

Visual Communication in the Politico-Cultural Sphere

Nerijus STASIULIS

Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Creative Industries,
Vilnius Gediminas Technical University,
Trakų Street, Room 102, Vilnius 00132, Lithuania
nerijus.stasiulis@vgtu.lt

Abstract: The article reviews the developing studies of visuality with respect to their own focus on cultural and political fields in which visual communication unfolds. I found that some of the academic interests related to visuality can be located within the broader or intersecting field of cultural and political studies and provide successful tools of analysing and describing the communicational interactions within local communities situated in broader contexts of mobility. Some light is shed on the visualisations of the current condition of the nation-state with respect to globalizing or Europeanising tendencies. Also, I discuss a more general impact of mobility and novel visualisations of the public and cultural sphere.

Keywords: cultural studies, media, nation-state, religion, visual communication, public spaces

INTRODUCTION

The visual has had a dual meaning in Western philosophy: on the one hand, the truth was supposed to reveal itself to the blessed sight of the mind, on the other hand, the eye along with the other senses acquired a problematic status. The *common sense* was located as if in-between the insufficiency of individual senses and the completeness of intellectual vision, and it was spiritualised as the *inner sense* of the inner man who was to turn toward beatific vision. Again, on the one hand, Western ocularcentrism has been recently deconstructed, on the other hand, the new media are characterised by a rather prevalent visual component. Generally, cultures tend to be expressed visually. Visual culture is linked to communities in which the former is shaped as people are moulded by the way things are seen in their communities and in turn act by changing these visualisations. Media can draw on historical hints and shape the way that we see and “create” our “history” or everyday lives. The visual field can be the space of interaction between attitudes, ideologies and

political or cultural aims as well as between the public and the inner, the general and the individual.

The article reviews some of the research on visual communication with emphasis on its public – political and cultural – significance. Studies of visual communication will prove to be resourceful with respect to delineating the local-global dynamics of the current politico-cultural field. The first chapter will focus on the reflection of the condition of the Western nation-state in the global process and political actions in shaping the nation-state in this context which are also visual, or visualised, actions. The second chapter, while still dealing with dynamics largely within the nation-states or even within regions or cities, or towns, will move the focus from the essential nature of the political unit toward a more mobile stance and will cover issues of intercultural (or multicultural, interreligious) communication, cultural resources for religious communication through novel visual means and novel visual expressions in public spaces. Still, both chapters merge in seeing visual communication as a creative act which takes place within and between communities.

The issues of the significance of images and visualisations for both the intellectual and the public sphere have been discussed in the philosophical-sociological context, among many others, by Aczél (2016), Dasgupta (2017), Jasper (2014), Juzefovič (2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2014a), Juzefovič and Sakalauskaitė (2014), Kačerauskas (2008, 2010, 2011, 2011a), Klajumaitė (2014), Kovács (2014), Mester (2014), Monginaitė (2010), Moore (2013), Nikiforova (2011, 2015), Nyíri (2009, 2016), Rabazauskaitė (2015), Reimeris (2011), Sabolius (2011), Skarupa (2014), Teplá (2014), Vabalaitė (2014), Vasiliauskaitė (2012).

VISUALITY AND THE EXISTENCE OF THE NATION-STATE

According to Kovács (2014), who analyses how communities have been visualised since pre-modern times up to the contemporary global age, current visual imagination of a national community is characterised by a blend of archaic, modern and postmodern elements as the modern geographical image of the state has changed due to the process of globalization. Contrary to predictions, though, the nation-state does not seem to be disappearing and is much more persistent than predicted by thinkers like Fukuyama. While some theories see the nation-state as an exclusively modern phenomenon, others see nations as “perennial”, still

others take the medium position and argue that the modern phenomenon of the nation-state is rooted in pre-modern religious-mythical symbols around which the community consciousness of archaic, ethnically based communities revolves (Kovács 2014: 47-48). The author emphasizes that theories that purport to explain the imagination which holds the unit of the modern nation-state together primarily in economic and rationalistic terms à la Benedict Anderson fail to explain the high “emotional temperature” of nationalism (Kovács 2014: 48-49).

