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Digital Visuality and Social Representation. Research Notes on the Visual Construction of meaning

Matteo Stocchetti
Helsinki University, Faculty of Social Sciences and Arcada University of Applied Sciences, Department of Culture and Communication, FINLAND

Abstract: Images are tools in the social construction of reality. The meaning of images, however, is not a feature of the image itself but the outcome of a communicative process that involves a negotiation between social actors with a stake, interests and resources to participate in the process. The theory of social representation provides a useful conceptual framework to capture this process and to look at the ideological influences that affects the visual construction of meaning in the digital age. From this perspective, I challenge the belief that digital visuality is a form of communication with emancipative power for the mere fact that it facilitates non-institutional and amateur production and circulation of images. I claim instead that the emancipative potential of this as other forms of visuality depends on their effects on the process through which images are given meaning – supporting or undermining openness, diversity, etc. – and on the nature of the meanings that can – or cannot – find expression in this process. Applying the theory of social representation to the analysis of the social construction of meaning for the images of 9/11, Abu-Ghraib and the Arab Spring, I argue that the influence of hegemonic ideology has been decisive in the repression of interpretations of these images with subversive or emancipative potential.

Keywords: digital visuality, social representation, 9/11, Abu-Ghraib, Arab Spring, visual communication

The social construction of visual meaning and the role of digital visuality

In a previous discussion (Stocchetti, 2014), I argued that the idea that digital visuality can have emancipative, political functions is based on problematic beliefs concerning the relation of visuality with truth, community and the construction of the real. These beliefs are associated with the use of images in accordance with at least three main logics or "principles" which I described as follows:

Address for Correspondence: Matteo Stocchetti, email: matteo.stocchetti[at]arcada.fi
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1. the “reality principle”, or the idea that images can “show” or otherwise provide some important or truthful piece of information and that vision is associated with authoritative knowledge (“what you see is what you get”);
2. the “pleasure principle”, or the idea that what really matters is not the information an image provides and the relation between the image and what it shows, but rather the ritualistic use of the image in the constitution of a community of meaning and ultimately the relationship between individuals united by the fact of giving the same meaning to the same image;
3. the “hyper-reality principle”, or the idea that an image, instead of providing information or performing a ritual can be a simulacra: a communicative tool used to actually “hide” rather than “showing” relevant aspects of reality.

Implicit in these logics is a notion of meaning which contains at least two important features. First, the meaning of images is not a permanent feature of the image itself but an impermanent outcome of a communicative process: the social construction of visual meaning. This process can be usefully looked at as a political process in which some participants are more influential than others and issues of meanings are always associated with issues of power. Second, if relations of power and relations of meaning are mutually constitutive – each one depends on the other – the interpretation of the political role of visual communication has to face a fundamental problem of indeterminacy: relations of meaning cannot be determined independently from relations of power and vice versa.

In this paper I will continue my discussion on the political role of digital visuality starting from the last general hypothesis which may be useful to recall here:

> If digital visuality cannot credibly reduce the indeterminacy of visual communication in its conventional functions of political propaganda and community building, one may still claim that, compared e.g. to conventional photography, digital visuality affects the social construction of reality in at least three ways. First, it opens up the practice of visual communication to large parts of the populations, blurring the distinction between producer, distributor and consumer of visual objects (…). Second, it enhances the productive capacity of visual technology beyond reality itself, into the hyper-real e.g. enabling the production of images that transcend the human perspective (…). Third, it performs as a logic for the representation of reality that have pedagogical implications and enhances the social value of visual communication in the social construction of reality (…) independently from reality itself. The combined effects of these three changes introduced by digital visuality, one may suggest, are “emancipative” on political grounds to the extent that their role is “subversive” of the social construction of reality. Political emancipation, in other words, is associated to the dissolution of the relations of power legitimized by notions of truth and reality that are effectively challenged by the logic of digital visuality, the hyperrealism of its representations, and the widespread access to both. To change the world, one should first change the way we look at it. Digital visuality can help in looking the world not as it is but as it could be (utopia/dystopia). (2014)

In the pages that follow, I look a bit deeper into the social construction of visual meaning to understand the conditions which may foster or undermine the emancipative potential of digital visuality in the social construction of visual meaning.

To look at these conditions, I will apply the Theory of Social Representation to the analysis of the social construction of visual meaning associated with the attacks of 9/11 and the events that followed - the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the abuses committed on Iraqi war prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the rebellions of the “Arab Spring”. The nature, meanings and socio-political implications of the images associated to these

events have inspired many important analyses (Blaagaard, Mortensen, & Neumayer, 2017).

