Critical Visual Theory – Introduction

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Abstract: The studies selected for publication in this special issue on Critical Visual Theory can be divided into three thematic groups: (1) image making as power making, (2) commodification and re-canonization, and (3) approaches to critical visual theory. The approaches to critical visual theory adopted by the authors of this issue may be subsumed under the following headings (3.1) critical visual discourse and visual memes in general and *Anonymous* visual discourse in particular, (3.2) collective memory and gendered gaze, and (3.3) visual capitalism, global north and south.

Keywords: Critical Visual Theory, Visual Communication, Digital Cultures, Protest, Semiotics, Visual Discourse, Collective Memories, Gendered Gazes, Visual Capitalism

1. "Image Making is Power Making"

This special issue on Critical Visual Theory presents papers selected from submissions in reply to the editors' Call for Paper to provide critical insights into economic, technical, political, cultural, and ecological aspects of transnational and global visual communication. The editors' aim was to present studies that make use of critical theories appropriate to advance critical research in visual information technologies, formats, and narratives in general and of strategies of veiling financial, military, economic, religious interests in particular. As was to be expected, papers covering a broad range of current topics from a plurality of perspectives were submitted. Those accepted for publication offer indeed possible answers to many of the questions raised in the editors' Call for Papers. Nevertheless, some current topics addressed in the editors' Call were not among the topics dealt with by the contributors. For example, none of the submissions addresses the hot topic of visual surveillance, which is presently attracting much social, political, and cultural attention after the enormous growth of mobile social online media in private and public spheres. However, the editors of this issue can recommend readers interested in this topic to consult the papers on visual surveillance by Fuchs (2012 and 2013), Hyunjin and McAllister (2011), Netchitailova (2011), and Santaella (2011) as complements to the present issue.

The ubiquity of images and imagery in the mass media and in public online spheres across the media and across national borders calls for a Critical Visual Theory. In most modern societies, the print media have been the predominant public forum for the distribution of information. Thus, verbal modes of argumentation have been hegemonic. Today, by contrast, we are faced with "flows of messages and images," as Manuel Castells (1996, 508) put it, which have become the "basic thread of our social structure," and we have now reached a point where "image making is power making" (ibid. 507). Nevertheless, the visual networks that have arisen from the ubiquitous spread of images in the media have not yet attracted the attention of researchers that they deserve. Castells himself did not study this development very closely, not even in his more recent publications. Nye (2011, xiii), by contrast, has shown that visual narratives contribute to "the public determination of legitimacy, good and evil – and the shaping of the preferences of one's opponents." Will Critical Visual Theory be able to make the complex social relations behind this development more "transparent?"

In his Introduction to the third edition of his *The Visual Culture Reader*, Mirzoeff (2013, xxxv) argues that "critical visuality studies need to be the place of intersection for the analysis

of techniques of visuality, media studies new and old, postcolonial studies, gender studies and queer theory […]. It needs to explore affinities with critical ethnic studies, critical legal studies, and other such iterations of the paradigm." Recent information and communication technologies have even broken up the established strategies and conventions concerning time and space. For several years, it has become ever more apparent that US military "allow Google, Digital Globe and Space Imagining to conduct an international business that turns Afghani and Iraqui territories (as well as those of other countries) into intellectual property produced, owned, and distributed by US corporations" (Parks 2013, 202). Globally, the influence of mainly US American, European, and Japanese media has been prevalent for decades. These hegemonic media have determined the formats and contents of representation in accordance with their own perspectives and interests and in the defense of their worldwide political power and privileges.

Visual Hegemonies (Ludes 2005) offers a preliminary outline of how to overcome the traditional preponderance of studies in verbal communication in economic, cultural, and scientific discourse. The investigation of visual hegemonies is a pressing issue for Critical Visual Theory. It is an interdisciplinary endeavor combining methods from Visual Studies in the humanities (such as semiotics, film and media studies) with discourse analysis, communication studies, sociology, and the empirical social sciences. Multidisciplinarity is called for since critical analysis of (audio)visual media cultures involves social institutions, collective media actors, political and economic agents, and the social movements that produce and disseminate (audio)visuals. The identification of institutional interests and power constellations is indispensable, and it calls for sociological expertise.

