

Changing Visual and Social Worlds: An Introduction to the Thematic Issue on "Digital Images and Visual Artifacts in Everyday Life"

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Key words: digital images in social worlds; visual artifacts; political and normative negotiation processes; social positioning; communicative trust-building; generation of evidence and knowledge; discursive subjectivation; personal testing and proving; visual-biographical self-design; social media; body images; methodological innovation

Abstract: The continual advancement of visual media technologies and their everyday accessibility has led to a wide array of possibilities for presenting oneself, others and the world, for imagining the improbable, the production of evidence, ideographic expression, as well as of self-deception and deception of others. That images are socially exchanged, in that they give rise to, reinforce, or destabilize social relationships, and that they are subject to processes of conventionalization, instrumentalization, and economization, is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, images and the diversity of visual artifacts remain a complex and only partially theorized subject within social theory and are still insufficiently integrated into existing theoretical frameworks. The authors of this special issue address this desideratum. Their contributions provide insights into the particularities of contemporary image and social worlds, which they explore through appropriate methodological approaches. Furthermore, they shed light on the social-theoretical and methodological research questions that emerge from a deeper engagement with such visual and social constellations.

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1. Subject and Key Issues

Susan SONTAG noted in her essay "On Photography" that "a society becomes 'modern' when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images, when images [...] become indispensable to the health of the economy, the stability to the polity, and the pursuit of private happiness" (1977, p.153). Modern in this sense, however, are not only the image-producing and image-consuming societies of our time but also, following the *pictorial turn* (MITCHELL, 1987) and the *iconic turn* (BOEHM, 1995), the concepts and methods of the social and cultural sciences, which aim to generate insights into contemporary visual and social realities. [1]

The notion that images—particularly photographs—serve as direct representations of reality is a simplistic assumption when considering everyday practices: The concept of reality undergoes significant transformation when images are created or placed within it. Reality is confronted with visual montages, idealizations, pictorial classifications, and the ability to store events in media in a

highly complex manner. When Arjun APPADURAI repeatedly invoked the triad of "the image, the imagined, the imaginary" in his analysis of global migration processes (2010 [1996], p.32), he did so to emphasize that imagination is not merely a cognitive capacity of the individual but also a social practice. Regardless of whether such a perspective conforms to the realism or moral intuitions of everyday common sense, what is imaginable and thinkable in historical and especially in modern, technologized societies is decisively shaped by prevailing practices of visualizing social spaces and the use of image media in everyday communication. Societal transformation cannot be reduced to the use of images, but any analysis that ignores their social and communicative significance would remain incomplete. [2]

The fact that scholarly engagement with practices and phenomena of visual media representation, interpretation, and construction of reality has, in recent decades, led to an ongoing development of visual analysis methods in the social and cultural sciences should not come as a surprise. What is noteworthy, however, is that these developments have laid essential groundwork for the investigation of contemporary visual and social worlds. Significant methodological advancements have been made, for instance, in understanding the compositional structure of pictorial spaces, in analyzing the interconnection of images with other images or with text and audio, a more sophisticated evaluation of large amounts of image data and engaging with the everyday uses of images. It is the intent of the authors in this special issue to provide both empirical insights into visual and social worlds made accessible through newer methodological approaches and theoretical reflections on the implications these insights hold for social theory and methodology. [3]

After introducing the subject and key issues (Section 1), we discuss the social-theoretical and methodological challenges of analyzing digital images and visual artifacts (Section 2), introduce the individual contributions, and explain the thematic, conceptual, and methodological overlaps as well as the specific approaches and findings (Section 3). Finally, we summarize the connections between the contributions and the aspects that we consider relevant to the transformation of digital images and social worlds (Section 4). [4]

