

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Autumn 2018 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857551654, DOI 10.7413/18258630031

ICONIC

By Emanuele Arielli

(First published November 30, 2018)

It. *Iconico*; Fr. *Iconique*; Germ. *Ikonisch*; Span. *Icónico*; (From Latin *icon*, ancient Greek *eikón*, “image, portrait”). In English, the term “iconic” has a double meaning. First of all, it refers to the realm of pictorial and visual artifacts. The second definition, which is of main interest here, refers to all emblematic phenomena within a cultural tradition, such as famous images, personalities, places, historical events, products or brands. In ancient times, the term icon was used in relation to the memorial paintings of the dead, and later it referred to the depictions of religious figures. The role of sacred icons was central during the iconoclastic controversy in the Byzantine era of the 8th century, and they later designated the devotional images of the Orthodox Christian tradition (Mondzain 2004). Only in recent time has iconicity’s meaning developed beyond its religious connotation, for instance in C.S. Peirce’s definition of the icon as a sign type defined by the similarity with its denoted object. In the 20th century, “iconic” has taken on a broader meaning, including all cases of emblematic imagery and objects linked to relevant historical and cultural phenomena.

CONTEMPORARY MEANING

Today, something is defined as “iconic” when it reaches a status of collective symbolic power by means of wide-reaching cultural diffusion: “An iconic image is one that has achieved wholly exceptional levels of widespread recognizability and has come to carry a rich series of varied associations for very large numbers of people across time and cultures” (Kemp 2012: 3). Since collective recognizability can be attained within a cultural tradition in different ways, the notion of being iconic has imprecise boundaries that overcome the realm of the visual: not only can images (as, for instance, Robert Capa’s *Falling soldier*) or artworks (the *Mona Lisa*) be iconic, but also events (the moon’s landing), historical figures (Napoleon, Che Guevara, Hitler), popular culture celebrities (Marilyn Monroe), places (buildings, landmarks, landscapes like the *Tour Eiffel*, the *Niagara Falls* etc.) and brands (Coca-Cola, the *iPhone*: see Holt 2004) can all be considered cultural icons. The symbolic character of icons is more generally based on narratives

and myths that go beyond their immediate level of visual representations. At the same time, iconic value is culturally conveyed through striking images that make an impact upon the viewer and our collective memory. In this regard, we could differentiate between iconic surface (its sensorial and visual dimension) and iconic depth (its discursive and symbolic meaning: see Alexander *et al.* 2012). This is analogous to Gottfried Boehm's (1994) idea of "iconic difference", that is, the duality between the aesthetic and sensual surface of an image and all immaterial meanings evoked by it that cannot be reduced to its representational and material level.

Cultural sociologists Bartmański and Alexander see iconicity as the product of collective involvement and cultural impact: "Icons allow members of societies (1) to experience a sense of participation in something fundamental whose fuller meaning eludes their comprehension and (2) to enjoy the possibility for control despite being unable to access directly the script that lies beneath" (Alexander *et al.* 2012: 2). In other words, icons are collective symbols and references that are immediately understood without need of a deep grasp of their cultural or historical meaning: for instance, we could recognize the iconicity of the famous Che Guevara portrait without having an idea of the Cuban revolution or Guevara's role in those events. As a consequence, an icon is a shared cultural signifier that is immediately recognized, but could entail different degrees of ambiguity and generality. For instance, a reproduction of Andy Warhol's Marilyn – an iconic piece of artwork having an iconic celebrity as subject – could be reproduced to represent either Marilyn herself, or Warhol's works, or contemporary art in general, American or Pop culture and so on. Or it could be used as a pure but well recognizable signifier without any need to make a specific reference, for instance as a decorative image on a printed beach towel. Similarly, " $E=mc^2$ " could be used to refer to Einstein's theory, to mathematics in general, or simply to intelligence without needing to know what that famous formula exactly conveys.

Since icons are signs with versatile connotations, as these examples show; their material appearances are the subject of endless reproduction and transformation. They could be seen as raw cultural material used for countless acts of reinvention and duplication, as in cases of artistic re-appropriation (Warhol's Marilyn or Duchamp's Mona Lisa) or in the production of consumer items, souvenirs, t-shirts, decorative posters, gadgets and so on. The widespread reproduction of an image further nourishes and substantiates its status as a cultural icon.

