

Learning to Think Iconically in the Human and Social Sciences: Iconic Standards of Understanding as a Pivotal Challenge for Method Development

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Abstract Theoretically as well as alongside an empirical research idea, this paper outlines conditions for the development of social scientific empirical methods able to further exploit the iconic potential of the image. Reconstructing the role of formal pictorial elements for the standards of understanding within the medium “image” is considered pivotal in this endeavor. Within the context of language, standards of communication have already been extensively researched. The linguistic format of the narrative, for instance, is well studied. Up to now, though, comparable formal vehicles of iconic semantics have only been examined in aesthetics and art history. Nevertheless, standards of iconic understanding are part of our implicit knowledge, are incessantly in use in everyday practice and, thus, the basis of everyday identity formation. With the help of empirical methods based on an iconic logos we can deepen our understanding of orientations, longings, and anxieties of our time that are often silently conveyed by images. Fashion will be outlined as a prototypical field, in which an empirically based development of such methods might start off.

Keywords Bildwissenschaft · Iconic logos · Picture interpretation · Fashion · Visual communication

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Introduction

Asking for iconicity within the social sciences is part of a larger trend witnessed in numerous conferences, research foci, and publications dedicated to visual studies, the German *Bildwissenschaft*,¹ or visual communication and image interpretation. To put it poignantly: ‘image’ is booming in the most diverse fields of enquiry. Not only the social sciences and the humanities, but also philosophy, cultural studies, and history embrace this trend. Some authors even dub this development an “iconic turn” or “pictorial turn” (e.g., Floch 2000; Maar and Burda 2004, 2006; Mason 2005; Mitchell 2005; Rose 2007; Belting 2007a; Sachs-Hombach 2009; Burri 2009). Consequently, research questions are manifold. To name a few: It has been asked to what extent and how images constitute scientific knowledge production (e.g., Knorr-Cetina 2001; Rowley-Jolivet 2004; Burri 2008); there are inquiries into the anthropological dimension of images (e.g., Belting 2005), and into specific psychological issues (in psychoanalysis, e.g., Tisseron 2005; in perception, e.g., Leder and Carbon 2006). Though some debates are confined to single disciplines, transdisciplinary research projects are strongly on the rise.

The transdisciplinary and young project *Bildwissenschaft* (Belting 2007b) is a focal point within the above-mentioned trend. It asks radically new questions that are of crucial relevance for the fundamental theories of the humanities. From a media theoretical perspective, i.e., assuming that *being human* essentially means being mediated (McLuhan 1964; Latour 1988, 1996 and 1998; Benjamin 2008; Slunecko 2008; Slunecko and Przyborski 2009), it can be said that scholars are finally coming to terms with a *hitherto poorly understood dimension of being*. This development does not merely reflect the digital revolution with the heightened presence of image that is accompanying it; much more importantly does it allow to focus on a systematic understanding of a pervasive mode of human communication, i.e., communication via images, traditionally neglected within the social sciences. Images are cultivated in our socialization and are permanently active in our ideas and *imagination*. Sometimes these processes are conscious and intentional. Most often, however, they are beyond the threshold of conscious perception, decision-making, and aims (e.g., Warburg 1992; Warnke 1993; Mitchell 2005; Michel 2006a). Thus Heidegger’s (1962) concept of our ‘house of being’ seemingly must be enlarged: We not only dwell in a house of language but also in a house of images. Our access to the world is no less structured by images than it is by language. By taking our ability to picture the world seriously, we have to admit that images, like language, are not a posteriori givens but constitute the condition for the possibility of our entire *Weltanschauung*; it is important to note that both, language and images, not only conserve and transmit such *Weltanschauung*, but are always the places of its mediation and negotiation.

¹ The German term “Bild” refers both to an actual material picture and to its mental representation, i.e., a concept or notion. In other words, there is only one German term for the principle, its manifestation, and the inner representation. For the sake of this text, thus, it has been necessary to work with three different terms (“picture” for the material manifestation, “image” for the representation, and “icon” when it comes to elaborating on more principle aspects). Recently, Mitchell (2009: 322) has fundamentally elaborated the different meaning of picture and image.

The methods of empirical research in psychology and in the humanities are anchored in such fundamental theories, i.e., in our basic assumptions about human functioning—no matter if the methods know about their own anchors or not. Such basic assumptions, e.g., that meaning is constituted solely by language, guide the way of “data” construction, too. They constitute what kind of research answers we are able to produce (Bohnsack 2007a, 2009; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008). As soon as we move beyond the language paradigm, thus, radically new venues open up for methodologies and empirical tools (as up to now methodologies have been almost solely language-focused). In terms of fundamental theories, visual communication is still quite uncharted territory. As such it is worthy of systematic—empirical—analysis and hopefully “the key to further breakthroughs in psychology”, as this key, according to Valsiner (2009: 10), is in the domain of general methodology (see also Branco and Valsiner 1997).