In his recent *Critical Introduction* to social media, Fuchs (2014) introduces basic concepts of political economy (from Karl Marx to Garnham, 1979 and 2011; Golding and Murdock 1997) and of the Frankfurt School Critical Theory (Marcuse, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas). Among the topics of special interest in the study of the political and economic forces within the image networks are questions such as ownership, the mechanisms of production, selection, and dissemination of audiovisual entertainment, and the study of how information is made available or concealed.

Critical research in visual discourse requires taking into account the devices of (audio)visual rhetoric (Knape 2007), the strategies of image use (Müller 2007), and the political, ideological, and economical contexts and interests. (Audio)visual narratives and the forms of their cross-media dissemination are central issues for a Critical Visual Theory inquiring into the underlying rationales, worldviews, and values disseminated by collective actors and institutions across the media, nationwide, and globally.

Beside the largely qualitative methods of semiotics, film, and media studies, quantitative studies have offered important contributions to Critical Visual Theory. Today, new methods of research, such as multimedia content management, coding systems, and multimodal online publication sites need to be explored. Innovative visual information and communication technologies further the development of Visual Studies (cf. Manovich 2012; Rose 2012) enabling Visual Studies in this field to cope with the challenges of the online media beyond the "Iconic" or "Pictorial Turn" (Boehm 1994 and 2007; Mitchell 1994 and 2007).

It is well known that images influence their viewers affectively and create networks of mental associations (e.g. Barthes 1981). Graber (1981), for example, summarizes that audiovisual languages are "more associational, connotative and unstructured and less logical, less clearly defined and delimited" (in: McQuail 2010, 374). However, McQuail believes that "the systematic analysis of audiovisual languages is, nevertheless, still at an early stage" (ibid.). Others are more optimistic, being convinced that progress in Visual Studies is possible if insights from the humanities are combined with analytical elements from the social sciences (e.g. Müller 2007, 2008).

Critical Visual Theory has to consider the performance of affective pictures in the process of their creation, distribution, and reception. It also has to consider their associative and affective impact. Public agents use the affective qualities of pictures and audiovisuals strategically in order to manipulate their audiences politically and ideologically in order to influence their habits, especially, since images, with their affective qualities, can transcend the limits of

facts and fiction: "Fictional emotions […] constitute the building blocks for the cultural activity of imagination. [...] In other words, imagination generates emotions through culturally scripted narratives, which mobilize the mechanism of identification with characters, plots, characters' intentions, and the subsequent emotional simulation. It is this mechanism which, when combined with visual vividness, inscribes some narrative vignettes in our mental schemas, and thus makes them more likely to become a part of our way of imagining and anticipating [...] through the repeated cultural scenarios and stories we encounter" (Illouz 2012, 210, 212).

From the perspective of Critical Visual Theory, it is also necessary to disclose the hidden dimensions of visual hegemonies, of power constellations and social conditions, and of emancipative potentials (cf. Stumberger 2007, 2010; Dogra 2012; Pantti 2013). New visual information and communication technologies, forums, and formats are put to use in order to cover up social facts and realities. Increasingly intelligent devices are already exceeding by far the resources of traditional webcams and techniques of video surveillance. Media studies and discourse analysis, and in particular the theory of sociological imagination (Mills 1959; Henny 1986; Grady 2008; May 2010; Mansell 2012) can contribute to the methods of a Critical Visual Studies. Multicultural approaches and multiperspectival modes of seeing, interpreting, and explaining the currently ongoing global transformations are called for.

Online video platforms and audiovisual social forums are canonizing and recanonizing digital cultures so that facts, fictions, information, commercials, entertainment, professionally produced and user-generated contents come together, mixing up traditional program formats. The new platforms cut and condense, internationalize and deprofessionalize, and they undermine traditional genres and viewing styles (Burgess and Green 2009). Media genres contribute to supporting as well as to subverting social cohesion. Via the extension of human attention, they are both factors of social change and of the persistence of hegemonies (McQuail 2010, 90-93).

2. Commodification and Recanonization

A central issue is the exploding commodification (Hyunjin and McAllister 2011; Fuchs 2014) of audiovisual screen media and narratives for Google, Facebook, and similar markets. The present special issue gives evidence of a master trend of a recanonization of traditional programs in narrative and counternarrative formats. If TV's "close dialogical and reflective relations with the rest of society are manifested in its contents" (Gripsrud 2010, 73), the question is whether this will also apply to the major online video platforms or whether the latter will mainly market the agendas for cohort-specific gossip agendas and drive out TV's visions. Nevertheless, we "still live in nation states that are not at all dead [...] and so broadcasting will continue to deliver national identity composed of shared cultural references across social, geographical, generational and other divisions" (ibid., 88). Will audiences, viewers, consumers be addressed and act as citizens or as "prosumers" (Fuchs 2011)? In search for answers to such questions, let us apply Dahlgren's (2010, 29f.) dimensions of (1) structure, (2) representation, and (3) interaction to online audio-visual communication networks.

