or the Internet; include studies of video games, comics, traditional art media, advertising, mobile devices, any other medium that has a visual component, going as far as technological-documentary manifestations of the image such as scanners, xerox, drone, x-rays, technical image etc. (*Elkins, 2003*). Visual culture is about the study of the image in all of its forms, being concerned basically any kind of technologies designed to enhance, or to translate, or to accommodate the visuals—from oil painting to press and television (*Berger, 1977*). In this material, visual culture provides the adequate medium for analysing the role of the image in today's communication patterns.

The versatility of the domain comes from the range of objects under the term “visual culture”, which aggregates “visual events in which information, meaning or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology.” (*Manovich, 2001a*) The term “visual

technology” refers to any media designed for perceptual purposes or with the potential to increase or augment our visual capacity. Because of the changing technological aspects of visual culture, as well as the scientific desire to create taxonomies or articulate what is “visual,” many aspects of visual culture overlap with the study of science and technology, including hybrid electronic media, cognitive environments, science, neurology, and image and brain theory. In an interview with the *Journal of Visual Culture*, academic Martin Jay explains the growing connection between the visual and the technological: “it is necessary to focus on how they work and what they do, rather than going over them too quickly to the ideas they represent or the reality they claim to portray.” (Jay, 2002) In this regard, we must ask questions about how the technological mediations facilitates or improves the extensions of the visual experience in our cultural perception of media (Soreanu, 2021).

Mimicking Cognitive Experience in Transient Mediums

Our knowledge process is based on assumed image patterns, and we have formed a system of knowledge of reality less dependent on knowledge associated with text-type content formats. We are witnessing a prevalence of image assumption over text, which is an abstract format, with progressive, sequential, and consecutive reading, which involves extensive mental processes of recognition, identification, association, meaning assignment, meaning construction and final image evocation. Consequently, this proves to be a more difficult communication process than the one offered by the type of image content, where the reading is simultaneous, and the perception of meaning occurs together with the visual identification of the subject.

We notice that in the contemporary media of communication—advertising, internet—the sovereign format is that of the image, where the text has an adjuvant function, of anchoring, fixing, clarifying (Barthes, 1985). Is this a mimetic approach, which replicates the primordial psycho-somatic experiences of human knowledge, returned to humanity as processes of knowledge? It is a setback of the tendencies to ergonomize or ease our existence, to facilitate the processes of interaction with the environment, to anchor “with the opposable fingers” in a reality dominated by ease, accessibility, ergonomics, but which reduces our intelligence and ability to adapt, to evoke the human condition? We communicate through images even when communication is mediated through other content formats (text, video, sound). We can say that we “read” the image, “lecture” the video, etc., “browse” a content dedicated, otherwise, to the intellect and reason through other processes than those of simple image reception. Reading the text, for example, is a reading process that involves visual perception, identifying characters, forming mental images, and associating them with concepts to generate understanding, sensuality and, consequently, the meaning of reading. By default, the visual regime is present and required, even if the digestion of the content is done through graphic symbols, letters. On the other hand, the trained human eye no longer goes through the complete process of reading each character or letter, but recognizes words, expressions, providing a shortening of understanding their meaning, as well as the ability to read “diagonally,” to selectively read a text. We are witnessing a similar process in the case of dynamic images, be it film, video, animation, or even comics. Because the reading sequence is progressive, consecutive, and cumulative, there is an immediate and a total meaning which is formed during the “reading” of the film, by appealing to memory, meaning and association of meanings deduced “on the go.” In this regard, the image

communication seems to be a clearer, more direct, perhaps more organic form than any other form of communication (text, sound, video).

Our existence is built on the image (and not on the text), because the image addresses another type of understanding and communication that teaches the culturalized reception, the educated one, acquired through education, both at the level of the individual, and at the level of civilized society. Until the acquisition of the ability to communicate through writing or speaking or other methods of artistic communication (sound, singing, signs), children communicate exclusively through visualized image, understood, decoded, reproduced, and practiced. They learn to know and recognize reality through images, whether visual or auditory, and the disciplines of visual arts cultivate this ability in all its forms of artistic manifestation. The introduction of the text as a way of knowledge involves a combined effort of the intellectual development stage, of specific cognitive processes based on attention, memory and structuring of neural plasticity that allow, ultimately, a baggage of knowledge and a form of high precision communication and powerful.