The paper thus focuses on the *picture as a methodological option for the humanities and the social sciences*. It asks how the picture may lend itself to the realization of research interests within the social sciences, by arguing for a first systematic *empirical* reconstruction of iconic standards of communication. What we are presenting here is embedded in an overall research perspective: to use pictures in empirical research as documents for cultural and social phenomena. In order to do this, however, we have to elaborate on an understanding of the picture itself. Using the picture as a methodological option for empirical research, one first has to focus on the picture as an ‘object’. Thus, the unfolding of this program will first require a disentanglement from concrete objects of inquiry. On a fundamental theoretical level the specific properties of the medium image in contrast to the medium language—which is, after all, essential to most empirical research—shall be explored. These meta-theoretical considerations will lead to methodological questions pertaining to a particular kind of empirical research, which is able to seriously employ the image in its entelechy (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*). As these methodological questions can only be tackled empirically, the paper concludes with the sketch of a concrete research idea in the field of fashion and clothing.

Standards of Qualitative Social Research in Light of the Linguistic and the Iconic Turn: Why Shall We Aim for a Systematic, Empirical Reconstruction of Iconic Standards of Understanding?

Although systematic methodological considerations of the image within the social sciences have just recently taken on a broader format, they are by far not without predecessors. The interrelation of image and language and the dominance of scientific interest for language at the expense of the image since the 1970s has already been adequately revealed (Bohnsack 2003 & 2009; Boehm 1994a & 2004; Müller 2003), this allowing to integrate our interest in iconic standards of understanding into a vivid current research debate: The concept of language-based cognition, i.e., the “linguistic turn” (a term coined by Rorty in 1967) and, to an even larger extent, the results of ethno-methodological conversation analysis (e.g., Sacks 1995; orig. 1964–1972) and sociolinguistics (Labov 1970) led to a resurgence of qualitative methods in the 1970s. At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the

1980s, European social scientists (e.g., Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen 1973) adopted the formulation of implicit standards of communication from researchers in the United States (Garfinkel, Labov, Sacks, to name the figureheads). It is exactly this shift of interest to the very foundation of communication that has made the current state of language-based methods possible.²

Verbal material as it is found in everyday life and is easily evocable for purposes of research turned out to be ideal empirical data, not only for linguistics but rather for a wide range of empirical research interests in the Humanities. Thereby, a central accomplishment of interpretation in empirical research, namely the conversion of empirical facts into text, is no longer necessary. Whenever research interests go *beyond the level of literal meaning*, though, language must be understood in its context (i.e., in its interactive embedding and various articulations, Kallmeyer 1994/5) and—interestingly enough in the context of the presented research interest—in its *imagery*.

The 1980s witnesses an even closer examination of the standards of communication: “Non-standardized methods pertain to natural standards and routines of communication, which must be known and their functionality accepted before data based on them can be interpreted”³ (Soeffner 1989: 60; see also Habermas 1981: 176). We know, for example, that people use the precisely describable format of the *narrative* (compare Sacks 1995; Labov 1970; Kallmeyer and Schütze 1977) for their everyday reconstruction of facts (e.g., Sacks 1995; Sacks et al. 1978; Labov 1970; Przyborski 2004). The format of the narrative, the structures of which are highly reliable, has proved particularly fruitful in this endeavour and has paved the way to a continuously expanding understanding of everyday language as functioning via *formal standards of communication* (e.g. Przyborski 2004; Rosenthal 2005; Bohnsack 2007a).

Moreover, such understanding of everyday standards of communication has greatly contributed to a *canonization and standardization* of qualitative methods. To give an example, the analysis of narratives is based on the *format* of narrative (compare Schütze 1983, 1984 and 1987; Rosenthal 2005; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008: 217). Thus, *qualitative methods* pertaining to the medium of language are already very elaborate (e.g., Ayaß and Bergmann 2006; Flick 2006; Bohnsack 2007a; Buber and Holzmüller 2007; Seal et al. 2007; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008).

