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# Iconicity: A Category for Social and Cultural Theory

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# Iconicity

## A Category for Social and Cultural Theory

by Marco Solaroli

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### 1. Introduction: On Icons and Iconicity

Over the last two decades, various intellectual waves of theoretical repositioning and advancement within and beyond the “cultural turn” in the social sciences and humanities have revealed a widespread, increasing (and increasingly institutionalized) attention to the “visual” and “material” – plus, more recently and secondarily, the “sensory” and “affective” – dimensions of social and cultural life. With the advent of the digital, there can be no doubt whatsoever that we are today in a critical stage in the evolution of interdisciplinary scholarship on visual culture, material culture, media and memory.

In this context, a rapidly expanding – yet highly fragmented – bulk of studies has focused on iconicity, icons and iconic power. Social life is widely marked by cultural icons. Iconic images, personages, objects, buildings, brands and events constitute deep-rooted and widely shared reference points, which materially embody, visually crystallize, aesthetically express and symbolically condense experiences and meanings. As such, icons stand out in the public culture, they enter the wide cultural imagery and contribute to the construction of public memory. “Iconic power” thus entails the ability to articulate and intensify cultural meanings, narratives and myths into an aesthetically striking, easily recognizable, emotionally rich and symbolically relevant visual-material entity.

However, and quite obviously, no icon was born icon. Reaching an iconic status – that is, acquiring and maintaining iconic power – is a complex, dynamic and unpredictable social and cultural process. Icons can be carriers of multiple, relatively unstable and even contradictory meanings, which can be articulated and re-articulated through symbolic struggles within different spheres of actions. In fact, iconic power is intrinsically performative, as it implies the ability to arouse controversies and reveal latent cultural tensions, making people act in different ways through different social practices, eventually shaping their own social identities. At the same time, through such a process, icons can eventually emerge upon a myriad of increasingly pervasive and fragmented visual-cultural “flows,” achieving power and meanings that are very widely recognized, evocated and shared. In so doing, culturally (and relatively) “solid” icons can become particularly relevant within the multi-cultural, multi-linguistic and increasingly globalized world of the late and “liquid” modernity, which was arguably struck by the fall of its grand narratives, yet even in moments of rapid social, technological and cultural changes – and shifting paradigms – it seems to be characterized also by the appearance of renewed and varied forms of secular re-enchantment.

In this context, icons can play a role of symbolic identification and social bonding in a world of unstable relationships, in which “connecting” and “sharing” look apparently easier and faster, but shared meanings and experiences are highly variable and increasingly uncertain. As powerfully symbolic eye-catchers in a late-modern, increasingly digital age of distracted attention, icons can bring into focus collectively, yet often unconsciously, shared emotions and meanings, condensing, intensifying, and circulating them in concrete visual-material forms. The study of iconicity, icons and iconic power is thus situated at the very intersection of major existing investigations and reflections on visibility, materiality, media and power, and as such it could provide unexpected and fruitful analytical insights on “how culture works.”

However, notwithstanding a few fertile empirical and theoretical works, the concept of “icon” has so far looked promising as much as elusive, even to the point of evanescence into common sense. We live surrounded by icons, but iconic power seems still ineffable. Questions such as: What is an icon? Why do icons matter? And especially, what do icons want? have often found only quite vague or very specific – and thus hardly generalizable – answers. As it becomes clear, the category of “iconicity” need deeper and closer empirical engagement, conceptual refinement and further analytical distinctions in order to be possibly re-conceptualized within a more organic and useful framework – and thus to become more meaningful also in relation to wider and ongoing intellectual debates.

This symposium aims at posing the concept of “icon” and the category of “iconicity” at the centre of contemporary cultural research in the social sciences, by con-

sidering such an area of investigation as a prism through which to more effectively re-articulate and bring into focus ongoing debates at the intersection of visual culture, material culture and media in our increasingly global and digital age. Arguing for iconicity as a relevant keyword in the vocabulary of contemporary social and cultural theory implies analytically unpacking it, tracing its intellectual roots, identifying its constitutive elements, and assessing its conceptual and empirical fertility in the description and interpretation of actual phenomena, within wider dynamics of power. That is precisely what this symposium sets out to do.

In order to open the discussion, this paper offers a comprehensive and critical assessment of the state of the art, highlighting the underlying tensions and the fundamental issues at stake, focusing on the most recent theoretical debates (e.g. the “iconic turn” in cultural sociology), and suggesting grey areas in need of further research and refinement. It aims to show that the category of iconicity can provide fertile ground for exploring connections and constructing dialogues among different strands in the social sciences and humanities that have so far developed almost independently of each other. In particular, this paper includes two major parts. In the first one (“Conceptualizing iconic power”), it offers a wide review of the interdisciplinary literature on icons and iconicity; in the second one (“Explaining iconic power”), drawing on empirical insights from global research on iconicity and visual-material culture, it outlines analytical strategies aimed at overcoming the flaws of different research strands while still benefiting from the strengths they all have, and it suggests future research paths to face the new digital scenario. Finally, in the Conclusions, it briefly introduces the authors and papers of the symposium.

This paper is thus conceived as the starting point of a wider, collective effort of intellectual bridge-building (between different research strands, within different epistemological traditions and across different disciplinary boundaries), and ultimately as an invitation to develop an organic, multi-dimensional and sharable analytical-conceptual framework, which might throw into further relief the dynamics of iconic power in contemporary social and cultural life, and the relevance of iconicity for social and cultural theory.

## **2. Conceptualizing Iconic Power: Disciplinary Fields and Theoretical Tensions**

The concept of icon has historically developed between the sacred and the profane – and between the visual and the material. Etymologically, icon derives from the Greek *eikōn*, meaning “image.” In early Christian culture, the term often generically

referred to memorial paintings of the dead. When Christianity was adopted as the Roman state official religion, it came to represent cult images of God, Jesus Christ, Mary and the saints, thus overlapping with the already established cult of the Roman emperors – and relegating other pagan icons to alleged idolatry. Not by chance, the (Greek) term appears in different parts of the (Septuagint) Bible (e.g. in the famous passage “God made man in his own image”) indicating the image of God, but also implying other meanings, for example referring to the image of relevant political figures on ancient Roman coins. Further revealing the critically intertwined relationship between iconicity and power, the crucial process of “sacralisation of icons” took place in particular through the crisis of the so-called Byzantine iconoclast period in the eighth century, when the imperial authority tried to oppose the use and circulation of images, and then throughout the Middle Ages, when it played a fundamental role in the development of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, also in its contrasts with the Roman Church. Interestingly, as objects of uncritical worship that possessed a tangibly holy presence, in the origin Christian icons were images carefully painted (often with egg tempera) on relatively small and thus easily portable wood panels. Moreover, especially in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, icons were not only objects of mainly visual and distant worship, but they were also touched, caressed, even kissed, and offered candles, incenses, and flowers. Icons thus were – and still today often are – experienced through rituals that involved not only visual, but also tactile and haptic, even olfactory and auditory activities. Through these activities, that is, in the social ritual of visual and more widely sensory encounter and relation with the religious icon, the devotional subject was eventually supposed to feel “touched” on his/her inner soul by the power of the icon. Since its inception, iconic experience was thus articulated through co-constitutive visual and material dimensions [Belting 1993; Mondzain 2004; Velmans 2013.]

The religious connotation of the concept of “icon” has been dominant for a very long time. However, over the course of the twentieth century, the term has expanded beyond religion and toward art, communication and culture, acquiring multiple and diverse connotations. Today it appears quite ubiquitously both in the ordinary language and within academic debates. Over the last twenty years, in fact, the spectrum of disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields and subfields involving ongoing – yet highly differentiated and fragmented – research on iconicity has greatly expanded.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The wide interdisciplinary spectrum of contemporary research on iconicity includes (at least): Visual culture studies, Art history, Aesthetics, Cultural studies, Cultural sociology, Cultural anthropology, Media sociology, Media studies (mainly film and photography), Visual communication, Journalism studies, Political communication, Semiotics, Religious studies, Philosophy, History, Literary studies, American studies, Urban studies, Memory studies, Cultural geography, Material culture

In order to better conceptualize the potential relevance of the concept of icon and iconicity for contemporary social and cultural theory, it could be useful to outline a possible intellectual genealogy of its meanings and uses. Such a task can begin by reconstructing three major and distinct “traditions” of research on iconicity, which have proved particularly influential over the years.

### *Early Research “Traditions”*

In historical order, the first research “tradition” can be traced back to the work of one of the foundational authors of modern semiotics, Charles Peirce. At the end of the nineteenth century, Peirce developed a theory of signs in which he famously distinguished between “icon,” “index,” and “symbol.” Iconic signs physically resembles what is shown, and thus “stand for” their object in virtue of shared qualities – they exhibit “a similarity of analogy to the subject of discourse;” indexical signs bear the impress of their objects in a direct, concrete, “natural” relation – they force “the attention to the particular object intended without describing it;” finally, symbolic signs have an arbitrary relation with their objects, which is based on social and cultural conventions, and it does not require physical likeness – they signify their objects “by means of an association of ideas or habitual connection between the name and the character signified” [Peirce 1931-1958; §1.369.] On the one hand, the model’s simplicity contributed to its empirical versatility and theoretical success; on the other hand, the vagueness of such a concept as icon raised constructive critiques [e.g. Eco 1976.] However, even if “icon” became a crucial term in the tool-kit of modern semiotics, over the years in many other disciplinary fields its use became closer to the ordinary language, only sometimes referable to the original semiotic definition (e.g. some “icons” on our computer monitors), and often implying, i.e. in the case of some “iconic photographs,” a mixture of all the three sign types, and a particular focus on the power of the “symbol.” On this basis, the semiotic conception of icon has been recently subject to a number of attempts aimed at better theorizing its analytical usefulness in the field of visual culture [e.g. Mitchell 1986; 2005.]

