

American Icons

The Genesis of a National Visual Language

Benedikt Feldges



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American Icons

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction	1
PART A	
Icons in the Museum	7
1 Collecting Pictures	9
2 Collecting Language	18
PART B	
Kaleidoscopic Spectacles	23
3 Pictorial Historiography	25
4 The Insignia of the Spectacle	33
5 Pictorial Genres	41
6 The Narrative of the News Spectacle	57
7 Iconic Lecterns	75
8 The Historicity of the Documentary's Imagery	96
PART C	
Hyperrealism	101
9 Pictorial Supremacy	103

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
10	The Icon of Joe Friday: The Moral in the <i>Dragnet</i>	117
11	The Icon of Lucy: Queen of Television Comedy	130
12	The Icon of Edward R. Murrow: Master of “the Control Room of Studio 41”	143
13	Walter Cronkite: Court Reporter of the Spectacle	156
14	Muhammad Ali: Champion of the Screen	169
15	Premodernism	181
	APPENDIX	187
16	Four Codes of Visual Language	189
17	Notes on the Syntactic Function of the Four Codes	216
18	Notes on the Pragmatics of Visual Language	221
19	Glossary: Four Codes of Visual Language	232
	<i>Notes</i>	239
	<i>Film and Television Sources</i>	263
	<i>Bibliography</i>	269
	<i>Index</i>	279

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Introduction

The ascent of pictorially based communication constitutes one of the most intriguing historical phenomena of the twentieth century. The still picture in newspapers and magazines, as well as the moving picture of the cinema, rose triumphantly from the shadow of the letter that had governed Western civilization for the past several centuries. By midcentury, with the maturation of broadcast technology, pictures were spreading cultural and social communication in a steady, unbroken stream, day in and day out.

From the very beginning, broadcasting's novel pictorial format offered every American citizen with access to a television set the intriguing potential to see any possible sight at any given moment. If this potential could be realized, historians also would have the luxury simply to resee the various manifestations of American life of the past decades. Instead of having to reconstruct past events or circumstances, a historian could simply ride the "video time machine."

A historical documentary that offers to take viewers back in time to (re)witness more than half a century of American history is merely continuing to extend powers and privileges similar to those touted at the very beginning of the implementation of television broadcast technology. On his first public affairs show *See It Now*, in 1951, renowned radio journalist Edward R. Murrow introduced "the control room of Studio 41," a television studio configuration stacked with monitors supposedly able to mirror all relevant life occurring at any moment, anywhere in the nation. With such a technological panopticum, reality as it unfolds could be recorded, "controlled," and then relayed to television audiences.

Today, it is the Museum of Television and Radio in New York that offers its visitors a viewing room stacked with monitors, now designated to mirror the reality of the past. In this panopticum of history, the promise of broadcast technology to capture reality with photographic accuracy also carries a hint of the mythical notion of time travel. In order to assess this promise, we need to ascertain what is seen in historical pictures. Contemplating an early photograph of John F. Kennedy taken, for example, at his twentieth birthday, the professional as well as the amateur historian can glimpse the later president in pictorial contours framed long before his political career

2 *American Icons*

took off. In the place of referencing the historical reality of an unknown young man on his twentieth birthday, as it must originally have done, the photograph seems to have changed, and now projects the contours of an icon that is known to millions and familiar even to those who were not even born at the time when it first became a household image. Instead of the historian, it is thus the icon that travels back in time, thereby changing both the reality reference of the photograph and the significance of the pictorial shape at its center.

The icon and the man who provides its contours seem to hold two different positions in history. Such detachment between the man and his appearance contradicts ingrained habits of seeing, because it suggests not only different timelines, but also differently evolving trajectories of significance: instead of reflecting the biography of a historical personality, the picture suggests another narrative, a pictorial one that accounts for the journey of the two-dimensional icon on its way to the spectator's eyes. This pictorial history would consequently account for the significance of an icon first according to the chronology in which spectators came to know and to understand the pictorial term, based on the context provided by previously seen pictures.