Contemporaneity seems to offer a setback to this type of comedy, especially in mass culture and consumer culture. I am referring here to communication in advertising, in online and internet media, in virtual media, in the multitude of media channels available to the contemporary public. Given the immediate addressability and the need to reach the target audience as quickly as possible, the speed of dissemination, in the conditions of globalization in which the image transcends language barriers, we are witnessing the tendency to emphasize communication rather through image-specific language elements, and not text. Different instances, such as image development in cinema or streaming film, engaging the image structure in the marketing materials of an advertising campaign, solving the page structure of a website interface, or developing a mobile phone application interface, are all based on image prioritization, and on the rules of visual composition that define it. They offer comfort, fun, usability, ease, speed, features specific to the type of perceiving or lecturing of the image content, which has become a symptom of communication in consumer culture.

Digital Media Stats: The Reign of the Image Content format

Digital marketing is, without a doubt, the most relevant form of promotion needed today in the context of the global digitalization of the media and, therefore, of the media of cultural expression. The communication takes place online, with the help of the internet and is completely dependent on the vehicle that facilitates the transfer of information (*McLuhan, 1964*). A look at the simplest statistics will reveal how information digestion occurs at the conjunction between the specificity of the digital environment and the creative autonomy of users who have become information processors in this era of technologicalization of everyday existence (*Manovich, 2001b*). Coupled with the staging of scientifically collected data that shows that 90% of the information processed by the human brain is visual because the human brain processes images 60,000 times faster than text (*Eisenberg, 2022*), we can argue that a visual marketing construct based on image prevalence is more easily digested by the public, thus fulfilling the communicative desideratum. An exhaustive overview of the role of image in social media relays also shows the explicit prevalence of image over text and consumers' predilection for this type of content, which has been transformed into a marketing strategy by specialized companies.

Ordinary user behaviour shows that they will spend, on average, less than 15 seconds to read the content of an online material, with an overwhelming 80% tendency to prefer the video format to textual information.

More than 2 million searches per minute are received on the Google search platform, while a brief estimate shows that humanity today generates an estimated 2.5 quintillion bytes of data every day (i.e.: 90 percent of the world's data has been created in the last two years alone) ([Eisenberg, 2022](#)). The emergence of a multitude of sources and communication platforms that generate visual image—from social media to the web and technologically generated images, in the conditions of the unprecedented computer explosion in recent years. A research funded by the National Institutes of Health in US back in 2014 shows that the human brain can process entire images that the eye sees for as little as 13 milliseconds ([Trafton, 2014](#)), with the direct consequence that before the next image appears, a part of the brain continues to process the images longer than the amount of time it was seen (as initiated and proved as Phi phenomenon from the very first film theoreticians Peter Mark Roget in 1869 and Max Wertheimer in 1912) ([Schuler, 2016, p. 31](#)). The direct conclusion and effect over the contemporary visual marketing is that text and illustrations work way better than the plain information without illustrations, making the visual an indispensable asset to any form of communication nowadays involving, for example, nonrepresentational pictures, graphic organizers, or learner-produced drawings ([Lentz & Levie, 1982](#)). This reflects on direct marketing strategies, on personal presentation solutions, on technological or corporate communication, basically in any visual area which rules our live, including education, and cultural understanding. For instance, using visual support in classroom or in a meeting room helps improve learning by up to 400% (clarification of content, motivation to learn, saves time with preparation of lessons or business reports, enhances vocabulary and solutions etc).