1. Concerning the structural dimension, we can see that "ownership, financing, control, procedures for licensing, rules for access [...] the legal frameworks" are all significantly different for online platforms in comparison with traditional broadcasting, especially public service broadcasting. After the recent media upheavals, we must assume neither that the public sphere characteristics of TV have any significant continuity in the new media nor that the new social forums carry on traditional public sphere tasks.

2. Public service and publicly regulated TV contents and formats have often been patterned by specific representational strategies, such as "fairness, completeness, accuracy, pluralism of opinion," supposedly characteristic of "the larger semiotic media culture which envelops it and intertextualizes it" (Dahlgren 2010, 29f.). However, TV is more and more being put off, complemented, or interrupted by "your tubes," not only by younger cohorts in media environments, but also for an increasing portion of screen media prosumers.

3. Interaction has two sides. "Firstly, it has to do with the citizens' encounters with the media – the communicative processes of making sense, of interpreting the Output. The second

aspect [...] is that between citizens themselves." Television "is visual and exists in time; the press is a textual medium that takes up space [...]. Within any given medium there are important genre differences" (ibid., 31). In general, the "power of economic elites has unquestionably expanded at the expense" of political elites and citizens (ibid., 34). Yet, it would be misleading to accept interactivity as a goal in itself. YouTube and Facebook gear interactivity mainly towards commercials. We need innovative methods for analyzing and reflecting these commercialized cultures, for which various elements are already available (cf. Bassett 2011; Bateman 2013 and 2014; Bock 2011; Buckingham 2009; Nöth 2011; Rose 2012).

What are the narratives that intercultural and intermedia comparison can discern (Kramer and Ludes, 2010)? Can the elements of the traditional media also be found in the new transgenre narratives or in "transmedia story telling" (Jenkins 2006, 97)? Can the traditional questions of what, who, where, when, how, and why still be asked? Which Key Visual narratives are shown? Do Critical Visual Studies require new concepts, methods and theories for the analysis of culture specific, transcultural and global communication? Do new visual information technologies revolutionize or democratize (Kappelhoff, Groß, and Illger 2012) traditional modes of presentation, dissemination, interactive patterns of usage, and modes of perceiving? Do new video formats impose new canon habits? Are televisual worldviews in video bits preferred by younger entertainment seekers? Are there only a few emancipative islands of enlightenment in the new media landscape?

Can the challenges to empirical research raised by these questions dispel the impression that most audiovisual online platforms and social forums are structurally highly monopolistic and that they are often dominated by entertainment-driven cohorts celebrating fun as a life-goal? However that may be, from the perspective of interactivity (or "interpassivity"), YouTube or Facebook, combined with WhatsApp and other social networking sites offer potential outlets for critical horizons and interactions, especially in situations of crisis and in censored media environments. Because of this critical potential, China excluded YouTube and established its own Video online portal, Youku. Most probably, however, it will be impossible for party or self-censorship to control countervisuals and counternarratives completely, so that some of the countervisuals and counternarratives may still succeed in breaking up party controlled narratives (cf. Hao's contribution to this special issue).

Do YouTube or Youku videos establish "close dialogical and reflective relations with the rest of society," as Gripsrud (2010) hypothesizes for TV in Europe? Since video online platforms are transnational, but the upload and usage habits vary more than the viewing habits of TV audiences. The genres are less stable, if they are stable at all, and it is most unlikely that they will remain constant for decades. YouTube and Youku also differ as to their users. We should not speak of "global" influence without differentiating between political orders, economic systems, cultural spheres, and age cohorts of users, producers. Different possibilities of accessibility and technical, economic, cultural, or political constraints need to be taken into account. It is to be expected that the inner dynamics of the dissemination of audiovisual products will contribute to undermining political dictatorships and hegemonies, and one day perhaps even of economic monopolies. However, it cannot be ignored that these products also tend to converge with superficial infotainment and commercials and that they are subject to professional strategies of secret political or economic surveillance.