Compared to previous ones, the main coordinates of my exploration cover methodological and more substantial grounds. In terms of method, there are excellent analyses that have discussed the political role of the visual representation of violence in terms of visual discourse (for example, Shepherd, 2008). Here, however, I suggest that the Theory of Social Representation, when applied as originally formulated by Serge Moscovici, is a distinctively productive approach when the problem is that of disambiguating the meaning of images and assess the actual impact of visuality on relations of power (what here I call “relevant social meaning”). This problem is important especially in aesthetic approaches to political analysis in which “the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics” (Bleiker, 2001, p. 510). In relation to the representation of violence, this “difference” is constitutive of the politics of aesthetics and what Jacques Rancière has described as, “the distribution of the sensible” or the activity that “establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts” (Ranciére, 2004 (200), p. 12). In this perspective, and in line with Judith Butler, “interpretation is not to be conceived restrictively as a subjective act” and, as I shall argue in a moment, “the photograph itself becomes a structuring scene of interpretation” (Butler, 2009, p. 67). This role is fundamentally political or, one may argue, even constitutive of the political itself, since, for example, it is at the origin of the performative power that Ariella Azoulay called “the civil contract of photography” (Azoulay, 2008)

In relation to the political affordances of visual communication, however, my analysis reveals at least two grounds for scepticism concerning its subversive or even “revolutionary” power. First, powerful ideological elements in the social construction of visual meaning are influential in dissolving the indeterminacy of digital visuality to the detriment of the emancipative encouragement of digital visuality. Second, the same discussion also discloses the capacity of hegemonic representations to enforce selective usage of available visual technology: while the “radical potential” of digital visuality is thwarted, its instrumentality in support of hegemony if fully exploited.

Social representation

In its original formulation by Serge Moscovici - his study on the impact of psychoanalysis on the French society of the late 50s and, in particular, on the social identities of Catholics and Communists (Moscovici, 1961) (Moscovici, 2008) - this approach addresses questions of meanings associated to the assimilation of scientific knowledge in society. Among the most relevant of these questions is social change, the communicative construction of meaning and the adaptation of social identities to changes introduced by scientific knowledge in the perception of the world. For our purpose, this approach contains at least two significant tenets. The first is that meaning is created in communicative practices. The second is that these communicative practices involve social identities in the double role of cause and effects: sources of change and passible of changes themselves.

Empirical research on social representation focuses mostly on written and oral communication. Interest on visual communication has been scarce in the past but is now

growing and the idea that images participate in important ways to the social representation of relevant phenomena has gained widespread currency (Howart, 2011) (De Rosa & Farr, 2001) (Sen & Wagner, 2005).

In applying the theory of social representation to the political role of digital visuality I am not claiming that images are empirical proofs concerning the nature of social representation of phenomena. Rather I suggest that the process of social representation is influential in the attribution of socially relevant meaning to both images and phenomena. Furthermore, this approach helps the analysts to grasp the hermeneutic circle of visual meaning: the fact that, in the practices of visual communication, *the phenomenon gives social meaning to the image as much as the image gives social meaning to the phenomenon.*

In this paper I cannot discuss exhaustively all the articulations, concepts and tenets that animate the contemporary debate on social representation. What I would like to do, instead, is to provide the reader with few, basic conceptual coordinates to grasp the heuristic opportunities offered by this approach to the study of visual communication[1]. Simplified to the extreme, the basic conceptual framework for the approach of social representation should include at least the following concepts: event, themata, objectification, naturalization and anchoring.

The Event

The process of social representation is in essence a communicative process for the production of meaning that is triggered by an *event*. This is a more or less dramatic occurrence, a phenomenon or an object that forces a re-definition of social identities by activating deeply seated ideas or beliefs called *themata* (see below). The event, in this perspective, is not a mere occurrence but something that a social community experiences as a fundamental challenge: something that cannot be ignored and that requires a response in terms of re-adjustment. The important idea here is that the social construction of meaning is triggered by the traumatic or semi-traumatic implications of the event for the community experiencing it. Moscovici himself is quite explicit about the importance of this idea when he notes that “a social representation emerges when there is a threat to the collective identity and when the communication of knowledge submerges the rules society has set itself” (Moscovici, 2008, p. 104).

For Wagner et al:

> Without an object being salient and relevant for a social group and hence entailing a public discourse and symbolic elaboration of the object, there is not much sense in looking for a shared representation (Wagner et al 1996, 347)

Sakki notes that not the scientific but the social relevance of the object or phenomenon is the condition that leads to social representation

[1] For this purpose, and to avoid burdening this preliminary discussion, I will refer to the recent publication by Finnish social psychologist, Inari Sakki on the social representation of European identity in school textbook (Sakki, 2010). This work is, to my knowledge, the most recent and accurate description of the concepts and theoretical debates pertaining to the theory of social representations in its current state.

> The SRT [social representation theory, NdA] studies specific kinds of representations: those that have become the subject of public concern. They are thought about, discussed and they may cause tensions and provoke actions. Therefore, the object of study must be socially meaningful and necessitate communication (Sakki, 2010, p. 76)

The fundamental idea at the roots of social representation (in the singular as a process) is that a problem generates communication about the meaning of the problem itself. Social representations (in the plural) are communicative objects emerging from the identity threats associated to the activation of themata by an event which have a traumatic impact on the community – e.g. war, revolutions etc. As we shall see in a moment, the exercise of organized violence is a special type of event that requires elaboration because of the ambivalent nature of this violence: both a problem and a solution for the integrity of the community.