In hindsight, so to speak, it is possible to diverge from the traditional mode of seeing and to develop a new understanding of pictorial broadcast media. To do so, it is necessary to dissolve the media's photographically grounded basis in reality, and to conceive of the pictorial shapes on screen as symbols, the significance of which develops in the context of communication. Already in the early 1960s, Reuven Frank, renowned producer of television documentaries and former president of NBC's news division, knew that "the picture is not a fact but a symbol."¹ In his words the screen turns "a real child and its real crying" into a "symbol for all children"; thus real people in front of a camera are transformed into what Nelson Goodman described as a "symbol system," and their agency is replaced by convention as the driving force of signification.²

In pursuing the factor of historicity in such a pictorial symbol system, a new dimension of visual communication can be explored. As indicated in the example of Kennedy, visual symbols of people, called "icons," acquire characteristic contours through repetition that distinguish them from others. Over time and depending on the degree of exposure they are granted on the public screen, such icons consequently also aggregate semantic depth. Similarly, symbols of objects, such as the Golden Gate Bridge or a bottle of Coca-Cola, henceforth called "emblems," accumulate a pictorial biography with new layers of meaning added by each pictorial narrative in which they appear, be it an ad, a movie, or news show. These pictorial narratives successively aggregate to form sophisticated pictorial terms, which together form a vocabulary. The concept of collective visual literacy, elsewhere described as a knowledge base that enables comprehension of visual information, can thus more specifically be described as a collective

knowledge of icons, emblems, and other generic visual symbols.³ In order for such a collective, even national vocabulary of visual terms to be generated and cultivated, two conditions need to be met: Pictures must be disseminated to a large, nationwide audience, and they must repeatedly feature a number of icons, emblems, and other generic symbols, so that audiences can recognize and share in the process of developing their significance.⁴ Because the broadcast medium came to surpass all previous media in the fulfillment of these two conditions, it can thus be seen as the main generator of national visual literacy.

Starting with a tour through New York's Museum of Television and Radio, this study explores how television pictures and their main visual symbols have become collectibles not only in the mind of American spectators, but also in the showrooms of museums, which present them as national heritage. In comparing the historical, the artistic, and the economic value of broadcast pictures, and in demonstrating how they are organized according to a collector's logic, which first develops categories and then highlights the special among more common collectibles, the study comes to consider the particular, often spectacular status that some icons develop within national visual literacy.

The subsequent analysis of the television documentary *History of the 20th Century* proposes an etymological ride through visual literacy collected over more than half a century of American broadcasting. The nine volumes of the documentary itself comprise a collection of prominent icons, such as Richard Nixon, Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, Lyndon B. Johnson, James Stewart, Jacqueline and John F. Kennedy, and so forth. Its vocabulary of pictorial terms thus offers an opportunity for reflecting on the visual literacy of the addressed audience and on the historical trajectories of its main icons and emblems. In focusing on the broadcast spectacle as one of the most important generators of national icons, the etymological approach to the documentary's (re)dissemination of pictures further attempts to characterize their status. The symbolic dimension of visual literacy that balances typical with atypical elements of meaning, as it is confronted by "unified," "controversial," and "exotic" icons, is particularly highlighted. This process of typifying visual symbols continues with every new exchange of icons, including their staging by the documentary in the limelight of history.

Having addressed the intriguing phenomenon of visual symbols moving back and forth in time, the discussion moves to their ability to shift without apparent boundary between fictional and nonfictional pictures.⁵ If Marilyn Monroe's icon matured in the artistic world of fiction and Edward Murrow's was cultivated in the realm of journalism, what then is the pictorial message conveyed when both visual symbols meet in the same frame? Can such a two-dimensional sight be considered fictional or nonfictional? And what is the meaning when John Wayne, the hero of so many Hollywood movies, appears on the stage of Lucille Ball's television show "playing himself"? Is he then (en)acting his fictional or his nonfictional icon or may it even be said

4 *American Icons*

that his icon has begun to speak on its own, based on its collective status in national visual literacy?

