Over the past decade, social media may have triggered unparalleled change in the fabric of society, its infrastructures, and the lives of many people. The media themselves are constantly evolving also. The following text analyses the most important changes in social media with a clear focus on new phenomena in visual culture and their effect on the everyday reality of societies. It further discusses the consequences of new formats, and the way companies are increasingly held to aesthetic-ethical standards.

This article is based on a first synopsis in the English language of the book series “Digitale Bildkulturen” published by Verlag Klaus Wagenbach. It has been written for and in coordination with the Foresight Academy.

1. The Story so Far

In cultural history the production and presentation of pictures was almost always linked to economic and technical conditions; more than anything else, the existence of pictures was governed by shortages. This has become more apparent since digitization and the innovations it entails have, for the first time in the history of humanity, made pictures easy to produce and disseminate.

From the perspective of cultural history, therefore, modern times amount to a revolutionary upheaval the implications of which are only gradually emerging.
But why were pictures an exclusive matter for so long?

1) Even the simplest pictures require materials like pigments, supporting structures such as stone or wood, and tools such as paintbrushes or engraving tools that were not available to all and sundry.

2) If a picture was to be more permanent, transportable or possess certain aesthetic qualities, the number of options regarding materials and techniques was more limited.

3) Apart from this, in almost all cases the production called for practical skills and knowledge, in more challenging cases even skills calling for a certain talent that could not be learned.

4) In addition, the production process was often rather time-consuming.

5) As long as there were no reproduction techniques and only very few people could travel to the place where a picture was located, the impact of the picture was very restricted.

Hence, the history of pictures is also predominantly a history of technical progress that gradually contributed to an increase in the number of pictures, to their heightened mobility and to the fact that they could be produced faster and appreciated by larger numbers of people. Yet, it was not until digitization and the internet as well as smartphones that these (five) limiting factors were for the most part overcome.
In political propaganda, on postage stamps and in advertising, a party wielding institutional or financial power makes resources available to others in order to produce and disseminate pictures, while exerting an influence on what those pictures depict. When analyzing a picture it is therefore always important to take into account who enabled the picture and which interests were involved in its production.

For the longest period in cultural history, however, in many cases no pictures at all of events, persons or large societal groups were passed on to posterity. It was not until techniques for the production and dissemination of pictures were more readily available that parties wielding less power and less wealth were able to manifest their view of the world or see larger numbers of pictures at all.

From that point in time, however, increasingly vociferous criticism of pictures was voiced publicly. Pictures were accused of being sensationalist and provocative, of targeting instincts and of being suitable for the uneducated only.

This was top-down social criticism, and it was formulated in variations in all mass media, from illustrated magazines and comics to film and television. Over the last 20 years, in the course of digitization - as a result of the internet and social media - this criticism has become even more vociferous.

However, the “flood of images” metaphor also reveals the fear and fascination felt by many when they realize what the cavalcade of images means for each one of us and for society as a whole. Will a world of digital images be a completely different world to the one we inhabited beforehand?

Such criticism was first and foremost the reaction of those who feared that their power would wane when they were no longer able to fully control the dissemination of pictures.
2. What Does Digitization Change?

Fear and fascination also arise because numerous newer developments are still at their initial stages so that it is often still unclear where they will lead and which implications they involve.

What is clear is that images have additional functions.

In particular, they serve communication purposes, i.e. direct communication among people, increasingly like speech. Politics is conducted, identities are built, careers established and destroyed, with the aid of images. Long-established concepts of authorship, production and reception, of individuality and collectivity, the notions of public and private, are undergoing significant changes.

The power of images will most likely intensify even further in future, in which respect moving images will become ever more important vis-à-vis static images.

In view of new genres and new functions of images that profoundly influence one’s thinking and actions, enhanced competence in handling images and the relevant contexts is necessary.

There are several leitmotifs spanning the various issues, which come to the fore and play a role again and again. It is, for example, important to appreciate that a public sphere has evolved on social media that in parts is very different in nature from analogue forms of the public sphere. In the digital realm almost everything leaves traces, is stored and can have consequences many years later. This means that, on the one hand, the digital public sphere involves more risk than the analogue sphere, but, on the other hand, it is seemingly safer and less restricted since it does not require the physical presence of the active parties and allows them to hide behind staged scenarios.