Digital visuality can play a fundamental role in the visual construction of the event. This is probably the single most important "point of entry" for the emancipative role of DV. But also the most jealously guarded prerogative of media organizations: to be first on the spot, to go "live", etc. The visual construction of the event is a crucial stake in the competition for the control over the social construction of reality. Digital visuality facilitates the participation of individuals but organizational, cultural and legal factors still support the influence of institutional media – individual images about a certain event become relevant if and when appropriated by media organizations. This re-appropriation is a form of usage that erodes or suppresses the radical potential of images by simply complying with the conventions, "styles", legal provisions etc. that regulate media work (e.g. not showing dead bodies of "our" soldier nor bodies of "their" dead children in war coverage)

Themata

According to Inari Sakki:

> Themata are those ideas around which representations are constituted and which engender them. Therefore, they have a normative and generative power in the formation of social representations. Themata are shared knowledge or beliefs of which people implicitly or explicitly think and talk about, and which often are taken for granted. They are rooted in collective memory of a group. They may not be expressed aloud in communication but they underlie socially shared knowledge. They are a kind of a deep structure or representation and not always open to direct observation (Sakki, 2010, p. 61)

Sakki notes that these themata are "deep" and difficult to observe presumably because they are either hidden also to those who share them (themata are semiconscious) or they are difficult to express (themata are irreducible to texts) or even sensitive aspects of people identity (themata are kept "secret" to avoid direct challenges to one's identity). My suggestion here is that, if themata are both "social and deep", relevant traces or signs of them should be found at cultural level or even – as I would argue in relation to the cases in exam here – at the level of institutionalized ideas e.g. in political theory or other forms of authoritative knowledge which can be associated to the object of representation.

The emancipative/subversive potential of digital visuality depends on its capacity to activate emancipative/subversive themata. The problem here is to see if and when such things as "emancipative themata" actually exist. In social representation theory, the

notions of “emancipated” and “polemic” representations designate representations shared by small groups or subgroups still compatible or in opposition to the “hegemonic” representations shared in some measure by all and constituting the „core” of the social identity (Ben-Asher, 2003, pp. 6.3-6.4). One can probably find interpretations of themata with subversive implications e.g. re-interpretation, re-contextualization, etc. Ultimately it is all about subverting relations of meanings to subvert the relations of power based on them. The theory of social representation (supported by cultural and historical knowledge) helps identifying these themata and understanding their communicative values in the processes of social representation and in the social construction of visual meaning.

Objectification & Naturalization

“Social representations – wrote Serge Moscovici – take shape according to two basic processes: *objectification* and *anchoring*” (Moscovici, 2008, p. 54) (Italics in the original). In the description of Sakki, “objectification is a process where something abstract is transformed into something almost physical and concrete. It means translating something that exists in our thoughts into something that exists in reality” (Sakki, 2010, p. 53). An especially interesting aspect of this process is its connection with visuality. As Sakki notes, “objectifying is to discover the iconic aspect of an ill-defined idea or being, that is, to match a concept with an image” (Sakki, 2010, p. 55). The idea behind this description is that images do in fact perform an important function of mediation between the world of ideas and the world of material object, transforming ideas (e.g. war) into objects (e.g. the images of war). For communicative purposes, concepts perform a rather similar function but objectification into an image seems to increase the intelligibility of a concept and therefore to facilitate its assimilation and divulgation, albeit in the simplified form of a visual image (De Rosa & Farr, 2001, pp. 6-7). This “simplification” or the transformation of a concept into an image is the temporary result of a negotiation over the conceptual meaning of images and it is in principle passible of further transformation as result of dissemination and further negotiation.

The idea expressed in the notion of naturalization or “...when something abstract becomes real”, and “an object become part of the social reality” (Sakki, 2010, pp. 55-56) points in my view, to the elements of continuity in the transformation of a concept into an image. In other words, it looks at the stage of the construction of meaning in which meanings are agreed upon and, to an extent, considered as “given” for further communication. In this communication, what is objectified/naturalized in a given image or set of images, can be denaturalized if and when there are agents with enough interest and resources to effectively do that. In this sense, objectification and naturalization should not be considered static results of communicative process but communicative processes themselves through which the unfamiliar become familiar.

The notions of objectification/naturalization assume but do not (yet) articulate the influence of visuality in concept formation and, or for our discussion, the influence of digital visuality in the autonomous formation of concepts by individuals and groups. What this notion suggests, in other words, is that the political role of digital visuality should be seen as mediated by (rather than alternative to) the role of concepts. In this perspective, the visual construction of concepts seems a fundamental process in the

competition for the control over the social construction of reality. This process - the visual formation of concepts - is ultimately where the power of advertisement and propaganda rests: establishing representations of reality based on images/concepts that organize information according to implicit hierarchies of values (e.g. the concept of citizenship based on the enmification of the non-citizens as in nationalistic propaganda) (see e.g. Roland Barthes *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1972) and Andrew Wernick, *Promotional Culture* (Wernick, 1991).

Anchoring

Anchoring is the "second major process" of social representation (Moscovici, 2008, p. 104) whose main function is to make the unfamiliar familiar or, more precisely "to anchor strange ideas to reduce them to ordinary categories and images, to set them in a familiar context… which draws something foreign and disturbing that intrigues us into our particular system of categories…" (Moscovici, 1984, p. 29).

More recently, Sakki describes anchoring as a process through which:

> New or strange phenomena-object, experiences, relations and practices are attached to everyday categories and worldviews and offered a familiar reference point. Anchoring integrates the emerging representation into a network of significance, marked by social values, generating a system of interpretation (Sakki, 2010, p. 50).

