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Modes of Seeing, or, Iconicity as Explanatory Notion

Cultural Research and Criticism After the Iconic Turn in Social Sciences

by Dominik Bartmanski

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1. Introduction: An Overlooked or Repressed Domain?

Cultural icon is a complex *fact*, not just a singular image, even if iconic effect seems reducible to the sensuous compression that only simplicity of a single visual *act* can promise. This does not mean, however, that vehicles of iconicity are always trivial or arbitrarily replaceable symbols. On the contrary, powerful icons seldom are merely conventional signs. They are more than that, for they often take form of materially constituted objects. As such, they are intricate signifiatory assemblages whose efficiency as socially shared phenomena cannot be decoupled from the affordances and entanglements of its material existence [McDonnell 2010; Hodder 2012.] Materiality matters. And so does the sheer visibility of objects, places and events. Small things can be a big deal. Sociology has been prone to neglect this seemingly banal but highly significant phenomenon, and consequently susceptible to either overlooking or repressing iconicity. If analytic purchase of iconicity is yet to be clarified through the debates such as the one offered by the present symposium, then the centrality of materiality for contemporary society cannot be questioned.

There is hardly a modern society without the distinctive and elaborate national iconography. Likewise, we can scarcely imagine globalization outside an international iconic sphere. Capitalist economies are barely conceivable without advertizing, effective advertizing without branding, powerful brands without icons, and icons without cultural meanings [Holt 2004.] Politics, whether democratic or authoritarian, rarely

if ever dispenses with iconic persuasion. Pop music is *pop* owing as much to its invisible sonic agreeableness as to high-resolution imagery of its notorious celebrity-icons. Great bands, brands and charismatic leaders are iconic agents of history, first trusted and followed, and then credited with changing its course. Just like our languages contain visually constituted *metaphors we live by* [Lakoff and Johnson 2003], so our late modern cultures have icons we live by. They are everywhere. And they have been ubiquitous for quite some time now.

Yet sociology had been conspicuously silent about the cryptic logic behind cultural icons. Unlike such canonical terms of qualitative sociology as *sign* and *signification*, *icon* and *iconicity* have not been incorporated into sociology's interpretive dictionary, even though the latter pair of concepts can considerably sharpen our understanding of the former.

Sociology discovered the generic notion of symbolism early on. Over decades it embraced *symbolic capital*, *symbolic boundary* and *symbolic violence* as central concepts, but did comparatively little to scrutinize their iconic dimension, either in Peircean, Freudian, Jungian, art historical or the colloquial sense. Was iconicity a contingently overlooked domain of sociology [Emmison and Smith 2000], or was it rather a repressed imperative of meaning-making which the dominant conceptions of significance and social influence preferred to not see? What made this gap in knowledge possible?

2. A Sociological Blindspot

Sociologists may point out that they did actually deal with some forms of the iconic when they recognized such phenomena as charisma, aura, or fetishism. However, as I will argue below, this is more of a problem than solution, in that such intellectual strategies meant subsuming icon either under another specific category or under a more general one, whereby the cultural specificity of the term was lost. Iconicity is a symbolic signification in its own right that involves felicitous performative arrangement of visually arresting phenomenon and socially potent meanings and their references. This signification means material-*cum*-aesthetic objectification of thoughts and feelings held by subjects.

In the Western tradition, however, objects and subjects were separated. Objects could be used by subjects to represent other objects or subjects. In all kinds of cultural studies, human intentionality was the key. Sociology credited subjects, and only subjects, with agency regarding this process of representation. Objects were more or less arbitrary tools. Having been interested primarily in subjects and what

they internalize (immaterial meaningful substance), sociology treated visual surfaces as matters of mere external *form* at best, or spurious *appearance* at worst. Sociologically significant visual signs were viewed just as a “garb of meaning,” to paraphrase Webb Keane [2005.]

Largely for the sake of its epistemic and critical goals as modern science, sociology abandoned the problematics of the surface and its sensory correlates in favor of the putative complexity of the latent substance of social life, such as moral codes, or reduced the surface to rationalized infrastructures of technology. The sensual aspect was barely registered. The palpable but elusive “magical” qualities of “aura,” “ambiance,” “genius loci” or what Blaise Pascal [1995, 28] simply calls “heart” as opposed to “reason” were left largely unattended. As Michael Taussig [1993, 207-208] argues regarding the topic of the “magic of mechanical reproduction,” “in the West this magic is inarticulable and is understood as the technological substance of civilized identity-formation.”

Thus, the mainstream sociology, not unlike psychology which around the same formative modern period focused on subconsciousness, wished to first of all uncover the abstract structure of action, or deconstruct its latent functions and deep play. As a result, the specialist fields of sociology of culture and later even cultural sociology had precious little to say about actual objects, the sensory formations and their role in the much-vaunted social construction of reality. This lacuna has in time become a vexing fact, especially when even the new field of visual sociology kept iconicity relatively unexplored in spite of the watershed in our representational economies occasioned by the digital/virtual revolution of the late twentieth century.

In short, icon has been an elephant in the rooms called cultural and visual sociology. Icon or iconicity do not appear in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* [Turner 2006], nor are these concepts mentioned in the glossary of terms in the excellent new textbook *Cultural Sociology: An Introduction* [Back *et al.* 2012.] The latter approaches the topic by including “aesthetic” defined as “the socially communicative capacities of the decorative, visual and material dimensions of culture.” But we won’t find iconicity in its index. This negligence persisted during much of the last two decades and began to be redressed only recently. As with any *blindspot*, of course, it is by definition hard to recognize it as such. The persistence of this one was due to the fact that sociology has largely been “culturalized” and “aesthetized” via so called *linguistic turn* that epistemically privileged text, narrative and discursive formations, and communication, as the aforementioned definition of the aesthetic indicates. Interestingly, this was in considerable measure an effect of dominant iconic intellectuals, such as Malinowski, Wittgenstein, Derrida or Foucault [Gellner 1999; Lamont

1987; Bartmanski 2012b] who brilliantly reinterpreted the significance of language and meaning. By the same token, however, from the 1970s on they overpowered the consolidation of the field uniquely positioned to rediscover the visual, the aesthetic and the iconic: cultural sociology. Reinventing sociology around the causally powerful discursive formations was certainly a productive turn of events for the discipline. In many ways the ripening of cultural sociology meant crossing the point of no return. But its comparative success seems to have desensitized the practitioners to the issue of inherent biases and simplifications of the linguistic model of culture.

The key sociological understandings of late modernity, i.e. self-understandings of the influential Western moderns, emphasized grand (political) *narratives* at the expense of grand imageries and tactile objects of all kinds, even if the latter often occasioned the emergence of those narrative signifiers and experientially epitomized their referents. Icons and iconicity tended to be associated with the *pictorial*, whereby the respective study was pigeonholed as merely aesthetic in a narrow sense of ornamentation. Studying icons, either in two or three dimensional forms like monuments, could be either contained in the analysis of symbolic forms or deemed a primarily aesthetic and thus ultimately “superficial” exercise.

The pictorial construal of the iconic is to sociology what the retinal in Marcel Duchamp’s view was to art. It is overwhelmingly conventional and disconnected from larger cultural and material questions. It definitely needed captions, both in a strict sense of the term and in the form of linguistic elaboration.

Therefore in spite of the Twentieth century’s being remarkably materialist and increasingly sensual, much of socio-cultural sciences and cultural criticism of that time preferred to focus on language and the associated categories: discourse, ideology and literary criticism. In the book *Fifty Key Sociologists: The Contemporary Theorists* compiled recently by Routledge [Scott 2007] discourse and ideology have multiple references, while icon or iconology is nowhere to be found. If sociology has been interested in culture at all, it drew mostly on linguistic philosophy and structuralism, and focused on the easily categorized and neatly regimented phenomena. Textuality became the hermeneutic model for cultural analysis (think Ricoeur). Language games were seen as speaking volumes about whole forms of life (think Wittgenstein). Communicative action, especially its deliberative and systemic aspects, dominated sociological imagination of symbolic interaction during the last decades of the twentieth century (think Habermas and Luhmann).