Economic and especially financial capital powers remain mostly "Key Invisibles" (May 2010; Ludes 2011). Public audiovisual spheres become sources of multi-sensuous experience (cf. Pink 2011), they testify to normative postulates (Habermas 2011) and give evidence of socio-economic conditions underlying the new struggles for hegemonic narratives. As Nye (2011, xiii, xvii) puts it, "conventional wisdom has always held that the State with the largest military prevails, but in an information age, it may be the states (or nonstates) with the best story that win. [...]. The ability to get the outcomes we want will rest upon a new narrative of smart power." Notice that YouTube presents itself like a social forum and not as a profit-seeking enterprise selling clicks. How about Youku's loyalty to the Communist Party's ideology of a harmonious People's Republic of China? Does Youku conceal opinions of opponents and perpetuate party member privileges? Is it a functional equivalent to the YouTube commercial ideology, or will YouTube's and Youku's strategies converge to some-

thing like a new "YouTubeYouku?" Neither of the two video platforms resembles a neutral forum, but both convey the impression of profit and politics driven cash and reputation cows. YouTube and Youku have begun to undermine and replace traditional broadcast, TV and even web TV, and hence all traditional genres with their specific cultural halos.

Critical Visual Theory reveals the strategies of trivialization in contrast to the democratization of audiovisual self-presentations, rankings, and self-views. The recanonization of genres as a means of orientation and communication, but also of the pitfalls of disorientation and (ex-)communication are not only questions of academic interest. As Nye (2011) has shown, it also contributes to redefining military, political, and economic power via new visual narratives, which do not only function as canons, but also address consumers and citizens in battles for eyes and minds. In such battles, the chances for victories and profits determine the modes of classifying, stereotyping, and ranking video bits as means for media escape or lifeworld action, and their potential for recanonizing visual definitions as well as for preparing, covering, and carrying out protests.

3. Towards a Critical Visual Theory

The contributions to this special issue Critical Visual Theory deal with a plurality of topics and represent diverse approaches. More than the classical and also than many current social theories, these studies focus on the global variety of meanings and functions of audiovisual narratives in contexts of exploitation, power, and counterpower (Therborn 2011 and 2013; McQuail 2013; Qiu 2009; Zhao 2012; Zhengrong, Zhang, and Deqiang 2013). The approaches to Critical Visual Theory adopted by the authors of this issue can be subsumed under the following headings (3.1) critical visual discourse and visual memes in general and *Anonymous* visual discourse in particular, (3.2) collective memory and gendered gaze, and (3.3) visual capitalism, global, North, and South.

3.1. Critical Visual Discourse, Anonymous, and Visual Memes

One of the recurrent topics in this special issue is contentious imagery circulated by protest actors on the Internet. This new field of study testifies to a growing interest in the use of visual media by protest movements (cf. Cottle and Lester 2011; Kellner 2012; Cammaerts et al. 2013; Doerr et al. 2013; Fahlenbrach et al. 2014). These studies document how protest images are spreading in a globalized media sphere. On the one hand, social movements attract public attention for their aims and actions by providing the media with attractive image events (Delicath and DeLuca 2003). On the other hand, the news value of contentious pictures is increasing, both in terms of attention value and in terms of the global dissemination of images. Reinforced by the Internet, the global diffusion of images is of high political and economic value. Scenes of uproar in the streets, confrontations between protesters and police, and spectacular symbolic performances provide images that are highly valued. While for a long time, access to the mass media restricted the efficiency of public protests to local events, the Internet is offering new possibilities for attracting public attention and mobilizing supporters on a global scale, too.

The first paper of this special issue, Fernando Andacht's "A Critical and Semiotic Approach to the Wonderful, Horrible Life Cycle of the *Kony 2012* Viral Video," presents a study of a worldwide mobilization initiated on the Internet that exemplifies the power of audiovisual narratives in affective and moral mobilization. The author applies Peirce's semiotics to the fastes-spreading viral online video campaign so far, the video *Kony 2012* against Uganda's warlord Joseph Kony. It was made and distributed by the American NGO Invisible Children, and it features, as its narrator, activist and filmmaker Jason Russell. By means of affection laden and dramaturgically staged images, the campaign succeeded in mobilizing worldwide solidarity for violently recruited and oppressed child soldiers. In his critical deconstruction of the visual rhetoric of the video, Andacht argues, "Just as the critics of *Kony 2012* helped us understand that attractive images, persuasive words, and a deceivingly simple solution to a complex humanitarian crisis could cause more harm than good to those in need, despite good intentions, a semiotic analysis of that critical discourse can make us aware of the blind