Boehm (1994b: 7) has been studying the principles of iconicity since the 1970s. He formulates the demands for a study of images in the following way: “Art history, which may well be referred to as picture studies (Bildwissenschaft), rarely considers the systematic side of its task. A discourse on the image comparable to that on linguistics has as of yet not been developed”. Though the visual studies in the Anglo-Saxon countries and the *Bildwissenschaft* in the German speaking countries

² To put it more poignantly: The linguistic turn even strengthened the human and social sciences’ focus on language and backgrounded the image as a carrier medium of scientific understanding. However, as it also raised the interest in standards of understanding and bred methodologies geared towards and spawned by these standards. Along these lines, we are now prepared to embark on a new trajectory, i.e., to focus on standards of understanding in the medium image.

³ All direct citations not taken from English original literature were translated by the authors.

have begun such a discourse, a systematic orientation towards empirical research with images in the social sciences is still in its very beginnings.

In the light of such premises, we argue for a systematic empirical effort, which seeks to describe the implicit regularities that enable us to communicate on the level of images in our everyday lives. These regularities and standards are an integral part of our everyday actions and, consequently, a form of implicit (Polanyi 1966) or a-theoretic (Mannheim 1982) knowledge. What is more, standards of understanding are also the condition for the validity of theory formation based on empirical reconstruction. The challenge not solely lies in the replicability of scientific studies but in the handling of images as raw data: How can various images actually be compared with one another? To address this challenge, *quantitative methods* standardize the very process of measurement or the process of description. This solution aims at controlling *what* is to be measured or described. *Reconstructive methods*, however, do not try to control the *phenomenon*, but to reconstruct the *conditions of its formation*, e.g., the natural standards of communication and interaction that bring about the phenomenon. Thus, they focus on *how* constructions of reality emerge as what they are. Thus we need to ask just how everyday constructions of reality are brought about on the level of images.

To sum up, we might say that the linguistic turn within the social sciences has stimulated extensive research on standards of communication in the medium of language. The description of these standards has allowed the development of highly elaborated methodologies on the basis of texts. The *systematic, empirical reconstruction of iconic standards of communication*, however, is still in its very beginnings. A scientific understanding of images from a methodological point of view, similar to that we have of language, promises to be a worthwhile research area. In the following, the potential of the image for scientific knowledge will be further explored mainly by asking how image-based methods can be developed by systematically relating fundamental theories to an empirical research endeavour and vice versa.

Paradigmatic Assumptions of Current Methods of Picture Interpretation in Qualitative Research: Iconicity as Text or in Its Own Right?

The insight that language always “indicates” (Heidegger 1962 or 1975: 310) is fundamental to methods and methodologies of reconstructive social research (Garfinkel 1967). The success story of the text paradigm, however, spawned the idea that not only the scientific world but the entire social world is constituted like a text (Oevermann 1986; Garz and Kaimer 1994). In this perspective, meaning is thought to be solely constituted by language. The notion of indexicality—insofar it is taken into consideration at all—never refers to matters *outside* of language. Other qualitative approaches route themselves stronger in action theories, biography theory, and/or the sociology of knowledge. In all these perspectives, the indicating character of language refers to indicating experience and/or action (a thought that has been advanced, poignantly, by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*).

Such different conceptions about the constitution of the social world are reflected in current social scientific methods of picture interpretation. Currently, we can draw

a provisional dividing line between the applied methodical strands within the social sciences, when it comes to working with pictures within an empirical design: Some more or less explicitly adopt the model of a *textuary* social world, whereas others stress the *entelechy of iconicity*, i.e., the iconic quality of pictures and its fundamental importance to our socialization.

This differentiation manifests itself in current methodologies in the following way: If the genuine iconic quality of pictures is considered a part of the constitution of social beings, methodical considerations often take one particularity of pictorial meaning, i.e., the *simultaneous* exposure of its constituents, as their point of departure. If, on the other hand, our social world is presumed to be mainly textual, social scientific methods treat the meaning of pictures as *sequential* in nature. This implicates two structurally different methodic approaches to the interpretation of images: If pictorial meaning is thought to be essentially sequential, the respective (methodological) argument is prone to follow the *gaze*. Consequently, the constitution of meaning is—more or less implicitly—constructed as being sequential in a way similar to the way texts are given meaning as they are read (research studies, e.g., Englisch 1991; Breckner 2003; Leder and Carbon 2006; Münte 2005). If a simultaneous bestowal of meaning is presumed, however, the argument is more likely developed out of the entelechy of the image itself, and simultaneity will be in the foreground of the discussion (research studies see, for example, Loer 1996; Bohnsack 2003, 2007a and 2009; Imdahl 1994)

Many current methodological considerations *and* practical implementations of qualitative picture and film interpretations refer back to the writings of Panofsky (1939, 1947, 1955a, b). In conjunction with Mannheim's documentary method (1964, orig. 1921–1926 and 1982, orig. 1922–1925), Panofsky considers the *picture a window to an epoch*. Why have the works of art historians of the first half of the 20th century only recently become of central importance to cultural and social scientific research (e.g., Müller 2003; Ehrenspeck and Schäffer 2003; Michel 2006a; Mersmann 2004), although many of these works have dealt with matters closely corresponding to their concerns? The larger paradigmatic context provides an answer: The art historian works demand at least a certain emancipation from the model of text.