The second research “tradition” can be traced back to the late work of a classic of sociology, Émile Durkheim. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Durkheim [1912; 1901] elaborated a theory of totemism in order to explore the social construction of the sacred meaning and value of collective representations that were at the

studies, Science & Technology Studies, Consumption studies, Marketing, Architecture, Design, Psychoanalysis, Gender studies, Celebrity studies and Fashion studies – and, of course, all the possible intersections among them.

centre of the ritual practices of religious life. Durkheim convincingly describes the totem as a powerful symbolic object through which the “collective consciousness” of the social group came to be perceived as visible, unified, “real” – and both the group’s identity and the wider social order could thus be naturalized. For quite a long time, the concept of totem has found only mixed success in the social sciences, especially since Lévi-Strauss [1963] apparently dismissed it as quite a generic category, which could be “good to think with” but ultimately unable to effectively unveil the existing social differences and their underlying ideological structures. Arguably because of its “illusory” and “primitive” connotation, the term “totem” has not been widely employed even in the ordinary language – contrary to “icon.” However, over the last two decades, Durkheim’s theoretical work has been creatively readopted within different strands of social and cultural research, and it has offered fertile insights into the analysis of late modern cultural icons and the wider visual and material culture. On the one hand, drawing on the observation that “the images of the totemic being are more sacred than the totemic being itself” [Durkheim 1912, 133], Durkheim’s totemism has been re-appreciated as a useful critical framework because it “addresses the value of images ... not as a hierarchy in which the image must be adored or reviled, worshipped or smashed,” and so, most importantly, it “allows the image to assume a social, conversational, and dialectical relationship with the beholder” [Mitchell 2005, 106; 1998.] Such a re-appreciation moved from the assumption that “at the same moment that Durkheim desacralized religion, he sacralized the social” [Miller 2005, 36], thus shifting the attention toward the social practices through which a given image and object assumes its power – rather than toward the object and image itself. On the other hand, in fact, drawing on the observation that “collective feelings become conscious of themselves only by settling upon external objects” [Durkheim 1912, 421], recent research has moved back to the “external objects” and images themselves, creatively extending Durkheim’s totemism to include an increasing sensibility toward specific aesthetic qualities and material affordances, exploring the multiple ways through which objects and images could acquire relatively independent and “agentic” features, beyond the social practices in which they may be embedded. From this perspective, through social practices and rituals as well as specific sensory-material engagements, contemporary visual-cultural icons can play the totemic role of social bonding and collective identification, giving a concrete and paradigmatic form to abstract consciousness and meanings. This recent body of work – which will be analysed in greater details in the next pages – also suggests how the intellectual roots (and routes) of iconicity could have much wider conceptual ramifications within the social science classic dictionary – from (Durkheim’s) totem and ritual to (Marx’s) commodity fetishism, from (Simmel’s) early investigations into the sociology of the

senses (particularly on sight) to (Benjamin's) aura and authenticity, from (Weber's) charisma to (Bourdieu's) symbolic power, symbolic capital and symbolic violence. In different ways (yet to be fully explored), the concept of "icon" reveals different degrees of intellectual kindred with all of them [see Mitchell 2005; Bartmanski and Alexander 2012; Bartmanski 2015.]

Finally, the third, influential research "tradition" can be traced back to those line of authors in art history who, in the first half of the twentieth century, inaugurated the very project of "iconology" as a "science of icons," in particular Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, and then Ernst Gombrich. This intellectual network (or "school") gradually coalesced around the Warburg Institute, which was founded out of Warburg's own large library in Hamburg (and following the rise of Nazism, it was moved to London in the 1930s, eventually finding its final location at the University of London in the 1940s). As a crucial cultural institution in the field of iconology, the Institute promoted a wide research program on the legacy of classical antiquity and the influences of its representations on different aspects of modern Western culture and civilization, particularly through the Renaissance. One of the most interesting – yet unfinished – projects was Warburg's "Atlas," a visual-material encyclopaedia of symbolic images (pinned on wooden panels) that aimed at tracing the "afterlife of antiquity" in modern culture through books, newspapers and newsmagazines, and other modern media. In this context, Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology* [Panofsky 1939; see also 1955] most likely represents the very first attempt to develop an organic framework for the analysis of visual culture – and today it is widely regarded as a classic in the field of art history. Drawing on Warburg's concept of "iconography" – that is, the formal analysis of the background of pictorial traditions behind and within artworks – as well as on Cassirer's concept of "symbolic form," Panofsky conceives iconology as the analysis of the meaningful relations between the formal qualities of artworks and the wider cultural and historical context. Such a framework comprises three major analytical dimensions: the primary ("pre-iconographical") level of perception and identification of the "forms" and "motifs" of the artwork; the secondary ("iconographical") level of association of the forms and motifs to the themes and concepts present in the image's "intrinsic content;" and the third ("iconological") level of interpretation of the artwork's meaning in its relation to the wider "symbolic values" and cultural background of a given society at a given historical moment. Notwithstanding the crucial analytical usefulness of such an approach, it is important to recall that, throughout its work, Panofsky used the concept of "icon" in consciously wide terms, to deal with the whole visual art field, without attributing it any clearly workable role, nor designating "icon" as a specific type of image, object, or sign.



Drawing creatively on these three early “traditions,” over the last twenty years a few key intellectual “turns” – mainly associated with rapidly emerging and increasingly institutionalized transdisciplinary research areas – have offered a wide variety of fruitful yet fragmented insights on the analysis of visual and material culture. The next pages will offer a brief review of their most relevant conceptual achievements and theoretical tensions, in order to eventually suggest how they should be organically rearticulated and integrated within a potential framework that – overcoming the flaws of each position with the strengths of the others – could pose iconicity, icons and iconic power at their very intersections, and closer to the core of contemporary debates in social and cultural theory.

### *Visual Culture and the Pictorial/Iconic Turn*

Since the early 1990s, in the wake of the cultural turn in the social sciences and the humanities, and responding to the increasing relevance and pervasiveness of the visual dimension of social and cultural life in the global and digital age, various interdisciplinary research strands – mainly from art history and aesthetics, cultural and media studies, sociology and anthropology, literary studies and semiotics – have gradually coalesced within a rapidly emerging field of visual studies (or visual culture studies). Research in this field investigates a multitude of images, objects, practices, visual processes and wider “scopic regimes” – spending also great energy into their theorizing. At the turn of the millennium, the field enjoyed increasing institutionalization, evidenced for example by the raising number of readers [e.g. Mirzoeff 1998; Evans and Hall 1999], introductory books [e.g. Mirzoeff 1999; Sturken and Cartwright 2001], academic journals<sup>2</sup> and programs [see Dikovitskaya 2005.] On a parallel and sometimes intersecting side, increasing attention has been paid to visual methods employed within social, ethnographic and cultural research [e.g. Pauwels 2010; Emmison, Smith and Mayall 2012; Rose 2012; 2014; Pink 2014.]

Notwithstanding the even marked differences between the various souls of the field, there can be no doubts whatsoever that all the major efforts at investigating visual culture share three and interrelated crucial assumptions – which relevantly form

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that in the same year – 2002 – two major journals were founded (the *Journal of Visual Culture* and *Visual Communication*), while the sixteen-year-old journal *Visual Sociology* was renamed *Visual Studies*, suggesting a wider interdisciplinary scope. These three major journals occupy different positions in relation to different disciplinary subfields – roughly distinguishable as closer to (i) the humanities (and theoretical debates) (JoVC); (ii) media and communication (VC); (iii) the social sciences (and methodological debates) (VS). On visual sociology, see Harper [2012]; on visual communication (and journals), see Barnhurst, Vari and Rodriguez [2004]; see also Becker [2004.]

also the basis of contemporary discussions on iconicity: (i) a theoretical reorientation from the “linguistic turn” of the 1960s toward a common search for extra-linguistic heuristic models that could recognize and investigate the relatively autonomous realm of visual material culture; (ii) an expanded scope of legitimate empirical inquiry that includes not only art images but any image from the media and popular culture, science, journalism, politics, etc. [Elkins 1999] – and thus a shift from religious to secular icons; (iii) an explicit and often critical focus on the processes of visual circulation and the practices of visual consumption in and through a variety of social spheres (and, increasingly, online).

A founding and key exponent of the field of visual culture studies, W.J.T. Mitchell has effectively argued that the “linguistic turn” [Rorty 1967] in philosophy and the humanities – which, through structuralism and semiotics, suggested an epistemic approach to the analysis of all cultural forms as if they were linguistic texts, thus focusing on language, narrative, discourses, and verbal communication – could not provide (anymore) the exhaustive analytical depth and accuracy to explore the complexities of non-discursive orders of representation of late modern life [see, in particular, Mitchell 1986; 1994; 2005.] On this basis, since the early 1990s, Mitchell has advanced a “pictorial turn,” defined as:

a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality. Most important, it is the realization that while the problem of pictorial representation has always been with us, it presses inescapably now, and with unprecedented force, on every level of culture, from the most refined philosophical speculations to the most vulgar productions of the mass media. Traditional strategies of containment no longer seems adequate, and the need for a global critique of visual culture seems inescapable [Mitchell 1994, 16.]

Such a definition – which has been widely debated and successively refined – reveals the significance of both a wider empirical spectrum and an analytical focus on the practices of visual consumption, through which to better investigate both the objectification of visual culture and the subjectification of vision. Interestingly, Mitchell’s approach develops out of a constructively critical reading of Panofsky (among others). On the one hand, Panofsky’s “magisterial range” makes him “an inevitable model and starting point for any general account of what is now called ‘visual culture’,” as he was able, in particular, to articulate “a multidimensional story

of Western religious, scientific, and philosophical thought entirely around the figure of the picture, understood as the concrete symbol of a complex cultural field of what Foucault might have called the ‘visible and articulable’” [Mitchell 1994, 16-18.] On the other hand, according to Mitchell, Panofsky’s theoretical framework could and should be criticized and refined under two major aspects. Firstly, in his iconology “the ‘icon’ is thoroughly absorbed by the ‘logos,’ understood as a rhetorical, literary, or even (less convincingly) a scientific discourse” [Mitchell 1994, 28.] Secondly, “the unfinished business in Panofsky’s ... iconological method ... is the question of the spectator” [Mitchell 1994, 18.]

As it becomes clear, the theoretical focus on popular culture and consumption as well as the critical engagement with visual-political issues [e.g. Mirzoeff 2005; 2011; Mitchell 2011] position visual culture studies at least partly within the heritage of (British) cultural studies, which have long investigated issues of representation, ideology, and the audience – developing also a fertile post-Barthesian visual sensibility, especially in the influential works of Stuart Hall [e.g. 1973; 1997; 2007; Evans and Hall 1999.] From this perspective, in the field of visual culture the “practices of looking” [Sturken and Cartwright 2001] can be critically defined as practices of active – even productive – consumption:

All images contain layers of meaning that include their formal aspects, their cultural and sociohistorical references, the ways they make reference to the images that precede them and surround them, and the contexts in which they are displayed. Reading and interpreting images is one way that we, as viewers, contribute to the process of assigning value to the culture in which we live. Practices of looking, then, are not passive acts of consumption [Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 42.]

Looking thus comes to be interpreted as a social practice that presupposes the cultural positioning of viewers – i.e. visual subjects who are constitutively endowed with agency and, at the same time, are considered objects of a critical discourse on visibility – and their situated and different forms of visual consumption, through which they can more or less creatively interact with what they are looking at, on the basis of their own social and cultural backgrounds, their fears and their desires. From this perspective, every “visual event” could be investigated by prising apart “three intersected layers”: “the locality of the viewer, the contents and contexts of the image, and the global imaginary within which the viewer attempts to make sense” of the images [Mirzoeff 2005, 12.]