As a further connotation, the notion of emotional anchoring seems particularly useful. Emotional anchoring and objectification are described as

> …communicative processes by which a new phenomenon is attached to well-known positive or negative emotions, for example fear or hope. In this way the unknown becomes recognizable as, for example, a threat, a danger, or as something nice and pleasurable (Höijer, 2010, p. 719)

Anchoring seems a crucial moment in the social construction of visual meaning. This is where disambiguation takes its final turn and, for example, the images of war or abuses are construed as images of victory or defeat, pleasure or pain, from the point of view of the victimizer or the victim, etc. However, since the meaning of the image is not a feature of the image but the outcome of the use of the image, images can be re-appropriated and given very different meanings in alternative anchoring.

Digital visuality and the politics of meaning: from 9/11 to the "Arab spring"

In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard argues that, after the "stagnation of the 1990s…with the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, we might even be said to have before us the absolute event, the 'mother' of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place" (Baudrillard, 2003 (2002), pp. 3-4). Interpreted in its symbolical dimension as a "humiliation" (Baudrillard, 2003 (2002), p. 100) those attacks posed a serious threat to the credibility of beliefs concerning fundamental aspects of US collective identity (e.g. exceptionalism, invulnerability, moral supremacy, etc.) and therefore to the integrity of that identity. It was this event and this threat that generated the social representation as a communicative and defensive response to that threat.

In the terms of the theory of social representation, therefore, 9/11 is the *event* that generates social representations and activates at least one fundamental *themata* that pre-existed the event itself: the relationship between West/US capitalism and Islam construed in terms of a competition between societies based on incompatible hierarchies of values.

The visual imagery used in the news coverage of that event - the images of the Twin Towers, violated, burning and collapsing associated to the images of Arab people celebrating the attacks as a victory – participated to the construction of the event itself as a trauma. It established the fundamental ambivalence that accompanies the hetero-referential visual representation of competitive in-group vs. out-group relationship (Sen & Wagner, 2005): the suffering of one is the pleasure of the other.

In this traumatic event, images participate to the social construction of meaning. They do so, in all their functions: performing truth claims following the "reality principle", community building in the logic of the "pleasure principle" or even as simulacra, hiding to Ego important aspects concerning Alter. In this process, images play a fundamental role in constituting an influential context for the experiencing of other events (the US led invasion of Iraq, the abuses at Abu Ghraib and the "Arab spring") and the interpretation of the relative imagery.

The nature of this context, and the role of digital visuality, pertain to the distinctive features of the way in which 9/11 was constructed as a visual event. First, the multiplication of the point of views of the visual coverage of the attacks. Second, the enforcement and institutionalization of a "global" gaze unified by available technology and by the global value of the event - itself a function of the symbolic values of the place (New York as the cultural capital of a certain idea of "West") and the glamour of the feat (two airplanes in two skyscrapers in a few minutes!). Third, simultaneity or the global enforcement of the event "real time". Fourth, juxtaposition or the visual coverage of the event through the images of the effects of the attacks in association with the celebrations in the Arab world, making the celebrations part of the event itself.

Themata

To my knowledge, the only subversive idea associated to 9/11 was formulated by Baudrillard when, commenting in the aftermath of that event, he wrote:

> The fact that we have dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it – because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree – is unacceptable. Yet it is a fact, and one which can indeed be measured by the motive of violence of all that has been said and written in the effort to dispel it. At a pinch, we can say that they did it, but we wished for it. If this is not taken into account, the event loses any symbolic dimension.… This goes far beyond hatred for the dominant world power among the disinherited and the exploited, among those who have ended up on the wrong side of the global order. Even those who share in the advantages of that order have this malicious desire in their hearts. Allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is – happily – universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center were perfect embodiments, in their very twinness, of that order. (Baudrillard, 2003 (2002), p. 6)

The themata associated to this idea is that of revenge or justice for humiliations inflicted upon others in the history of globalization and before - ideas that are too complex to be

suitable for the reduction into "live" coverage and too painful to be handled by a community facing the agony of awakening to its own vulnerability.

The other and more acceptable – from the perspective of the US society - themata is that of the "*clash of civilizations*" (Huntington, 1998). Activated by 9/11, this themata accompanies the interpretation of the US led invasion of Iraq but also, although in different forms, the abuses of Abu Ghraib and the Arab Spring. In this latter case, the ideas expressed by Francis Fukuyama in its formulation of "the end of history" (Fukuyama, 2006) add to the idea of contraposition between West/US capitalism and Islam the idea of intrinsic superiority of the former. In the light of this themata the images of the Arab spring can be interpreted as a reassuring "sign" of victory for a representation of the West/US construed around the core values of corporate capitalism and representative democracy at a moment when these values are challenged within the West itself (McKinley, 2007) – most visibly by the "Occupy wall street" movement in the very same days of the early revolts in those Arab countries

A further themata with deep roots in US political culture is the role of US power in world affair and the competition between the main ideologies in US foreign policy *internationalism vs. nationalism* (Shurman, 1974). In the aftermath of 9/11, this themata has been influential in the re-definition of US collective identity, e.g. anchoring the visual coverage of the invasion of Iraq in terms of "repressed revenge" as a response to the different normative imperatives which followed from different ideological interpretation of 9/11: Serving the "international community", performing as the policeman of the new world order eliminating a common threat vs. serving national interest and restoring the national self-image by revenging the attacks on 9/11.

