Digital Visuality and Social Representation. Research Notes on the Visual Construction of meaning

Matteo Stocchetti
Helsinki University, Faculty of Social Sciences and Arcada University of Applied Sciences, Department of Culture and Communication, FINLAND

Abstract: Images are tools in the social construction of reality. The meaning of images, however, is not a feature of the image itself but the outcome of a communicative process that involves a negotiation between social actors with a stake, interests and resources to participate in the process. The theory of social representation provides a useful conceptual framework to capture this process and to look at the ideological influences that affects the visual construction of meaning in the digital age. From this perspective, I challenge the belief that digital visuality is a form of communication with emancipative power for the mere fact that it facilitates non-institutional and amateur production and circulation of images. I claim instead that the emancipative potential of this as other forms of visuality depends on their effects on the process through which images are given meaning – supporting or undermining openness, diversity, etc. – and on the nature of the meanings that can – or cannot – find expression in this process. Applying the theory of social representation to the analysis of the social construction of meaning for the images of 9/11, Abu-Ghraib and the Arab Spring, I argue that the influence of hegemonic ideology has been decisive in the repression of interpretations of these images with subversive or emancipative potential.

Keywords: digital visuality, social representation, 9/11, Abu-Ghraib, Arab Spring, visual communication