2. Social-Theoretical and Methodological Challenges

The contributors to this thematic issue focus particularly on the proliferation of digital media in everyday communication. This development is accompanied not only by novel uses of images and other visual artifacts but also by substantial transformations in social life and social communication: Face-to-face interactions are increasingly mediated, and the role of the body in these interactions is being reconfigured—especially in technologically mediated settings such as human-robot interactions. In social media contexts, photographs become expressive tools for personal self-presentation and social positioning. Videos and other moving images, in turn, are used on digital platforms and against the backdrop of global visual cultures not only to document experiences and events but also to challenge and reconfigure seemingly stable moral and political certainties. These developments bear significant implications for how we understand the interplay of communication, interaction, and action within social theory. More broadly, these transformations demand the development of new social-theoretical concepts capable of capturing the dynamics of technologically mediated realities. Simultaneously, they require methodological innovation—tailored analytical tools that enable social scientists to grasp these emerging visual phenomena with empirical precision. [5]

Do digital images give rise to new communicative genres, novel forms of social action, and alternative modes of social organization, knowledge production, and selfhood? How should we conceptualize interaction, communication, and action under the current conditions of change? These questions point to the need for new terminologies to adequately analyze the social use of digital images and to the possibility of developing image-analytical approaches that move beyond traditional conceptual frameworks. The multifaceted nature of contemporary visual media, the complexity of their social uses, and the diverse epistemological interests of social science researchers necessitate fundamental methodological reflection. What exactly is meant by "image" and "visual communication"? Which established methodological approaches are suitable for investigating them—and which must be further developed? [6]

3. Emergence of the Thematic Issue and Introduction to the Contributions

The questions addressed in this thematic issue were initially discussed within a symposium on "Personal Uses of Digital Images," held at the University of Vienna among a group of approximately fifteen scholars. These discussions gave rise to the idea of continuing the exchange on a broader scale through a special issue of FQS. We are grateful that this proposal was accepted, allowing us to distribute a [call for papers](#) in July 2023. The call elicited 66 abstract submissions, confirming both the topical relevance and the high level of interest from scholars who have been working on similar questions for some time, as well as from early-career researchers offering new, forward-looking inquiries and perspectives. [7]

The authors of the texts assembled in this issue have addressed different aspects raised in the call, highlighting in their compilation which themes were considered particularly compelling or significant. This concerns the sociopolitical relevance of visual communication, explicitly addressed in three contributions. Marc DITTRICH and Günter MEY (2025) examine the negotiation of racism as a socially pressing issue in post-migrant societies through the lens of rap videos. From a social-theoretical perspective, they raise the question of how new publics emerge and what role these publics play in societal discourse. For their empirical analysis, they employed an audiovisual grounded theory methodology they developed, which is particularly suited to capturing the multimodal nature of popular cultural visual artifacts. [8]

Viktoria RÖSCH, Paula MATTHIES, and Michaela KÖTTIG (2025) explore gender-political positionings within a right-wing extremist context. Through a case study of a self-presentation on the platform X, they investigate the nexus between visual self-presentation and action orientations discernible in accompanying textual contributions, with a particular emphasis on existing contradictions and ambivalences. To grasp this relationship, they developed a refined methodological approach, triangulating *image cluster analysis* (MÜLLER, 2020) with *thematic field analysis* (ROSENTHAL, 2015 [2005]). [9]

Mina GODHARZANI-BAKHTIARI (2025) likewise addresses a topic of high sociopolitical relevance. Her study focuses on the media genre of investigative videos produced by organizations such as *Forensic Architecture*, which aim to reconstruct incidents of violent crime and use their findings to contribute to the political discourse. She conceptualizes investigative videos as meta-artifacts and illustrates—using the example of a constructed video on the 2006 murder of Halit YOZGAT by the *Nationalsozialistische Untergrund* [National Socialist Underground] (NSU)—how such constructions visually transform spatial, atmospheric and embodied open-source data from various media formats (photographs, interviews, investigation records) into an objectified visual representation of an event. She also developed a specific methodological approach to video analysis, linking it to genre analysis (LUCKMANN, 1986) and the sociological film analysis of PELTZER and KEPPLER (2015). [10]