Being interested in apprehending “underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion” (1974: 30), Panofsky's ambitions are not confined to images as research objects, though; he is equally choosing architecture or music as objects of investigation. As an art historian, Panofsky has been criticized for his “arbitrary attitude” towards pictures. For Imdahl, Panofsky does not sufficiently consider the genuinely pictorial aspects of the image. As a consequence, Imdahl focuses on precisely these aspects (of *icons*) and calls this focus “Ikonik”. He not only attempts to provide a theory of images as being endowed with an iconic sense in its own right, but verifies this theory impressively with his empiric work on images (Imdahl 1994, 1996a and b; Ruck and Slunecko 2008). Imdahl is representative for a concern voiced by the newly emerging “Bildwissenschaft”, i.e., “image science” (Belting 2007b: 20 ff.). Boehm (2007a: 20) formulates this concern in accordance with Mitchell (2007) as “understanding the image as ‘logos,’ as an act, which endows meaning”, i.e., as a “vision of a non-verbal, iconic logos”.

Imdahl's approach demands that we let go of the idea that social meaning is accessible to social scientific research primarily by way of (the) language (model). Rather, iconicity must be regarded as entirely different and yet equally fundamental. This might be the key to a new empirical tradition capable of understanding the social and psychological functioning of the much cited and ubiquitous *flood of images*. If pictures as manifestations of images are considered to have a genuinely iconic structure of meaning, a different sort of methodology than that offered by the language model is called for.

Imdahl's perspective goes along well with a particularly lively stream of advanced qualitative methods in Germany (Bohnsack 2007a und 2009; Loer 1996; Schütze 1983; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008), insofar as always two levels of meaning are differentiated and related in a systematic manner: The content is put in relation to the (interactive) form in which it is presented. In a first step, *what* is said or visible is separated from its interactive counterpart, i.e., from the ways in which this content is *actually conveyed*. These two levels—*what* and *how*—are analyzed by comparing them systematically and methodically. This approach permits the analysis of structures of social life that go beyond intentional, instrumental-rational action without claiming any a priori knowledge of the makeup of these structures. The task of qualitative research is then no longer to simply paraphrase, or classify manifest material; its primary task is no longer to identify objective meaning (“*what* are social facts?”); rather, it assumes a “genetic attitude” (Mannheim 1982), asking *how* is meaning created in everyday social practices. Such *praxeological* perspective (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2002) sheds new light on questions pertaining to the collective production and dissemination of meaning, i.e., how we bring about our social world, and how we bring about understanding and misunderstanding.

This perspective also reaches beyond the dominant paradigm within communication and media studies, i.e., to examine the *content* or the *information* of pictures (for instance in newspapers and films). Paradoxically as it may sound, current (qualitative) media research disregards the medium, at least in a meta-theoretical and methodological sense. (Qualitative) Content analysis, for example,—one of the less genuine but all the more popular methods of communication studies—also does not differentiate between the two levels of meaning mentioned above (Mayring and Gläser-Zikuda 2005). Action theories, which are systematically connected with media theories and transcend rational choice models, are hardly applied altogether. Media theoretical offers in this area, as have been made, e.g., by Latour (1988) or McLuhan (1964), are hardly mentioned in empiric media studies (see Przyborski 2008; for an exception see Slunecko and Przyborski 2009). Communication scientists and constructivists Schmidt and Zurstiege (2007: 32) refer to the blinding out of the medium as the “autology problem”, i.e., a disregard or at least, a gross underestimation of the fact that each medium necessitates specific theoretical and methodological accesses.⁴

⁴ Current considerations on the methodology of (qualitative) media research, thus, display a (meta-) theoretical disregard of the medium. In order to remedy this deplorable condition, one first of all has to sharpen one's central meta-theoretical term—medium; to do so, it is necessary to demarcate one's understanding of medium from the quite blurry use of the term in our daily and practice. In our perspective (comp. also Slunecko and Przyborski 2009) the *medium* rather refers to language and image, whereas we understand newspaper, movie, or radio as *form* according to Luhmann (1998: 196 and 2002: 227).