What is particularly significant and far-reaching is that images on social media are not just passively viewed, but, rather, are actively re-used, adapted and transformed.

For this reason, in 2019 we introduced the series of books “Digitale Bildkulturen” (Digital Image Cultures). It is published by Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, four volumes are published each year in which experts provide succinct information about a phenomenon.
They are highly mobile and, like all digital data files, highly fluid, meaning that they can be modified thousands of times and in mere seconds, can be adjusted to new contexts by a myriad of different parties, as proven by the success of internet memes.


“The genesis of certain internet memes [...] often lies in the dark. And the question of how they function when they’re there has been a favourite topic of discussion among marketing advisors and media academics for the last 10 years. For internet memes are [...] extremely powerful attention machines. [...] The aspect of imitation and transformation is necessary in order to speak of an internet meme. The mere sharing or dissemination of content alone merely defines its virality - an internet meme requires three additional aspects: Reproduction, re-combination and reference. [...] More recent in this form of network culture is, especially, the fact that it enables active participation in contrast to the previously leading mass media. [...] The democratization of publishing resources has given a voice primarily to those who, during the 20th century (and definitely during earlier centuries), were never able to express themselves in this manner.”

This means that, all in all, decisions as to which images come into circulation (this applies not only to memes) will be made more democratically than in the past. Admittedly, due to algorithms employed by platform operators who are motivated by financial interests, not every activity on a social network has the same chance of being visible; however, as many people as never before now have the chance of visual self-determination. This specifically concerns people from previously rather “invisible” social strata, i.e. people from minorities or from socially weaker social strata, people with handicaps or those living in difficult circumstances.
Nowadays we know exactly what an asylum camp in Moria looks like, we are well-informed about current protests and demonstrations in far-flung countries and autocratic states. Images and videos of force exerted by governments and others can go viral instantaneously - with consequences like in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd, which triggered an unforeseen dynamic in the “Black Lives Matter” movement. Hence, now more than ever, visibility is a decisive power factor.


“If one goes out onto the street nowadays in order to demonstrate, a smartphone is an essential piece of equipment; as in other areas of life, recording the events in photos and videos is part of it. The images shot are [...] uploaded to social networks, commented upon and shared. This is how people protesting all over the world inform their networks about their political activism and disseminate their own views of the events in close-up.

Often the aim is to contradict the official reporting because, for example, it disregards, fails to document, downplays or denounces political movements that are critical of the regime. This is true especially in repressive countries. The camera on a mobile phone has advanced to become possibly the most significant protest tool.”

However, other content is also shared and thus made visible to the public: In the meantime, influencers allow their followers to see not only their privileged lives with gorgeous clothes and amazing vacations, but fatal accidents and catastrophes as well.

The expression of all kinds of emotions is now a topic on social media; as customary in historical genre paintings, the emotions are specially packaged, the difference being that in the past artists decided what would be shown and how, whereas nowadays the persons concerned determine themselves which image of them is to be displayed.
This generates new types of images, new codes, new conventions. In this respect, feminism especially has made considerable inroads and is nowadays more successful with hashtags and - primarily - a persuasive image strategy rather than with theories and manifestos. The fact that, for the first time, women can decide themselves how they are portrayed, generates not only more diverse bodily images, but also functions as an empowerment strategy: Heightened visibility leads to improved equality.

In view of the algorithms used to program platforms such as Instagram, only those who succeed in creating images that, thanks to the attention they garner, are frequently liked and commented on, will succeed in accessing numerous feeds, thus attracting even more attention.


“Nowadays, however, the decisive point is the possibility for women to establish and maintain networks on social media and to disseminate their images themselves. Dominant aesthetic standards and image motifs characterizing contemporary culture were developed by women. Women have also succeeded in disseminating their pictorial worlds and motifs rapidly in advertising, in fashion and in art. The images of feminist network artists and the image strategy of female activists on social media have therefore contributed significantly towards the popularization of feminism and body positivity in general.”

A recurring, important topic is, therefore: Self-determination of images made of a person that are put into circulation, as well as self-determination on the basis of the images one uses for communication purposes.

This also means that people have to consider matters more carefully than was the case in the past, as to when and how they wish to become visible.

The more people have the opportunity to be visible, the more intense is the competition for attention. The reason is that as much as the options have increased to make oneself and one’s interests public, the less time is available in order to take note of everything that is published and posted.

