



# Iconizing of Literature, Art, Humanities, and Science

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## Intermediality and Value in Popular Culture

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*Edited by*

PAULA WOJCIK  
SOPHIE PICARD  
HANNES HÖFER

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Paula Wojcik • Sophie Picard • Hannes Höfer  
Editors

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*photographiques contemporaines*, Gollion, Infolio, 2016; *Spiritualité contemporaine de l'art*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 2012; *La mystique de l'art*, Paris, Cerf-Histoire, 2007; *Le regard et la Parole. Une théologie protestante de l'Image*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1997.

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# Introduction: Iconizing of Literature, Art, Humanities, and Science—Intermediality and Value in Popular Culture

*Paula Wojcik, Sophie Picard, and Hannes Höfer*

Why do people wear shirts with the Shakespearian quotation “to be or not be?” or a portrait of philosopher Slavoj Žižek? How does popular and mass media adaptation and appropriation influence theoretical or literary concepts like ‘deconstruction’ or the ‘Kafkaesque’? Why are Lolita, Don Quixote, and Einstein ubiquitous and yet Tonio Kröger, Leopold Bloom, and Leó Szilárd are not? What does the presence of characters, quotations, motifs, and concepts in popular culture and daily life reveal about their cultural value?

This presence also raises some theoretical and methodological questions concerning the representation, perception, usage, and reception of literature, art, humanities, and science. Our book’s main objective is to hone in on their widespread, decontextualized—and, thus, often schematized—forms of appearance. Against the background of media-oriented, interdisciplinary, and praxeological approaches, it explores the forms and processes of intermedia

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circulation and cultural valuation. By focusing on practices, actors, socio-historical, and cultural conditions, we discuss the functions of literature, art, humanities, and science in different settings of everyday life: media and fashion, national and transnational cultures, esoteric expert's discourses and exoteric popular use. Provided by scholars of theology, musicology, history, fine arts, linguistics, as well as film, literary, media, and cultural studies the analyses link discussions on popular and mass media adaptation and appropriation with cultural valuation, canonization and academic debates. This approach opens up an area of tension between the profane and culturally-sacred in a unique way, as it exposes some underlying transgressive dynamics: processes of intermedia circulation, interdisciplinary mediation, and floating between cultural and social milieus. These dynamics constitute a specific form of appearance known as 'cultural icons'.

## CUTURAL ICONS

The concept of 'cultural icon' refers to phenomena which have a value for a specific audience, created by a (re-)productive inter- and transmedial condensation of meaning (Kemp 2011). We use 'icon' as it is commonly used in cultural studies, which is, in turn adopted from art theory, based on the works of the grand masters of 'iconology' Aby Warburg (2010) and Erwin Panofsky (1939). These disciplinary roots cast a shadow on the current discussion in so far as cultural studies are still driven by the idea that icons are mandatorily bound to a visual presence (Haustein 2008; Leypoldt and Engler 2010; Kemp 2011; Ghosh 2011; Parker 2012; Colombi et al. 2016). This understanding does not consider that cultural icons are collectively-shared mental concepts that can manifest themselves as material or visual (images, persons, etc.) and non-material or non-visual (names, quotations, places, melodies, etc.) artefacts and entities. Icons are mental constructs that compress a society's cultural imagination. There is no reason that condensation and representation of meaning should be limited to pictorial representations, as a short quotation or piece of music can perform the same function.

In addition to art history, the concept of the icon also plays a central role in semiotics. In the theories of Peirce and Jakobson, icons are signs, which establish their relationship with the signified through similarity (Peirce 2012; Jakobson 1964a, 1964b). However, Umberto Eco criticizes this idea for being blurry and universalistic at the same time (Eco 1991, 256–57). According to him, similarity can never be defined absolutely, but is always based on historically-variant cultural agreements: "Iconicity is neither an individual phenomenon nor an exclusively semiotic phenomenon. It is a collection of phenomena bundled together under a general-purpose label (just as the word 'plague' probably referred to a number of different diseases in the Middle Ages)" (Eco 1991, 287). We follow Eco in the respect that iconicity cannot be explained in an exclusively-semiotic way. To examine the full impact of cultural

icons, we also need to open up the concept for non-visual phenomena and locate them within a larger cultural and historical framework.