Beyond (British) cultural studies, the field of visual culture studies has developed a parallel dialogue with European – particularly German – research traditions in art history, aesthetics and anthropology that, almost in the same period, and through the works of such major authors as Gottfried Boehm and

Hans Belting, have coalesced around the idea of an “image science” (*Bildwissenschaft*). In the early 1990s, in fact, while Mitchell was advancing the idea of a “pictorial turn,” Boehm was proposing the idea of an “iconic turn” [Boehm 1994; Boehm and Mitchell 2009.] However, explicitly drawing on the hermeneutic tradition, Boehm mainly focuses on the image’s “inner logic,” the internal structure of articulation of its meanings, which generates its “iconic intelligence.” In his words: “How do images create meaning? This question serves as my guide, and although the interaction with the observers is always considered in light of the conditions of each context, initially, the visible emphasis was certainly placed on the side of the artefact” [Boehm and Mitchell 2009, 106.] More than the “interaction with the observers” and the act of looking, such an approach explores “the side of the artefact” and the “act of showing – in which representation generates presence” [Boehm 2012, 21.] Accordingly, Boehm’s iconic turn is based on the concept of “iconic difference,” on the shift from “representation” to “presentation” to “presence,” i.e. the way in which “the image displays something, and in so doing it displays itself,” through a process of “intensification” [Boehm 2012, 16-17.] Iconic difference thus implies an “iconic contrast” within the image, which can activate meaningful articulations between the “material” and the “immaterial” – the “surface” and the “depth” [Boehm 1994; 2007; see also Burda and Maar 2004; Maar and Burda 2006.] As it becomes clear, through such a conceptual framework, the iconic turn aims to capture “the sense of life attributed to visual objects” [Moxey 2008, 137; see Mitchell 2005.]

As a whole, drawing on its internal theoretical and analytical differences, and often refining them through empirical research, over the last two decades the field of visual culture studies has offered differently fruitful and potentially converging interpretations of the practices of production, circulation and (especially) consumption of contemporary images and visual objects, as well as of the “sense of life” attributed to powerful visual-cultural icons. From this perspective, late modern icons could be conceived as “special things” ranging “from what we might call rather ordinary, secular, and modern “special things” like commodities, souvenirs, family photos, and collections, to sacred, magical, uncanny things, symbolic things, associated with ritual and narrative, prophecies and divinations” [Mitchell 2005, 193.] Empirically, particularly in Mitchell’s work, the study of visual-cultural icons has addressed a variety of paradigmatic examples, from the image of the dinosaur [Mitchell 1998], to Barack Obama [Mitchell 2009], to the iconic photographs of the war in Iraq and the Abu Ghraib scandal [Mitchell 2011.]

### *Media, Communication, Journalism and Photography*

Over the last two decades, the transformations of the relation between media and visibility have received increased attention within the field of communication studies [e.g. Thompson 1995.] As far as iconicity is concerned, such an attention has empirically been focused mainly on a few interrelated domains, i.e. iconic (news) photography, iconic events, iconic celebrities, and iconic brands.

The problem of iconic power in photography has quite a long life, and it has generated a considerable bulk of research over the years. In order to bring it into focus, it might be helpful to start reading again an old yet enlightening news article. In May 1977, in fact, on the pages of a major Italian newsmagazine, Umberto Eco commented on a photograph showing a sole man, on a street in the centre of Milan, wearing a balaclava and holding a gun, during a political protest in which a sergeant was shot to death. Eco begins his article with the following words: “Today more than ever political news itself is marked, motivated, abundantly nourished by the symbolic. Understanding the mechanisms of the symbolic in which we move means being political. Not understanding them leads to mistaken politics. Of course, it is also a mistake to reduce political and economic events to mere symbolic mechanisms; but it is equally wrong to ignore this dimension.” Then he added:

The vicissitudes of our century have been summed up in a few exemplary photographs that have proved epoch-making: the unruly crowd pouring into the square during the ‘ten days that shook the world’; Robert Capa’s dying *miliciano*; the marines planting the flag on Iwo Jima; the Vietnamese prisoner being executed with a shot in the temple; Che Guevara’s tortured body on a plank in a barracks. Each of these images has become a myth and has condensed numerous speeches. It has surpassed the individual circumstance that produced it; it no longer speaks of that single character or of those characters, but expresses concepts. It is unique, but at the same time it refers to other images that preceded it or that, in imitation, have followed it [Eco 1977.]

The photo of the “Milanese gunman” became iconic, at least within Italian public culture. According to Eco, its performative success and cultural power was mainly due to the fact that “it abruptly revealed, without the need for a lot of digressive speeches, something that has been circulating in a lot of talk, but that words alone could not make people accept. At the moment it appeared, its communicative career began: once again the political and the private have been marked by the plots of the symbolic, which, as always happens, has proved producer of reality.”

In a few sentences, Eco anticipated and condensed a number of problems that, in the following four decades, have nourished theoretical debates and empirical analyses among scholars of media and cultural production, regarding, in

particular, the social and cultural dynamics behind those “few exemplary photographs that have proved epoch-making.” In an influential article, Schudson [1989, 158] similarly asked: “sometimes ... a photograph profoundly changes the way a person sees the world, sometimes not. Why? What determines whether cultural objects will light a fire or not? How does culture work?” – thus inaugurating a fruitful phase of research aimed at fully recognizing and investigating the historical role of media in the production of cultural power and, more specifically, iconic power. In the scholarship on journalism and photography, different studies have highlighted the most critical aspects of the process of iconic construction, showing the multiple ways in which photojournalistic icons have often been strategically produced, framed, and employed for the benefit of the ideological interests of the dominant political elites, or just according to different media logics [e.g. Perlmutter 1998; Griffin 1999; Zelizer 2004.] Such research started from the shared assumption that “photography as a medium is characterized by two powerful and potentially contradictory qualities: its apparent ability to capture a particular moment and its tendency to transcend the moment” [Griffin 1999, 139; see also Zelizer 2010.] From the same perspective, for example, Bennett and Lawrence [1995] define “news icons” as “more than just vivid, memorable images; freed from their original contexts, they enter the narrative streams of subsequent, disparate, and often unconnected events. And in contrast with other dramatic news images, icons not only dominate the events within which they originate but are used by journalists to evoke larger cultural themes, symbolizing values, contradictions, or changes that have begun to surface in society,” thus concluding that news icons “introduce rich associative imagery into the news” and they provide “journalists with event-enhancing narrative possibilities ... symbolic tools for the potential reshaping of political culture and public policy” [Bennett and Lawrence 1995, 23-27.]

However, as a whole, and quite contrary to what was happening in the field of visual culture, until the early 2000s scarce attention was paid to the photographs’ potential social and political effects, usually taken-for-granted and defined in generic terms on the basis of a passive conception of media consumers, which analytically reduced iconic power mainly to the ability of incorporating enduring myths or dominant political-national narratives. In this context, Hariman and Lucaites [2007]’s work on iconic photography offered a more articulated conceptual framework, which fruitfully paid more attention to the analytical connections between the impact of specific images and the climate of social consciousness and civic, emotional and moral predispositions at the basis of the construction and activation of a cultural struc-

ture of public response. From this perspective, iconic (news) photographs acquire their power not only by offering a particularly eloquent representation of the events on the basis of widely shared visual-cultural conventions, but also by re-articulating those aesthetic forms in order to stir up emotions, to facilitate the comprehension, to motivate social action, and to shape memory. On this basis, and drawing also on seminal work on the practices of visual news-making and news framing [e.g. Hall 1973; Rosenblum 1978], more recent research has focused on the cultural transformation of news photographs into cultural icons adopting a wider conception of the performative power of visual narratives [e.g. Griffin 2004; Zelizer 2010], especially during media scandals and political crises, such as Abu Ghraib [e.g. Thompson 2005; 2000; Anden-Papadopoulos 2008; Solaroli 2011], and focusing more (even ethnographically) on situated professional practices of visual news-making and potential construction of iconic power, even in the new digital environment [Pogliano 2015; see also Hill and Schwartz 2015; Solaroli 2015.]

Iconic photographs are often constitutively correlated to iconic events and/or iconic public figures. In this case, however, the role of media in the construction of cultural and iconic power goes well beyond the symbolic boundaries of a given social and cultural sphere, e.g. journalism. On the one hand, in fact, the “iconic status can be viewed as the result of ‘successful’ press narratives that inspire continued renegotiations over meaning” [Leavy 2007, 10.] On the other hand, an event becomes iconic when it “undergoes intense initial interpretative practices but also becomes mythic within the culture through its appropriation into other political or social discourses and its eventual use within commercial culture” [ivi, 4-5], thus turning out to represent “a major source through which a collective memory of the past is established and national identity is formed and contested” [ivi, 28.] Therefore, iconic events can be conceived as ritual vehicles through which to articulate and re-negotiate identity – e.g. national identity. As such, iconic events often involve iconic public figures, or iconic celebrities, conceived as “anthropomorphic figures that truly ‘embody’” one nation’s “values, ideologemes and structures of feelings, being, as they are, particularly suited for public identification and desire” [Rieser 2013, 3.] Similarly, celebrity can be defined as a form of “power in terms of its capacity to house conceptions of individuality and simultaneously to embody or help embody “collective configurations” of the social world;” while “iconic celebrity” refers to the “iconic quality” possessed by the celebrity as “the zenith of a career” [Marshall 2014, 17] – which literally resembles the definition of iconic photography as “the zenith of photojournalistic achievement” [Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 27.] “What the icon represents,” in other words, “is the possibility that the celebrity has actually entered the language of the culture and can exist whether the celebrity continues to “perform” or dies”

[Marshall 2014, 17] – which can be argued to be the destiny of most icons (see Schlör [2006] and Bartmanski [2012a], for the case of the Berlin wall).

Along similar lines, “iconic brands” can be defined as brands that have become wider cultural icons and have “identity value,” that is, are imbued with narratives that consumers find valuable in their identity-construction [Holt 2004.] However, a more critical research tradition highlights the ways in which iconic brands have increased within culture industry since the second World War, often inherently to the construction of “Americanness” as a “global imaginary construct, whose icons are modeled within global mass-media networks aimed at post-national markets, at a global ‘iconomy’” [Rieser 2013, 6; see also Sternberg 1999; De Grazia 2006; Sassatelli 2007.] In other words, from this perspective, iconic brands move through an increasingly “global culture industry” [Lash and Lury 2007], and within the “brandscapes of capital” [Goldman and Papson 2006; 2011] of “cool capitalism” [McGuigan 2009.]

### *Material Culture and the Visuality-Materiality Nexus*

Since the mid-1980s, on the wake of the cultural turn, a “material turn” has raised in the social sciences – at the beginning mainly within cultural anthropology, archaeology and cultural geography, then throughout different disciplinary (sub)fields. Addressing the specifically material dimension of social and cultural life, the material turn in the social sciences has focused on objects, their “social lives” [Appadurai 1986] and “cultural biographies” [Kopytoff 1986], the social and material practices in which they are embedded, and the meaningful relationships between subjects and objects – thus acknowledging the latter potentially “agentic” capacities, and recognizing the need to overcome strictly linguistic models in the analysis of materiality [Miller 1987.] In particular, over the years, the variously nuanced concept of “practice,” as a situated and embodied form of action facing the spatiality and materiality of social experience, has proved central to this field, since, as one of its key exponents has effectively synthesized, “it is not just that objects can be agents, it is that practices and their relationships create the appearance of both subjects and objects through the dialectics of objectification” [Miller 2005, 6.] Over the last decade, materiality has finally become increasingly visible also in social theory and cultural sociology – particularly among scholars of consumption [e.g. Sassatelli 2007] and STS (Science and Technology Studies), often via ANT (Action Network Theory) [Latour 2005; see also Griswold, Mangione and McDonnell 2013] – and even in economic sociology [Swedberg 2008.]