Where Can We Look for Iconic Standards of Understanding?

Taking the perspective so far elaborated upon seriously the term “medium” refers to picture/image, language, music, film, etc., *each* with its own logic of constituting social meaning (Luhmann 1998: 196). Reaching beyond a layer of meaning which is easily accessible *verbally* (e.g., what we see, what we recognize) makes a shift of perspective necessary. We must not stay with the common sense view of the medium and its content; rather, we ought to allot icons (and language or music, respectively) their particular position in the ensemble of different media. We operate in the iconic medium as well as we operate in the verbal medium. In this perspective, we can focus on the question what vehicles of meaning the picture offers and how we bring about meaning within the iconic medium. These vehicles are supposed to be formal elements. In documentary image interpretation (Bohnsack 2009) such possibilities have already been elaborated. *In principle* (i.e., as the epistemic difference), the documentary interpretation differentiates between the immanent, communicatively generalized meaning and the documentary meaning (Przyborski and Slunecko 2009). While immanent meaning is accessible as a communicatively generalized body of knowledge, documentary meaning must be worked out—using interpretation techniques—as an a-theoretical body of knowledge, which is embedded in everyday practices of action and perception.

When it comes to analyzing pictures, three levels of meaning can be distinguished along Panofsky and the tradition of the documentary method: *Pre-iconographic meaning* (that which can be understood immediately without using narrative knowledge, for instance that there is a woman in the picture and that she is wearing a colorful dress), *iconographic meaning* (that which is understood using narrative knowledge, for instance that Kate Moss is wearing a Pucci dress) and *iconologic meaning* (what does the picture reveal about a culture, for instance: the typical style of fashion photography at the turn of the century, which works with the tension between wealth and glamour on the one hand and physical and mental degeneracy on the other). The first two types of meaning are immanent, the last type represents praxeological, in most cases tacit knowledge, i.e., documentary meaning. To begin with, three *formal elements* of images, which have been referred to as main targets of investigation, are considered *pivotal for the second type of meaning* (Imdahl 1996a; Bohnsack 2007a, b, and 2009; Boehm 2007b):

1. the overall *planimetric* structure, i.e., the formal construction of the picture in-plane
2. the *perspective projection*, i.e. the projection of spatiality and physicality as a manifestation of *Weltanschauung*—in the literal sense of the word
3. the *scenic choreography* as alignment of persons and objects depicted in the picture.⁵

This repertoire should be expanded in the course of further research endeavours, e.g., to include *the relation between acuity and blur*, i.e., indeterminacy as it appears in the picture (Boehm 2007b: 201ff).

⁵ For a deeper elaboration of these three formal elements—planimetric structure, perspective projection, and scenic choreography—see Ruck and Slunecko 2008.

These venues towards image formation are constituents of collective communication processes—quasi beyond a conceptually reflected perception of the image. Empirical research endeavors, which rely on directly asking people on this matter, thereby implicitly assume that we are able to formulate—upon request—our habitualized knowledge (i.e., the knowledge, which structures our everyday practice). If we want to abandon this limited, or even flawed, research strategy, we have to come up with inquiry strategies more adequate for our purpose. In the following sections, we suggest one such strategy: to *provoke pictorial answers to pictures!*

Fashion in Images: A Research Idea

As we have stated from the onset, our main concern is methodological in nature: We want to gain knowledge about standards of understanding in the medium of image in order to use this knowledge for method development. Nevertheless, such concern can only be pursued by way of a concrete research subject. More precisely, a subject is needed which is relevant in everyday life and which is negotiated mainly visually. Fashion and style fulfill both these demands.

Discourse on fashion and clothing easily runs danger of being regarded as superficial⁶ (Soeffner 2005). However, there are classical theories which thoroughly acknowledge fashion's extensive meaning for society—another fact which makes fashion a feasible subject for the methodological interest outlined so far. For example, Simmel's writings (1997a) on fashion from the beginning of the last century examine the role of fashion in collective and individual inclusion and exclusion efforts. Due to its indifference to factual frames of reference in life, fashion's sole motivation is *formal-societal*, i.e., it articulates and thus brings about social order. Almost a hundred years later, Esposito (2004) describes fashion on the basis of Luhmann's *system theory* as an irreducible frame of reference especially because of its paradoxicality. Fashion always means observing observations in everyday life (Soeffner 2005). Such observations are actually of a *visual and concrete nature*. Barnard (2002), interweaving postmodernism, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies, also introduces fashion as an almost ubiquitous collective form of communication. He clearly refuses to understand communication solely along the language model (Barnard 2002: 188) and *ultimately* stresses *visual perception* and, thus, the *iconic dimension* of fashion. The fashion industry rather consistently works with images, even words, mainly brands, sometimes rather function as images.