To understand the impact of cultural icons we need to shed some light on the origin of the concept. Cultural icons are a secular variant of the formerly-religious *eikón* or *ikón* (Kemp 2011, 340) that serve to negotiate or exhibit the self-image of social or cultural groups. Analogies between the sacred and the profane icons are manifold. Both are mental formations which are accessible through their ‘representatives’ or ‘substitutes’: the Virgin Mary and popstars Lady Gaga and Madonna transcend their human presence and are culturally-valued concepts of ‘Mary’, ‘Lady Gaga’, and ‘Madonna’ (respectively) that we engage with as pictures, prayers, songs, or stories/anecdotes evolving around them. Both the sacred and the profane are community-building as they can represent the identity of a lifestyle milieu, a (sub-)culture, or an entire nation. “An icon generates strong responses; people identify with it, or against it” Dennis R. Hall and Susan Grove Hall (2006, xvii) write in *American Cultural Icons*. If people identify “against it” the self-image can be criticized or even attacked by destroying or desecrating the icon—a practice known as iconoclasm.

Within popular culture and daily life, cultural icons are pivotal to (re-)creating, communicating, and disseminating cultural meaning, and value. If human, they are moral authorities (Gandhi, Mother Teresa), cultural heroes (Abraham Lincoln, Pocahontas; see Leypoldt and Engler 2010), *grands hommes* (Napoleon Bonaparte, Voltaire), or role models (Sappho, Virginia Woolf). If non-human, they represent a society’s achievements (double-helix), or help to express someone’s beliefs or feelings of belonging (LGBTQI+ pride flag). Icons can perform these functions only because they are widespread in different media and thus well-known and immediately recognizable. Reciprocally, this presence within the media and culture increases the icon’s visibility, ensuring ongoing attention through transformation and constant (re-)use. Thus, literature, art, humanities, and science—widely considered high-brow, elitist, or hermetic expert’s culture—become popular.<sup>1</sup>

From what has been said so far, the following questions guide the analysis of cultural icons in this volume: How do icons of literature, art, humanities, and science become iconic? Are they iconic in general, or only for a specific audience or social group, class, or milieu? How are they represented in different media? How is the reciprocal influence between the media representation and the materiality of the medium determined? What do they mean, and do they change their meaning when moving through different audiences, media, or cultures? The case studies in this compilation follow up these questions by consulting theories and methods from trans- and intermedia (including

<sup>1</sup>For our purposes, we define popularity after John Fiske (2007) as (1) a broad impact (and the associated transgression of the original areas of application) and (2) an appropriation (and, therefore, a use that resists genuinely work-centered approaches and radically interprets the phenomena in light of lifetime and experience horizons). Both dimensions are essential to describe the emergence, persistence, and transformation of cultural icons.

transfiction) studies as well as praxeology. They acknowledge the reciprocal, reaffirming influence between the media-oriented processes and aesthetics as well as the individual and collective actor's practices and intentions.

To demonstrate how the concept of cultural icons provides understanding of the dynamics between different media and practices, we suggest two transversal perspectives that mirror recent developments in communication, social, media, cultural, and literary studies. The first focuses on the intermedia structures in the emergence and dissemination of icons. The second, on processes of value creation: appropriation, (re-)production, and negotiation of icons on behalf of individual actors, audiences, social groups, milieus, or markets.

### INTERMEDIALITY OF CULTURAL ICONS

Literature, art, humanities, and science become iconic by constant (re-)usage of elements such as characters, quotations, motifs, or concepts within different media. According to Henry Jenkins (2006, 2) we can imagine this as a “constant flow of content.” Thus, our approach within this book is strongly informed by media—and especially inter- and transmedia theory. The term ‘media’ is not unambiguous and easy to define. Following Marie-Laure Ryan (2014, 26), media belong to different categories: “channels of mass communication” (i.e. newspapers, television, internet), “specific applications of digital technology” (i.e. computer games and memes), “art forms” (i.e. literature, music, painting, film), and “the material substance out of which messages are made or in which signs are presented” (i.e. fashion, life style products, and the human body). In our interdisciplinary setting, however, the following categorization might prove more helpful: some of the media in which icons occur are narrative-based (e.g. literature, movies, series, computer games, commercials), others are mainly visual (e.g. fine arts or lifestyle products like fashion), while others include both visual and auditory elements (e.g. durable and visible notations and ephemeral orchestra, radio, or spoken word). Another group may be classified as genuinely multimedial (or multimodal), because they combine pictures and words (e.g. printed advertisement or memes). As they can be represented in any (or all) of the categories, icons are trans-medial.