Some forms of ethical consciousness are found (at least in North Western Europe) already in the 12th century but in the context of a completely difficult political organization, and social imagination was not defined by political maps and was dominated by organic metaphors (the notion of the body politic based on the notion of *mysticum corpus Christi*) and religious symbols, and the idea of *patria* referred to a locality or assumed strong religious connotations. Of course, we must not ignore the republican notion of political *patria* in classical antiquity which in Christianity was transformed into the heavenly fatherland for which martyrs (the warriors of Christ) died, and which began to be secularized in the High and Late Middle Ages and assumed the meaning of political-legal body. Western Europe, especially France and England, were the pioneers of the political organization of the modern nation-state while national consciousnesses in the multilingual empires of Central and Eastern Europe followed their own routes. Today, the visualisation of a nation in terms of its mapped geographical border may fade but the nation will certainly be visualised as a community of shared language and common culture because nobody will identify its fatherland with (will “die for”) Europe (Kovács 2014: 51). The author concludes that “national consciousness constitutes a basic form of communal identity for the time being and remains presumably in this role in the foreseeable future as well” (Kovács 2014: 54).

Kačerauskas (2010) provides a detailed reflection on the role of maps in the shaping of a national community. He sees a map as a medium of transferring a tradition which is in need of renewal. Firstly, a map of a nation-state is not so much an object of geography as it is a social phenomenon emerging in the shaping of a nation as a community of individuals. Secondly, a map exerts influence on the public life and contributes to shaping political attitudes. Thirdly, a map allows communication between different generations of a nation and is crucial for transmitting

tradition. Fourthly, novelties in social life arise by means of novel interpretation of a map; a map is a point of intersection between image and writing, and so on. Finally, the author sees the map as a medium which incorporates aspects of written, oral and visual culture. The map embodies the artistic ability of a national community to balance between its past and its future, its written legacy and verbal encouragement, culture and nature and other opposites (Kačerauskas 2010: 217).

Teplá (2014) discusses a “mythologisation” of political reality in photographic images. She analyses a particular example of two Czech presidential candidates of the final round of the 2013 presidential election – the right-wing Karel Schwarzenberg and the left-wing Miloš Zeman – being represented in a right-leaning online medium *Lidovky.cz*. She focuses on the relation of image and ideology based on the studies of visual literacy, critical analysis of visual culture, image-based research, and the concept of ideologies defined in terms of social knowledge, society and discourse. From the visual studies point of view that the author employs, images are understood as tools of agents used to produce ideologies: images have no power in themselves apart from the one which is given to them. This makes visual communication essentially a political process. Images are part of the process of negotiating values in a society and, beyond their context, are meaningless. Enter ideologies understood as a “complex of beliefs, values and ideas of a specific social group” (Teplá 2014: 28). Ideologies are not reserved for dominant groups only, still, certain elite groups are in better position to form and disseminate their ideologies because of their access to and control of media and education. The aim of an investigator is to deconstruct the publicly displayed images in order to show their embeddedness in an ideological context from which they are used as tools of manipulation.

Teplá reflects on the connotations of the images in terms of their descriptive meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. Unsurprisingly, she found that the photographs of the right-wing candidate in *Lidovky.cz* represented him in a symbolic structure (to identify him with grace, humanity and tradition), as being close to the ideal, in a close relationship to the viewer, with an emphasis on his personality, while the photographs of the other candidate conveyed the opposite messages. However, it was the left-wing candidate who won the election, so other social and political factors seemed to be more influential on the voters’ choice (Teplá 2014: 36).