As it becomes clear, material culture studies and visual culture studies share a number of presuppositions, from the agency, or sense of life, attributed to images and objects, to the analytical search for extra-linguistic heuristic models. In particular, Mitchell has theorized the analytical distinction between “image” and “picture,” arguing that “objects and images are fused together to produce those things I have been calling “pictures” in an expanded field” [Mitchell 2005, 196], implying that “the picture is the image plus the support; it is the appearance of the immaterial image in a material medium” [ivi, 85; see also Mitchell 2014.] However, until recently, like sociology, visual culture studies have paid only scarce attention to materiality. In this context, recent attempts to problematize and analytically specify the visibility-materiality nexus have proved particularly fruitful. In a collection explicitly entitled *Visibility/Materiality* [Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012a], the co-constitution of materiality and visibility comes to be analytically addressed via a focus, again, on (embodied) practice (as it is made explicit in the first chapter, which introduces a “Manifesto for Practice”). It is via practice, in fact, that people sensuously interact with visual objects and cognitively experience the narratives embodied in their specific material forms. Such an approach “draws attention to the co-constitution of humans subjectivities and the visual objects their practices create,” positioning itself as “somewhat different from enquiries based on looking, seeing, analysing and writing text; instead, it considers the (geo)politics of embodied, material encounter and engagement” [Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012b, 3; see also Bartmanski 2013.]

Such an integrative approach resonates with previous, quite rare yet fruitful sociological and anthropological theories of photography qua object, that indeed conceive it not just as a two-dimensional image, but as a three-dimensional material entity, whose materiality can indeed play a relevant role in the construction of its meaning [e.g. Edwards and Hart 2004a; Emmison, Smith and Mayall 2012.] From this perspective, “photographs are both images *and* physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience ... and are thus enmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions” [Edwards and Hart 2004b, 1]; in other words, “material forms create very different embodied experiences of images and very different affective tones or theatres of consumption” [ivi, 5.]

On this basis, in the co-constitutive fields of visual and material culture, recognizing the centrality of the materiality of images and icons – i.e. the qualities of their aesthetic shapes and material surface, the concrete representational forms in which they are framed and entangled, and the different affordances embodied in such configurations – could have fertile effects in so far as it permits to theoretically conceive them not merely as commodities for consumption or passive carriers of fixed meanings, but as potentially “active,” dynamic media themselves.

### *Cultural Sociology and the Iconic Turn*

Since the late nineties, in the field of the sociological study of culture, a so-called “strong program” of “cultural sociology” has been aggressively advanced by Jeffrey Alexander and his “school.” This perspective explicitly (and polemically) distances itself from previous, highly established and influential yet so-called “weak” programs of “sociology of culture” – including Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural theory, Foucaultian social theory, (British) cultural studies, and the (mostly American) research stream on the “production and reception of culture” [Alexander and Smith 2002; 2010; Alexander 2003; on the strong program and Bourdieu, see Santoro and Solaroli 2015.] Differently from these approaches, Alexander proposes to consider culture as the deepest structure of social life, the inner engine of social action, and the constitutively meaningful dimension of society – thus positioning it at the very centre of the sociological understanding of social life.

Drawing on a variety of sources, from hermeneutics to (post-)structuralism and semiotic theory (and their applications particularly in literary studies and symbolic anthropology, from Ricoeur to Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Sahlins), the Strong Program aims at overcoming the traditional divide between hermeneutics and structuralism (toward a “structural hermeneutics”) in order to understand the meaningful cultural factors that precede, surround, inform, shape, and arguably co-cause social action. Such causal forces are described in terms of “binary codes” (e.g. “friend/enemy,” “good/evil,” “rational/irrational”) and “cultural narratives”: “narratives, just like binary codes, circulate and are contested in the collective conscience/public sphere, and in this process can shape history” [Alexander and Smith 2010, 17.] They are the foundational components of the “culture structure” through which what Durkheim called the “collective conscience” emerges and influences the more concrete realms of social life. As such, culture structure must be identified and re-constructed in order to investigate its “internal design” and its patterns of meanings. From this perspective, therefore, studying public culture implies deciphering the coded narratives’ power to influence social action by capturing the meaningful symbolic texture of collective consciousness.

While the field of the sociological study of culture was pervaded by a variety of internal symbolic struggles for positioning and power, as we have previously seen two major (post-“linguistic”) “visual” and “material” turns were fruitfully investing a much wider disciplinary spectrum in the humanities and social sciences. In this context, over the last few years an “iconic turn” has been announced (also) within the “strong program” in cultural sociology [Alexander 2008a; Alexander, Bartmanski, Giesen 2012; see also Alexander 2008b; 2010.] Drawing particularly on Durkheim’s

classic insights on totemism and collective consciousness, Alexander's iconic turn sets out to develop a cultural-sociological approach to visual-material culture, treating icons as "agentic, relatively autonomous performers" [Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, 6] characterized, in Alexander's theoretical terms, by a potentially powerful interplay between material-aesthetic *surface* and discursive-moral *depth*, which makes meaning "iconically visible." On this basis, icons come to be defined as "symbolic condensations" – attained through the performative fusion of surface and depth – that anchors social meanings and value in a particular, aesthetically shaped material form, via the process of "iconic consciousness." With the purpose of "broadening sociological epistemology in an aesthetic way" [ivi, 5], the focus on icons, iconicity and iconic power thus deals with the social "experience" of visual-material objects, which implies "not only understanding them cognitively or evaluating them morally but also feeling their sensual, aesthetic force" [ivi, 1.]

As it becomes clear, the iconic turn in cultural sociology aims at theoretically and empirically investigating the power of specific visual-cultural objects to symbolically condense deep meanings in a peculiar sensuous, material form – thus showing, through an expanding variety of case studies, how a cultural sociology of iconicity would look like. In so doing, it clearly represents also the strategic attempt of taking a distinctive position vis-à-vis a bulk of research increasingly carried out in the social sciences and humanities, especially in the now-widely established interdisciplinary fields of visual culture and material culture studies (relatively renewing their conceptual vocabulary and analytical tool-kits).

Focusing on the aesthetic-cum-moral dimension of visual-material cultural objects, on the one hand the iconic turn in cultural sociology constructively resonates with the emphasis on singularity and subjectification previously emerged in the social sciences through anthropological studies of material culture, on the other hand it expands it through a specific theoretical investment on issues of social and cultural "performance" [e.g. Alexander 2004b on "cultural pragmatics;" Alexander 2011.] In other words, after bringing textual analysis from the humanities into cultural sociology, the analysis of social action and cultural (iconic) objects as texts was significantly reoriented and expanded by constructively moving toward performance studies and visual-material culture studies [Alexander 2015.] So far, such a cultural-sociological approach to "iconic power" has offered fruitful insights on the meaningful potential of visual-material objectual shapes and affordances, and on the symbolic complexity of concrete entanglements that embody, express and performatively co-generate social and cultural meanings [Alexander, Bartmanski, Giesen 2012; Bartmanski 2015; see also Zubrzycki 2013.]

### *Behind Surface/Depth*

Claiming – via iconicity – that visibility and materiality should be considered and analysed as central dimensions of social and cultural life, Alexander has joined a chorus of voices that, as the previous pages have showed, has become highly heterogeneous and increasingly crowded over the last two decades. On this basis, a constructively critical assessment of the iconic turn in cultural sociology should entail a recognition of its explicit intellectual roots, or at least its major intellectual influences, its actual strengths and limits, and its potential for future empirical research and theoretical advancement.

As we have just seen, according to this perspective, the iconic process of meaning construction takes place by experiencing “iconic consciousness” via the articulated interplay between aesthetic-material “surface” and discursive-moral “depth.” The surface/depth (analytical) metaphor is thus at the very core of Alexander’s approach, strategically aimed at synthesize and innovate existing research on iconicity. However, the surface/depth metaphor has some, even eminent, predecessors. They can be found mainly out of the social sciences, in the fields of art history, philosophy, aesthetics, semiotics, literary studies, via (post-)structuralism, hermeneutics and narrative theory. A first crucial example is Panofsky [1939]’s iconology. In his interpretative model, in fact, as it has been authoritatively highlighted, “the movement is from surface to depth” [Mitchell 1994, 26.] In other words, Panofsky argued that cultural meanings “do not manifest themselves comprehensively, but nevertheless symptomatically,” and thus the artwork could be conceived as “a symptom of something else which expresses itself in a countless variety of other symptoms” [Panofsky 1955, 28-31.] In the field of visual analysis, such a perspective has since been more or less literally, creatively or reductively incorporated in different conceptualizations, e.g. Barthes’ distinction between the denotative and connotative meaningful dimensions of the “rhetoric of image” [Barthes 1964; see also Hall 1973.] More relevantly and explicitly, Panofsky’s approach clearly resonates with subsequent and more psychoanalytically and marxistically influenced literary theory and criticism based on close “symptomatic reading,” as an interpretative method aimed at unveiling the deep (i.e. latent or repressed) ideological meanings behind the ones that are manifest on the surface of the text [e.g. Jameson 1981; on “surface reading,” see Best and Marcus 2009.] Not by chance, cultural sociology can be explicitly conceived as “a kind of social psychoanalysis” [Alexander 2003, 4.]

Beyond Panofsky, another more explicit forefather of the “surface/depth” metaphor is Paul Ricoeur. In the early 1970s, through his influential, structural “model

of the text,” Ricoeur famously suggested to consider social action as a meaningful cultural text. In his words,

the function of structural analysis is to lead from a *surface semantics*, that of the narrated myth, to a *depth semantics*, that of the boundary situations that constitute the ultimate “referent” of the myth ... If ... we consider structural analysis as a stage – and a necessary one – between a naïve interpretation and a critical interpretation, between a *surface interpretation* and a *depth interpretation*, then it would be possible to locate explanation and understanding as two different stage of the same *hermeneutical arc*” [Ricoeur 1971, 557; emphasis added.]

Ricoeur was personally and intellectually close to Lithuanian structuralist semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas who, a few years later, advanced the theoretical distinction between “figurative” and “plastic” semiotics [Greimas 1984.] “Plastic” deals with internally related shapes and colours, but also “texture” and other qualities of sensory perception, while “figurative” refers to elements that can be recognized through a correlation with the objects of the world. Their meaningful interplay can be interpreted according to “lower” and “higher” levels of mediation, which constitute the (unfixed) relation between “expression” and “content.” Such an approach has proved quite fruitful within visual analysis, especially within the “French” school of semiotics. In this context, on partly similar lines, Louis Marin [1989; 2002] has theorized the “double” dimension of the image through the concepts of “transparency,” the (surface) representation of what is absent, and “opacity,” what the image does not show, which is articulated through the image’s powerful “reflexivity” as a visual-material entity that, by re-presenting something else, has the effect of (self-)presenting itself – thus resulting similar also to Boehm’s definition of the “iconic contrast” within the image, between the “material” and the “immaterial,” the “surface” and the “depth,” and the “act of showing” in which “representation generates presence” [Boehm 1994; 2007; 2012.]