The competition for attention requires contributions and especially images that are particularly witty, daring or amazing, that attract attention through a punch line or a high degree of improbability, or that discuss an existential topic.
SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS / 2. What Does Digitization Change?

There is therefore intense competition for creative and ever-new formats, which also favors the tendency of further enhancing individual aesthetic characteristics in order to guarantee the desired attention. Numerous filters and masks ensure that contents are alienated in a manner that is gross or bizarre, particularly amusing or sweet, but always an exaggeration.

It is only in rare cases that manipulated images are considered lies or fakes, and thus a problem. Rather, manipulated images function as rhetorical means intended to emotionalize, stimulate, polarize or offer protection against misunderstandings. Specifically because, in the meantime, images so often serve predominantly communicative purposes, like language they aim to shape the exchange of views among people such that people feel comprehensively addressed and, therefore, sense stronger ties with their counterparts.

This communicative function of images becomes particularly clear where selfies are concerned, one of the earliest and most important genres of images on social media. As regards selfies, design using the means of facial expression and gestures is often not sufficient to achieve adequate sway and attention. For this reason numerous image editing programs and digital filters were developed specifically in order to set the stage for selfies. Make-up art is also experiencing a revival; growing numbers of people are developing practical skills in the prettifying of their faces and are investing time and creativity in order to garner acknowledgement and feedback.

Those who view such images are aware that manipulation is involved - yet they prefer these images to genuine, unfiltered images: because they seek entertainment and diversification, or in order to be informed about at topic or a statement in a pithier, more pointed manner.
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The options of analogue and digital design help them to establish better and closer contact with others, to articulate themselves in a differentiated manner that makes an impression. To this extent, the heavily edited images also contribute to the visual self-determination of people.


“The fact that one deliberately packages facial expression and gestures while conscious that one becomes an image causes a natural expression to become a creative achievement. For this reason people often make an artificial impression on selfies. To the extent it becomes an image, their face becomes an artefact. [...] However, becoming an image means not only working on one’s facial expression or orienting that expression towards a role model, but also to visualize and enhance one’s own visibility. To be pointedly visible is equal to orienting oneself towards one’s counterparts: towards those who will see the selfie.”

Has there long been the right to one’s own image in the legal sense, for which reason portrait photos may not be published without authorization (unless one is a person of contemporary history), so nowadays one is often the author of one’s own image, too - not just where selfies are concerned. Women are no longer simply exposed to the gaze of male artists and photographers, members of minorities no longer have to comply with the pictorial conventions of the societal majority. Contrary to the longest era in history, images are no longer the medium of the controlling classes.
What is the Way Forward?

“The right to one’s own image” has therefore become far more important that it used to be. It is likely that the topic will continue to grow in significance in the near future based on the first years of experience on social media and a wide range of adventures.

One may, for example, expect images in advertising and stock photography to be produced without depicting genuine people because this is too costly and leads to various regulatory grey zones.

Roland Meyer: Gesichtserkennung. Vernetzte Bilder, körperlose Masken, engl. Facial recognition. Linked images, disembodied masks, Berlin 2021, p. 59 et seq.: “Every time thispersondoesnotexist.com is called up, a new image of a human face appears that is extremely difficult to distinguish from a normal portrait photo, but which in fact is the product of a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN). [..] Such fake portraits have also appeared on corporate websites, for example, where they suggest a larger team than the one that exists, likewise as profile photos on Facebook accounts that conduct mass dissemination of pro-Chinese propaganda. [..] The same technologies that revolutionized face recognition serve in the meantime to produce a constant stream of new digital faces without bodies. One may expect the information ‘this person does not exist’ in relation to growing numbers of images on the internet.”
SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS / 3 What Is the Way Forward?

However, it is also likely that people will increasingly use such fake images in order to protect themselves from being too visible for surveillance cameras and face recognition software, or from being susceptible to control in unwelcome situations. Hence, visual self-determination also includes the option of not always being identifiable.

The public sphere of social media is exhausting also because one can become aware at any time of gossip about oneself or one’s milieu being spread in other circles. It is often said that everyone would prefer to remain within his/her own filter bubble and only become aware of what people with similar opinions are saying, but this is only half the truth. The other half is that there are growing numbers of people who spread what is going on in other filter bubbles, which is just as public as the gossip about others in one’s own filter bubble. All disparaging jokes and nasty comments that previously remained within the circle of “armchair politicians” will reach the ears of those about whom they are made. This generates negative emotions on both sides, poisons the climate in society and calls for new social standards in future.