It is true that – as Christopher Pinney [2005, 260] noted – “part of the radicality of the linguistic turn consisted in its critique of neo-Romantic fictions of the autonomous object and of self-present meaning. However, it might be argued that in its material cultural incarnation the stress on the cultural inscription of objects and

images has erased any engagement with materiality or visibility except on linguistic terms.” Moreover, according to Stephen Turner [2003, 67] “it is reasonable to wonder whether our perception of the centrality of ideology in the period from 1848 to 1956 is to a greater extent than usually acknowledged an illusion of perspective, and that as intellectuals we tend to ascribe a greater significance to the words of the intellectuals of the past than they had at the time.” It is only today that we see a tendency in cultural sociology to systematically reflect on this circumstance. For example, Jeffrey Alexander [2008a; 2008b], whose cultural sociology was developed largely as a new structuralist paradigm, nowadays postulates to incorporate this analytic dimension by arguing that “iconic power” matters and is traceable to materially mediated *experiences* rather than just to linguistically coded *communication*. However, it has done relatively little to demonstrate it in various contexts empirically and to glean all the plausible conceptual conclusions stemming from this new realization.

The problem of neglecting iconicity may have been compounded by the fact that the influential classic masters of social theory such as Marx and Weber as well as Benjamin, who conditioned many a fellow scholar to presume much of modern life to be fetishistic, disenchanting and bereft of aura respectively, remain omnipresent until now. Shaped by these enormous influences, sociology mostly occupied an intellectual spectrum stretching from revolutionary zeal to sceptical realism. Its main modes of seeing recognized structures of all kinds and their impact on the mind but missed the surface and its impact on the senses. To “see sociologically” meant the exciting project of discovering a general overview of “the life of the mind” and “how we think” [see Arendt 1978], less so the task of seeing the mind as a matter of “human feeling” [see Langer 1988.] This is not to blame the pioneering classics. If anything, it tells us more about the subsequent generations’ inability or reluctance to transcend the boundaries of the seminal modes of seeing.

Consequently, compared with other social sciences sociology could be described as being of a critical or even radical disposition, i.e. against “taking things at face value” and suspicious of surfaces as mere “masks,” seeing the cultural stuff in terms of epiphenomenal effects or even illusion. If anything, sociological analysis has often been *iconoclastic* in spirit. Simultaneously, it was also, as Gouldner [1978] already observed, vulnerable to quasi-sectarian attachment to its “founding fathers” bordering at times on *iconolatry* of sorts. What Gouldner called the “culture of critical discourse” is doubly revealing of the repression of iconicity in sociology: discursive criticism of discursive formations left little room for a reflection on and experience of sensory formations as integral parts of theory and practice of sociology.

In other words, if some giants of sociology and those who later stood on their shoulders did deal with some concepts relevant to the present topic, for example fetish (Marx), totem (Durkheim), sense and charisma (Weber), aura and authenticity (Benjamin), taste and symbolic violence (Bourdieu), these notions were either relatively reductively theorized, underdeveloped, ambiguous and exceptional, nostalgically rather than constructively critical, and viewed as carriers of reproduction rather than change. With a plausible exception of Benjamin who did consider a wider spectrum of cultural dimensions, these thinkers did not prioritize the systematic scrutiny of the ways these dimensions coalesce to produce powerful social mobilizations. Symptomatically, Benjamin's more sensitive observations were arguably more influential in cultural studies than sociology. The discursive formations have always seemed much more important to sociologists, and much more empirically tractable than the sensory ones, both as the subject of analysis and object of critique.

Under those circumstances, iconicity was overlooked, or vicariously evoked by other categories, some of which were residual rather than systematically developed. It was a blindspot of the main modes of sociological seeing. Interestingly, just like the linguistic turn revolutionized sociology from without rather than from within, the iconic turn in sociology had to be brought to the discipline from outside too. In the U.S. American and European humanities different variants of "iconology" have been outlined.

3. Turning Culture On: The Iconic Turn as a New Knowledge of Cultural Construction

Privileging discursive formations over sensory formations disembodies subjectivities. It makes for productive thought experiments and analytic distinctions, but does less to comprehend actual ways things get done. Circumscribing the iconic surfaces to pure semiotics or pictorial aesthetics also unduly dematerializes three dimensional objects that often serve as crucial vehicles of iconicity. Seeing them merely as ornamental *sights* or highly visible *sites* of ideological hegemony (or resistance) misrepresents their complexity. Paying attention to critical deconstruction of icons rather than to reconstruction of their performative character narrows down the critical force of sociology. This way we end up reifying iconic power and bracketing those elements that make people susceptible to iconic power in the first place. What is to be done?

First, to unravel the performative complexity of powerful symbols one needs a more supple conceptual apparatus and this is what icon and iconicity enables sociologists to do, if only as a first step toward multisensory apprehension of cultural significance. It is a bridge concept that connects previously sequestered registers of social construction. It enables one to *see* a distinct class of social phenomena as intricate objectifications actively partaking *in* rather than passively reflective *of* the social construction of reality. These visually arresting objectifications are often striking in form and highly charged in content, whereby the two spheres are interwoven and contingently performed, not just conventionally implemented.

Second, iconicity affords a new kind of knowledge and thus a new kind of social criticism based on expanded understanding rather than specific political concerns. Subordinating sociological study of the surface to ideological *deconstruction* of imagery runs a risk of circumventing the hard questions of symbolic *construction* as such, and consequently subsuming cultural criticism to one mode of critical seeing – the political. To be sure, the political is important but it does not exhaust the issues of broadly conceived social power, for example as conceptualized in Alexander’s model of social performance [Alexander 2006.] Specifically, by foregrounding the political or the governmental one risks emphasizing techniques of oversight at the expense of analyzing modes of sight that made effective techniques manageable in the first place; supervision at the expense of vision itself; visual code and rhetoric rather than visual impression; critique of the interpellating gaze rather than phenomenology of perception; manipulative spectacle of media rather than social performance to whose imperatives all are responsive, even if in unequal ways.

An undeniable asset of classical critical discourses, whether image-related or not, is that they have sensitized us to the issue of instrumental power insidiously shaping most of what we see and experience. But there is a flipside too. As Nicholas Mirzoeff [2013, xxxvi] pointed out: “Whereas visual culture was first formulated above all as a critical project, the expanded field of visibility requires the production of new knowledges.” New knowledge is indeed a key, and it cannot be easily generated without new categories that afford new analytic vantage points.

As far as visual and cultural sociology are concerned, iconicity may be of prime importance, especially in the intensively mediated society of the digital era. There has always been more to visibility and visual culture than met the eye of critics and anti-establishment activists. When strictly critical faculty of researching culture plays the first fiddle, we engage it negatively, possibly to the detriment of positive and constructive understanding. In such a case, the vigorous pursuit to demystify powerful social interests can undermine another struggle – for disinterested, analytically motivated inquiry that establishes a potential for critical – and self-critical – alternatives.

As critics we may become iconoclastic rather than iconically conscious. Perhaps the most concise articulation of this risk was voiced by Régis Debray [2000, 84] who wrote: “Wanting to demystify the fetishism of tools and equipment, we lose sight of their very reality.”

To say all that does not mean to discourage political criticism as we know it, or to naively regurgitate a utopia of value neutral sociology that should replace established leftist ideals. Instead, it means an attempt at reinvigorating cultural and social criticism along more conceptually diverse lines charted by the recent shifts in cultural theorizing, including the performative, the material and the spatial turn. Focus on the iconic belongs to this new wave of conceptualizations that can sensitize us to the benefits of developing new theories. In sociology, and social theory more broadly, the particular liability of standard cultural criticism is that it is largely *counter-cultural*. This means that while it has been growing ever more progressive politically, it has advanced much less conceptually. In his recent work, Latour [2010, 57] picks up this issue arguing that “the progressives commit an error as flagrant as that of their ostensive opponents” because, not unlike the reactionaries and conservatives, they cling to their key concepts as “ideals” rather than “a heritage to be sorted out.”