These apparently fragmentary and specific insights help to reconstruct the variety of intellectual assonances, affinities and influences behind Alexander’s iconic theory’s appealing analytical metaphor of surface/depth [see also Gilmore 2003.] Even more explicitly, another relevant intellectual “relative” of the iconic turn in cultural sociology – one that has nonetheless been overlooked (and, so far, quoted just *en passant* in the intellectual outputs of the “Yale school”) – is offered by some (post-bourdiesian) research carried out in the field of US philosophical aesthetics, particularly through the work of Richard Shusterman. In one of his most articulated works, explicitly entitled *Surface and Depth. Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* [Shusterman 2002], the continuity between such an approach and the iconic turn

in cultural sociology can be traced almost line for line – as the following sentences, which open Shusterman’s book, reveal:

Aesthetics is pervaded by a powerful yet paradoxical doubleness: it stresses both surface and depth ... One of the distinguishing virtues of aesthetics is its defence of the deep value of surfaces ... the rich and productive power of sensory appearance ... Aesthetic experience and art criticism cannot adequately explain or ultimately justify themselves without probing into the deeper, less-visible cultural structures that may not be part of the content of art’s experience but which nonetheless significantly frame and shape it ... However, the aesthetic drive toward depth attains its fulfilment only by breaking through to the surface ... just as aesthetic experience can be fully appreciated only by going beyond it, so the deeper logics of culture cannot fully understand or justify themselves without recognizing the power of aesthetics experience as something that sustain and helps justify these deeper cultural structures that, in turn, ground aesthetic experience [Shusterman 2002, 1-3.]

From different disciplinary perspectives, the above presented approaches all aim at articulating an epistemologically richer, more analytically organic, and more empirically fruitful dialectics between the analysis of aesthetic-material “surfaces” and the analysis of cultural “depths” – one which, translated in this context, could better explain how iconicity really works.

### **3. Explaining Iconic Power: Toward a Multi-Dimensional Analytical Framework**

What is an icon? In a general sense, an icon can be defined as “an image that refers to something outside of its individual components, something (or someone) that has great symbolic meaning for many people” [Sturken e Cartwright 2001, 36] or, similarly, an image “that has achieved wholly exceptional levels of widespread recognisability and has come to carry a rich series of varied associations for very large numbers of people across time and cultures, such that it has to a greater or lesser degree transgressed the parameters of its initial making, function, context, and meaning” [Kemp 2012, 3.] As it becomes clear, definitions of icon almost inescapably seem to be doomed to a certain degree of indefiniteness, embracing a very wide spectrum of possibilities. Not by chance, scholarly explorations of iconicity have crossed a huge variety of empirical lands, including *iconic photographs* [e.g. Goldberg 1993; Perlmutter 1998; Griffin 1999; Zelizer 2004; Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Rousseau 2009; Mitchell 2011; Solaroli 2011; Tulloch and Blood 2012; Binder 2012; Campbell 2012; Chouliaraki 2013; Gunthert 2015; Hill and Schwartz 2015]; *iconic events* [e.g. Leavy 2007; Foran 2008; Bartmanski 2012a; Smith 2012; Sonnevand 2013; Zubrzycki 2013]; *iconic personages* (i.e. public figures, stars and celebrities, artists, singers, in-

tellecuals, politicians, actors/actresses, sportsmen/sportswomen, etc.) [e.g. Reynolds and Hutner 2000; Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Feldges 2008; Hölbling, Rieser and Rieser 2006; Mitchell 2009; Leypoldt and Engler 2010; Alexander 2010b; Breese 2010; Bartmanski 2012b; Rieser, Fuchs, Phillips 2013; see also Alexander 2006; De Jong 2007]; *iconic buildings and urban scapes* [e.g. Ethington and Schwartz 2006; Schlör 2006; Ford 2008; Anderson 2012; see also Trachtenberg 1979; Cosgrove and Daniels 1989; Mitchell 2002b]; *iconic artworks* [e.g. Alexander 2004a; 2008b; Kemp 2012]; *iconic commodities and mundane cultural objects* [e.g. Nelkin and Lindee 1995; Mitchell 1998; Stenberg 1999; Rogers 1999; Dant 2006; Kemp 2012; Danaher 2014; Bartmanski and Woodward 2015]; and *iconic brands* [e.g. Goldman and Papson 1999; Holt 2004; Kravets and Öрге 2010.]

Within such a wide empirical ground, icons continuously functions as visual-material condensations of meanings. Their aesthetic eloquence and semiotic features, their sensory and emotional appeal, their social traction, and particularly their constitutively meaningful associability with latent yet powerful narratives make icons emerge like “tips of icebergs” in culture and society, publicly visible and easily recognisable cultural anchors in the liquid and complex times of late-modern social life. Their emergence performatively generate framing wars and reiterated use, widespread (transmedia, transcontextual, transnational) circulation, and even creative appropriation and symbolic re-articulation. In this process, icons become powerful cultural resources that might be re-mobilized in the future for social action, memory-building, and cultural critique.

As multifaceted, rich and empirically versatile cultural phenomena, icons and iconic power have been conceptualized, analyzed and explained according to a variety of different epistemological traditions, theoretical assumptions and methodological strategies. On the basis of the reconstruction of the state of the art (see paragraph 2), it is possible to identify and distinguish two major analytical approaches that are widely diffused within ongoing research on iconicity (simplifying them for the sake of synthesis). On the one hand, “external” analytical approaches have mainly focused on the social practices of production, diffusion, consumption and circulation of cultural icons, through which their meanings come to be framed (and re-framed) and their performative power comes to be assessed; from this perspective, icons are often mainly seen as social “products,” or even instruments of power. On the other hand, “internal” analyses have mainly focused on material shape, aesthetic composition, and representational-semiotic features, through which cultural icons meaningfully inscribe and orient the viewer/user, thus revealing “agentic” capacities; from this perspective, icons are conceived as apparently (yet relatively) autonomous “sources” of symbolic meanings, social purposes and cultural power.

Notwithstanding the obvious analytical differences, the two approaches should be conceived as potentially converging, rather than mutually exclusive. In fact, they both aim at explaining the social and cultural construction of iconic power starting from a set of shared foundational assumptions, which inform what Mitchell [2005, 189] calls the “*sounding* of the image, an inquiry into what it says and does, what rituals and myths circulate around it”. Both approaches focus on the relation between aesthetic surface and cultural depth, the role of discursive framing and narrative performance, the resonance with wider “structures of feeling” [see Williams 1961; 1977], and the social life and cultural biography of icons. In other words, in both cases icons are claimed to address a deep cultural-structural tension that becomes publicly visible and concretely situated in a specific visual-material form but, at the same time, is still “felt” much more widely in the social world: the structures of feeling thus cohere, condense, and concretize into visual-material cultural icons, and can be socially experienced via “iconic consciousness.” In this process, icons can powerfully enter the public cultural sphere with their own performative traction, becoming symbolic and emotional resources for social action and even civic, political engagement.

As it becomes clear, iconic power represents the unpredictable outcome of a complex and dynamic cultural process which depends on “intrinsic” qualities and “agentic” capacities *as much as* on the constitutive relation *with* the icon, articulated through micro-level social, material and even ritual practices of visual encounter and sensory interaction, meso-level institutional and organizational field dynamics and framing wars, and wider, macro-level narrative performance (and counter-performance). In other words, it is important to be cautious in attributing too much autonomous “vitality” to cultural icons, and it is necessary to develop further refined analytical distinctions, addressing the multiple and variable relations among the different factors involved in the process, and identifying the crucial vectors of influence surrounding and shaping the possible configurations of such relations.

In this context, among the most organic and fertile theoretical syntheses, Hariman and Lucaites’ work on iconic photography [Hariman and Lucaites 2007], Alexander’s theory of iconic consciousness via surface/depth [Alexander 2008a; 2008b; Bartmanski and Alexander 2012], and Kurasawa’s conceptual framework on visual icons [Kurasawa 2015] stand out. By briefly reconstructing their main and different strengths, it will then be possible to suggest missing links and further dimensions to be explored and integrated within wider, more comprehensive analytical models.

Hariman and Lucaites [2007] offer an articulated and thick description of the process of construction of the iconic power of a selected group of renowned (news) photographs of the twentieth century. The authors focus on the pictures’ potential



civic role, their ability to performatively resonate with dominant (US) public and moral discourse as well as to coordinate strategies of identification. Accordingly, iconic photographs are defined as “photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics” [ivi, 27.] In more analytical terms, an icon comes to be conceived as “an aesthetically familiar form of civic performance coordinating an array of semiotic transcriptions that project an emotional scenario to manage a basic contradiction or recurrent crisis” [ivi, 29] or, more briefly, “civic performances combining semiotic complexity and emotional connection” [ivi, 36.] As it becomes clear, this approach integrates a specific analytical attention on both the image’s semiotic-aesthetic design and its effects in terms of public response. Such an interpretative model deconstructs the multiple dimensions of meaning which take a unique form in the icon through five different vectors of influence: reproducing ideology; communicating social knowledge; shaping collective memory; modelling citizenship; and providing figural resources for communicative action. According to this perspective, the significance of the five factors can be empirically assessed by reconstructing the history of circulation and appropriation within different contexts. In fact, iconic photographs performatively fuse multiple cultural codes in a process of semiotic transcription through which they can stimulate and coordinate different paths of identification, therefore becoming resources to interpret relevant events and reduce complexity. In other words, icons function evoking and activating experiential repertoires of social behaviour, constructing a scenario in which emotions can become a vehicle to comprehension and re-action, especially during public and political crises. On this basis, the icon’s success depends on its ability to activate cultural structures of feeling by “keying” the emotional dimension of the event and effectively fusing together the production, the object of the representation, the wider socio-cultural context and the publics [Hariman and Lucaites 2007.]

Alexander [2008a; 2008b; see also Alexander, Giesen, Bartmanski 2012] interprets icons as “symbolic condensations” that “root generic, social meanings in a specific and ‘material’ form. They allow the abstraction of morality to be subsumed, to be made invisible [*sic*,] by aesthetic shape;” in other words, “iconic consciousness occurs when an aesthetically shaped materiality signifies social value” [Alexander 2008a, 782.] From this perspective, icons can play a sort of *anamnestic* role in society, as they condense, embody, preserve and unveil a cultural deposit of forms, meanings and emotions that can help making sense of historical or current experiences, thus shaping subjectivity and identity. According to this view, iconic power generates in the constitutive interaction between material-aesthetic “surface” and discursive-mor-

al “depth.” Iconicity thus deals with “experiencing material objects, not only understanding them cognitively or evaluating them morally but also feeling their sensual, aesthetic force” [Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, 1.] Analytically, such an approach reconstructs the performative symbolic associations between visual-material icons and wider, deep, coded cultural narratives, empirically drawing on their dynamics of circulation in the public culture: “It is because they galvanize narratives that icons are not only aesthetic representations but also become full citizens of public discourse” [ivi, 3.] Icons thus come to be conceived as “cultural construction that provide believer-friendly epiphanies and customer-friendly images” [*ibidem*], “agentic, relatively autonomous performers” whose performative success should be analytically traced back to “formal qualities of aesthetic surfaces” as well as “socially constructed circumstances of reception,” which are critically mediated by “independent institutional and interpretative powers” [ivi, 6.]