Finally, the *feminization of the enemy* is a themata that in both cases of the invasion of Iraq and Abu Ghraib, opens up interpretative avenues that I have discussed elsewhere in relation to the WAR is LOVE metaphor (Stocchetti, 2009). Put briefly, metaphoric associations tend to be bidirectional, and the roles of source and target domain interchangeable – which in practice means that if WAR IS LOVE then LOVE IS WAR. Looked at in terms of themata, this idea performs the legitimization of violence and the actions of the victimizer on the victim in terms of intentions of the former – as in the belief that a certain degree of violence is inherent in passionate relationships expressed in the Latin sentence "vis grata puella". Rooted in deep structures of meaning associated to patriarchal conservatism and reactionary ideologies, this idea expresses its generative power in all three the cases in exam: in the visual coverage of the invasion of Iraq, with the moralization of violence and military technology, in the images of abuses at Abu Ghraib and the feminization of war prisoners, and in the celebration of civil strife in the visual representation of the Arab Spring.

Objectifications

The visual coverage of the attacks of 9/11, the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the abuses at Abu Ghraib and the Arab Spring *objectifies/naturalizes those events in terms of acts of visual display*. The concept of visual display in the media, discussed by Anne Koski (2011), describes the performativity of visual coverage as a form of a speech act that, when performed in public by an official representative of the state, "can be interpreted as a purposeful signal" which is "simultaneously intentional and

conventional" (Koski, 2011, pp. 93-95). The act of visual display therefore can be seen as a political act whose intelligibility depends on ritual functions based on existing structures of meaning but that, in the achievement of specific communicative goals (e.g. signaling American military supremacy) is not constrained by ritualistic meaning. Furthermore, acts of visual display are associated to the symbolic expression of power, inviting participation from a particular point of view associated to implicit hierarchies of values in the effort of influencing the social construction of socially relevant meanings. These hierarchies and the point of view itself can be endorsed or rejected but cannot be ignored because embedded in the visual object and the empirical reality of the viewer. Objectification in terms of an act of visual display establishes a common experiential background for very different opinions about the event themselves. The experience of violence is reduced to visual participation, from a particular point of view, for both those who enjoy it and those who don't. In the coverage of Iraq wars visual participation enforced the point of view of the US and its allies. For the abuses at Abu Ghraib the point of view was that of the victimizer. For the Arab Spring the point of view was, ambivalently, that of the demonstrators as endorsed by Western (mostly BBC and CNN) media.

In the war coverage of the US led invasion of Iraq in BBC World and CNN International, as presumably in other broadcasting, war was objectified in a form of visual communication where the goal was not primarily that of providing information but rather that of inducing involvement on one of the sides – the one who could safely "embed" journalist and cameraman i.e. the one who could control the visual communication about the war itself. This form of coverage was part of the war itself: the visual experience of the phenomenon, part of the phenomenon and it can be interpreted as an act of visual violence. Watching the agony of Iraqi military from the camera of an incoming missile, or in the green light of Allied night vision devices are forms of communicative behavior based on applications of digital visuality that enforce on the viewer the point of view of the victimizer. If we think that Iraqi people saw on BBC and CNN the same images of the "sweaty watcher" described by Nicholas Mirzoeff in his *Watching Babylon* (Mirzoeff, 2005, pp. 1-2), we can understand how this type of broadcasting can perform as an act of visual violence in which the victim can see the consummation of her fate with the eyes of the victimizer – a bit like the young woman that in the movie "Strange Days" is forced to see her rape "live" with the eyes of her rapist. This form of objectification – the reduction of war to its visual experience – preserves the ambivalence intrinsic to visual communication. In fact, the nature of this involvement is also ambivalent, contingent on conditions independent from the nature of the visual text - joyful participation for those who shared the need for revenge - like the sweaty watcher in Mirzoeff description - a sort of revulsion for those who did not - like Baudrillard in *War Porn* (Baudrillard, 2006) and Mirzoeff himself - and presumably anything in between. Once the experience of war is objectified/naturalized in terms of an act of visual display, the paradoxical logic of the "society of spectacle" kicks in irresistibly (Debord, 2002 (1967)): "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images… it is a world vision which has become objectified" (Debord, 2002 (1967)). Once the collective experience of war is successfully objectified/naturalized in terms of an act of visual display not much can be done against the possibility that war itself could be experienced in the terms of visual pleasure - as Mirzoeff bitterly observes – or to inhibit the social construing of visual war coverage as "real" entertainment compared to the "fictional" entertainment of war movies and war games.

The images of the abuses committed on Iraqi war prisoners at Abu Ghraib were privately produced and therefore hardly imputable or interpretable in terms of a more or less deliberate act of psychological warfare. The objectification/naturalization of those images in term of an act of visual display should be interpreted on the double track of overt and latent meaning. Overtly they were a proof that abuses were committed. Latently, they were a proof of the repressed desire of revenge that instigated the war. If the institutional war coverage managed to construe the war as an exercise of organized violence based on "precise weapons", inspired by the security of the "international community" and implemented professionally and almost deprived of hatred (*sine ira et sine studio*), the images of Abu Ghraib were a window on the private dimension of the war. The act of visual display itself was a negation of the institutional interpretation – proving it false – and a reaffirmation of the hatred and the desires of revenge that institutional war coverage tried to hide. In continuity with the war coverage, however, those images enforce participation from the point of view of the victimizer(s): we are shown what the photographer saw, a selection of his/her field of visible reality based on his/her emotional engagement with the events. Also in continuity with the psychological dimension of warfare, those images performed the "feminization of the enemy" which was an extension of a narrative logic of the ideological justification for the invasion of Iraq (Stocchetti 2009).