An interesting dissociation can be made even while considering the format of the images—the topic, the subject, and the general taxonomy of any visual available for viewing online. Eye tracking studies have documented a dramatic gap in how users approach website images, as analysed by contemporary web-design strategists specialized in Research-Based User Experience who found out that some types of pictures are completely ignored (for instance, the images that are purely decorative), while other types of pictures are treated as important content and scrutinized, such as visuals of products and (real) people (as opposed to stock photos of models) ([Nielsen, 2010](#)). Their study shows how the average user spent 10% more time viewing the portrait photos than reading the biographies, even though the bios consumed 316% more space of the available screen. The text-image based content, while used for online presentations, also relies on subject and representation, on formal aspects such as size, reading/looking time or visual impact, and the capacity of the image to carry information.

In a non-surprising way, the visual types of content like infographics, photos, charts, presentations, and videos comprise a significant portion of content that business strategies are using, also reflected in social media platforms which are also categorized by content—mainly image-based (Instagram), video-based (Vimeo, YouTube, Dailymotion), text-based (Twitter), or mixed (Facebook, Instagram). However, the turn into the recent structures of the social media showed that every platform needs a textual support (as description of the visual image or video), and the textual messaging is more successful doubled by an image (tweets with images receive

150% more shares than tweets without images ([Cooper, 2013](#)). In purchasing decisions, the preferred format of video is assuring the product acquisition, the quality of reviews, and 43% of business-to-consumer marketers say that pre-produced video is the most successful type of content for marketing purposes. Doubling sound with relevant imagery in linear communications, like adding visuals to a sonor message, ensures that people are likely to retained 65% of the information three days later, and remember only 10% of that information if only sound is available ([Medina, 2017](#)). And, when converted into impact factors and marketing decisions, the prevalence of the visual formats over the textual is clearly a factor to be considered, as in the digital economy, there is a critical need to bridge the type of information (about product's quality and characteristics) toward prospective consumers. While also demonstrating how to apply advanced deep learning techniques to measure the congruence between information of different types, a study by Wang & Song researchers in US revealed the positive importance of the textual and visual data congruence in consumers' purchase decisions [1] ([Wang & Song, 2020](#)). Also, in another example of case of conference presentations, the formats dissociation and congruence based on the different types of technical visual knowledge [2] allows conference participants to comprehend the vast amount of visual material shown during presentations, while operating with a visual semiotic considered as an “unvoiced” language of communication in that particular communicational context, where “the images constitute a text.” ([Rowley-Jolivet, 2000](#))

In many regards, the conjunction of the content formats of text and image used together, reveals the need of a new alphabet of understanding options, where various approaches to multimodality is involved through a wide range of perspectives based on socio-semiotics in visual communication, rhetorical approaches to advertising and visual persuasion, and also cognitive metaphor theories ([Bateman, 2014](#)). Lecturing this communicational construct—through a semiotic lens which allows both a differentiation and standing-apart structures for text [3] and image pushes our perception to understand that polysemy of an image (inherently more difficult to “read”) and the text's vocational effortless passing from the signifier to what is signified, are breaking the conventional rule that visual space is about looking, while textual space is about learning. However, this becomes more perceivable in visual arts territory which provides a peculiar environment of a visually assertive textual form, a transposition which signals the materiality of written language as visual feature ([Soreanu, 2020](#)). The viewer “reads,” and the reader becomes a “viewer,” as they both become aware of the noncognitive and affective qualities of the visible ([Ross, 2014](#)). This convergence of art (and science) on the topic of visual perception, with a particular touch in contemporary visual arts, for instance, invites to self-reflection on the nature of the artistic medium understood as a philosophical approach of the vision perception ([Schuler, 2016](#)). As noted, and examined by Elizabeth Rowley-Jolivet, visualization and language share similar characteristics of being culturally embedded (since visual communication embodies a social dimension), constituting a code of communication (they develop their own lexicogrammar of visuals), and their usage to make claims in disciplinary discourse (to persuade, to make and support specific arguments) ([Rowley-Jolivet, 2000](#)).