This is partly why even otherwise sophisticated volume such as the cited above new edition of *The Visual Culture Reader* edited by Mirzoeff contains in its index *language, discipline, biopower, panopticon, spectacle, communism, capitalism, Marx, Derrida and Weber*, but lacks any reference to iconicity and related concepts. There is Benjamin but no Kracauer, whose innovative parallel lifework of a Jewish cultural commentator of interwar Germany goes unnoticed. There is no mention of the new works of aforementioned Latour and his concepts of iconoclasm and factish, and no references to the twentieth century theorists of the modes of seeing like Panofsky, Gombrich, Berger, Belting, Boehm, or even Barthes. Neither phenomenology nor Merleau-Ponty makes an appearance in that index. The book’s undeniably relevant and timely content is actually less comprehensive than it seems at first glance. The irony is that it features a series of reflections on select emblematic figures (*flaneur*), places (*ground zero*), and categories (*orientalism*), yet without self-reflectively including iconicity itself. It covers many new topical areas but fills less theoretical gaps. It refines new distinctions but does less to reconceptualize the old ones that still imperceptibly underwrite our research.

I argue that iconicity and icon are among the categories that can provide a much needed refreshing of sociology’s analytical frames without contriving neologisms. It is their complexity that makes them useful tools for more multidimensional social analysis and cultural criticism. Without them, the visual and cultural studies preoccupied with representations and rightly critical of linguistic romanticism run a risk of

what Mitchell once dubbed the repressing of the non-visual, thus leaving their own “romanticism” unexamined [Miller 2005, 40.]

4. The Iconic Turn: Rethinking the Extant Dualisms in Cultural Theory

Why do these ironic moments occur despite the emergence of the iconic turn and other similar alternative agendas? I have begun to systematically address this issue in my article *Word/Image Dualism Revisited* [Bartmanski 2014.] Specifically, that article is a tentative intellectual history of the intellectual binary logics that set discursive formations (word) apart from sensory formations (image,) whereby the latter were effectively “absorbed” and subordinated by the former within cultural sciences, to use Mitchell’s apt phrasing again.

The present paper builds on that, but elaborates iconicity by a more in-depth discussion of materiality, which in turn enables one to shift emphasis toward concrete working definitions of icon and to discuss both their analytic purchase and new critical potential. In order to demonstrate how iconicity can help forge a multidimensional way of seeing social representations, I first review the issue of the extraordinary power of the binary separation between the domain of abstract thought formed in language and the domain of sensations formed in experience. Only then the discussion of the conceptual significance of iconicity can reveal its full potential.

For one thing, it is not so much the binary logics itself that is irredeemably flawed. As *analytic tool* such heuristics can serve some of sociological purposes very well indeed. These modes of seeing often constitute the cognitive templates of the very subjects we earnestly and empathically study [Miller 2005.] On top of that, as Stephen Turner [2003, 52] argues, we need to remember that “images work in different ways than words; they make claims on our primordial sense of solidarity that words do not make.” The problematic issue then is *how* and to what uses the dualism has been put in social research. One of the main problems was essentialization of dualism.

Since Enlightenment, language was lauded as *the* medium of communication and articulation of reason. The senses only facilitated deeply felt experience and were subject to elusive and feeble judgments of taste rather than powerful logic. In principle, the operations of reason formulated in words were active and self-correcting, whereas the sensual side of life available through seeing, hearing and touch seemed reactive and susceptible to illusion. There were several notable consequences of the so conceived dualism for the social analysis and criticism. For example, meaning became strongly associated with textuality, as opposed to the senses that were as-

sociated with potentially misleading impressions or sensations. Thus, the senses – e.g. seeing, hearing, touch – constituted the somewhat mysterious other of *logos*, whereby vision was “denigrated” [Jay 1994], sound “misrepresented” [Sterne 2003, 14] and touch omitted across the social sciences [Classen 2012, xi.] As this dualism of logos and the senses congealed, it informed the whole antagonistic philosophical traditions and rigid academic division of labor, which presupposed the difference between contemplative and critical domains. Even before discourses and senses were understood as *formations*, they had been sequestered in their own separate symbolic universes. Consider the asymmetrical, colloquial and high-brow binaries, from the heart vs. the head to the phenomenal vs. the noumenal, superficial vs. deep, etc.

FIG. 1.

<i>Seeing:</i>	Passive	Reception/Impression	Experience	Immediate/Impulsive
<i>Writing:</i>	Active	Creation/Meaning	Communication	Linear/Deliberative

Crucially, the fields based on these binaries were unequally endowed with meaning-making capacity. Since literacy came to be understood as constitutive of thoughts and seeing as conducive to mere sensations, the former seemed “objectively” more valuable than the “subjective” and instinctual nature of the latter. In time, the distinct but epistemically asymmetrical methodologies would emerge, with textuality and discursivity assuming the privileged role as the operative system of culture. Textuality equaled the ideal semiotic order, and pictoriality the aesthetic preference. This is partly why broadly conceived visuality and iconicity could be overlooked, or at least subordinated to discursive captions. To this day “the standard strategy of humanistic thinking about the visual is to import verbal and literary modes of expression to understand it. ‘Visual language’ is translatable into language” [Turner 2003, 59.] It is only now that sociologists like Turner acknowledge that “these attempts at translation are usually feeble” [*ibidem*, 59], trying to reflect on their structuralist limitations.

However artificial that separation and unequal treatment may seem, the resulting deployment and evaluation of human engagement with social world exerted palpable influence on theory and practice of social research and education. The ongoing separation of “arts and sciences,” or “soft and hard” disciplines attests to it, and its binary logic can still be detected in various spheres of life. It went far beyond sciences proper, effectively influencing other domains. It took long time before things began to get re-evaluated and even longer time to realize that these orders of dualistic

separation and subordination of different aspects of reality represented what Latour critically diagnosed as *modern purification*. Anthropologists and sociologists begin nowadays to fully realize that “what appear to be opposites are complementary pairs” [Pinney 2005, 257.]

FIG. 2.

<i>Picture</i>	<i>Text</i>
Reflecting and Inspiring Feelings	Constituting and Articulating Thoughts
Primordial Solidarity	Enlightened Arguments
Material/ Perishable	Immaterial/Lasting
Schematic Imagery	Narrative with Deep References
Order of Physical Properties	Arbitrary System of Signs
Predominantly Connotative	Predominantly Denotative
Paradigmatic Condensation	Syntagmatic Flow
Synchronic Approach	Diachronic Approach
Phenomenological Sensibility	Structuralist Sensibility

To be sure, language remains crucial. What changes is our reflexivity about its assets and drawbacks. David Howes [2005, 4] identified the crux of this issue when he observed that “the limitations of language are unavoidable so long as language is the medium of communication. What it is possible to avoid, however, is the expansion of language into a structural model that dictates all cultural and personal experience and expression.” Iconicity is an important agent in this new game. Icons often are foundational, hybrid and multisensory entities, or “impure” performative manifestations, and it is precisely in such assemblages, not just in discourses, where the “messy” work of cultural sociology [Reed 2009, 3] offers greatest challenges but also truly groundbreaking rewards. Their cultural efficiency indicates that there is no necessary *contradiction* between different registers of existence such as mentality and corporeality, object and subject, body and mind, contemplation and movement, etc. Even if analytically distinct or seemingly disjoint, they are all consequential and feed on each other in a great number of unconventional ways which are yet to be described.

Latour insists that it is this dualistic purification outlined above that should be held responsible for creating the context in which images in general and icons in particular tend to be excluded from proper social scientific repertoire. His own criticism of the founding fathers links this situation with his compatriot, Durkheim. Latour argues that since Durkheim, “the material surfaces of social reality have been viewed as the projection screen for human interests and thoughts,” and that it has

actually been “the price of entry into the sociology as profession” [Latour 1993, 52]. He admits in passing that Durkheimian thought may actually be more complex than this scheme would allow. Nevertheless, Durkheim’s late sociology did not have a chance to further develop its implicit invitation to us “Moderns” to see that “we no longer need to contrast the disenchanted, virtual, absent, deterritorialized world with the other one: the rich, intimate, compact and complete world that belongs to the Primitives ... We are like everyone else” [Latour 2010, 34.] It is only the later works, for example those of Malinowski or Eliade that explicitly did.