The visual coverage of the Arab Spring, at least in its initial phases, is an act of visual display in which, like in the invasion of Iraq and the abuses of Abu Ghraib, Western audiences are shown the ongoing events from the point of view or the "gaze" that are closer to the in-group/identity defined in terms of West/US capitalism. Like in the case of Abu Ghraib, circulating images are for the most part privately produced by local participants. Unlike Abu Ghraib and in a fashion closer to the uses of images in the invasion of Iraq, the institutional appropriation of private images performs ideological functions, re-construing the event in relation to the themata (e.g. clash of civilizations) activated by 9/11. At least as experienced in Western media the visual coverage of the Arab Spring construes and celebrates digital visuality as a technology of freedom which allows both the political exposure of authoritarian regimes (reality principle and truth claim of images) and the mobilization against them (pleasure principle and community building). Digital technology/visuality are represented as "democratic" and digital camera as democratic "weapons" against undemocratic regimes (BBC, 2011a) (BBC, 2011b). It can be argued that while the democratic nature of digital technology is disputed by digital surveillance in US, China, Iran etc., the idea that digital camera can be effective "weapons" against undemocratic regimes is a dangerous metaphor that recognizes the instrumental value of visual communication but misconstrues the conditions of its efficacy: it gives power not to unorganized masses but to the agents or the political actors that can make a politically effective use of images. We see pictures taken by the people directly experiencing those events on BBC or CNN because those images have been appropriated by these organizations and because the regimes affected by the "Arab Spring" do not yet have the capacity neither to control the circulation of digital images nor to mount an effective counter-campaign. In this sense one may indeed claim that these regimes surely underestimated the communicative potential of digital visuality. Quite obviously, this is something else than claiming that digital cameras are the weapons of democracy: digital images and technology are "weaponized", only if and when used by influential actors in coordinated visual strategy.

Anchoring

The coverage of the US led invasion of Iraq in BBC World and CNN International participated to the socio-institutional effort of constructing the war as an act of justice which repressed a more fundamental need of revenge. Institutional discourse anchored the experience of 9/11 as an act of war, a humiliation and ultimately a trauma for American national identity comparable to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941: a shock whose detrimental effects on the collective identity could be overcome or healed only with the total defeat and humiliation of the offender[2]. Although the anchoring of the US led invasion of Iraq war in terms of revenge seems plausible, my suggestion is that, at least in the institutional forms of BBC World and CNN International war coverage, the visual representation of the invasion was inspired by the need of repressing, rather than expressing, the revenge motives. I am using the term "repressing" and not "concealing" here because "denial" seems a more plausible term than "lying" when discussing the responses to traumas threatening collective identities. Not only a war of revenge would have undermined the politics of war, but "justice" is preferable to "revenge" as a motive in the self-representation and legitimation of US as a "policeman".

The images of Abu Ghraib are an ambivalent proof of the abuses *and* of the repressed desires of revenge. They can be enjoyed or rejected as a continuation of the "visual pleasure" from the war, but also enjoyed or rejected as the unveiling of the repression at work in the visual construction of the war – disturbing because it showed the "true nature" of US intervention: not bringing justice in the name of the "international community" but satisfying the frustrated need of revenge for the humiliation inflicted by the attacks of 9/11. The anchoring process itself takes different connotations depending on the social functions one attributes to visual communication. As proof of the abuses, those images can be interpreted and used for their truth claim based on the "reality principle": the idea that digital images can show events more directly and efficiently than other forms or representation. As proof of repressed desires of revenge, however, those images are associated to the "pleasure principle" and the idea that the correspondence between the images and the reality is less important than the relationship created among individuals that give those images a particular meaning. In this perspective, as visual representations of repressed desires of revenge – along ethnic, cultural, political and even gender lines - the images of Abu Ghraib perform community building functions. They did so as empirical objects whose relevant social meaning is construed through oppositional anchoring: one either enjoys the sight of humiliation *or* feels humiliated. Looked through the lenses of the "war on terror" and the polarization of political identities ("with us or against us"), the images of Abu Ghraib provided the opportunity to engage the constitution of social identities on hetero-referential (Sen & Wagner, 2005) and emotional grounds (Höijer, 2010): *If you enjoy the sight you are with us; If you feel humiliated you are against us*.

From a political point of view, however, the constitution of identity on emotional grounds creates more problems than it solves, especially if the goal is to overcome the traumatic effects of 9/11 on US/Western and possibly Islamic identities. By enforcing

[2] The campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan probably did not offer a victory comparable to that on Japan and Iraq become a suitable scapegoat. Not by chance, as the peace treaty with Japan in 1945 was signed on the USS Missouri, Bush delivered is "victory speech" from the USS Abraham Lincoln 2003.

emotional anchoring on social categorization (the distinction between in-group and out-group), and coupling or "tying up" feelings with loyalties, the possibility opens up for (in)voluntary violations of the in-group/out-group divides. In practice, some of "us" may indeed feel humiliated and may decide to actually leave the "in-group" as construed in the oppositional representation of the West/US capitalism vs. Islam. The cleavage those images created within the "US/West" collective identity is an important one and its political implications should not be underestimated. Politicians can tell people what to think and be more or less successful in their propaganda efforts. But when it comes to the problem of how to feel the task seems more complicated and indeterminacy more influential.