The problematization of how visual means are employed to construct ostensibly objective evidence as emphasized by GODHARZANI-BAKHTIARI, also runs through other contributions. Bernt SCHNETTLER, Tom KADEN and Lisa VOIGT (2025), for example, examine the social production and distribution of practical knowledge, focusing on the transformation of knowledge production itself. In their study they investigate clip-based audiovisual communication for solving everyday problems on platforms such as Instagram. With a case study they reveal how everyday, occupational, and institutional contexts merge in these clips, reshaping both the form and distribution of practical knowledge. Methodologically, the authors combine corpus-based genre analysis (KNOBLAUCH & SCHNETTLER, 2010) with principles of hermeneutic case analysis (SOEFFNER, 2004). [11]

Beyond issues of evidence and knowledge production, several contributions foreground normative negotiations around what is perceived as trustworthy or legitimate in digital-visual communication. Katrin TIIDENBERG, Annette N. MARKHAM, Maria SCHREIBER and Andrea SCHAFFAR (2025) explore how social media users evaluate the trustworthiness of content. They employ a multi-stage approach they term *augmented autoethnography*, beginning with autoethnographic protocols collected during student seminars at universities in different countries, which are then gradually synthesized into cross-contextual patterns using coding procedures at different levels of aggregation. The present contribution is focused on the methodological approach, which aims to combine a situation-specific microanalytical perspective with aggregated pattern identification of specific and as yet unknown patterns of trust formation in the use of social media across social contexts. [12]

Federico LUCCHESI and Katharina LOBINGER's (2025) research is oriented towards a similar topic, albeit with a focus on normative negotiation processes. Their analysis centers on the emergence of implicit social media norms concerning the acceptable and unacceptable practices in communication. The authors explore this question using the example of couples posting about their partner, about themselves as part of the relationship, or about the relationship itself. Drawing on individual and couple interviews and a qualitative content analysis, they show how implicit communicative norms are negotiated into normative orientations. Their findings suggest that general social norms about communicative appropriateness in social media intersect with relationship-specific ones in the context of couple communication. [13]

A different form of normative discursivization is addressed by Moritz MEISTER, Sarah PRITZ, Aglaja PRZYBORSKI and Thomas SLUNECKO (2025) in their examination of mood-tracking apps, developed for the systematic, quasi-diary-like recording of affective states. The authors conceptualize these apps as "media micro-dispositives" shaping subjectification processes and subject figures and contributing to the "readability of the self" (§16).¹ Through two case studies, they demonstrate how the visual design of icons and start screens convey a promise of supporting individual and collective well-being. Their analysis reveals that such

1 All translations from non-English texts are ours.

apps render emotions controllable, decouple them from environmental factors, and individualize both well-being and distress. Methodologically, they combine image analysis using the *documentary method* with an examination of the operativity of app interfaces, capturing how recording practices and their representations are co-constituted. [14]

Clarissa SCHÄR (2025) similarly adopts a subjectification-theoretical perspective, albeit with a nearly opposite focus. She explores how young adults in social media employ imaginative visual self-presentations on social media, particularly with respect to their responses to discursive addresses and their ability to assert their own subject positions. Analyzing the self-presentation of a wheelchair user who stages herself in physically improbable or impossible postures, SCHÄR develops a concept of imagination as a "corporeally grounded force of subject formation" (§54). Her image analysis is based on an advanced version of the *documentary method* (BOHNSACK, 2017; BOHNSACK & PRZYBORSKI, 2015). [15]