Global Image. The Multimodal Communication

The image may be worth a thousand words, but the text is, in fact, a much more powerful and richly signified way of communication, precisely because it is abstract by definition and does not introduce canonical limitations of perception. Beyond European writing systems, based on phonetic structures associated with graphic characters (letters, sounds), an example is the writing of the Far East based on ideograms that define things, concepts, situations, ideas and not sounds. Japanese writing, based on kanji imported from China, has led—in turn—to the adoption of syllabaries to replace vocal or sound writing with kanji. The consequence of such a writing system is that the signature beach is infinitely richer, lacking, perhaps, the precision of Western communication, but much broader in directions and meanings (starting from the association of adjacent concepts that give rise to collateral meanings). Paradoxically, we are also witnessing the cultivation of these ideograms as images, as is the case with oriental artistic calligraphy, which is valid even in the case of not knowing the associated linguistic codes for a visually educated eye.

The presence of the linguistic component in advertising or cinema, for example, leads to hybrid solutions in which the films are dubbed, avoiding subtitling; the subtitles, in turn, offer solutions to increase the content by including interjections as echoes of the sound from the filmed material for a better perception of the film; television shows for the general public constantly offer the image of the moderator or the guests whose reactions are indicative of the audience's behaviour [4].

Visual communication's most important feature is the ability to process information faster, offering ways to connect with audiences. We live in a society dominated by the culture of image, where social media and mobile communication embodies different types of visuals critical in the success of any PR campaign (*Jakus, 2018*). In image specific for the press, one can see the echoes of the relationship between image and text as symbiotic forms of communication, given that informatic disputes and the possibility of manipulating public opinion are the main stakes of media actors (having examples such as Brexit [5], flat-earth movement or the current war in Ukraine). In all cases, influencing public opinion with the help of images, even outside the boundaries of ethics, appealing to false images and forms of fake news, has had an overwhelming impact on the voting decision (in the case of Brexit) or on the international understanding of the de facto situation (from the Russian-Ukrainian theatre of war). Or, in the case of the appearance and development of the much-discussed concept of flat-earth, we witness the paradox of the disappearance of a subjective viewpoint of the photographic image (*German, 2018*) that becomes an argument and a counter-argument for geographical evidence (*Peraica, 2019*). Obviously, the impact ratio of an image or video that can be viralized much more easily than a text or a title is a consequence of the huge capacity of the visual content format compared to text reading (*Soifron, 2015*).

Globalization is another condition that favours the image, which does not need cultural linguistic codes to be read – hence the success of image advertising and the niche of text-based advertising (*Pflaeging & Stöckel, 2021*). Considering the relation between the two main formats of information we are analysing (text and image), research published in 2022 shows how the typeface anatomy of a logo can define the consistency of brands (and the research covers the case of flexible multimodal brands), in which the visual diversity and structural entertainment are essential for their visual profiling (*Lelis et al., 2022*). These morphologic features which are

consistent regardless of the highly mutable contexts sometimes, are relying on typography as the key graphic/visual resource for the main translation and reception of a brand's name, assuring the recognition and memorisation goals of the brand. Thus, type is the most constant component, due to its incontestable role in guaranteeing readability. In specific cases, the famous advertising campaigns benefited from geographical versions in which the textual elements or visual semiotics were adapted to the destination cultures [6].

Perhaps the most relevant example of the overall functioning of an advertising campaign is, in branding, as a component element of an advertising campaign, the logo / visual mark. The logo is a key element the visual identity of a brand and stands as one of the most powerful communication elements an entity has, becoming critical in building positioning and identity profiles for the target audiences to recognize and value (*Lelis et al., 2022*). Logos function as hybrid visual and text-based elements of visual communication. Logos are examples of texts that are visualized, that function as an image and not as text, given their recognizability and the “undressing” of the text reading feature. Logos such as Coca-Cola, IBM, Microsoft, and many others, no longer need the actual reading of the letters, are perfectly identifiable as image elements, in full association with the multitude of collateral language elements (chromatic, font, texture, treatment graphic etc) (*Soreanu, 2018*). Ironically, since Walter Benjamin's argument that the mass public of the twentieth century would necessarily correlate with a newly politicized art (and culture), the world has changed considerably, still debating between established cultural values, and the new emerging art market and digitization directions which have made Benjamin's arguments more pertinent than ever (*Emison, 2021*).

