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

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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