The images of Abu Ghraib where also re-appropriated. Cultural re-appropriation can be considered as a form of communicative behavior symptomatic of a collective need to come to terms with the visual evidence of an event that undermines the in-group cohesion and the representation of collective identity possibly more than the event itself. In one of such instances of re-appropriation, Columbian artist Fernando Botero offers a visualization of the abuses to produce an explicit association with Picasso's *Guernica* based on the conceptualization of art as "permanent accusation"[3] In another instance, the re-appropriation of the images of Abu Ghraib in the form of fetishist practices is a form of ambivalent anchoring that subverts the relationship between the victim and the victimizer from one of "abuse" to one of "complicity". Also in this case the pleasure principle is at work and the relation of meaning among the members of the in-group is prioritized over the relationship between the image and the event it portrays (reality principle). I should add that both these instances of cultural re-appropriation of the images of Abu Ghraib are also acts of visual displays whose intelligibility depends on the images of abuses that institutionalizes the normative function of art, in one instance, and the subversion of the victim-victimizer relationship in terms of mutual pleasure in the other. While the former performs conventional or "modern" esthetic functions (e.g. the hypostatization of the abuses in a work of art), the latter is more compatible with the consumerist styles that Frederic Jameson attributes to the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991): the decoupling of the signifiers (photo of abuses) from the signified (the abuses) and the repositioning of the latter in the domain of fetishism as a private and rightful enjoyment.

The anchoring in terms of revenge applies equally well to the relevant social meaning of those images in *expressing* repressed desires but also in *feeding* more or less conscious desires of revenge, especially in communities whose identity is associated to the image of abused Iraqi soldiers. The images of Abu Ghraib are traumatic *also* for Arab identity. While the nature of this trauma can be looked at in both its cultural and gender connotations, it would be interesting to look deeper into how those images and the event they refer to generates social representation as a defensive response for example through the visualization of revenge (Filkins, 2004).[4]

If 9/11 is considered an event that triggers a collective representational need (which I discuss here in terms of the social construction of visual meaning), the concept of

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[3] See Fernando Botero at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fernando_Botero (last visited 22.02.2012

[4] The idea of revenge, like the themata of the 'clash of civilizations' is quite influential and relevant also in the discussion about the cultural roots of Islamic terrorism, a most interesting topic addressed by scholars such as Fawaz Gerges, Gilles Kepel and Louise Richardson, among others, but one that I cannot discuss here. See, for example (Gergez, 2005, pp. 251-277), (Kepel, 2008, p. 33), (Richardson, 2006, p. 71 & ff)

revenge opens up some interesting interpretative avenues also in the case of the images the Arab "spring". Those of us old enough to remember the Prague Spring during the Cold War, must have wondered what was the ground for the naming of the rebellions in some Arab countries as "Arab Spring". The Prague Spring was an effort to reform soviet communism which ended in the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet Union in 1968. The Arab Spring is a sequence of insurrections against more or less authoritarian regimes in some Arab countries which at least in two cases – Libya and Syria – so far, has led to civil war and foreign invasions. If on historical grounds, the differences may not be as relevant as the similarities, on ideological grounds, however, the association is actually quite plausible. The idea of revenge is here construed on the ideological dimension of a competition that during the Cold War was between the capitalist West against the communist East but that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, some believe is between the West/US capitalism and Islam.

In this line of interpretation, the images of the Arab "spring" are an act of visual display that celebrate the power of the West/US capitalism in both its technological (digital cameras that circumvent regimes censorship) and ideological (the advancement of democracy) dimensions. In this act, visual communication in general and digital visuality in particular, are construed as the tools that allow access to "truth", circumventing the control of local regimes but also offering the technological infrastructure for Western media (e.g. BBC International) to re-appropriate those images. In this process of re-appropriation the notion of revenge seems a plausible interpretative key in terms of both the truth claim and the community building functions associated to the usage of (digital) imagery (Stocchetti 2014). In relation to their truth claim or the "reality principle", those images are anchored in the idea that (Western) democracy is advancing in those countries. Equipped with digital cameras and other communicative tools provided by available (Western) technology, the people of those countries are portrayed in the process of "becoming like us" which is itself a sign of the hegemonization of American identity threatened by 9/11 and re-defined by the "war on terror". In this perspective the cultural re-appropriation by Western media supports the idea of the inevitable advance of (Western) democracy, famously discussed by Francis Fukuyama in the aftermath of the Cold War[5]. In relation to the community building function or the "pleasure principle", those images are anchored in the idea that the advancement of democracy - and the transformation of "they" into "us" is actually a victory of the West in the clash of civilizations prophesized by Samuel P. Huntington at the turn of the century. In the cultural re-appropriation of those images from this standpoint, the visual saga of the Gadhafi resistance, escape and eventual assassination is an element of particular significance for the anchoring in revenge and one that connects the Arab Spring with the invasion of Iraq (the images of dead Saddam and his sons) and the "war on terror" (the images of dead Osama Bin Laden). In this anchoring, the representation of suffering and the victimization of local population by their rulers are appropriated by both the West/US and the Islamists. But if for the West/US the victims of the regimes are the proof of the regime's illegitimacy, for local Arab audiences the illegitimacy of the regime does not requires proof and its victims are martyrs for Islam. If this would be true, and the social construction of visual suffering in the Arab Spring does indeed follow very different anchoring in the West/US compared