Early television's circulation of celebrities of all provenances is discussed as an "iconic carousel" that propelled a discourse of "hyperrealism."⁶ Through case studies of the iconic careers of early television celebrities, such as Jack Webb in *Dragnet*, Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*, the two journalists Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite, as well as sportsman Muhammad Ali, the television medium's inventive ways of accentuating the reality reference of its screen is scrutinized from various angles. Not so much an artistic style as an overpowering discourse, the medium's hyperrealism is finally characterized as a historical mindset that put belief in the technology of broadcasting before the highly symbolic nature of its picture-based language.

The seamless ease with which television claimed from the beginning to handle the fictional and the nonfictional picture within one screen curiously conflicts with the basic notion of pictorial communication. From Marshall McLuhan's famous observation of the medium being the message to Ann Mary Doane's resolute statement that the "only context for television is itself—its own rigorous scheduling," many scholars have noticed television's predisposition for logical contradictions, but to this day there is little consensus on how to diagnose it.⁷ The approach developed here is the first one to concentrate almost exclusively on the pictorial base of television. It shows how this pictorial base develops into a particular kind of symbolic language, and how these symbols acquire historically (diachronically) typified significance, which has the power to engulf any other content presented on screen. Photographically recorded reality may certainly provide helpful pieces of information to the historian, but only when the external context can be reconstructed on site, as done, for example, with the famous "Zapruder film" of President Kennedy's assassination.⁸ Onscreen, such pictures, including those that display the reconstruction of the historical pictures' creation, replace the external context with a communicative one, which constructs significance based on the intention of those conveying content, as well as the understanding of those receiving it. Trying to extract content from the pictures' original reality reference, which was in one way or another at odds with the transmitters' intentions, enmeshes the historian in speculations that can never be confirmed in front of a television set. For this reason, the pragmatic solution is first of all to search for the intention of those who present us with pictorial content. This approach to pictorial communication, however, requires not only positioning oneself behind the back of the "evil demon of the picture" (as Jean Baudrillard called the photographic anchor in reality), but also facing the task of identifying traces that transmitters have left in the pictures' content.⁹

To better locate and describe the communicative transmitter-receiver context of pictures, a model of a split pictorial transmittership is introduced and developed throughout the study. Following Barbara Zelizer's

observations on the collective nature of authorship in television news, the model proposes to differentiate between creating a picture and presenting it to spectators.¹⁰ The act of taking a photograph often has its own story, one that can sometimes even seem to contradict the mediated content, as in the shot of the famous flag “raising” at Iwo Jima, which actually depicts a moment when the American soldiers were taking the flag down. This act of picture making is also often accomplished by a different person than the one who selects the picture for presentation to an audience.¹¹ The act of presentation also has its own history, which always involves selection and a decision made in anticipation of a particular audience. While the first act already infuses significance based on the decision to use a camera and to select the shot, translating a three-dimensional view into a two-dimensional frame, the second act performs the further adjustment to a communicative context, designating the shot’s significance to be received by an actual audience. As such, this second act of presentation metaphorically expresses the gesture of pointing with the index finger, which gesture has the ability to emphasize pictorial aspects that were not necessarily intended or evident when the shot was created.

In differentiating these two acts of transmittership, it thus becomes possible to locate a shift: from a coincidental production of significance that is still very close to reality, to an intentional significance produced whenever pictures are presented to spectators. If, for example, an amateur video captures a scene such as a plane crash, the coincidental aspect of these pictures—which may also help in reconstructing what happened—is turned into intentional communication, when a television producer selects and edits the pictures in anticipation of his audience’s interest in the message and/or in the pictorial spectacle of the scene. Thus, according to the relation between the two components of split transmittership, the pictures will be worked into different categories. For example, there are those more anonymous pictures that have lost touch with the intention of their creators, as is often the case in the broadcast spectacle, and those for which the act of creating and presenting is done by one and the same person, as is often the case with family photography.