Vasiliauskaitė (2012) investigates how different power structures utilize the same event to exert different influences on the viewer through visual means. She focuses on the specific visualisation in the placard “A Millenium of the Homeland” created by a bikers’ club for a concert which was arranged on the occasion of the national celebration of a thousand-year anniversary of the first mentioning of the name “Lithuania” in official records in 1009. Her article is devoted to testing her hypotheses that the placard represents an ideology akin to neo-Nazism. The author defines neo-Nazism as a variant of the ideology of the radical right which stems from the second half of the 20th century, includes the extreme notion of nationalism substantiated by the ethnic notion of the nation from the 19th century, aggressive xenophobia (characterized by a rhetoric of “survival”, holocaust revisionism, anti-Semitic, racist, machist, misogynistic, anti-gay, anti-Roma, anti-“foreigner” or anti-immigrant and the like), is inclined towards authoritarianism, anti-intellectualism, the cult of physical force, the code of “blood and honour” and admires the symbolism of the Third Reich.

The placard itself is a drawing that depicts a pagan Lithuanian with a shield and a bloody sword in his hands standing next to an oak tree (the folk symbol of Lithuanians) and a decapitated Christian monk with blood gushing up from his now open-ended neck (the name “Lithuania” was mentioned in 1009 in the context of st. Bruno’s martyrdom who was killed by pagan Lithuanians) and is intended as humorous. Vasiliauskaitė discusses three interpretations of the event outstanding in the public sphere to which she then compares the interpretation implied in the placard which she sees as different from all others. Firstly, the official interpretation of the festival endorsed by the state is that in 1009 Lithuania was discovered by the Christian civilization and this discovery was what created Lithuania and brought it onto the international scene. But the emphasis here is on statehood rather than Christianity. The second interpretation, on the other hand, emphasizes the Christian meaning of the event and seeks to present the very fact of St. Bruno’s mission as the beginning of the workings of the Gospel among Lithuanians and neighbour nations. The third interpretation emphasizes the “brutality” of the “barbarous” event of the peaceful monk’s decapitation and mocks the very notion of celebrating on such an occasion. The fourth, neo-Nazi, interpretation is different from the third one in that it suggest the conflict between proud “paganism” and invading and disrespectful Christianity,

and is different from the first one in that it sees the contact with the world and Europe (which in both interpretations is actualized in the present context of the membership in the European Union) in the negative light. “Europe” is understood as an enemy force which imposes on Lithuania the shackles of political correctness and human rights. Lithuanians in the placard are identified with proud and strong ancestors who stood against arrogant but rude invaders and their alien values. The simplistic design of the placard is seen by Vasiliauskaitė as adding to its intentional anti-intellectualism. It is set to encourage political action against “foreign values“, with various inscription indicating its intention to transform the official standing of the Republic of Lithuania. Hence, although it does not invoke the need for a strong leader and does not use Nazi symbolism, the author concludes that the unity of visual-ideologic elements in the placard suggests that it represents part of the spectrum of extreme right-wing neo-Nazi ideology.

Mester (2014) analyses the grounding philosophy of the modern state, that of Hobbes, in the context of the study of the parallel reasoning in words, pictures and gestures. He analyses Hobbes’s text as an example to show the complex role of visualisation and the relationship of words and pictures in early modernity. Although the tradition of ancient rhetoric is focused on the written text, its practise is closely knit to visual gesticulation; however, Hobbes, in his relation to ancient rhetoric, completely ignores the visual component. Still, he uses visual imagery to convey his notion of the social contract (Mester 2014: 102-103). However, Mester emphasizes that Hobbes knew full well the meaning of political action which transcends the weakness of both words and pictures. The human action is not to be reduced to and is not identical with its verbal or pictorial expressions. The gestures of people who participate in a collective action cannot be studied in the light of the verbal-pictorial dichotomy, therefore a new methodological tool is to be sought. Intentions of people are not explained by the vocabulary of speech acts or pictorial acts (Mester 2014: 105).

Aczél (2016) also focuses on visual thinking and sensualisation of language which have been marginalised due to treatment of rhetoric in terms of its textual products and logical procedures. She also makes away with the verbal-pictorial dichotomy when she argues that rhetoric has an original connection to seeing. Founded in the oral culture, it stems from sensual communicative existence. Rhetoric is persuasive precisely because

of its potential to make audiences see, feel and eventually enact which is rooted in the speaker's own visual encounter with the world (Aczél 2016: 70). Image-based messages are better at inducing action than concept-based messages (Aczél 2016: 77-78).