CULTURAL ICONS AS MODERN MYTHOLOGY

A further reason why the visible and material surfaces of icons are subject to appropriation and transformation lies in the fact that they not only *represent* a specific object or event (a famous actor, a relevant scientific formula), but that they *present* and retain some value or quality of the original object. As in the devotional icons of Christian orthodoxy, where the presence of the sacred subjects is ritually transferred to their representation, "iconic images are endowed with a special presence, as if some quality of the original is embedded in them" (Kemp 2012: 342). The religious and sacral connotations of secular icons lie not only in their evocative power, but also in the fact that their widespread recognizability makes them objects of collective cultural rituals. "Secular icons [...] create an iconic depth that allows them to

become symbols in modern rituals" (Binder 2012: 102). This brings us to Émile Durkheim's analysis of totemism, where the spiritual connection among members of a social group is attained through the veneration of material objects, animals or entities: "Collective feelings become fully conscious of themselves *only* by settling upon external tangible objects" (Durkheim 1995: 421). Similarly, iconic symbols are collective representations that allow immediate recognition of events, objects or personalities and constitute defining elements of one's own cultural memory and identity.

Iconic phenomena are thus the product of cultural myth-making processes that confer to images a non-religious sacredness in which they are separated from their original historical contingency, becoming timeless and universal (Marilyn Monroe as the icon of femininity, Einstein's formula as the symbol of science, the picture of the "napalm girl" as the representation of innocent people's war sufferings, and so on: see Barthes 2001).

ICONIC POWER AND THE ARTS

From a broad point of view, iconic artifacts have always been linked to the art tradition. Through the process of historical canonization, for instance, famous artworks like Michelangelo's David or da Vinci's Mona Lisa became paradigmatic icons in western culture. Not only does cultural tradition have the power to canonize artworks, but art in itself is endowed with an *iconizing* power, that is, the ability to confer emblematic and universal value to its subjects. In the past, this has been the function of religious art and of representations used to celebrate political authority; in contemporary times, art's iconizing power is manifested in popular culture through the production of celebrity and stardom.

A further significant relationship between art and iconicity in modern times is shown in the artistic appropriation of cultural icons, their reinterpretation and de-contextualization, like in Duchamp's Mona Lisa, Jasper Jones' US-flag, or the countless uses by contemporary artists of popular culture icons: for instance, more than a hundred famous artists have used the figure of Mickey Mouse in their artworks (among others: Peter Blake, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, Eduardo Paolozzi, Christian Boltanski, Mark Dion, Damien Hirst: see Crawford 2018).

The appropriation of cultural icons has been a specific strategy of Pop Art, which can be understood as "an art about signs and sign-systems" (Alloway 1997: 170), committed to drawing from the most popular symbols of modern culture and focusing on their myth-making powers. Many of Andy Warhol's reproductions of iconic historical and cultural figures (Marilyn Monroe, Mao Zedong, Elvis Presley, Lenin, Sigmund Freud) have in turn become iconic pictures in their own right. If one of the art's purposes is to reflect upon the foundation of a society's culture and ideology, then the targeting of emblematic symbols of collective memory becomes a major expressive strategy: art not only becomes iconic and has iconizing power, but also, "the icons are being iconized" (Kemp 2012: 346) by art itself through an operation of cultural self-reflection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- J.C. Alexander *et al.* (eds.), *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- L. Alloway, *Popular culture and pop art*, in S. H. Madoff (ed.), *Pop art: a critical history*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997: 167-174.
- R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2001 (orig. ed. 1957).
- W. Binder, *The Emergence of Iconic Depth: Secular Icons in a Comparative Perspective*, in J.C. Alexander, D. Bartmanski, B. Giesen (eds.), *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012: 101-118.
- G. Boehm (ed.), *Was ist ein Bild?*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994.
- H. Crawford, *Mass Media Mouse and Artists: The Making and Appropriation of an Iconic Image*, Proceeding of the Conference "Icon as Cultural Model: Past, Present and Future", Open University the Netherlands, 2018.
- É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York, Free Press, 1995 (orig. ed. 1912).
- D.B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons. The Principles of Cultural Branding*, Cambridge, Harvard Business School Press, 2004.
- M. Kemp, *Christ to Coke. How Image Becomes Icon*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.
- M.J. Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy. The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

E. Arielli, *Iconic*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2018 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/autumn/iconic.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630031.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAE's* archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the first volume of *ILAE's* printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects *ILAE's* Spring and the Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

E. Arielli, *Iconic*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 1, Milano, Mimesis, 2018.