If one is not among a trusted group of people, even among good friends and in homogeneous groups, one has to exercise markedly more care and consideration online than in the past. However, some parties view this as a definite restriction of their freedom of speech. Why should one no longer be allowed to say certain words? Why should it no longer be allowed to display certain caricatures or memes? Why could certain images be punishable under criminal law?

It is already becoming clear that many new and severe conflicts will arise where larger numbers of more diverse people than in the past play an active role in the public sphere - and specifically in the public sphere of social media. This new diversity is exhausting for all those involved. For those who previously controlled the public sphere, it means having to relinquish part of their power and visibility. They have to learn to share and to be more considerate than in the past. Otherwise, as “old white men” who have not recognized the signs of the times and who stubbornly cling on to their privileges, they will make themselves highly unpopular.

Daniel Hornuff: Hassbilder. Gewalt posten, Erniedrigung liken, Feindschaft teilen, engl. Hate images. Posting violence, likening humiliation, sharing hostility, Berlin 2020, p. 43:

“Hate does not automatically provoke hate back. [...] In order to take hold it depends on the willingness of others. The others determine whether or not hate unfolds its effect. In this respect, hate is a communicative act that achieves its aim only if it encounters people whose form of response is already allowed for in its intention. In other words: Hate is ineffective in the absence of a reaction that presupposes the successful communication of hate.”
SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS / 3 What Is the Way Forward?

It is to be expected that in future people will react more sensitively to anything they consider to be a breach of their visual self-determination, and also that they increasingly possess the technology to push back against such breaches. [Bild 28] Above all, however, people will attempt more often and more intensely to influence the public image of everything that directly or indirectly concerns them. They will increasingly perceive followers of their accounts as a power to be deployed in order to exert pressure or trigger campaigns.

Brands and products that are staged with tremendous image effort are therefore considered to be impolite or even aggressive in circles with a substantial affinity to social media. They also seem old-fashioned because they are structured according to the logic of traditional mass media: as broadcasters that consider the consumers to be recipients. In contrast, they should be drawn up to create incentives, to be used in different ways if at all possible, and to be interpreted in different ways. An image should therefore be created so that it is inspiring, stimulates one's own further developments and leaves customers enough scope for their self-determination.

This is especially important for enterprises that are already gaining the impression that their clients are more confident than ever. It is therefore essential to examine with regard to everything that becomes public - as a product, advertising or an image campaign - what might trigger a shit storm because somebody else feels discriminated against or insulted because one's own conduct was overly naive or insensitive.

What is more important, however, is to appreciate that the image of a brand is shaped less by the enterprise itself or its advertising agencies and more by influencers and other users on social media.

The heightened self-confidence of many people and their higher demands made of self-determination mean they seek sufficient scope in order to be able to associate their own needs, expectations, experiences and views of the world with a certain product.

Products should be like ‘Art Toys,’ i.e. like a genre of artefacts positioned somewhere between art, fashion and design that have become highly successful in recent years as a result of the social media boom - especially on Instagram - and that have been disseminated globally through brands such as KAWS or Friendswithyou. Their creators do not ascribe a fixed meaning to such ‘Art Toys’ and do not invest in significant image efforts, but, rather, endeavour to work with shapes, motifs and effects that do have an impact but without dictating a certain experience. The same ‘Art Toy’ provides consolation to one person and awakens protective instincts in another - it is variously considered to be sweet, amusing or forlorn.
The greater the extent to which a person is able to determine the meaning of something, the greater is the chance that he or she will forge a close emotional link to that object. For this reason ‘Art Toys’ have numerous fans who initially were mere followers of artists or designers.

The manner in which they handle ‘Art Toys’ and integrate them into their lives, ascribe a meaning to them, actually makes the objects toys. The image of an ‘Art Toy’ is often very varied and disparate - but the item is the product of its fans. The image does not originate from the author of the product, it is a kind of fan fiction.

Especially in branches devoted to material products - garments, accessories, cosmetics, devices and food products - it will become increasingly important in future to take up the opportunities offered by the fact that customers are followers and followers become fans. Through their projections and interpretations, they shape the brand and its products while simultaneously realizing their own ambitions of self-determination. They are the most independent and at the same time the staunchest customers.
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