Actions are necessarily temporal, and, interestingly, Nyíri (2009) suggest that images can make away with verbal interpretation if they are put in their own temporal context (Nyíri 2009: 10). It is generally acknowledged that images have a primordial power to impressively communicate what verbal language would fail to communicate (even animals respond to images – Nyíri 2009: 8); but it is also common to regard them as in need of being guided verbally in order to be properly understood. Still, according to the author, images are only meaning-deficient when they are construed as “snap-shots” but not when they exist in a context of previous and posterior images of the same action or side-by-side with other images. What is more, the primary contact we make with the world is not mediated verbally as human mind is primarily and fundamentally visual and indeed kinesthetic (Nyíri 2016). The world shows itself to our temporal sight in action.

VISUALITY AND THE MOBILE NETWORK

Nikiforova (2011) describes the trouble that religious visualisations – in the form of clothes worn by different confessions to express their faith as well as other publicly visible expressions of faith – encounter in present-day multicultural Europe and its nation-states. The question of European Muslim women's “dress code” is “hot” in the media, and it could be compared to the difference of Jewish clothing which has been noticeable in Europe for ages, still, rarely caused a universal outrage. But in the context of the clash between secular and religious worlds the problem of the visualisation of one's faith through clothes has become a pressing political and legal problem. Wearing Muslim “religious symbolism” has been outlawed in different places in Europe (Nikiforova 2011: 36). The heated debate also includes building of mosques and, especially, minarets, mass prayers in public squares and like forms of visualisation. The author seeks to draw the reader's attention to the example of the visual image of Judaism in its sacral architecture which forms an important part of cultural and historical heritage of many a town and township of Lithuania. Neither Jews nor other denominations have generally met

intolerance in Lithuania despite the sad events during the Second World War. She concludes that reaching unity through difference and compromise remains an important goal and challenge for contemporary Europe.

Jasper (2014) perhaps hints at the hidden root of human action beyond pictures and words when he describes the current return to the visual in theological thinking and suggests that “reading” religious paintings takes us beyond the word-image opposition. The work of religious art links the doctrines of belief with inner life of both the artist and the viewer. Visual presence of religious content (the author employs depictions of Biblical scenes in paintings from the Reformation and Counter Reformation period to the present day) is in touch with the deep hopes and fears of our incarnate being. Religious art does not require further explication in words but speaks for itself. Jasper approvingly cites Barnett Newman who contended that man’s primary expression was a poetic outcry, that before he learned to use a stick as a javelin he used it to draw the God image (Jasper 2014: 114). He pays our attention to the broad shift in Western culture away from the verbal to the visual as well as to the questionable status of theology in its older narrative and doctrinal forms; yet, he suggest that the visual can offer a renewed energy to convey religious contents. Through theological readings of Reformation artists like Rembrandt and Lucas Cranach the Elder, and Counter Reformation painters like Velazquez, one can learn to appreciate the role of the visual in theological thinking as the religious dimension has been intrinsic to art since time immemorial.

Moore (2013) makes questionable the abstract verbal component in art by criticizing formalist tendencies in the art of the last century. The author is emphatic that the “mimetic instinct” and “the social instinct” (Moore 2013: 95) are naturally linked so that the aim of visual illustration is necessarily communicational, which is the reason why art was for centuries public. But recent art has aimed at expressing a private world of the creator and therefore has lost former public significance which was replaced by the particular, the individual and the aesthetic (Moore 2013: 94). The meaning and reference of pieces of art lost objective significance and could only be interpreted by their audience composed of individuals just as private and blind as the expressionist artists themselves. If art is to regain its public significance and communicational power, it is strongly recommended that it focus on the intrinsic power of the image to represent and to speak for itself without verbal additives.