While Latour is right that much was overlooked or artificially purified in modern sociology, it is also the case that his rejection of the criticized traditions may amount to throwing the baby with the bath water. Again, what seems to count is not so much with *what* categories professionals and lay observers think (meaning, culture, society, network, actor) but *how* we apply them. Simply replacing dualistic theories with the idea of a total mixing of humans and things will not necessarily get us very far. Even those generally sympathetic to Latourian material turn point out that it may not be the best available tool for reaching a key goal: bridging the divide between materialist insights and representational theories. Reflecting on what is generally understood as concrete and virtual connectedness of things and humans, Ian Hodder [2012, 94] argues that “rather than focusing on the web as a network we can see it as a sticky entrapment.” Such discussions indicate that human and social sciences still are in a process of searching for conceptually more adequate modes of seeing. One thing is certain: no totalizing vision privileging one faculty or dimension over others will do. This is why flexible *multidimensional* perspectives rather than overarching *synthetic* systems can be of greater use in social theory. As far as theory of sensual culture is concerned, it took the unorthodox efforts of thinkers in the humanities, like Mitchell, Boehm, Belting or Sterne to transcend the dualistic or totalizing canons of cultural thought without burning too many bridges.

However, some of those frameworks may need a great deal of conceptual and methodological translation to concretely serve sociology on its road toward more multidimensional approaches. One comprehensive attempt at such translation has been made by Canadian sociologist and anthropologist David Howes [2005] in his edited volume *The Sensual Culture Reader*. Although it enhances greatly our understanding of images and aestheticization of everyday life, it does not thematize iconicity. In terms of monographs and specific studies that do, the book by Lucaites and Hariman [2007] *No Caption Needed* and recent articles by Alexander [2008a; 2008b] offer clear sociological applications, each of which draws on respective seminal humanistic traditions. They provide sharp definitions that are concretely operationalized and put to action in a series of revealing case studies. Perhaps most importantly, they present

iconicity as an open and bridging concept, one indispensable for re-imagining modernity beyond old purifying dualisms, but not against all that those dualisms inspired.

Interestingly, both agendas combine the concept of icon with other multidimensional but better established categories: civil society and social performance. But there are important differences too. Lucaites and Hariman offer a carefully calibrated and narrowly contextualized definition of *icon*, foregrounding photography as the key modern iconic medium. Being a sociologist, Alexander delivers a framework of *iconic power* and *iconic consciousness* with his signature, more universalist flair. Specifically, he defines iconicity culturally through a more generalizable nexus of surface/depth without explicitly contextualizing icons as time- or medium-specific entities. But on his part, he appears more reluctant to question the structuralist legacies that once occasioned the overlooking of the visual and repressing of materiality. Moreover, it is possible to argue that the dichotomy of surface and depth is less than a perfect solution to overcome dualistic thinking. As I shall show, the causal role of materiality that Alexander overtly emphasizes within this scheme is nevertheless comparatively unclear *vis-à-vis* other elements of performance. Other materially oriented iconologies help amend this problem.

5. No Caption Needed: Journalistic Iconology in a Modern Era

Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites persuasively thematized the issues that are central to the present argument. First, the authors acknowledge icons as neglected, insisting that they provide “examples of underappreciated dimension of public advocacy” [Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 12.] Indeed, the gap looms larger than we might think, for “no theory we know of can account adequately for the generation, circulation, and uses of the full range of visual icons” [*ibidem*, 27.]

Second, they confirm that deep-seated critical attitudes prevent us from appreciating concepts like iconicity. They show that especially in the area of their focus – democratic politics – the theory “has kept its distance from visual representation, perhaps from an aversion to political spectacle learned from the experience with Nazism, or from a more deep-seated preoccupation with the ideas and arguments structuring political thought. Without propositional meaning or syntactic structure ... iconic photographs would seem to confirm the long standing suspicion of visual display in Western philosophy” [*ibidem*, 3.]

Third, they deem this situation deeply problematic because they “don’t believe that politics can be reduced either to rationality or power” [*ibidem*, 4] and because “political influence goes well beyond what can be measured by polling, and that a

focus on individual (linguistic) response can be misleading when predispositions and values are widely shared” [*ibidem*, 8.] Different modalities of cultural action, materiality and signification, hard politics and soft symbolism, “are not so neatly separated in practice, so there is good reason to move beyond the question of which mode is dominant and consider more complicated relationship between communication technology and culture” [*ibidem*, 5.] They go on to emphasize that “even though the development of modern public culture did occur primarily through the print media, it also has been dependent on oral and visual practices rich in symbolism [...] Instead of seeing visual practices as threats to practical reasoning or as ornamental devices that may be a necessary concession to holding the attention of a mass audience, we believe they can provide crucial social, emotional and mnemonic materials for political identity and action” [*ibidem*, 14.] Here Hariman and Lucaites advance an important claim that iconicity may be a productive vehicle for rethinking the separation of words and images.

In my own work devoted to post-communist nostalgia in Berlin [Bartmanski 2011], I have tried to illustrate precisely this problem. That study shows that Hariman’s and Lucaites’ conclusions based on American research are applicable to European societies. Images and visual practices related to them, as well as objects and their emplacement do matter as “mnemonic materials” crucial to identity building. Similarly, the story of the political meanings of the Berlin Wall and its fall expose merely analytic value of such divisions as *soft* symbolism vs. *hard* politics, words vs. images, discourse vs. materiality, especially when analyzed iconologically and put in a comparative perspective [Bartmanski 2012a.] From this iconological vantage point, “symbolic politics” is a pleonasm. All politics and socially important objectifications by definition involve symbolic action. Conversely, all symbolism invariably *is* material, in one way or another.

Despite its great merits for rethinking old dualism, the framework developed by Hariman and Lucaites still evinces some traces of the traditional social scientific mode of seeing that Stephen Turner diagnosed as conceptual translation of the visual into the linguistic. For instance, while talking about iconic impact, they use the phrase *visual eloquence* and they see their work as a study in *visual rhetoric*. But there are two other issues of potentially greater significance. First, this is an exclusively *pictorial* iconology that focuses on *photographic journalism*. While there is no doubt that iconic photographs played and continue to play important roles in various social processes, their iconicity has more often than not been conventionalized and geared towards specific journalistic practice. Moreover, the social impact of photographs is not completely reducible to visibility of the technical medium that made them available to the public. The authors admit it by pointing to (1) the fact of the expansion of digital

media and (2) the changes within journalistic profession that may make their study “more historical than they would like” [*ibidem*, 23.] It is certainly important – as the authors realize – to pinpoint iconic image as publicly distributed picture in which “social knowledge is fused with a paradigmatic scene.” Yet, it is also important to remember that (1) such images are encountered in many different social conditions and material circumstances that significantly influence their reception [McDonnell 2010], and that (2) the paradigmatic visualization of knowledge in such an image draws on a series of previously and simultaneously embodied experiences of the audiences without which strong iconic effects, like identification or repulsion, would be diminished (or virtually impossible) and which are not only mediated but lived and felt.

Second, this is a study of the icons deeply embedded in the U.S. public culture. *Politics* and *democracy* are among the key words, and they are always used together, to the point of appearing interchangeable. The authors are certainly aware that if politics can't be reduced to rationality or power, it is even less probable that we could reduce politics to democracy. Yet the chosen scope of their empirical study does not permit them to say much about the use of iconicity in different political cultures, in other democracies and in authoritarian systems, even though their comment about the impact of German Nazism in this respect shows they register the hugely important iconic investment on the part of that totalitarian regime. The photojournalism which provides the reservoir of the analyzed icons is defined as “characteristically democratic art” [*ibidem*, 3] and “an important technology of liberal-democratic citizenship” [*ibidem*, 18.] But was the social efficiency of other photojournalistic practices, including communist ones, based on entirely different iconic and performative principles? Aren't other contemporary kinds of citizenship upheld by photojournalistic and more broadly photographic technologies?