SCHÄR thus brings into focus the human body as basis of visual representation and its imaginative transgression. Such a fractured relationship with the media—as one may refer to it by varying a notion from Walter SCHULZ (1994)—wherein there is a transition between symbolic openness and closure contingent on the particular circumstances is also central to the final three contributions. Anne SONNENMOSER (2025), conceptually foregrounding the social form of play as a mode of (digital) image use, investigates the interplay of personal self-presentation and virtual space through the case of cosplay. She identifies play as the symbolic framework uniting digital and corporeal presentations of cosplayers, who embody fictional image templates and navigate between virtual and physical spaces through specialized body techniques that affirm their personal image within media-hybrid social worlds. A particular form of visual self-presentation also stands at the center of Roswitha BRECKNER's (2025) contribution. She examines the media status of self-stagings on social media that juxtapose everyday photographs with highly stylized, norm-breaking images inspired by advertising, theater, and film. Using a case study of a man's self-presentation on Facebook and Instagram, she develops the concept of hypermedialization—a play between transparency and deception, where images reveal something only expressible through exaggeration and shock, while simultaneously undermining their own truth claims. In her methodology, she combines *image cluster analysis* (MÜLLER, 2020) with a *biographical case reconstruction* based on a *biographical-narrative interview* (FISCHER-ROSENTHAL & ROSENTHAL, 1997). [16]

While SONNENMOSER and BRECKNER discuss possibilities for symbolic opening of communicative spaces through digital image media, conceptualized via image play and hypermediality, Michael R. MÜLLER (2025a) offers a counter-perspective. He focuses on the closure of such spaces through phrasal, i.e., idiomatic uses of images. MÜLLER argues that this form of image use should not be dismissed as superficiality but understood as a socially foundational mode of communicative processing of everyday life—whether in social media interactions or human-machine communication. As image and media technologies become more embedded in everyday life, this mode gains societal importance and

diversifies into various visual idioms. He illustrates where and how these idioms can be identified and their embeddedness in everyday meaning contexts reconstructed, drawing on diverse case studies. His figurative-comparative image data analysis, which he has developed and refined over time, is presented as a suitable methodology for analyzing large-scale image datasets and identifying idiomatic communication patterns within them. [17]

4. Summary

Structurally evident—both within the configuration of the contributions collected here and in the individual contributions themselves—is the notion that what SONTAG, as cited at the outset, described as the "production and consumption of images" that makes a society "modern" (1977, p.153) is more and something different than the mere accumulation of images. The structures of the image worlds emerging in these analyses are simultaneously expressions and manifestations of a changing social world (VAN DIJCK, 2013). Visually mediated or entirely image-based social environments become public arenas for politically charged positioning, sites of truth-, knowledge-, and trust-production that lay claim to or strategically instrumentalize visual evidence, and intermedial zones of encounter—whether between spatially distant individuals or between humans and machine-based technologies. Idiomatic uses of images and visual stylizations may not grant the world, the self, or others immediate "legibility," but they do confer a form of contour and intersubjective comprehensibility that channels social communication into whatever orderly courses. [18]

In a contrasting mode of use, digital image worlds function as a fictional realm of possible realities in virtual spaces. When inserted into such referential constellations, images and the visibility of the body become complex media of self-thematization, of boundary-transgressing self-presentation, or of a hypermedialization of self-expression pushed to symbolic extremes, oscillating between opacity and hyper-expressivity. [19]

For social and cultural researchers working analytically with images and image data, such phenomena reaffirm the insight that images are usually more—and something other—than representations of reality. As the contributions demonstrate, images must be approached theoretically and methodologically as social phenomena and studied in terms of their respective medial and socio-communicative usages—as "complex image phenomena" (MÜLLER, 2025b). [20]

The analyses and conceptual frameworks assembled in this special issue address the transformation of contemporary social worlds through visual media—a transformation that is visible in various dimensions across the contributions. Yet it can only be grasped in facets, especially in light of the ongoing development of so-called artificial intelligences, which are likely to continue reshaping the visual and social worlds under consideration here. As prompt-based digital photography becomes increasingly embedded in the everyday production and consumption of images, the transformation of contemporary image worlds will not merely be quantitative but also qualitative, aesthetic, and thematic in nature. The questions

raised—about the production of evidence, knowledge, truth, and accountability; about the shifting nature of social negotiation processes; about changes and possible hypermedializations in subject and self-constitution; about the expansion of virtual spaces; and about the idiomatization of everyday visual practices—will not become easier to answer as the technologization of everyday life progresses. Rather, they will bring new theoretical and methodological challenges. [21]

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