spots or contradictions that weaken the critiques by distorting the complex reality of the world of sign action." Thus, the author does not only question the simplifications involved in this exceptionally successful audiovisual campaign for the Invisible Children NGO, which seemed to be more successful in terms of clicks than in political relevance, but he also problematizes the dualistic assumption underlying most critiques of *Kony 2012*, namely, the hoary dichotomy of passive audience vs. active media. When it comes to the audience, this dualism reproduces the kind of oversimplifying reductionism of which the critics accuse this video.

Protest actors make increasing use of visual narratives and of the devices of visual rhetoric in order to attract public attention and mobilize protest in transnational public spheres on the Internet (Doerr et al. 2013). This is the topic of the second contribution of this issue, by Stoehrel and Lindgren, entitled "For the Lulz: Anonymous, Aesthetics and Affect." The authors examine the strategies of visual action and activism used by *Anonymous*, one of the most prominent online hacktivist groups. Two kinds of contentious practice are in the authors' focus. The first is hacking as a subversive action making use of technological expert knowledge as a cultural capital in order to question the technological power structures of established economic and political institutions. While Anonymous' hacking practices originally only affected specific powerful elites of public attention, the activists soon extended the spectrum of their topics and forms of protest. The second kind of contentious practice examined by the authors are affective forms of visual protest in the streets and in online forums. Stoehrel and Lindgren describe culture jamming practices of *Anonymous*, the use of visual signs and symbols in established political and commercial public spheres with the purpose of "remediating" them in subversive and critical ways. "What Anonymous does is to mobilize affect (inspire a social and/radical imaginary, and provide a detailed plan for public action) drawing on a body of discourses and counternarratives, beyond the traditional frames established by state or commercial media. Considered in such a communicative-political perspective, the democratic contribution of Anonymous can be said to be less about 'hacking' and more about raising or developing 'critical thought' and/or provoking political debates (via its aesthetic and affective strategies)."

The reframing of visual narratives established in the mass media and by established public actors as a form of culture jamming (Lasn 2000; Völlinger 2010) is characteristic of the "participatory culture" of many online media. Appropriating conventionalized signs and symbols, narratives, and discourses, activists express their ideas by means of strategies of visual reversion and subversion. In the end, protest networks such as Anonymous and Occupy even profit from strategies of subversive appropriation insofar as they turn themselves into objects of "remediation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999) or "remix" (Campanelli 2010).

In "Visual Memes as Neutralizers of Political Dissent," Stefka Hristova examines how the transnational network *Occupy* develops strategies of protesting against global economies and spreading its imagery by means of culture jamming techniques and in the form of "visual memes." Even independently of their creators, their subversive images and verbal slogans are becoming virally distributed in the most diverse public spheres as well as in collective practices. Hristova defines "revolution" in the digital age as a "subversive and viral activity," a "rupture with hegemonic signs and meanings, as represented by established mass media, companies and politics." The author contextualizes these activities within the broader context of digital democracy and concludes: "Considering the predominant use of the Internet by users for entertainment purposes as well as the ever-expanding corporate control of cyberspace, I argue that digital democracy, as participatory and decentralized as it might be, functions within the hegemonic political narrative of the state [...]. The space of 'digital democracy,' in which the visual memes as well as humorous modalities of Occupy flourished, faced less censorship and suppression. In the arena of the visual digital world, viral movements were given more time to develop, thrive, and dwindle away."

3.2. Collective Memories and Gendered Gazes

"Participatory cultures" (Burgess and Green 2009) that have emerged from the Internet also affect the dynamics of collective memories (Neiger et al. 2011; Ernst 2012). Established me-