“Visually fusing social knowledge with a paradigmatic scene” is a phrase that sounds like a solid generalizable principle formulated in the spirit of Roland Barthes. But narrowing the scope of the study to the U.S. democratic audience and linking iconicity to premeditated advocacy, Hariman and Lucaites leave one wondering not only how generalizable this conceptualization is, but also why would they refrain from expanding their sample? One of the reasons regarding the latter issue may simply be that the authors are personally concerned with the political struggle within the U.S. that has multiple international implications. In particular, they seem concerned that “the icons of U.S. public culture increasingly underwrite liberalism more than they do democracy,” and that “this imbalance threatens *progressive* social and economic policies and ultimately democracy itself” [*ibidem*, 19, italics mine.] This argument may very well be true and potential consequences of the diagnosed predicament rather serious. At the same time, however, this space- and time-specific political agenda may

have prevented them from reflecting more systematically both on differences and similarities between various iconic cultures.

On the one hand, therefore, Hariman and Lucaites exercise standard academic caution when they narrow their claims. On the other hand, they do make much broader statements at the same time. For example, “it is becoming evident that *Western* culture has *always* been more dependent on visual materials than had been thought [...] that cities and nations have been organized visually” [*ibidem*, 5, emphasis mine.] I do not disagree but we have to ask what Western cultures and to what degree in which historical periods? Only in Western and Mediterranean Europe and only in four decades following WWII there were several nations politically organized in quite different ways, from Greece and Portugal to West Germany to Ireland.

They also propose definitions that seem remarkably portable and flexible rather than just local. The conceptual value of *No Caption Needed* resides precisely in this more theoretically daring and creative parts. If we replace photos with icons in their definition of photojournalistic icons then – *mutatis mutandis* – we arrive at a plausible conceptualization of iconic appeal: the wide recognition and remembering of something (or someone) understood to be representation of historically significant event or phenomenon, activating strong emotional response, either identification or rejection, often through reproduction across a range of media, genres or topics. When Hariman and Lucaites synthesize what they call five constitutive axioms of iconic photograph’s appeal, the result seems similarly generalist in spirit: “the iconic photograph is (1) an aesthetically familiar form of (2) civic performance coordinating an array of (3) semiotic transcriptions that project (4) an emotional scenario (5) to manage a basic contradiction or recurrent crisis” [*ibidem*, 29.]

Had these definitions been applied more widely and cross-culturally, they could be better tested and thus sociologically stronger. Of course, this may be unfair to say, given that the authors do not represent the discipline of sociology, being instead more rooted in the American tradition of communications studies. Note that they underscore knowledge, aesthetics, eloquence, advocacy, political identity, genre, semiotic transcriptions, and rhetorics. Their semiotic analysis clearly learned from various post-structuralist debates, which is visible in sophisticated treatment of the observation that icon’s meanings are not necessarily fixed or stable over time. Still, it is a semiotic engagement with conventionalized pictoriality whose direct connection to big politics is never far from view. “We are interested in the specific task of understanding how any iconic image produced and disseminated through photojournalism defines what it means to be a citizen, to live in a modern polity, to possess equal rights, to collective obligations, and similar determinations of public identity” [*ibidem*, 28.]

There are, however, similarly semiotically driven and yet more expansive concepts of iconicity developed in conjunction to civil sphere.

6. Material Surface, Immaterial Depth: Social Iconology of Alexander

According to Alexander's conception, every icon is a bundle of material – aesthetic – surface, and immaterial – spiritual, moral or intellectual – depth. The *surface* can be understood as the necessary *interface* of the material feeling of meaning. It has an immersive capacity to rivet attention and draw audiences in, i.e. engage them emotionally and morally with itself and what it stands for. This idea echoes Turner's conception of emotive and solidaristic capacities of images. Each such surface remains connected to other symbols and whole constellations of meaning, and it is the *relations* between them out of which signification emerges. Socially significant surfaces are mediated – or represented – narratively, especially by special agents of discursive work, the critics. The depth is not only the signified part of iconic performativity; it is also about “deeper” existential significance of individual and collective feelings, something that makes the Geertzian play of social life indeed *deep* and worth playing.

The definition of icon stemming from these basic precepts resembles the previous one but is markedly more general. Here icon is a paradigmatic condensation of meaning. This condensation is attained through performative fusion of surface and depth. When accomplished, it offers a totemic kind of *typification*. It is not only about aesthetic familiarity but about material crystallization of generic meanings. It is the materially concretized cultural trope, the visual/sensual synecdoche. Being such a particularly potent kind of collective representation, icon effectively connects the dissipated dots of discursive meanings. It brings into focus certain collectively shared but often inchoate and diffuse sentiments and understandings – inchoate only until they get jointly articulated in iconic manner and then circulated in society.

In this respect Alexander revisits Durkheim and his notion that “to express our own ideas even to ourselves we need to attach those ideas to *material things* that symbolize them” [Durkheim 1995, 229, italics mine.] This very idea was later popularized by Levi-Strauss who observed that totemic objects are *bonnes a penser*, or “good to think with.” Alexander elaborates Durkheim's assertion that “probably because collective feelings become conscious of themselves *only* by settling upon external objects, [the moral forces] could not organize themselves without taking some of their traits from things. In this way, they took on a kind of physical nature;

they came to *mingle* as such with the life of the physical world” [*ibidem*, 421, italics mine.]

Interestingly, this is what Latour seems to refer to as the Tardian moment in Durkheim, the reciprocal rather than strictly hierarchical take on the intricate relations between humans and non-humans, subject and object, depth and surface. Yet it is hardly enough to have a general notion of the relationship between these spheres. A specific strong explanatory notion is needed. As both Latour and Alexander would probably agree, Durkheim did not flesh out a theory of surface/depth nexus in which any concept of autonomous materiality would be a constitutive part. At the time of publication of *Elementary Forms* he seemed neither prepared nor interested in departing too far from the basic Saussurean presuppositions. Alexander picks up where Durkheim left off and plugs the surface/depth dialectics into his own cultural sociology based on the principle of relative independence of culture.

First, he asserts that “while totemism may have been transformed and radically pluralized, it has hardly been effaced” [Alexander 2008b, 785.] This makes for another unexpected resemblance with the Latourian pronouncements that “we have never been modern,” and that “there are no Barbarians” [Latour 2010, 34.] In other words, the dichotomy of disenchantment and enchantment on which some canonical claims to modernity relied seems untenable to the degree that two different theorists contest alleged disenchantment.

Second, Alexander argues that “while (Durkheim) is clearly aware of feeling consciousness and aesthetic surface, it is also clear that he has little understanding of how they actually work” [Alexander 2008b, 787.] In his studies of Giacometti’s iconic sculpture, contemporary celebrities and an American landmark building designed by a famous architect, Alexander reconstructs performative mechanisms behind iconic power of those different, socially significant symbols which are photographically mediated and thus amplified, but also stand on their own as specifically embodied, emplaced and narrated cultural entities.

Compared with Hariman’s and Lucaites’ propositions, the expanded *scope* of Alexander’s definition of iconicity makes his conceptualization – at least in principle – not only less context- and culture-specific but also more flexible regarding the *scale* at which it can be applied. Icon does not necessarily have to be a widely disseminated modern photograph of political significance recognized by millions at national or international level. It does not always have to sit at the center of an epochal contradiction or crisis. Democracy is not a necessary condition of its emergence and sustained influence either. Icon can be detected in different regimes, and across time and space contexts. It can be a cult object of an arcane profession, or a building that epitomizes style of a region and thus conducive to anchoring the region’s identity. What matters

is the mechanism of typification described above, the collective feelings sustained by it and social desire to have them expressed with or attributed to specific material constellations.

Although this neo-Durkheimian paradigm productively transforms the original concept of totemism, it does less to sharply distinguish iconicity from symbolism, which is of no small significance. In particular, the resemblance principle and the distinctive power of materiality are not jointly thematized, nor is the Saussurean axiom of the arbitrary nature of the bundle of surface and depth interrogated. Likewise, “immateriality” of the depth is taken for granted rather than explained. This may be a problem for at least two reasons. One is that the surface/depth nexus may be more of a version of the old dualism of object/subject or image/word than a new proposition. Another problem has been pointed out by Daniel Miller who cautions against sociological use of “immateriality” as a concept; he reminds us that the eternal return of humanity to “vast projects devoted to immateriality like religion or philosophy rests upon the same paradox: that immateriality can only be expressed through materiality” [Miller 2005, 28.] Indeed, can we actually point to, or imagine socially effective cultural phenomena realized outside human or non-human materiality? Isn’t the “immaterial depth” just another figure of speech – a metaphorical *mode of seeing* – that says more about our intellectual traditions than about empirical reality?