Since multimodality deals with combinations of speech, writing, image, sound, and other expressive resources (or formats of content, ways in which the communicational content is articulated), it is ubiquitous in human communicative practices, sharing structure, discourse semantics and rhetorical function in communicational context (*Manovich, 2001a*). Visual image technologies are nowadays shortening the distance between people and the manifestations of art and culture due to the rapid development of digital media (*Mao & Xunxun, 2021*), while considering the democratization of media.

Discussion

The Image as a Cultural Experience

Because its reception cannot be dissociated from the cultural context of its conception, production, or dissemination—regardless of whether we are talking about the press image (objective, journalistic), the universal visual arts image, which transcends the limitations of objective communication and accesses meanings and high values) or even the social-religious image (the vehicle of communication for so many decades)—the image offers a cultural perspective of reality. As visual culture becomes a discipline which is increasingly central to the cultural understanding of today's human visual civilization, it is important how we perceive the media influence in our communication, and in what way the reality is shaped through the process of communicating it as both a medium and a message (*McLuhan, 1964*). Moreover, it creates a direction of discussion which embodies the very core features of objectivity as a prime condition in crafting the communication process in today's digital world. The question is if, on one hand, today's communication objectivity is a tool able to embody this ethical dimension of the cultural

studies, and—on the other hand—how the communication in public space is shaped and balanced at the convergence of the message syntax and medium characteristics.

Conclusions

Reflecting on the way we look at images today, and how our understanding of the image resonates with the context of extreme digitalization, we noticed its prevalence in the contemporary media and the way it echoes the definition of our cultural identity. Using visual culture tools and theories and different case studies from both the objective and journalistic press image, and the image in advertising or visual arts which transcends conventional communication limits, our analysis shows different cultural perspectives to reflect of the way we shape our existence today at the intersection of digital media, communication patterns and content cultural digestion. From its very core structural patterns (the way text and image work in building meaning in communicative structures), we argued how the image is prevalent in today's media culture and how our perception on reality—as information processors—is conditioned by visual reading and lecturing patterns. This research also opens perspectives of further research on the topic of media, content formats and content structure, or post-media aesthetics.

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Notes:

- [1] Wang and Song applied deep neural network model to rank the importance of different types of information and used a regression model to investigate the impact of information consistency on sales predictions, based on the empirical analysis. The study showed that the image is more important for ‘search goods’, whereas the text is more influential for ‘experience goods’, in consumers’ purchase decisions (*Wang & Song, 2020*).
- [2] The author identifies different types of technical visual knowledge in a communication construction, such as interpretational knowledge, spatial knowledge, sequential knowledge, or rhetorical knowledge (*Rowley-Jolivet, 2000*).
- [3] As Maurice Merleau-Ponty noticed, “...the wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion. My eyes follow the line on the paper, and from that moment I am caught up in their meanings, I lose sight of them.” (*Ponty, 2013*)
- [4] As seen in nowadays TV shows, where specific moderators instruct the audience to obtain the desired reaction or attitude in support of the main topic of the show, also stimulating the “televisual quasi-intimacy” for the home viewers in ways which are both ideologically and culturally significant for the mediatic society (*Painter, 1993*).
- [5] A content analysis of several thousands of multilingual posts collected from the social media platform Flickr, focus on the types of visual content the citizens used to react to Brexit, as well as

on what types of social relations this content can particularly create between their authors and the other members of the Flickr community (*Bouko et al., 2021*).

- [6] An example is the case of the rebranding campaign of the Romanian company “Antibiotice”, in which the logo’s visual constructive “plus” sign was replaced with an arrow for the Arab countries, where it could have been associated with the Christian symbol of the cross). See “Programul de rebranding al companiei Antibiotice, intre cele mai valoroase la nivel international”. <https://www.antibiotice.ro/noutati>