Public visualisations are strongly connected to broader cultural tendencies. Public spaces express the turn towards the virtual. Juzefovič and Sakalauskaitė (2014) demonstrate how virtual reality is mapped in the framework of mediology based on Michael Heim's research. They assert that virtual reality and its mapping should be considered true reality as opposed to mere word magic. Virtual reality and electronic media do give rise to new forms of mediated communication based on the synthesis of virtuality and reality – a most banal but convincing instance of that is the bank machine which acts in the capacity of a real cashier although is not one. Following Heim, the authors understand virtual reality as an immersive interactive system whose basis is digital information (Juzefovič and Sakalauskaitė 2014: 202). Mediology is one of the many interdisciplinary approaches to the problem of virtual reality which pays special attention to the role of technologies as it combines insights from aesthetics, philosophy and history of technology, and communication and information theory. It focuses on the cultural and social effects of the media rather than on the media themselves and seeks to erase the distinction between culture and technology. For instance, the analysis of the context of the invention of the bicycle indicates that it is closely connected to democratic and individualistic tendencies, the changing women's' role in the society and new kinetic ideas expressed by painters and cinematographers (Juzefovič and Sakalauskaitė 2014: 203-204).

Mediology is especially good for interpreting recent forms of digital media such as augmented space. Augmented space is akin to virtual space but essentially different in that the former exists on the computer screen and seeks to imitate non-virtual reality while the latter contributes to existing reality by explaining, perfecting or paraphrasing it. It was first used for military purposes, then in the field of medicine, and then in the worlds of art and entertainment. Interestingly, the authors notice that attention paid by projections of augmented space to the surrounding environment makes them akin in this respect to traditional Chinese aesthetics (Juzefovič and Sakalauskaitė 2014: 206-207). They also predict that augmented spaces will expand to fill “non-spaces”, that is, spaces in the city which are frequented by the inhabitants but do not have histories of their own (Juzefovič and Sakalauskaitė 2014: 207).

Rabazauskaitė (2015) proposes a model of creative tourism which could also be used to revitalise public spaces. The concept of creative tourism blurs the demarcation line between a tourist and a local because

a tourist becomes a contributor to the local life as opposed to a passive consumer. The author presents a case study on *Traveling Architecture Workshops*. During the project, a team of architects and volunteers visited 16 different towns in Lithuania in each of which they held a three-day workshop and collaborated with local children in getting to know public spaces in need of visual embellishment. These workshops enhanced the public environment of the towns through their participatory activities. On a more theoretical level, Rabzauskaitė (2015: 127-128) tends to conceive the social interaction in the course of creative tourism in terms of the ritual of interaction: tourists and locals acquire symbols that have membership significance and, as the symbols are exchanged between participants, members renew or supplement their stock of symbols. In addition, this activity is highly charged with emotion which is the reason why sometimes even a tourist feels local. Locals are in turn also highly involved in the activity as both the locals and the tourists are transformed in the process of cooperation wherein the former turn into curious explorers of their cities or towns and the latter get to know daily routes of local inhabitants.

CONCLUSION

The modern trend of desensitized and disembodied attitudes has been counteracted by rediscoveries of sensuality and embodiment. The visual turn of the 20th century can be considered part of this rediscovery. Postmodern technology, an offspring of modern rationalism, has drawn the sensual into itself or has merged with it. Accordingly, the spiritual and the abstract (such as the religious or the political) all prove to be essentially linked to visual presence. The article has focused on the significance of the visual for public communication and action, especially with respect to the context of the tension, or communication, between the nation-state and global mobility. Verbal communication acquires visual expression or is either complemented, or fulfilled, or even outspoken by it. Still, some authors hint at the level beyond word and picture wherefrom meaning springs and empowers verbal or visual expressions. The deeper level of action appears to be at the core of the processes within the nation-state and with respect to its place in the global context, and it is brought to life and sustained, and modified through visual communication. The potencies of the visual to shape the public sphere as well as the inner life are still being uncovered.

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