Although more recent *empirical studies* in part subscribe to these theoretical considerations, they do not include a systematic analysis of pictorial material (e.g., Konrad 2005; König 2007; Ebner 2007). These studies revolve around a reconstruc-

⁶ Compared to other topics represented by mass media such as war and violence, politics and economy, or even (personal) relationships and gender relations, both theories and empirical studies about fashion have largely been neglected in the social sciences. This may in part be due to the fact that fashion is a cultural element through which a large number of societal issues are negotiated. Among these are class and gender relations (e.g. Vinken 2006), the trimming of the human body (e.g. Wegenstein 2006), pictures of adolescence, adulthood, and old age (e.g. Schäffer 2010), and other aspects of cultural decorum (Mühlmann 1998).

tion of the social history of fashion and costumery, and analyses of youth culture (e.g., König 2007). In contrast, we are ultimately interested in fashion and clothing in their social sense, as a manifestation of style and as a process of style development, because style fuses aesthetic and social scientific categories (Mannheim 1982: 86).

Style development and actions related to style are oriented towards an aesthetic sphere. Style is both a part of everyday life and superordinate to it, because the aesthetic sphere is one that transcends pragmatic and instrumental-rational contexts of action.⁷ From an interaction-theoretic as well as an action-theoretic perspective, two poles of style can be distinguished: stereotyped, i.e., a communicative-generalized type of style, mostly found in a commercial context; and a habitual type of style, by contrast, which is always *also* part of everyday styles, and of personal as well as group identities.⁸ The first of these is conceptual-theoretic, the latter an expression of a certain lifestyle, a certain everyday practice, a certain habitus (Bourdieu 1982 & 1985). As a part of social orientations, however, style is already typified and thus to some extent conceptualized, too. It serves the categorization and recognition of social roles and is instrumental-rational since stylistic practices always anticipate being watched by others—even anticipating watching oneself being watched.

The more stable a society, the less people have an urge to reflect upon stylistic orientations. Such orientations operate tacitly in everyday practices. Habitual confidence and an unquestioned sense of belonging to certain milieus and classes are expressed in stylistic confidence and as part of everyday typifications. By contrast, the more mobile and dynamic a society, and thus the more biographic, habitual breaks are to be found, the more style *appears* to be a matter of choice (compare Soeffner 2005). We do, however, not regard this—allegedly individual—choice as a free floating, aesthetic playing with styles in the postmodern sense, but rather as systematic expression of modern, expressively mediated, social milieus that are superimposing each other *within* the individual (see Soeffner 2005; Przyborski 2004: 290; Vinken 2006). Commercial, stereotypical style propositions infringe on this collective, habitual insecurity.

What we propose at this point is to examine the *interrelation of commercial and habitual styles*. Where and how does the *fashion industry* become relevant in *everyday life*? Two starting points for empirical implementation of these interests seem to be promising:

1. *Migration milieus* might be of particular interest, as collective habitual (biographical) breaks are an intrinsic part of the lives of people living in such milieus. These milieus could be contrasted with more *stable milieus* in which the pressure of social mobility is either not necessary or not possible. This later milieu is best represented by middle class families or autochthonal working class families.

⁷ Soeffner (2005) illustrates this non-pragmatic quality of style with “shoes, which can only be sold along with pain killers”. Also compare Simmel 1997b.

⁸ The distinction between a communicative-generalized type of style and a habitual type of style is analytic in nature; both sides are always inherent in an actual style. With Mannheim (1982: 87), we refer to the habitual side of a style, when we see it in its functional relation to a specific contexture of experience; when we refer to the communicative-generalized side of style we rather see the explicit classification of its elements.

2. Next to cultural mobility, *changing gender relations* are worth a closer examination: The research frame that we propose, allows images of women and men to be put under the social scientific lenses. In this regard, it is particularly promising to investigate: groups strongly guided, e.g., by an aesthetic of the slender body, or showing an extreme propensity to *subject the body to fashion* or style prescripts via physical training or plastic surgery.

Both main research targets—to clarify standards of iconic communication (represented by formal elements) and to reconstruct processes of style formation—refer to collective structures. They are thus *best accessible* when the people investigated do have a common experiential ground, which is the case with *real groups*, i.e., groups whose members know each other well (Mannheim 1982; Bohnsack 2007a).