In order to pinpoint content in a picture, however, a minimal consensus is required as to how such content is coded (semantics), how it can be combined to form a message (syntactics), and how it adapts to the particular character of those involved in the exchange (pragmatics). If the transmitter-receiver context of pictures provides the first step in shifting pictorial meanings and significance from unmediated to mediated origins, the second step concerns the conventional forces of signification that arrange the two-dimensional shapes into comprehensible pictorial narratives. Combining these forces in the concept of the visual sign, the appendix offers a theoretical outline of how a sign-based logic can be applied to pictures, which always feature novel visual characteristics in novel visual contours. In proposing four principles or codes of visual language, a model is introduced that synthesizes

6 *American Icons*

previous attempts at defining visual signs, such as the work of Umberto Eco, and provides the foundation for defining icons and emblems as conventionalized terms of a language that matures over time.¹² The model is summarized in a kind of glossary at the end of the appendix. It is intended to close a gap in modern theory through defining the pictorial entities needed to understand visual literacy as based on a differentiated vocabulary. Only with this model in place can research be made into the terms' historicity, and thus can a novel type of pictorial etymology be investigated.¹³

The research into the discourse of hyperrealism is thus complemented with the exploration of a new logic for pictorial communication, at the core of which a new understanding of icons emerges. Icons were generally defined by Charles Sanders Peirce as signifying based on their resemblance to a model in reality ("iconicity"); as Umberto Eco noted, this iconicity can never be complete. Here, the factor of iconicity is applied to the process of "iconization," whereby a sign is developed with enough visual characteristics to be recognized in another picture.¹⁴ This small but influential shift in their definition serves as the starting point for comprehending the icons on screen not so much as an "imagined community," but as the material manifestation of the networking of American society via the national idiom of a sophisticated visual language.¹⁵

Part A

Icons in the Museum

1 Collecting Pictures

Every day hundreds of thousands of pictures are broadcast by any given television channel. At the end of a year, a decade, or even a century, the number of pictures produced by American television alone reaches a dimension that is difficult to comprehend. Yet, such mass production appears to have little impact on the commercial value or the cultural status of the broadcast picture. After only four decades of broadcasting, faster than for many art forms, television has made its way to the museum. Dignified as a national treasure by the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago or by the marble halls of the Museum of Television and Radio in New York, those billions of broadcast pictures of the twentieth century thus add up to compare in some ways with other, distinct art forms.

Evading the ordinary in spite of their overwhelming number, broadcast pictures seem to retain their cultural and commercial significance in the face of time. Nostalgic retrospectives, historical documentaries, candlelight biographies, entertaining year-end reviews, daily CNN snippets of what happened on “this day, this century”—pictorial history on television has become popular enough to sustain its own genres, even its own channels. With the History Channel, A&E, TLC, ESPN Classic Sports, or Nickelodeon, the media has ultimately institutionalized historical pictures within its daily flow of visual entertainment and information.

In discovering its past through reusing its own reels and tapes, television’s approach to history differs vastly from that of the movie industry, which has developed its own brand of historical imagery. Unlike film, which uses artistic imagery as dramatic setting, as in the highly decorated Steven Spielberg productions *Schindler’s List* and *Saving Private Ryan*, television most often proposes viewing the past in the much more direct fashion of restaging old photographs or rerunning old reels. Trying less to find a new pictorial language for past worlds than to borrow the documentary’s aim of showing it “how it really was,” the old pictures are deployed as if history were an unchanging property. What sustains this phenomenon of “visual history” on television, it appears, is its ability to stir curiosity. The exotic views into a two-dimensional past, in light of the mythical promise to see history with

one's own eyes, seem destined to find the interest of large audiences, thus rejuvenating their commercial value.

By the late seventies and early eighties of the last century, most major networks had begun to invest in state-of-the-art archives, allowing them access to historical pictures whenever needed. Before the big networks discovered the full economic potential of pictorial archives, however, the reels and tapes of three decades of broadcasting were left scattered in the cellars of producers, local stations, and a handful of private collectors. It is hardly a coincidence that Fred MacDonald, a renowned scholar of television history, holds one of the most substantial private collections of television sources.¹ Originally compiling the Chicago-based archive for his academic research, which resulted in several major works on the history of American television, MacDonald retired from teaching in favor of maintaining and enhancing his archive for commercial purposes. The lucrative sale of a shot of Priscilla Presley to the locally produced Oprah Winfrey show, which needed the footage overnight, became the kernel of his business. In the 1990s, the demand for historical footage allowed ABC's Video Source to charge a producer a minimum of \$600 per minute of video. Retooling the reels of the past for the present has indeed become a profitable business.