Transmediality brings us to the first decisive criterion for iconicity: *iteration*. Characters, quotations, or concepts are iconic when they (1) appear in different media, and (2) when each representation is a reference to others. For example, literary characters or quotations can appear in film, series, or computer games—which in turn can spread in primarily-visual non-narrative media formats like memes or advertisement, and become recognizable to a broader audience (Stephens and Grossman 2015). An analysis of icons operates within an area of tension between the transmedia character of the icon and its media-specific representations which is best described by adopting Marsha Kinder and Tara McPherson's (2014) catchphrase “transmedia frictions.” These frictions are inevitable as some of the case studies in our volume indicate, when expert discourse claims an interpretive authority that is consistently undermined by popular representations (see Münch and Wojcik in this volume).

At the same time media representations can serve as *multipliers* which strengthen and determine presence. Movies fulfill this function, as Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* and Miloš Forman's *Amadeus* prove (see Stemberger and Bomnüter in this volume). Both had a lasting effect on the popular image of Nabokov's heroine and the Viennese composer. But there are, of course, other multipliers that reach back to a pre-mass-media era. Icons such as Homer or Goethe (see Syrový and Löck in this volume) became famous and revered because of songs, paintings, busts, theater, and opera performances. These multipliers usually emphasize certain features, which can become so-called "key identifiers" (Kemp 2011, 3) of the icon. Once solidified, just a few notes, a dress, or a gesture can instantly invoke the icon in any medium. Those practices of fragmentation and (as Stemberger describes in this volume) "metonymical extensions" can be observed in the aforementioned 1962 Kubrick film adaptation: the red glasses that Lolita wears became a lifestyle product that can (still) be purchased all over the world. The fragmented element of a fictional movie became an object of marketing strategies (Pearson 2015), developed a life on its own and now reaches out of the fictional or imaginative realm into the real world.

Writers and artists also appropriate and combine these key identifiers with other new and unexpected elements. Edgar Allan Poe's character, schematized to his characteristic eyebrows and moustache, can appear in a comic book or a video game (see Wojcik in this volume). Even if only rudimentarily marked a fictional character can remain recognizable in a setting that is neither medially nor narratively related to the novel or the film adaptation it stems from—a common practice that has been described as transfictionality (Ryan 2008; Saint-Gelais 2010; Bech Albertsen 2019). Metonymic extensions of icons also can provide a link between two or more narratives to mark them as parts of a bigger narrative universe—these so-called transmedia storyworlds are not only an artistic strategy but also a strong marketing tool (Jenkins 2007, 2009).

The possibilities for dissemination through intermedia networks grow if we consider digital participatory culture (Green and Jenkins 2011; Jenkins et al. 2018) provided by social media, internet forums, blogs, or fan fiction websites. Authored by scientists, experts and creatives who share their research and art, publishing houses, museums, galleries, opera houses, concert halls as well as individual users who exhibit their individual interests they make a significant contribution to the iconizing of literature, art, humanities, and science. This can be a museum's or an individual's Instagram post from the new Klimt exhibition which shows *The Kiss* or a selfie with *The Kiss*. This can also be a Twitter account that uses the icon of Sappho or Einstein, or a blog named "Schrödinger's Cat" (which really exists). Memes serve as multipliers which simultaneously stabilize and determine popularity and presence (Wiggins and Bowers 2015; Wiggins 2019). In addition, the sharing and expressing of (dis)approval in the digital world points to the *(re-)creation of cultural value*—our second decisive criterion for iconic status.