A Concrete Idea for a Research Design

In this section, we develop the research design one step further. We propose to ask real groups to *choose a commercial picture*, which very much appeals to them in regard to *fashion and clothing*. It is important that they consider the picture, which they find out of newspapers, (fashion or lifestyle) magazines, the internet, or other mass media, “cool” or “beautiful” in terms of fashion and clothing. It shall appeal to them as a whole. In a second step, i.e., after the commercial pictures have been provided, the groups would be asked to provide a picture produced by themselves, in which the impression, the mood, those aspects of the commercial picture they consider ‘cool’ etc., are to be rendered, i.e., are to reappear (no matter if they shoot or draw it just for the project or if they provide it from what they already have).

The persons investigated would thus provide the research team with pictures from *two different categories*: one commercial, public picture and one self-produced, private picture. The two types of pictures are to be *connected by the impression and the mood* as these two aspects address primarily those orientations, which cannot be conceptually grasped and are part of the implicit *weltanschauung*. It is important to note that in regard to both types of pictures, the research team is addressing the group as a whole and does not want to elicit pictures from individual group members.

Different *technical abilities and photographic skills* do not impede the analysis of the pictures, as they are simply regarded as another document of the subjects’ everyday practice. In other words, the ability to deal with adverse or to look for favorable conditions, e.g., an alertness, or inattentiveness to technical matters of producing pictures, is already regarded as part of the habitus. Goffman and Bourdieu consider photography a highly compact, focused source for examining organization principles of milieus. Goffman (1979: 10) formulates this in regard to rituals: “The rendition of structurally important social arrangements and ultimate beliefs which ceremony fleetingly provides the sense, still photography can further condense”. Bourdieu (1983), on the other hand, argues from a habitus-theoretical perspective. Habitus serves as a principle both for establishing classifiable forms of practice and for its classification system. The collective dimension of private photography thereby attracts new interest. Habitus brings forth the photographic action of both the

persons depicted and of those depicting—both manifesting themselves in the product. The aesthetics revealed in private photography, thus, turns out to be not at all unsystematic.

Along these lines, we will now develop, how the documentary method meets the meta-theoretical demands that we have developed so far. Moreover, this method has already been successfully applied to interpreting private photos as well as commercial fashion photos (for first analyses see Bohnsack 2007a & 2009). A key principle of this method is the interpretation of formal elements. This step of interpretation will of course be pivotal. The methodic-technical steps of interpretation have already been sketched in the section “Where can we look for iconic standards of understanding?”.

Another key aspect is the systematic comparative analysis. Bohnsack (2008: 56) writes: “The specific structure of meaning of conversation or of a narration, for instance, is made accessible when I comparatively contrast it with alternative courses of conversation or narrations [...]. In the interpretation of pictures, too, we are dependent on horizons of comparison [...]. Access to the interpretation of the formal composition of a picture in its individuality can be gained [...] by contrasting it with other contingent possibilities of composition. These can be designed by experiments of thoughts or—and even more validly—the interpretation can be guided by *empirical* horizons of comparison”. This holds especially true for photos with similar content coming from different milieus. In the proposed scenario this would be fashion and clothing pictures from different milieus.

A picture, though, is only a single cut-out from everyday life. At this point, group discussions help to gain a broader insight and offer the opportunity to estimate the relevance of the meaning and orientation structures, as reconstructed in the analysis of the pictures, for overall milieu typical orientations, habitus and identity constructions. Thus, stimulus-based group discussions with the group-chosen pictures as the stimuli could be a further research step.

It is important that such discussions start with asking *what* can be seen in the picture. This way, the group negotiates questions of style and taste (pertaining to the stimulus material) beyond their intentionality (in contrast, most current research with auto-photography remains within the realm of intentionality, e.g., Noland 2006). The negotiation of style preferences, taste, and habitus is—this way—expressed in the modality of talking (Przyborski 2004). Only the last part of the group discussion should focus on explicit evaluations of the stimulus material. Thus one could compare implicit, *habitual* ways of the reception and negotiation of style with explicitly *reflected* ones. Exmanent questions, i.e., questions relevant from the researchers’ point of view, should only be posed at the end of the discussion, in case they were not touched in its course. The same procedure is to be applied to the private pictures. We suggest to proceed the evaluation of the group discussions completely separate from that of the photographs. Only in a further and concluding step, the results of the two strands of analysis, i.e. the analysis of the pictures and of the group discussions, can be compared systematically.