Such commodification of historical broadcast pictures presents a number of problems to those interested in an academic approach to the visual past of the nation. First of all, unlike art historians, scholars of history are not really used to working with sources that have maintained or even increased their value over the years. History should be of current relevance and could possibly be popular, but the case of television appears extreme on both counts. Furthermore, the sheer quantity of historical pictures is baffling to the selection process and this problem of access is complicated further by the excessive value of the source material, particularly if a scholar needs to obtain copies for detailed analysis. And beyond all this lies the question of the nature of these ephemeral broadcast pictures.

What exactly is it, after all, that allows these electronic pictures to generate, despite their mass, time and again, the power to capture the eye and to establish their social and economic significance? By comparison to art, the mass of television pictures defies Walter Benjamin's famous bond between the originality of an art work and its "aura," since the reels can be copied, rerun and resampled without apparent loss of significance.² A preliminary hypothesis concerning the particular aura of the broadcast picture involves the following assumption: Since any of the billions of broadcast pictures can hardly beat the ordinary on each single occasion, the mass must involve a measurement of controlled accessibility and selection that regulates which shot is special and which only serves to contrast with the extraordinary. It is thus presumed that not all broadcast pictures have an aura of their own, but all, or to the least those that are not forgotten, are woven into relations that together contribute to the aura of each single shot. Such a web of contrasting relations would thus not only involve those pictures sequenced

in a narrative that highlights the extraordinary sight, but also a large pool of absent pictures, with associative characteristics provided by producers and spectators alike. Thus the significance of one television picture would be engaged through a process of collecting, sorting, and arranging many pictures, which, ordered in relations of similarity and difference, provide the basis for a purposeful selection of those characteristics able to attract the gaze of large audiences and to inspire their interest. In this mode, the extraordinary pictures thrive on those in the background, and vice versa, thus furnishing each other on any given occasion with significance and aura. The hypothesis is thus that it might just be the mass of pictures itself that grounds not only the significance but also the aura of television pictures, as it assembles pictorial significance in ever more relations, whenever presented on new occasions and in new narrative contexts.

And there is more difference within the similarity: Unlike that of Benjamin's work of art, the aura of television pictures appears not limited to the unity comprised by canvas, color, frame, and content, but can also hinge on pictorial fragments. Visual symbols of popular personalities or of well-known objects appear to develop significance which provides them autonomous status within a picture. As these sights within the sight move from one picture to the other, and as they commence to differ from other, more general visual symbols within a picture, such as, for example, a passerby, a car, or a tree, they gain, rather than lose, aura by means of repetition. In this dynamic, pictorial fragments, such as visual symbols, receive more pointed significance the more they are staged. Thus, repeated presentation of visual symbols in more or less different contexts not only makes their contours more recognizable than other similar symbols, but also adds layers of significance to their content, shaping icons, such as Elvis Presley or Muhammad Ali, or emblems, such as the White House or the Golden Gate Bridge. The collecting, selecting, and presenting of television pictures thus extends beyond the picture as a whole—unlike the case with plastic art—to include as well single pictorial elements. In consequence, the shaping of contrastive relationships interconnects not only pictures or shots as entireties, but also visual symbols, icons, and emblems within them. Based on this second hypothesis, an otherwise perfectly ordinary picture can gain special significance, and thus acquire commercial value, should it contain one particular fragment, such as an icon. And, following this observation, a picture can also gain such significance and value long after its creation, as indicated by the example of the television station that explicitly asked Mac Donald for a particular visual symbol without regard to the setting of the shot as a whole.

Based on these observations, the large mass of pictures and of pictorial fragments circulating in popular culture provide at each moment and from any given angle a background that regulates the cultural significance, the commercial value, and the aura of those sights presented on screen. The professionals who produce and present the shots and the spectators who see