dia, corporations, and other powerful public actors guide the collective memory and knowledge by its very conventions of representing the world in still and in moving images. Three studies in this collection of papers on Critical Visual Theory address this topic area with evidence from three very different world regions, India, Israel, and the United States. The first, by Keval J. Kumar, deals with "The 'Bollywoodization' of Popular Indian Visual Culture" from a critical perspective. Kumar starts with a concise characterization of Indian visual culture as a historical battlefield of Hollywood, Bollywood, and new "fundamentalist forces." The author deals with the visual standards of storytelling in Bollywood cinema, in which he sees a hegemonic discourse dominating not only conventions of visual narratives in Indian movies but also in other media, such as the press, television, advertising, the worldwide web, or social media. As Kumar concludes, the dominance of Bollywood film industries and their standards in representing not only fictional worlds but also reality masks many counterhegemonic trends in film art and media practices: "Indian visual culture may have been bollywoodized over the last two decades or so, but this development has not gone unchallenged. The resistance to Bollywood's many attempts to take over has been led by filmmakers and other visual artists from different parts of the country as well as from the diaspora. This counterhegemonic movement, still in its nascent stages, offers varied and alternative works of art, which celebrate subaltern perspectives." Kumar's contribution does not only address the question of collective knowledge and common sense, as it is shaped and represented by collective imagery, but also focuses on collective memory, when the author considers Bollywood's hegemonic visual standards in the history of Indian visual culture. "Only time will tell whether the vibrant visual culture of India, known for its diversity and openness, will survive Bollywood and the lurking threats from fascist and fundamentalist forces" (cf. Nair and Tanvir 2014).

In the Middle East, Israel and Palestine have been struggling with their collective interpretation of the past in order to legitimize current and future political action. Casemajor's contribution, entitled "Framing Openness: The Digital Circulation of Israel's National Photographic Memory," deals with aspects of the visual culture of this memory deeply rooted in historical conflicts. The author studies the visual narratives that have been documented in photographs showing the collective solidarity amongst people in building a new nation since the early days of Israel. Her study gives evidence of the visual creation of a national myth but also of discursive conflicts that began to come to the fore when the archives of these photographic documents were made accessible to the public in 2011. Casemajor also investigates the discursive conflicts that arose from the general online availability of these archives and the symbolic disputes about obtaining and securing discursive control over the collective ways of Israel's self-representation. These conflicts were affected both by the political circumstances of the Arab-Israel War and by the public circumstances of the digital media as "participatory" ones, guided by the ideal of an "open access policy." The author concludes, "While the manufacture of meaning opens up multiple interpretations, in the case of Israel's national photography collection, copyright legislation drastically restricts the public association of an image with heterodox regimes of signification, belief and ideology. This case shows how military, political and religious conflicts can frame the openness of an 'open' digital archive."

Gendered gazes are a third topic in the second section of this issue on Critical Visual Theory. McAllister and DeCarvalho present it under the title of "Sexualized Branded Entertainment and the Male Consumer Gaze." The authors offer a critical analysis of branded US TV-events in which a "gendered male gaze" prevails. Drawing on the classic feminist approach of film scholar Laura Mulvey, McAllister and DeCarvalho expand the concept of "male gaze" from fiction film to gendered imagery in entertainment and consumer culture. "For example, focusing on the increase of male-targeted cable and satellite outlets devoted to sports (the NFL Network, Speed, Untamed Sports TV, and multiple manifestations of ESPN and Fox Sports) highlights the increasingly gendered nature of entertainment and marketing. Each of these channels is supported by a complex of promotional partners and social digital media outlets, and look to advertisers for program development and support." McAllister and DeCarvalho do not only deconstruct the ideology and the gendered meanings of a "male gaze" at female body postures and at audiovisual performances, they also draw a line be-

tween economically driven interests of corporations and their advertising strategies and those of the TV stations and media companies. Against this background, the authors present images of women at the interface of culturally evolved gendered ideologies and economic interests, consumer conventions, and profit strategies in a cross-media public sphere.

3.3. Visual Capitalism, Global North and South

While capitalism has always played its role in media discourse, it is explicitly in the focus of a paper dealing with "visual capitalism." This concept describes the strategies of commodification of visual formats and narratives characteristic of the methods of production, presentation, and application of digital images. Pereira and Harcha address this topic in their paper "Revolutions of Resolution: About the Fluxes of Poor Images in Visual Capitalism." The authors argue, "in order to better understand the postindustrial production and circulation of images in visual capitalism, we must look out for the particularities that these dynamics acquire in a digital economy. This leads us to ask what type of formal changes, new value hierarchies, representative models, aesthetic productions and cultural practices have emerged from specific uses of digital technologies and its modes of socialization." Pereira and Harcha make the point that capitalism tends to dictate the rules of media discourse in economic terms and that the value of images and videos is economically determined with respect to techno-aesthetical qualities. Making the case of "poor images," the authors observe that there is a general tendency for low-resolution images to become standardized in the production and dissemination of images online. According to the authors, "poor images" are more profitable economically, as they can be distributed more quickly and hence attract attention more easily, which reveals the close interdependency between economic and governmental interests, and the use of the Internet "for the purposes of advertising and surveillance shows the constant ambivalence of this contemporary battlefield of global visuality." Under the conditions of "visual capitalism" in a globalized economic world, images are being used as "goods." At the same time, there is a potential of counterhegemonic influences: "In a globalized image world, visual and media hegemonies perpetuate the neoliberal configurations of power. However, new media platforms may foster emancipative potentials based on the production, manipulation, and circulation of images that flow to an aesthetic field able to disrupt and disturb official narratives." However, it remains to be asked whether such generalizations do not imply an unfair equation of visual conditions across highly distinct modes of the production, circulation, and usage of all kinds of visual technologies and formats.