Throughout the whole research scenario, media reception and picture reception are neither regarded as exclusively intellectual and instrumental-rational processes of recognition nor as perception forms, which are based on individual, intrapsychic factors. As Michel (2006a, b) has shown, reception is part of the habitus. As such,

reception is a practice, beyond concepts and theories; it pertains to a “modus recipiendi” (Michel 2006b: 220). In the group discussions, three levels of interaction are interlaced: the interactions within the groups, the interaction between researchers and groups, and finally the interaction between group members and pictures. This last interaction can be regarded in two different ways: in discussions on private pictures, both the discussion and the pictures represent the *same milieu* (the one represented by the group), the same habitus; discussions on the basis of commercial pictures, however, allow for a juxtaposition of two *different milieus*: the ones represented by the group and the fashion industry. This permits an examination of the relation between commercial and habitual styles.

In the actual research practice, it is crucial to leave the participants of the discussions room to relate to each other so that their discourse swings into the articulation of their common experiential ground. This is important to reconstruct their overall orientation and identity structure. The differentiation between immanent and documentary meaning again guides the two steps of interpretation. While in the first step the communicative-generalized content and its structure is elaborated, the second step focuses on the elaboration of conjunctive orientations as elements of a collective habitus. As in the interpretation of pictures, the analysis of formal elements of composition (here: of the discussion) is key to the second step. Here these elements are, for instance, repetitions, code-switching, interactive modes, the relation between detailed narratives and argumentative types of text (Przyborski 2004).

Collecting data should be carried out by ways of *intensive field research* as well as systematical participant observation and be guided by a retrieval strategy. *Sampling principles* for qualitative methods have first been framed by the *grounded theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Both pictures and group discussions should be evaluated on the basis of the same method, e.g., of the documentary interpretation method, whose basic structure has already been outlined (Bohnsack 2007a; Przyborski 2004; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008: 101 and 271). Though the particular steps of interpretation are different, the research paradigm itself does *not* change. That allows for a comparison of the results from pictures and discussions without an intermediate step and without methodological ‘stray’.⁹

Methodological Impact—Summary

In concluding, we condense the main goals into three theses and briefly refer to the possible impact for methodological developments in the human and social sciences.

1. Formal elements of images/pictures are crucial to everyday standards of iconic understanding: Elaborating a typology which is grasping the relation of private and commercial pictures means to gradually work on the implicit structures of the iconic understanding, which can furthermore be compared along different milieus. The embedding of the iconic understanding in a broader orientation

⁹ A research project based on the research design here outlined has just recently been funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), compare www.iconicom.ac.at

- structure is provided by the results of the group discussions. We hypothesize that the *planimetric structure* could be a semantic vehicle for *belonging and separateness*; the *perspective projection* a vehicle for one's own (resp. for the collective) *positioning in the world*; and the *scenic choreography* for felt and perceived (and this way for the constitution of) *social patterns*.
2. A systematic reconstruction of the way formal elements of images work in the everyday constitution of meaning will help to formalize, guide, and evaluate their application in qualitative social research, i.e., why and how certain steps of picture interpretation must be fulfilled when using pictures as empirical data in the human and social sciences. Moreover, we might see much clearer what kind of research questions might be answered by iconic material.
 3. Within an overall conceptual frame according to which we cannot but constitute meaning within media, looking how social facts and meaning is created within the medium (picture/image) instead of asking for the impact media have on us (and vice versa) is likely to bring forward new aspects of a theory of media reception. The insights we gain from the two different accesses—pictures and group discussions—shall lead to an empirically based theory on how we function as reflecting (as stylistic practices always anticipate being watched by others) actors in the medium picture/image and shed light on the iconic part of our identity constructions.

As long as meaning is considered to be ultimately constituted in the frame of *language and text* and as long as the logic of language is applied to the interpretation of images/pictures, we gamble away promising new venues for method development. Assuming that the “*iconic logos*” is an integral part of our social world results in considerable different methods and techniques of picture interpretation. The acceptance of a fundamental iconic logos is of vital necessity for the reconstruction of *everyday functionality of images*. In our age of digitalization, bringing about ever more rapid medial developments and a radical abundance of pictorial stimuli, the systematic research of iconic semantics must be of particular interest to the social sciences. We need methods in which the entelechy of the medium “image” is already inscribed. In order to understand iconic standards of communication, we as social scientists have to learn to *think iconically* in our methods. Only with the help of such methods can we gain an understanding of orientations, longings, and anxieties of our time that are often silently conveyed by images.

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