Kurasawa [2015] develops a conceptual-analytical framework that explicitly aims at overcoming the limitation of previous and more reductive investigations of iconicity, i.e. what he explicitly refers to as visual “internalism” and “externalism.” On the basis of an ongoing empirical research on humanitarian visuality and iconic images of distant suffering (and of previous work, e.g. Kurasawa [2012]), Kurasawa particularly draws on Panofsky’s iconology (see paragraph 2), yet re-articulating, extending and refining it through a creative appropriation of a set of central concepts from contemporary sociological theory, i.e. structure, repertoire, convention, network, and field. Kurasawa’s framework thus comes to be articulated through four major notions: “semiotic structure,” “iconographic repertoire of conventions,” “circulatory network,” and “iconological field.” On the one hand, the concepts of semiotic structure and iconographic repertoire of conventions refer to the iconic image’s initial meaning, constructed also through the evocation, on the surface of the icon, of a deeply rooted cultural background of conventional aesthetic patterns. On the other hand, the concepts of circulatory network and, especially, iconological field refer to the social space of different institutional and organizational actors involved in the production, selection, distribution, reception and circulation – and thus ideological coding (and re-coding) – of the visual icons.

The organic interplay of multiple analytical dimensions make these three frameworks particularly rich and flexible, and thus potentially fruitful in empirical terms. However, they also present a number of differences. For example, on the one hand, Hariman and Lucaites’ work likely represents the most articulated conceptualization of iconic photography available today. However, it focuses on a relevant yet specific form of iconicity (i.e. news photography), and it deals with it within the boundaries of a specific field (i.e. US public culture). On the other hand, Alexander’s theoretical

model of iconic consciousness is conceptually appealing yet analytically quite simple and generic. However, for the same reason, it is also more easily applicable to a wider variety of cultural domains.

Most relevantly, notwithstanding their clear theoretical strengths and analytical fertility, these major frameworks reveal also two crucial grey areas – which should be taken into further account, adequately conceptualized and empirically scrutinized in future research aimed at the construction of a truly multi-dimensional and “stronger” framework. These two areas deal with meso-level institutional-organizational field dynamics of social production and interpretative framing of the cultural icons, and micro-level social and material interactions with the cultural icons. These two levels, as it will turn out, can play a fundamental role in the surface/depth interplay and, thus, in the construction of iconic power.

### *The Global Visual-Cultural Field of Iconic Power*

In both Hariman and Lucaites’ and Alexander’s frameworks the role of meso-level institutional-organizational construction of the cultural icon, its meaning and power appears analytically overlooked, or understated. Hariman and Lucaites’s perspective explicitly “minimizes the differences between production and reception in order to identify intermediate factors such as design” [Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 318], while Alexander [2012, 26] affirms that the “discursive and moral meaning of material objects comes not from aesthetic surface but from society, from somewhere outside the objects themselves,” yet its model includes only generically defined “social powers” (i.e. “productive powers,” “distributive powers,” and “hermeneutical powers” (criticism) [see Alexander 2012; 2004b]). In a crucial attempt to overcome some of these limitations, Kurasawa [2015] develops the concepts of “circulatory networks” and “iconological field” – the latter explicitly derived by Pierre Bourdieu’s influential theory of the “cultural field” [Bourdieu 1993; 1996], which has been widely adopted and refined over the last two decades in the social sciences [e.g. Hilgers and Mangez 2015.] However, following Kurasawa, yet drawing more decidedly on a number of crucial insights derived by Bourdieu’s and other theories of media and cultural production, further work could and should be done in terms of analytical improvement and empirical investigation on the different fields (or spheres of social action) in which the social and symbolic struggles for construction and interpretation of iconic power take place. In that direction, recent research can turn out to be precious. For example, Pogliano [2015, in this symposium] starts from the recognition that “according to the existing literature, the meaning and power of the icon lies in

its performative role, in its existence as co-agent in a variety of social performances. Attention shifts to “what the icon does,” whilst the question of “what makes an image into an icon?” is frequently reformulated as “which attributes must an image have in order to become iconic?.” On this basis, he moves on to ethnographically investigate the practices of production, selection and framing of potentially iconic news photographs within major newsrooms, focusing on the social practices and the crucial symbolic work carried out by key cultural intermediaries such as photo-editors. (In that directions, future ethnographies in the field of design, architecture, branding, etc. or during major (iconic) events, might add relevant elements to the discussion). Leavy [2007] instead develops an analytical framework to study “iconic events,” identifying three major interpretative phases involved in the process of iconic construction. Leavy explains how these three interpretative phases are conflictually articulated into and through differentiated spheres of social action, i.e. journalism, politics, and popular culture. From this perspective, the construction of iconic events imply intense framing practices within the journalistic field, appropriation and potential re-framing within the political field (following different agendas), and re-appropriation and potential re-framing into the sphere of popular culture, where history can be transformed into a commodity and shaped as a form of entertainment [e.g. Sturken 2007], and/or become a source for creative forms of social-political action and symbolic resistance.

As these example suggest, the analytical construction of the (global) visual-cultural field of iconic power – in which a variety of social actors and institutions (differently positioned within multiple social spheres according to different field-trajectories and different volumes of varied capitals, i.e. material and symbolic resources) engage in symbolic struggles over the definition, the meaning and the power of icons – might turn out to be particularly fruitful and helpful, in order to better differentiate and understand the social practices involved in the process of cultural construction as well as to focus the attention on three interrelated, relevant yet usually under-investigated issues.

Firstly, focusing on the wider visual-cultural iconic field rather than on single icons, and investigating analytically differentiated dimensions of production, diffusion and circulation of icons over time can avoid involving tautological, post-hoc explanations. Often, in fact, at least the initial interpretations (e.g. the in the journalistic field) of a given event (or photography, object, etc.) describe it as historically exceptional, and they hyper-represent it, thus affording it a “turning point” character and reinforcing (co-constructing) its supposed exceptionality. Similarly, yet more problematically, scholarly analyses of given icons sometimes tend to mainly re-track and describe their careers over time, thus privileging almost exclusively the dynamics of

circulation, without adequately focusing on previous framing phases, e.g. production and diffusion – thus risking at the end to offer quite naïve explanation of iconicity that claims icons to be powerful because they are, indeed, iconic! In this context, the concept of visual-cultural field of iconic power could help shedding light on material and symbolic production as well as narrative construction, embedment and performance, which takes place through a variety of conflictual social practices of framing and re-framing within differentiated spheres of social action. As a consequence, as Kurasawa [2015] rightly observes, the mapping out of the field of iconic power could further clarify what Latour [2002] has termed “image war” or “iconoclasm.” In fact, as anticipated, a crucial element in the construction of cultural power is situated in the interplay between (potential) icons and narratives (e.g. Griffin [1999] on narratives and iconic photographs; Smith [2005] and Alexander [2011] on narratives and cultural codes; Harrè [2002], and Humphries and Smith [2014], on narratives and objects). Especially during deeply relevant or even traumatic public events (e.g. 9/11), shared narratives can help people cope under highly unpredicted and destabilizing conditions [e.g. Sturken 2002; Ross 2002; Alexander 2004c.] For this reason, as it is widely known, public memory – as a socially and culturally constructed deposit of widely shared and actively re-mobilizable visual, material and verbal narratives, and lived experiences – represents a site of social and cultural tension, and institutional negotiation over meaning. From this perspective, icons could be conceived as “not simply manifestations of coherent world pictures or cosmologies whose myths and sacred geographies might be securely mapped and narrated, but sites of struggle over stories and territories” [Mitchell 2005, 196.]

Secondly, and consequentially, the concept of field can help focusing on the social and symbolic *struggles* involved in the process of construction of iconic power. Struggle implies competition, and competition implies winners and losers. Here again, however, scholarly analyses of icons often tend to focus exclusively on the winners, without really investigating the process of competition for iconic status. And questions such as: “How do new images appear in the world? What make them succeed or fail in the cultural ecology of symbolic forms?” [Mitchell 2005, 86] often remain unanswered. In this context, it would be crucial to make more efforts aimed at explaining not only successful icons but also failed icons, that is, icons that used to be icons (but are not icons anymore), and especially potential icons that could have become icons but actually did not. Iconic struggles are performative competitions among different potential icons, or better, among conflictual and more or less explicit and strategic social instances of cultural iconization. In a few words, studying some icons’ social and cultural visibility, or iconic light, should entail analyzing other icons’ invisibility, or iconic shadow. As it

is widely acknowledged, “visual culture entails a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked” [Mitchell 2002, 170], but such a meditation does not often translate into empirical research. A useful yet indeed theoretical starting point is offered by Brighenti [2015, in this symposium], who focuses on what he calls “twilight zones of iconicity,” that is, what remains at the “thresholds of visibility” [see also Bartmanski 2011; Trumbull 2010.] However, even the major empirical case studies so far analyzed with richness of details in the field of visual culture could be fruitfully re-articulated paying more attention to their counterparts of potential (yet un-concretized) iconicity. An easy example is the 1991 Gulf War, where TV viewers were exposed to an empty spectacle of videogame-like images, whilst dead bodies resulted invisible, thus inexistent [e.g. Mitchell 1994, 397-405.] Or, more recently, the conflictual narrative construction after the terroristic attacks of 9/11, when people – as Judith Butler [2009, 38] writes – often “encountered in the media graphic pictures of those who died. Along with their names, their stories, the reactions of their families. Public grieving was dedicated to making these images *iconic* for the nation, which meant of course that there was considerably *less* public grieving for non-US nationals, and *none at all* for illegal workers” (emphasis added; see also Tulloch and Blood [2010] on “absent images” from “iconic photojournalism”). Such a research path could shed new light on what we could call, in neo-bourdieuian terms, the “visual-symbolic violence” of icons, and on iconic construction as a competitive selective process involving fundamental *ethic* issues, such as the visual construction of imagined communities and the production of “otherness” [e.g. Chouliaraki 2010; 2013.]

Thirdly, the concept of field could help detailing and explaining different degrees of iconicity and iconic intensity, or “scales” of iconic power. Icons are often defined as such regardless of their social, geographical and cultural context, be it a local subculture, a nation, or even a wider, global cultural sphere. Is it possible to build a typology of icons, of their different forms and degrees of iconicity, with different scales of influence? In this direction, too, field-theory might help. Studying the consecration, or symbolic power, of a given group of social actors and cultural products can precisely focus the attention on those meso-level institutional mechanism through which certain icons emerge within specific fields (and not within others). Sociology of culture, for example, has explained why the same intellectual such as Derrida or Bourdieu can become dominant in one country and not in another [Lamont 1987; Santoro 2009.] But iconic influence can clearly be also trans-national, and trans-field. Drawing on that sociological work, while focusing on the construction of iconicity, Bartmanski [2012b, 428] has defined the “iconization of intellectual pur-

suit” as the “construction of symbolic authority *that brings cultural resonance*” (emphasis added) – thus trying to conceptually merge together symbolic capital/power and iconic capital/power, or better to focus on the (potentially reciprocal) relationship between the symbolic power acquired within a specific cultural field and the iconic power acquired in the wider cultural “field of visibility” [Brighenti 2010], where actors and products are endowed with different volumes of “capital of visibility” [Heinich 2012.] In that direction, further research could be done on the role of formal institutions of cultural consecration in the construction of both field-specific symbolic power (and cultural value), and wider iconic power [e.g. English 2005, on the case of awards and prizes.]