In Alexander, materiality of the surface seems to be underscored as indispensable for producing iconic *effect* but not generative or co-constitutive of *meaning* per se. It is relationally *activated* rather than *agentive* in a late modern sense; surfaces have properties that can be turned into meaningful qualities by embeddedness in the intellectual spheres. As Alexander writes, “the discursive and moral meaning of material objects comes not from aesthetic surface but from society, from somewhere outside the objects themselves” [Alexander 2012, 26.] Similarly, Durkheim admitted that some surface must be there for collective feelings to consolidate and thus for their iconic crystallization to function. Yet in his hands the material vehicles of meaning seemed to be to the depth what ink was to text – very practical but ultimately arbitrary fixing. Here Alexander does not stray too far from Durkheim. *Medium* itself is not emphasized to be a *message*, it seems more of the message’s elective companion. In short, this mode of seeing iconicity means that if properly narrated, felicitously performed and equipped with powerful means of symbolic production, *any* surface can presumably work as a vehicle of *any* depth.

Following Barthes’ semiotics [1978, 36-37] Alexander [*ibidem*, 26, italics mine] elaborates this argument by pointing to a kind of empirical illusion that sociological theory needs to correct. He argues that a remarkable fact about icons is that “even when observers are aware of the aesthetic surface and moral depth, these two *inde-*

pendently constructed and distinctive domains invariably seem to be thoroughly and completely intertwined. On the one hand, a particular aesthetic form seems to ‘be’ the meaning of the material thing, to naturally and perfectly express it; on the other hand, some particular social meaning seems intrinsically to demand some specific articulation of the beautiful or the sublime. Everyday consciousness is reified; it seamlessly naturalizes *arbitrary* meaning structures even as it essentializes historically contingent aesthetic forms.” Alexander admits that iconic power of objects (the socio-cultural effect) varies but this variability is explained with little use of the actual properties of the involved materiality but mostly by social context, discursive performativity and the influence of critical carrier groups attached to it. For this reason, his conception can work well in certain artistic contexts [Alexander 2008a] or cases of discursively intensive media cultures [Alexander 2010] and within the struggles of Western civil societies [Alexander 2006.] While its scope and flexibility is ostensibly greater than Hariman’s and Lucaites’ one, it works particularly well largely in the same contexts and, indeed, so far has been tested only in them.

Alexander’s iconological argument is generally useful because there is evidence that the relations between text-like representations and visual schemes on the one hand, and specific historical evaluations and meanings on the other tend to stem at least in part from contingent power distribution and are subject to historical and generational change. Different groups and cultures interpret the same things differently and have different styles of cultural attribution. It is indeed empirically untenable to claim that a (powerful) iconic meaning of a (special) thing comes only from itself or is the only one possible. Even material culture scholars explicitly caution “not to swing the pendulum too far toward materiality” [Miller 2005, 38.]

But the reverse can hardly be the only truth about culture and iconicity as well. It is not empirically precise either to assert that meaning of an icon simply “comes from somewhere outside,” specifically from contingently changing “society” and its relations. These variables are too broad. A much more ethnographically thick work is needed to substantiate the claim that the discursive variability and arbitrary semiotic relations override material factors when it comes to sociological explanation of icons. In fact, there are masses of significant data in social sciences that indicate otherwise and simply cannot be ignored. Interestingly, a critical comment that Ian Hodder made about Latour is useful – *mutatis mutandis* – to understand the limitations of purely representational iconology of Alexander too. “Everything is relational and this insight is important but it is also the case that materials and objects have affordances that are continuous from context to context” [Hodder 2012, 94.] Objectual environment of action both constrains and enables meaning-making to a significant – and often variable – degree. It is spatially distributed and has different temporalities that mold

symbolic action. In short, the issue with Durkheimian tradition as the inspiration for iconology is not only that *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* evinced little aesthetic sensibility which may be crucial for this emerging subdiscipline but also that “at the same moment that (Durkheim) desacralized religion, he sacralized the social” [Miller 2005, 36.] One big contextual category is supplanted with another, whereas sociology is in need of new, finely calibrated explanatory categories capable of dealing with multiplicity of meaning-making practices, especially the sensually rich, electronic environments that “augment” social reality today.

In short, the meaning is reducible neither to aesthetics and material determinants nor to abstract conceptions of society and arbitrariness of linguistic signification. While the *aesthetic forms* and *tastes* are indeed overwhelmingly conventional and habitual, the *material properties*, *their sensuous impact* and *conditions of reception* are not so – they are part of larger, less- or non-arbitrary structures of human sensorium. Physical reality sets less- or non-negotiable parameters of life replete with specific qualities, both constraining and enabling, and with “affordances that are continuous from context to context” and structure our interpretive possibilities [Hodder 2012.]

While this observation needs more conclusive empirical explorations in cultural sociology, there is little doubt that it is vital for iconological analysis. It seems hardly enough to say that culture or icon is “like language,” i.e. based on arbitrary systems of signification, and that all its iconic touchstones are equally conventional bundles of surface and depth. In fact, there are conditions under which “an object’s materiality may trump symbolic forms of communication such as language” [McDonnell 2010, 1805.] Importantly, we have to distinguish between human-made and natural objects to account for variability of such effects, just like we have to distinguish between pictorial signs and their forms and material tools and their parts. The latter simply have different degree of freedom when it comes to social evaluations and deconstruction [Miller 1987, 116.] All such entities can serve as vehicles of meaning-making and iconic action but they do so according to differentiated principles of meaning attribution. Crucially, “different bundles of qualities, through interaction with different audiences afford different uses and meanings” [McDonnell 2010, 1806.] There is evidence that “at certain historical moments and in certain contexts humans appear dominant over things, but at other places and times things seem to have the dominant hand” [Hodder 2012, 94.] In other words, meaning-making is highly complex and variable to the extent hardly stipulated in any structuralist heuristics.

What are the implications of these observations for sociology? Having once learned a great deal from the language-sensitive anthropologists like Geertz and Turn-

er, cultural sociology may well benefit from paying attention to what the next wave of anthropological work has established by dint of the material turn. Specifically, as iconologists we need to come to terms with two key findings effectively articulated by American anthropologist Webb Keane: (1) that “materiality of signification is not just a factor for the sign interpreter but gives rise to and transforms modalities of action and subjectivity regardless of whether they are interpreted” [Keane 2005, 186] and (2) that “different orders of semiosis are differently subject to determination or autonomous logic” [*ibidem*, 199.] 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*. Moreover, we can expect that there are different degrees of iconic power depending on different arrangements – or bundles – of constitutive factors, i.e. “different orders of semiosis.”

Of course, this kind of iconological variability gives less sociological comfort than neat universalist principles of structuralism or other “systemic” approach. As Latour [2010, 43] notes, “just as the scholastic world abhorred a vacuum, the world of social explanations abhors the variable-geometry ontologies that might force it to redefine not only action but also actors.” Iconologists have no choice but to deal with it. As American political theorist Jane Bennett [2010, 9] observes, “agentic capacity is now seen as differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types.” This is a new kind of sociological variability which needs to be systematically accounted for and conceptually integrated with our traditional understandings of human intentionality and social action. Taking icons seriously is one way of doing that. Iconicity is a “bridging” category in that it joins both the explanations based on the changing technological ecologies and based on relatively stable phenomenological regularities.

To conclude this part of the argument we may say that while Alexander is right that *conventions* tend to naturalize themselves, it is equally crucial to realize that not all in culture is conventional. Indeed, we also observe a reverse problem, namely that the elements of what Durkheim once called “the life of the physical world,” for example some bodily gestures, tend to pass for pure convention whereas more complex entanglements and some mimetic principles seem to be at work too [Corbeill 2004, 6-9.] As Keane [2005, 195, 200] points out, “not all social life in all domains is tightly controlled and totalized” by conventional systems of signification, and “even the most conventional signs are instantiated in material forms.”