[5] As a note one can only note the difference in the institutional re-appropriation of the imagery associated to the Occupy Wall Street movement that in the very same days of the early Arab Spring, was demonstrating against the distortions introduced in the US democracy by financial capitalism. My impression is that while the latter is construed as a democratic rebellion the former is construed as a civic disturbance.

to local audiences, the anchoring in term of revenge and the cultural re-appropriation in the terms of “necessary” or “enforced” advancement of democracy by Western media would have performed at least one important (dis)function of propaganda: blinding domestic publics to the fact that the insurrections of the Arab Spring paved the way for the advance of Islamist organizations.

The main points of my discussion and some questions concerning the role of digital visuality are tentatively summarized below[6].

[6] A special thanks to Inari Sakki for her comments and help in the compilation of this chart.

EVENT	9/11			What is the role of digital visuality (DV) in the visual construction of the event?
Main THEMATA	WEST/US CAPITALISM vs. ISLAM			
other themata	GOOD vs. EVIL, DEMOCRACY vs. TERROR/DICTATORSHIP, HUMAN vs. ANIMAL, MASCULINE vs. FEMININE			
Can DV activate alternative/emancipative/subversive Themata?				
CONTEXTS	Iraq 2003		Abu Ghraib	Arab Spring
	(themata US-Islam)		(themata human-animal)	(themata democracy-dictatorship)
	masculine-feminine			
	Institutional DV		Informal/private DV	Informal/private DV re-appropriated by media orgs.
Can DV resists institutional re-appropriation?				
OBJECTIFICATIONS	war/violence		torture, abuses	demonstrations
(most common visualizations)	Saddam/Bin Laden		American soldier	twitter, digital camera etc.
	Arab victims			Gadhafi
DV is itself a representation of the West/US capitalism/freedom				
ANCHORS	act of war		enjoyment/disgust (emotional anchoring)	Prague Spring (naming)
	trauma/pearl harbour fear (emotional anchoring)		pleasure, humiliation	victory of capitalism/democracy, superiority of the West
Common anchoring for all cases:	Revenge			
Can DV influence anchoring?				
IDENTITY FUNCTIONS	re-definition to overcome the 9/11 trauma		Revenge vs. justice	Reassurance about West/US capitalism
polarization/polemic of American identities (in- and out-groups)				

Figure 1. Social representations and visual communication: a provisional conceptual framework

Conclusions

On a general note, I am indeed tempted to agree with Brian Winston when, in open contrast with Marshall McLuhan, he suggested that available technology is not a cause but an effect of social order and the "law of the suppression of radical potential" is decisive in making sure that technological innovation cannot produce non incremental change or "revolution" in the former (Winston, 1986) [see also (Traber, 1986)].

Digital visuality is a form of visual technology with emancipative or even subversive potentials to the extent it facilitates the participation of more and more diverse social identities, interests and hierarchies of values to the social construction of visual meaning. The actual expression of this potential however is far from granted.

Visual communication has distinctive aspects of indeterminacy that in particular circumstances (e.g. redefinition of traumatized social identities) creates opportunities for emancipation. Hegemonic ideology, however, is productive: it responds actively to challenges and can inhibit emancipative potentialities if and when they emerge. The "pure and random play of signifiers" (Jameson, 1991, p. 96) which digital visuality seems so decisive in bringing about is not a weakness but the very strength of the cultural logic of late capitalism, and the very reason of its resistance.

If every signifier were always autonomous from every signified, communication and understanding would be simply impossible. In practice, communication and understanding happen all the time but, if we are interested in relations of power, we may usefully notice that some understandings are more influential than others. To enforce the emancipative potential of digital visuality – as well as other forms of communication - we have to gain a better grasp on the conditions of this autonomy since, taken in its absolute form, this autonomy reflects an epistemological standpoint that undermines the emancipative potential of digital visuality because it erodes the ideological impact of diversity in the visual construction of reality but not the effects of the hegemonic influences it describes.

If suggesting that "resistance is futile" may perform as a self-fulfilling prophecy, the influence of ideological elements in repressing the radical potential of digital visuality should not be underestimated. In fact, the autonomy of the signifier, and the commodification of culture associated to it, cannot be associated to semantic chaos but rather the hegemonic control on the social construction of meaning. While every individual is in principle capable of giving meaning - and a given image can be given as many different meanings as there are individuals using it - in my discussion I prefer to use the notion of relevant social meaning to describe the impermanent outcome of the social construction of visual meaning and to capture the influence of ideology in this process. For our discussion, this notion suggests at least two important points. First that the meaning of images is constructed not independently from, but functionally connected to, the purposes, interests, values, histories, etc. of the most influential among the agents participating in the process. Second, that even if the meaning of images is ambiguous, disambiguation is possible because the viewers never see images in a vacuum. The context of the uses of images contains situational clues that perform like interpretative keys for the decoding of the image and disambiguation. This process of disambiguation is relevant for the visual construction of reality: the process in which images and visual communication are used in the representation of relevant social issues.

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