Finally, as these few examples briefly suggest, paying more attention – via cultural field-theories – to the role of meso-level institutional and organizational dynamics in relation to the emergence and outcomes of the competition among different (potential) icons, or better different social instances of (potential) cultural iconization, might newly contribute to the explanation of the reasons why certain cultural frames “resonate,” certain cultural meanings “attach,” and certain cultural narratives come to be performatively successful, or “fail,” within the symbolic struggles over the production and interpretation of cultural icons and the construction of iconic power. In other words, although the major theories of iconic power (particularly within Alexander’s “strong program”) tend to trace the performative success of an icon mainly back to the semiotic interplay between its aesthetic-material qualities (surface) and wider cultural-structural factors (depth), it is important not to downplay the *social* processes, institutions and networks of actors who conflictually contribute to its production, frame and re-frame its meaning, and consecrate its power within and through multiple cultural fields. At the same time, and quite relevantly, the increasing attention on – and conceptualization of – the cultural power of icons as visual-material objects, with meaningful and empirically traceable social effects, might contribute to refine influential social theories of cultural production (such as Bourdieu’s) by integrating a specifically aesthetic sensibility that claims attention to materiality (on materiality in field-theory, see Dominguez Rubio and Silva [2013]; on Bourdieu and Alexander, with a focus on the concept of field, see Santoro and Solaroli [2015]).

### *Rituals of Iconic Encounter: Material Texture, Sensory Affordance, Emotional Entrainment*

One day in early 1994, a now Emeritus Professor in Art History at Oxford University, who has spent a considerable part of his life studying Leonardo da Vinci, had the quite unique opportunity to assist to Leonardo's masterpiece *Mona Lisa* (or *La Joconde*)'s emersion from its protecting casing, for its annual inspection, at the Louvre Museum in Paris. Together with the director of the museum and a leading Leonardo scholar (from Italy), in an emotionally charged context he suddenly found himself full of great expectations, feeling the pressure of the possibility to spend some quite private time with one of the world's most famous paintings. In his words:

I have been hoping for many years to encounter her out of her prison. It is odd, I am thinking, that this picture almost uniquely tends to invoke a 'she' or 'her' rather than 'it' or 'its' ... It is a *thrilling* and *worrying* moment ... Great art encountered in the flesh can produce sensations that go beyond visual stimulation. Somehow more seems to be involved than the eye and even the mind. The whole mind-body seems to be caught up in the process. The duality of mind and body as advocated in the seventeenth century by Descartes seems quite wrong at such moments. The same thing happens with great music, which has an undoubted somatic dimension, and with great drama and dance in which we seem within ourselves to mirror and ape what we are seeing. For me it also happens with those transcendent moments in sport ... There is a sense that the image *lives* ... I have never experienced a stronger *feeling of presence* in a work of art ... she is not just looking. She is overtly reacting, smiling with a knowingness that is perpetually engaging and even disconcerting [Kemp 2012, 142-145; emphasis added.]

There could not be a better example to explain a crucial, foundational element of iconic power, which is frequently evoked yet rarely analytically addressed within major theories of iconicity. Hariman and Lucaites, for example, claim that the iconic image "seems to reveal a transcendental quality in ordinary experience. The religious metaphor in the label "icon" works because of how, by staring into the image, one senses a higher power unfolding and is lifted up into awe, reaffirmed in one's relationship to that power, and moved to act accordingly" [Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 290.] The "Yale school" of cultural sociology highlights the point even further, via the concept of "iconic consciousness": "Iconic consciousness occurs when an aesthetically shaped materiality signifies social value ... The iconic is about experience, not communication. To be iconically conscious is ... to understand by feeling, by contact, by the 'evidence of the senses' rather than the mind. Iconicity depends on feeling consciousness" [Alexander 2008a, 782], or similarly, "actors have iconic consciousness when they experience material objects, not only understanding them cognitively or evaluating them morally but also feeling their sensual, aesthetic force"



[Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, 1] – a force that allow icons to be “immediately understood even if their meaning is diffuse and vague” [Giesen 2012, 247.] Bartmanski [2015] affirms that “icon is not just a *powerful sign*, it is a different kind of signification whose force stems in large measure from its character of *sensually constituted object* ... a sensuously evocative crystallization (and thus potential mobilization) of shared, often visceral collective feelings;” while Sonnevend [2012, 227] talks about “iconic rituals” based (also) on the “unpredictable chemistry” of “image encounter,” “an uncertain, unpredictable, and often uncanny aspect to the encounter,” “something,” which “resists linguistic appropriation” and it is “an elusive concept for social science.”

But what does all this mean, sociologically? How can social and cultural theory grasp and explain Oxford Professor’s feelings in front of *Mona Lisa*, and his “focused interaction” with a visual-material icon so culturally powerful to look “alive”?

If social and material practices as well as sensory and emotional experiences converge in co-producing iconic meaning, and if “visual culture encourages reflection on ... the ratios between different sensory and semiotic modes ... the tactile, the auditory, the haptic, and the phenomenon of synesthesia” [Mitchell 2002, 170], then it becomes fundamental to focus in greater details on the material, sensory, and emotional dimensions of iconic power. Without venturing into the psychology of perception, or even psychoanalysis (where, for example, such a notion as *cathexis* would help), it can still be possible to briefly outline a “ritual theory of iconic encounter,” founded in particular on the concepts of *material texture*, *sensory affordance*, and *emotional entrainment*.

First of all, it is necessary to recall that visual-material cultural objects have material properties that evoke certain experiential patterns, inspire certain social practices, and reveal certain meaningful potentialities. In other words, the current scholarly focus on iconic materiality could problematize, gradually blur and potentially overcome well-known theoretical dichotomies such as subjectivity/objectivity and word/image, re-framing them by showing both the “relational” and the “agent-ic” properties of icons, thus going beyond the surface/depth analytical interplay. As Shusterman [2002, 3] already observed, in fact, “there is some depth to any surface, and what lies beneath the surface – the undersurface – both has a surface and *is* itself a surface of some kind.” Such a perspective is further, concretely reinforced by the *Mona Lisa* example:

Some artists can make their images live in an uncanny way that transcends the inert material they are using ... It is a question of working the spectator’s mechanism of perception, of giving them enough to see what is needed but not giving them so much that they have nothing left to do. In Leonardo’s case, or more specifically

in the case of Mona Lisa, it involves an incredibly subtle interplay between the painted *surface* and the incident and reflected light ... Across the picture and into the *depth* Leonardo magically exploits paint films of different depth and relative *opacity*. The different degrees of optical penetration play subtle and elusive games with the spectator's eyes [Kemp 2012, 142-143, emphasis added.]

One could easily find a number of empirical predecessors. For example, in a historical investigation (which ended at the dawn of the digital age) on the “form of news,” Barnhurst and Nerone [2001] already suggested that readers “do not read bits of text and pictures. What they read is the paper: the tangible object *as a whole*. They enter the news environment and interact with its *surface* textures and *deeper* shapes. Readers don't read the news; they *swim* in it” [Barnhurst and Nerone 2001, 7; emphasis added.] From a different disciplinary perspective but with quite similar assumptions, Ingold [2007, 7] goes much more further, explicitly claiming that “the surface of materiality, in short, is an *illusion*. We cannot touch it because it is not there. Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the ‘other side’ of materiality but *swim* in an ocean of materials” (emphasis added). In simply metaphorical terms, the idea of “swimming” through culture (and more specifically, the idea of a “swimming” cultural experience of iconic consciousness) could actually make the dichotomic, structuralist distinction between material surface and immaterial depth much less rigid. On this basis, the current attention to materiality itself, its role in iconic construction and, reciprocally, the way in which icons enable us to attend to it, could be re-articulated in different terms within iconicity research. In sum, materiality matters, few would object it. Yet, the question remains: “How?.” Often, the material dimension of objects and social processes seem to remain as a merely inert postulate. In order to analytically specify and better differentiate the concept, empirical research should deal with embodied practices (and technologies) of visual encounter and material engagement, and theoretical attention should shift from generic “materiality” to more specific issues of “material texture” and “sensory affordance” – drawing on different insights from anthropology [e.g. Hodder 2012; Howes 2013], semiotics [e.g. Djonov and Van Leeuwen 2011], visual studies [e.g. Bruno 2014], and even economic sociology [e.g. Swedberg 2011.] As Rose and Tolia-Kelly [2012, 5] explain, “*materiality* does not assume solidity of object and fixity of meaning ... but incorporates the poetics of rhythms, forms, textures and the value of memory-matter engagement ... sensory affordances of materials can also incorporate a pluralistic account of reactions and interpretations that link to *histories*, *memories* and *ecologies of seeing*, feeling and perceiving.”

In this context, Giuliana Bruno's *Surface* [2014] offers a welcome contribution. Focusing on the “haptic” experiential dimension, Bruno conceives images as sort of

“places” to be sensuously entered and emotionally inhabited [see also Bruno 2002.] In trying to resisting and overcoming the rigid dichotomy between material surface and immaterial visual-sensory experience, she clearly – yet not explicitly – positions very close to current debates on iconicity and “iconic experience.” Starting from the assumption that “in visual culture, surface matters, and it has depth” [Bruno 2014, 5], materiality is thus conceptualized not just as a property, but as a space of active material relations involving “synaesthetic,” rather than merely visual/material, activities. Surface, in other words, is “porous,” and its material skin is “texture” [Bruno 2014.] The “haptic” experience of texture is thus a form of knowledge interaction based on both physical and emotional movement [see also Degen and Rose 2012.] Not by chance, as Bruno recalls, “emotion” etymologically derives from ancient Latin “*emovere*,” to move.

Such a perspective can fruitfully contribute to our understanding of the multiple and conflictual ways in which an icon’s sensory and material affordances generate its emotive impact, or in other words (as the *Mona Lisa* example shows), how texture can intensify social, sensory and emotional experience of iconic consciousness. Clearly, such a consciousness can be based on either pleasure for or horror/repulsion of the iconic surface. In any case, the aesthetic qualities, material texture and sensory affordances of the icons contribute to “their attractiveness, their aura, their atmosphere,” and thus they can serve to “intensify life” [Böhme 2003, 72.] In this context, engaging more directly and deeply with neo-durkheimian sociological literature on rituals could reveal fruitful insights. From this perspective, the social and sensory interaction with the culturally powerful icon can generate individual and collective effervescence and “emotional energy” [Collins 1999] (e.g. during iconic live events, Smith [2012]; or as fans in front of their celebrity-icon, Alexander [2010b]). In other words, it would be useful to carry out more empirical – and even ethnographic [Pink 2009] – research on the ritual practices of “emotional entrainment” [Collins 2004; see also von Scheve et al. 2014] that can emotionally “charge” the iconic encounter, shape iconic experience, and develop iconic consciousness – even during iconic “media events” [Dayan and Katz 1992] and mediatized rituals [e.g. Couldry 2003; Cottle 2006.]