Put differently, there is an urgent need to consider the *non-representational* aspect of symbolic meaning-making which is traceable to the impact that objectual affordances of social environments have on people. Consequently, sociologists need to consider variability of iconic efficiency as relative to material affordances and the

kinds of feedbacks we observe between different classes of affordances and iconic efficacy. Iconically conscious qualitative sociology takes into account all, even seemingly mundane, material qualities. In the next section I provide further arguments why it is important and how to go about this new task.

7. Semiotic Ideology and Materiality: Webb Keane's Cultural Iconology

Hariman, Lucaites and Alexander provide specific and general theory of performative iconicity respectively. Both illuminate the functioning of certain visual regimes of the Western civil sphere. These programmes are based on the similar effort to reinterpret the binarisms of the past and thematize a series of mediations that give rise to our modern iconic representations. Importantly, they involve efforts to explain variability of iconic power. Hariman and Lucaites focus on how icon “presents a pattern of motivation that can make some responses more likely than others” [Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 8.] On his part, Alexander emphasizes that “the intentions of an object's designer” are but a single aspect of the complex iconic process, and he discerns an important source of variation in the “hermeneutical power” of critics. I have argued that although very productive for developing new iconological arguments, these research prescriptions still put significantly more emphasis on subject- than object-related explanations.

Since there is no iconicity without some kind of material mediation, cultural sociology of icons needs to consider seeing both subjects and objects as *interdependent* rather than “relatively independent.” Alexander's notion of the “relative independence of culture” – just like the notions of “society” or “social relations” – may function as justifiable generalization in certain contexts or types of interpretation. Yet, “ultimately they are heuristic terms” of social philosophy [Miller 2005, 45], whose analytical purchase steeply decreases as we move from programmatic and provisional models toward specific theories and in-depth interventions requiring much more robust descriptors than “relative” or “social” [Olick 2010, 98.] Likewise, more sharply calibrated understandings of structural model, representational forms, and temporal sequences are necessary, for there is a risk that “any ontologization of the notion of structure is bound to trap the theorist in ultimately irresolvable issues related to the ‘causal effect’ (or ‘autonomy’) of one of these ontological levels on the other one” [Lizardo 2010, 684.]

Drawing on his extensive anthropology of clothing, housing and language in Indonesia, Webb Keane offers particularly useful clues on how such a more variably calibrated iconology might look like. First, he argues that cultural objects come as

bundles of specific material/sensuous qualities that form experiential clusters and “transform modalities of action regardless of whether they are interpreted” [Keane 2005, 186.] “Necessarily embodied in some particular objectual form, a given quality is contingently (rather than by logical necessity or social convention) bound up with other qualities [...] This points to one of the obvious, but important, effects of materiality: [a given quality] cannot be manifest without some embodiment that *inescapably* binds it to some other qualities as well” [Keane 2005, 194, italics mine.] This argument indicates that part of complexity resides already at the level of iconic surfaces understood as material bundles, which in turn suggests that meaning is generated in part through such inescapable assemblages of features which have rather hard consequences on behavior and interpretation.

Second, iconic “surfaces are not just the tangible garments draped on otherwise invisible and immaterial ideas [...] if things mediate our historicity, we cannot be content to ask only what meanings people attribute to them now. And even of those meanings, we must be attentive to the ways in which they are regimented and brought into relation to other things” [*ibidem*, 193.] To couch this in the parlance of Jane Bennett, iconological explanation needs to take into account the relations effective across a wide range of ontological entities, such as machines, built environment, communicative networks, etc. Keane admits that much of this is “the task of social power.” What he calls “semiotic ideology” – the cultural whole of general assumptions that helps realize the iconic potential of objects – closely resembles the notion of “background representations” in the neo-Durkheimian theory of Alexander. He cautions, however, that “there is no reason to conclude that semiotic ideologies are total systems capable of rendering all things meaningful” [*ibidem*, 191.] He goes on emphasizing that “the openness of things to further consequences perpetually threatens to destabilize existing semiotic ideologies” [*ibidem*, 191.] In this conception, the tense traditional dichotomies such as ideology vs. infrastructure, mind vs. body, or things vs. thoughts are not rigorously maintained, much less theoretically “resolved” in favor of one aspect. Rather, specific bundles and their unfolding over time are taken to be one of the main objects of analysis.

Icons are prime examples that “the practical character of things is neither subordinated to nor isolated from thought” [*ibidem*, 183.] Interestingly, Keane sees these aspects of iconicity as “something so obvious as to be commonly overlooked” but he also gives an example of how social (and sociological) background beliefs could occasion such negligence: “The Protestant anxiety about the relative autonomy of the human subject from the material world constrains what will count as signs, as intentions, and as actions – excluding, like Weber, such things as the contingent materiality of things from the proper domain of the human” [*ibidem*, 201.]

Seeing the problem of subject/object dualism in this way is one of the reasons why Miller [2005, 37] asserts that the future of social sciences – certainly a future of cultural sociology after the iconic turn – “lies in human modesty about being human.” In practice this modesty means transcending the traditional boundaries between these ossified dichotomous categories and advocating potentially more supple hybrid concepts. Consequently, a major sociological challenge is to unravel “the processes of objectification that create our sense of ourselves as subjects and the institutions that constitute society, but which are always appropriations of the materiality by which they are constituted” [*ibidem*, 37.] Introducing iconicity as an analytic and explanatory category helps develop this process of sociological unraveling. Taken seriously, icon will enable sociologists to see more accurately the role of concrete circumstances in signifiatory processes and to appreciate the difference that materiality and experiential parameters make in the perennially contested processes of cultural representation. It is instructive to recall in this context Richard Shusterman’s conception of *somaesthetic* according to which “the representational/experiential distinction must not be taken as rigidly exclusive, for there is an inevitable complementarity of representations and experience, of outer and inner” [Shusterman 2000, 275.] We can expect this to become more and more comprehensible as the three “registers” of meaningfulness – screen, software and body – get increasingly interconnected and visibly co-dependent, producing new levels of universal experience [Thrift 2005, 231.] To the extent that this set of anticipations is correct, iconicity can play a significant explanatory role in sociology. It is likely to become a useful tool in the relevant conceptual redefinitions of social scientific practice and cultural criticism.

8. Recapitulation: Iconicity as New Explanatory Notion in Sociology

As I have tried to show, iconicity considerably redefines our study of social signification by complexifying the standard categories of sign, image, representation and meaning. A key conceptual move is to include sensuous notion of “materiality” that comprises the physical and sensually relevant environments of human action. Sensory experiences of things co-produce meaning. Objects and material surfaces are not the canvas to which meaning is mechanically “attached.” Such descriptive metaphor is insufficient for much of what cultural sociology is doing now, or should and will be doing in the near future. We can analytically distinguish such categories as visibility/visibility, aurality, haptics, space, emplacement, etc. The task is to connect them and include the dynamics of these connections in explanatory models of inter-

pretive sociology that concerns itself with *meaning*. Icon as a cultural notion enables us to begin this work.

As a mode of seeing culture in action, iconicity makes us realize that deep connectedness that goes beyond standard, relatively rigid representational or performative relations of producers and audiences. There is no immaterial cultural content, no separate purely symbolic domain that retains independence – even theoretical – from the complexities of entanglements and consequences of a distributive agency that consists of various co-dependent forms of “vibrant matter” [see Hodder 2012, 215; Bennett 2010.] Socially consequential meanings are collective feelings and emotive commitments that are traceable to specific “skeins of humans and things” and temporalities that are imposed on humans by things, not just the other way around [Hodder 2012.]

The so understood material environments – now increasingly “augmented” by virtual realities – always step into the sociological picture and they are highly differentiated and interconnected, jointly framing and molding all significant representational economies. In sum, there is no one single pattern of social signification, no one-size-fits-all structural logic.