Mukhongo, in her paper "Negotiating the New Media Platforms: Youth and Political Images in Kenya," offers a rather different perspective on "visual hegemonies." Drawing a distinction between capitalist Global North and South, the author argues: "Visual hegemonies reflect how political images from the North dominate over political images from the South." More specifically, she discusses the effects of social media for visual self-representations of young Africans. These young people are characterized as digital citizens, using the Web 2.0 as a public sphere for anti-hegemonic discourses. Their media practices are conditioned by governmental and economic methods of surveillance, which transgress the borders between local politics of the South and global economics as dominated by the North. Mukhongo investigates the anti-hegemonic tactics of the African digital citizens to keep control over their images: "It seeks to show how visual representation of politically relevant scenes may improve political connectivity and sustain counter hegemonic discourses despite government surveillance tactics and yet promote or reinforce cultural relativities, political subjectivities, stereotypes and visual hegemonies. Emphasis is on the use of images to circumvent government surveillance tactics." Finally, the author reveals the simultaneity of local and global determinations of image discourses in online communities.

In the closing paper of this special issue, entitled "'A Real China:' On User-Generated Videos – Audiovisual Narratives of Confucianism," Hao examines cultural specifics in the use of images in online videos on the Chinese video-platform Youku. Complementary to scholars who have focused on cultural specifics and the globalization of Western visual standards on the Internet and in global economies, Hao's focus is set on Chinese specifics of online public

spheres. In her empirical research of twenty hours of grass-roots-videos put online on Youku between 2007 and 2013 she observes that the underlying audiovisual narratives of the videos convey, explicitly or implicitly, Confucian values, as they have been characteristic of traditional Chinese culture. The author shows how "visual alternatives" are emerging that do not combine with Western traditions: "From the official discourse, as it is reflected in the current profile of Chinese grass-roots videos, it seems that the revived traditional Confucian heritage has acquired new meanings in the life of ordinary people. The Confucian values are both referred to when it comes to criticize politics (with the Internet as a potential for breaking through the control of the authoritarian regime over communication) and when the construction of an online Confucian socio-culture is at stake." The references to traditional Confucian values identified by Hao in the Chinese audiovisual narratives are "visual alternatives," both locally and globally. In China, they constitute a counterhegemonic discourse contradicting the governmental ideology by means of ancient wisdoms. On a global scale, they are "visual alternatives" to the predominant Western standards of visual signs and meanings.

The contributions to this special issue could address only a few topics, concepts, theoretical approaches, genres, actors, and power challenges for strategic visual communication. YouTube (and Youku for China) have been discussed as the most influential social online forums as well as the strategies of hacktivists undermining hegemonic visual narratives. Can they create counterimages and counternarratives against the established methods of concealing information, exploiting consumers and citizens, and pursing their own power interest against them? A recent report by Oxfam (2014, 5) revealed that "one percent of the world's families own almost half (46 percent) of the world's wealth." The few thousand families and corporations dominating the world's economy and the billions of people living and dying in relative poverty are too often ignored by journalists and in visual discourse. Critical Visual Theory has the task of disclosing the Key Visual Narratives and visual memes of anonymous as well as highly visible activists. This is the only method to dis-cover and undermine superficial coverage or sophisticated strategies of concealing fundamental inequalities (Therborn 2013) and violent repressions. University seminars on Critical Visual Theory are already being offered, but the systematic exploration of Critical Visual Theory is only in its beginnings. Further progress requires more transdisciplinary cooperation and the deepening of the theoretical foundations of this new and most promising research field.

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