In conclusion, these fragments of a ritual theory of iconic encounter, founded in particular on the concepts of material texture, sensory affordance, and emotional entrainment, might help to shed some new light on the dynamics of iconic power by investigating how people “commune with” icons, that is, by taking the intertwined dimensions of the “social,” “material” and “experiential” more seriously, in order to gradually overcome the “representational/experiential distinction,” toward a culturally “somaesthetic” approach that assumes “an inevitable complementarity of repre-

sentations and experience, of outer and inner” [Shusterman 2000, 275.] As Bartmanski [2015] suggests, drawing on Thrift [2005], we can expect such an approach to become increasingly necessary and central as the three major registers of meaningfulness – screen, software, and body – “get increasingly interconnected and visibly co-dependent” in the digital age.

### *Beyond Surface/Depth? Future Digital Challenges*

How does iconicity work in the digital age? Does social and cultural construction of icons and iconic power change within digital culture? If yes, how? On the basis of the current scholarly state of the art, it seems too early to have a convincing set of answers. However, it is possible to briefly highlight a few recent and ongoing dynamics, and to raise a number of theoretical issues.

First of all, from a socio-technological point of view, attention is shifting from material *surface* to digital *interface*, and from visual-material form and content to sensorial, experiential, interactive and especially sharing practice. (Think about, for example, the visual-haptic-sonic experience of interaction with one’s own mobile and emotional archive on the surface – or better, through the interface – of one’s own (iconic) iPhone, which serves also to connect with relevant others and to share information and social experiences).

In this context, cultural icons must be approached not only as visual-material objects situated in concrete settings, but also, and increasingly, as digital interfaces embedded in and circulating through (software-based) networked spaces, where technologies of digital production and sharing, but also of post-production and visual-material retouching and enhancement, abound – raising, among others, aesthetic and ethic issues of “digital texture” [e.g. Solaroli 2015.]

Moreover, debates on digital culture are often enmeshed in a naively “democratic” rhetoric of “diffuse” power. According to this view, in an age of “mobile lives” [Elliott and Urry 2010], “spreadable media” [Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013] or so-called “social media” [e.g. Van Dijck 2013], and “ubiquitous photography” [Hand 2012], we should expect phenomena of “visual pollution” [Portella 2014] and “visual inattention” [Frosh 2010] to become digitally heightened – thus registering, as a consequence, a process of potential iconic “dilution.” In other words, today it seems easier to share images, yet arguably harder to find images that really stand out: “the creation of super-iconic figures” is in fact claimed to be “inhibited” by “the multiplication of lesser icons, as fostered by ... social and technological changes” [Rieser 2013, 14.] Therefore, in the digital era of spreadable media, should we talk about

spreadable, vernacular, “lesser,” or even “depthless” icons? Is iconic meaning increasingly spreading “laterally,” thus making the traditional analytical interplay of surface/depth already outdated?

Surely, the immediate, pervasive, “immersive” and sharing character of digital culture, and the large diffusion of visual inputs and new media technologies, historically situated within the wider, late-modern (and drastic) social weakening of traditional centres of cultural and political power, could lead the way to the emergence of mobile and fragmented micro-practices of cultural production, social and even political expression, and online sharing, through which new forms of subjectivity might take shape, and new orders of visibility might eventually be enabled. In this context, among the most visible effects, the phenomenon of “inflation of celebrity” [e.g. Rojek 2012], which is correlated to the expanded dimension of online self-publicizing [e.g. Marshall 2014], has recently attracted increasing attention. In fact, while on the one hand “the internet has a major effect on how the mass media celebrities operate and how their personae are collaboratively constructed,” on the other hand “it has also created a new domain of ‘micro-celebrity’ ... where ordinary people create a web presence and a public persona through blogs and social media ... [that] work in ways that mimic larger systems and can from time to time mutate into mainstream celebrity;” on this basis, “celebrity takes on new functions and meanings in these contexts as it is effectively turned into a demotic strategy of identity formation” [Turner 2013, 23] – thus resonating with the proliferation of reality TV programs and talent shows that can at least temporarily transform everyday people into potentially iconic media celebrities.

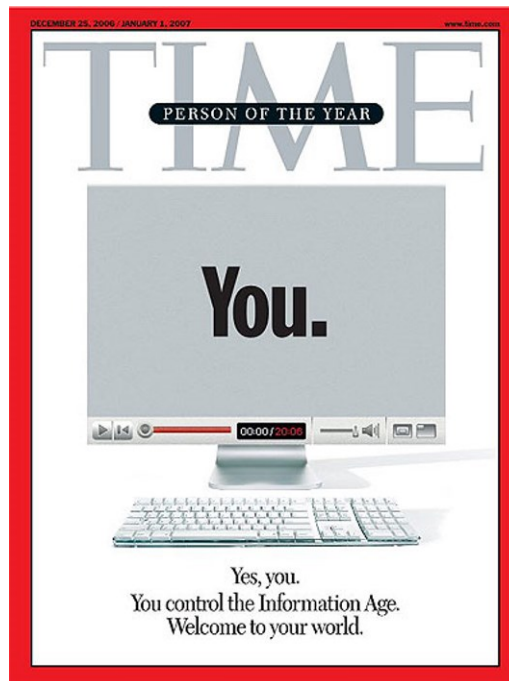


FIG. 1. Time Magazine Cover: “Person of the Year: You.,” December 25, 2006 / January 1, 2007.



FIG. 2. (Zadig & Voltaire) Shop Window: “2014: Everyone Can Be an Icon,” West Village, NYC, January 2014. Photo: Marco Solaroli.

But does this all mean that we are entering a “post-iconic” age in which, as this now-famous Time magazine cover (Fig. 1) claims, everybody – even “you” – can be

the “person of the year,” or, as this New York City shop window (Fig. 2) suggests, “everyone can be an icon”? Maybe even showing off your own “iconic style,” as this (gender) advertisement (Fig. 3) wants you to believe, or better buy?



FIG. 3. (Frye) Advertisement in the Subway: “150 Years of Iconic Style,” Brooklyn, NYC, December 2013. Photo: Marco Solaroli.

In reality, notwithstanding the frequency with which social media and digital culture come to be described as inherently “democratic,” there can be no doubt whatever that the new media environment has also contributed to turn everyday anonymous users and addicted consumers into self-branding and live-streaming micro-celebrities, while digital technology companies can contemporaneously and greatly profit from online participation and even personal privacy [Marwick 2013.] In this context, we should be very cautious (and critical) about digital excess of potential iconicity. As Alexander [2015] writes in his afterword to this symposium: “Perhaps the real danger is not losing iconicity but having too much of it.”

#### 4. Conclusions: On This Symposium

This symposium aims to offer critical insights on iconicity, building intellectual bridges among different disciplinary fields and research strands in the social sciences and humanities. It comprises three major sections, which balance theoretical analysis and empirical research.

The first section includes three papers (Bartmanski; Hariman and Lucaites; Brighenti) in which the concept of iconicity (and icon) comes to be theoretically investigated and critically refined. In particular, a co-editor of the book *Iconic Power* [Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen 2012], Bartmanski critically reflects on the iconic

turn in cultural sociology, in relation to both the historical position of visual culture within the social sciences and the most recent debates on material culture, which might further enrich current research on iconicity. The authors of the leading book on iconic photography, *No Caption Needed* [2007], Hariman and Lucaites offer a comparative perspective on their own work on icons in the field of communication and visual rhetoric and the iconic turn in cultural sociology, providing a number of insightful suggestions in terms of both conceptualization and method. Finally, the author of *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research* [2010], which effectively argued for visibility to be considered as a crucial category for the social sciences, Brighenti puzzles on the notion of icon from an original theoretical perspective, focusing both on and out of iconicity.

The second part of the symposium includes three papers (Pogliano; Kurasawa; Magaudda), where the concept of iconicity comes to be tested and applied on more empirical grounds, also in order to be better conceptualized. In particular, Pogliano presents the results of a comparative ethnographic research carried out within the newsrooms of major newspapers in Italy and France, focusing on the selection and framing of potentially iconic news photographs of major crises of the last decade, and suggesting the fertile integration between different approaches in the sociology of cultural production, journalism studies, and the iconic turn in cultural sociology. On the basis of an ongoing research on humanitarian visibility and visual icons of distant suffering, Kurasawa similarly suggests the organic integration of different insights from cultural research within and beyond the social sciences, and he develops a dense conceptual framework based on the notions of structure, repertoire, convention, network, and field. Finally, Magaudda focuses on the case study of Apple and the practices of framing and re-framing of the iconic brand and its products, contextualizing the concept of iconic power into the digital realm and at the intersection of material culture studies, sociology of consumption, and STS (Science & Technology Studies).

Finally, the third and last part of the symposium looks back to the whole journey. In the afterword, Jeffrey Alexander offers a firsthand theoretical reconstruction of the iconic turn within the “strong program” in cultural sociology, while Marita Sturken and Gillian Rose offer personal comments on the symposium, critically evaluating its results and, most relevantly, suggesting new possible areas of further empirical inquiry, conceptual refinement and theoretical development.

As a whole, the symposium builds on current research to walk new theoretical paths and to imagine new directions of intellectual reorientation. Addressing multiple and complex dynamics of iconic power in contemporary social and cultural life, it explores the conceptual significance of “icon” at the intersection of ongoing debates



on visual culture, material culture, media and memory in our increasingly global and digital age. On this basis, it suggests the crucial relevance of iconicity as a category for social and cultural theory.

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## **Iconicity**

### A Category for Social and Cultural Theory

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Abstract: Over the last two decades, various intellectual waves of theoretical repositioning and advancement within and beyond the “cultural turn” in the social sciences and humanities have revealed a widespread, increasing (and increasingly institutionalized) attention to the “visual” and “material” – plus, more recently and secondarily, the “sensory” and “affective” – dimensions of social and cultural life. In this context, this symposium aims at posing the concept of “icon” and the category of “iconicity” at the centre of contemporary cultural research in the social sciences. In order to open the discussion, this paper offers a comprehensive and critical assessment of the state of the art, highlighting the underlying tensions and the fundamental issues at stake, focusing on the most recent theoretical debates (e.g. the “iconic turn” in cultural sociology), and suggesting grey areas in need of further research and refinement. It aims to show that the category of iconicity can provide fertile ground for exploring connections and constructing dialogues among different strands in the social sciences and humanities that have so far developed almost independently of each other. Finally, it offers a number of insights toward the construction of an organic and truly multi-dimensional analytical-conceptual framework, which might throw into further relief the dynamics of iconic power in the increasingly global and digital age, and the relevance of iconicity as a category for social and cultural theory.

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*Keywords: Iconicity; iconic turn; icon; visual culture; material culture; digital culture.*

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