One of the clearest, empirically grounded formulations of this outlook has been provided by archaeologist Ian Hodder [2012, 97] whose words engage directly the foundational categories of cultural sociology:

Humans work within webs of meaning that often seem arbitrary, symbolic and representational. Their abstract and generalizing thought processes are dependent on these webs, on language, on systems of representations. But very often these same symbolic representations gain their salience from being embedded in sets of practices and experiences. Most material symbols in particular tend to be iconic and indexical; there tends to be some relationship between sign and referent. Notions of contiguity and association abound. I am not, thus, arguing for a separate world of symbolic representation. Even linguistic meanings are thoroughly embedded in practice. My aim here has been to say that the webs and networks in which humans live are as much symbolic, meaningful, spiritual, religious, conceptual, as they are practical and technical, economic and social.

If materiality, not just pictoriality or visuality, seems now crucial to a cultural understanding of iconicity and vice versa, it is not only because certain mimetic principles have been made more visible by relaxing the principles of structuralism, or recognizing that even the structuralist like Levi-Strauss was cautious not to ontologize his modelling of social reality [Lizardo 2010.] It is because through iconicity we can better appreciate the meaningful potentiality of material qualities and affordances, and the complexity of actual entanglements that generate, transmit and distribute so-

cial meanings. Today these entanglements are further complexified by the unprecedented electronic augmentation of social reality. To delineate the pathways of these transmissions and distributions means to gain new vantage points from which such different issues as gentrification or political populism can be critically engaged with greater force.

Icon is a sensuously evocative crystallization (and thus potential mobilization) of shared, often visceral collective feelings. Mere convention on its own could hardly ever generate identification and effervescence often occasioned by and necessary for iconic effects. Likewise, mere materiality in forms of the “natural” ecology or the built infrastructure could hardly indicate anything without semiotic ideologies and background representations intertwined with them in specific social settings [Hodder 2012, 208.] But again, these representations are not abstract or absolutely open-ended cognitive schemas or free-floating symbols. As far as social action and order are concerned, neither aspect of signification is conceivable without the other, and neither can be explained with one size fits all mode of seeing and representing. Like its conceptual predecessor – totem, icon is “good to think with,” or to be more specific, it’s good to rethink the complexity of culture in action.

When it comes to complex images and objectual symbols, we may explain concisely the crucial role of surface in meaning-making with a cross-disciplinary simile: the iconic effect can be defined as a social fact just like the caustic effect can be defined as an optical fact. We learn from both that the specific refracting material is needed to sustain a striking, focused effect which reveals sensual character of seemingly immaterial phenomenon – meaning and light respectively. Different combinations of elements produce different kinds of observable effects. Sometimes it is a colorful arch of rainbow; at other times it is a bright nephroid shape. Likewise, some images and objects are more amenable to certain kinds of emotional projections than others within a given socio-material context and temporal sequence. As Ian Hodder [2012, 213] succinctly put it, “the terrain of entanglement is not flat and some entanglements are more entrapping than others.” It is this flexible multidimensional attitude that the iconic turn injects to cultural sociology today.

In other words, iconicity as a sociological category is promising because it postulates new kinds of connectedness between factors that have previously been separated in sociological imagination or connected only in conventional, sometimes highly idealized ways. Each of the three major frameworks presented here illuminates different aspects of iconicity or what we may call iconic complexity of objects and images. Icon is an image that may not need any caption but in practice captions of all sorts are almost always there and they invariably influence our engagement with it. Conversely, while words and arbitrary semiotic systems backed by power are im-

portant, in practice they are always intimately structured by material environments of action. There are also non-representational factors at play, and they are less inert than sociologists traditionally thought. These factors constitute what Jane Bennett [2010] evocatively calls “vibrant matter.” If contemporary virtual and digital technologies now make this observation intuitively persuasive, it should not distract us from the fact that concrete “analogue” materialities of all kinds also exert these kinds of vibrant influences on meaning-making [see Bartmanski and Woodward 2013 and 2014.] Symbolically potent objects are bundles of resonant qualities experienced in specific ways by humans (we may heuristically call it internal, or corporeal materiality of icons). At the same time, they are also very closely entangled in what Hodder calls “sticky entrapments” on which their objectual character and social efficacy depend (we may heuristically call it external or objectual materiality of icons). In social practice these things are always intertwined and thus should be treated jointly, as bundles conducive to emergent cultural effects. It is in the interstitial spaces where these existential spheres meet and interact that the deep “messiness” of culture resides. If complexity of culture resided only in complexity of discourse, then sociologists would have known much more about cultural dynamics by now. That we in fact are not perfectly sure how exactly culture matters – as Stephen Vaisey [2008] and Terence McDonnell [2010] noted – is the circumstance that makes new composite categories like iconicity useful.

As a mode of seeing, the iconic turn proposes how we may avoid both the reductionist and materialistic tendencies that cultural sociologists like Alexander fear, and how we should be wary of the “premature translation of things into signs” that anthropologists like Pinney and Keane fear [2005, 266.] As Keane’s iconology demonstrates, textuality of cultural signification is an *explanandum* rather than the privileged *explanans*. An iconological point of view indicates that to make our cultural sociological practice more sensitive to multifaceted character of meaning, we need not more applications of generic principles of “thick description” but a range of cultural analyses that include “sensuous description” into qualitative methodology [Classen 2012, xii.]

To perform the so conceptually expanded analysis means to improve on or even rewrite many standard treatments of major social problems and new vexing issues. It is in this sense that the broadly conceived iconic turn is also a new critical mode of seeing that enables one to go beyond tired classical divisions. Notably, it enables to transcend *materialistic* critiques toward positions that recognize different valences of *materiality* outlined above. It heightens our awareness of what is at stake in the critical position itself and what are its various ramifications.

Taking iconicity seriously means to enter a post-fetishistic and post-disenchanted vision of modernity. To refer to Latour and his radical anti-dualistic attitude once

more, “in a world that no longer moves from alienation to emancipation, but from entanglement to even greater entanglement [...] the traditional division between ‘determinations’ and ‘liberations’ serves no useful purpose in defining a globalization whose complexity, for the moment, defies political understanding” [Latour 2010, 61.] Even if provocatively radical, this sociological diagnosis can hardly be ignored and the iconic turn provides a language in which a series of responses to such challenging views can be developed.

To conclude, icons and their power tell us something quite lofty about our cultures but they also tell something rather mundane about ourselves as materially constituted and inexorably sensual beings. It reveals our lives to be grounded as much in discursive as in sensory formations. On the one hand, not unlike Bourdieu, Daniel Miller recognized a distinctly scholarly reluctance to face the mundane, the truly “messy,” often inchoative but socially consequential world of human action beyond the grasp of any textual archive or below the radar of mainstream media. On the other hand, sociology seems to have been anxious about facing the reason-defying power of grand images and objects. Perhaps this is partly why sociologists have repressed or overlooked the efficacy of icons, small and big. In a fashion somewhat reminiscent of religious iconoclasm, sociology seems to have been apprehensive about systematically looking into the sensual surfaces of icons, perhaps for the fear of being “naïve” or superficial, or of discovering the all too mundane conditions of the sacred, the sensual roots of the abstract, the visceral and aesthetic dimension of the intellectual, the material character of the seemingly immaterial. The discipline is changing now. The iconic turn may be yet another point of no return for cultural sociology, just like the linguistic turn once was.

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Modes of Seeing, or, Iconicity as Explanatory Notion

Cultural Research and Criticism After the Iconic Turn in Social Sciences

Abstract: Icons constantly punctuate social life and yet sociology has thematized cultural iconicity only very recently. This article describes what cultural sociology can gain by incorporating *iconicity* into the catalogue of its explanatory notions. Specifically, it discusses several new prominent iconological frameworks, or modes of seeing culture, and how they alter our understanding of meaning-making, both in social life and social science. Taken together, these conceptual transformations can be heuristically described as “the iconic turn.” What emerges out of this discussion is a new theorization of cultural complexity, whereby different registers of materiality are revealed to be as important in the processes of iconic signification as discursive formations. Subsequently, some major implications of the iconic turn are presented and pathways to productive and critical sociological operationalizations outlined.

Keywords: Iconicity, Visuality, Materiality, Social Criticism, Cultural Signification.

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