## CREATING THE VALUE OF CULTURAL ICONS

To comprehend the iconization of literature, art, humanities, and science in popular culture we need to explore techniques, mechanisms, and systemic obligations underlying the creation of cultural value in the different cultural fields. More specifically, we need to consider identification with or against, and appropriation of icons that are visible within different cultural practices (e.g. fashion, gaming, cooking, or decorating) as valuation practices. Literature, art, humanities, and science become part of a lifestyle or everyday routine because we value them high enough to integrate them into our own habits and world-view. This is usually preceded by, or cooccurs with, the above-mentioned intermedia circulation processes. For example, the aforementioned thought experiment known as Schrödinger's Cat can be part of a breakfast routine because it is printed on a coffee cup; it received a 'popularity boost' by the television series *Big Bang Theory* presenting it as an important theoretical idea. Quotations are collected and recorded with ink in notebooks or even on skin, spray painted as graffiti on walls, and posted as funny memes. We preserve these quotations in many ways because they are culturally valuable. At the same time, the preservation itself adds to the cultural value of the icon.

But, what do we do by using the coffee cup or getting tattooed? Bishnupriya Ghosh (2011, 3) defines an icon as a "mediator of a structure of feeling for an emergent collective". A spontaneous and ephemeral action (such as sharing a meme), its identity-forming repetition (such as wearing Lolita-sunglasses), and permanent exhibition (such as a tattooed quotation) communicate an emotional attachment that has a habitus-forming potential. It does so because these actions do not simply refer to the given representation or 'the original', but to the whole world of performances and meanings that establish the iconicity. However, the 'whole world' does not mean that icons are universal or global; they are always linked to a specific audience and represent a particular 'culture.'

Whereas mass-media-critical approaches, like those provided by Barthes (2010) or Link (1991) usually relate agency to abstract entities like 'power', 'media', or 'society', our compilation highlights the particularistic scope of icons and considers the individual and collective actors and agents. As the global condition is genuinely pluralistic and diverse, we need to identify and describe the actors in more depth and to acknowledge their cultural or social background and their individual agency.<sup>2</sup> Against the background of sociological theories of identity-formation that point out that identities are dialectically formed in a negotiation between the individual and the society (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and by drawing from what has been summarized by the buzzterm 'identity supermarkets' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2015; Hitzler

<sup>2</sup>The diversity of actors distinguishes our idea of 'iconicity' from Richard Dawkins' (2006) concept of the 'meme'. The idea of applying evolution, mutation, and natural selection to culture as well as biology is animistic, as it does not take into account the fact that culture is made by and for (usually human) actors.

and Honer 2015; Reckwitz 2017) we need to acknowledge this particularity of icons.

Although there are icons of universally-binding characters like Mahatma Gandhi or Mother Teresa, one should not underestimate the impact of secular worship by pointing only to those ‘global icons’ (Ghosh 2011; Haustein 2008). In the same way that Pocahontas, Mount Rushmore, or Joe Friday are only iconic in the USA (Hall and Hall 2006; Feldges 2008; Hölbling 2006; Leyboldt and Engler 2010), the iconicity of the Glagolitic script applies only to Croatian culture (see Tyran in this volume). The particularism is not only a matter of national cultures but also lifestyle or professional milieus. Consequently, the articles of this volume discuss diverse iconizing communities reaching from the unspecific and broad ‘popular culture’ to very specific and sometimes hermetic scientific and expert’s discourses. What a fandom wiki in popular culture is, that is an author’s society in the academic world. And just like the anime character of Lelouch Lamperouge can be considered to be iconic only within an anime fan community or LeBron James within a basketball fan community, the term ‘deconstruction’ (see Gernalzick in this volume), a Hans-Georg Gadamer quotation (see Höfer in this volume), or musical counterpoint (see Petersen in this volume) are iconic only within an academic and humanities-oriented milieu. Within these specific settings, the icon is an icon because it implies the idea of misuse in order to annoy the ‘devotees’. Making fun of Gadamer enrages different people than making fun of Lelouch Lamperouge or LeBron James.

This brings us back to the already-mentioned concept of iconoclasm. There is no value without the potential of devaluation, no worship without the potential of desecration; in short: no iconicity without iconoclasm. In today’s popular culture, iconoclasm can be about physically knocking statues off their pedestals—but more likely, it is a symbolic matter. At the same time, iconoclasm constantly confirms the icon’s cultural value (Latour 2002). We can define iconoclasm as the negotiation of status whenever and wherever an identity-forming iconic element is appropriated across cultures. This also applies to irony, parody, or simply distortion. In internet memes, for instance, a funny quotation may violate an idolized painting, picture, or person, or *vice versa* a funny picture may dishonor a meaningful quote (see Picard in this volume).

Processes of iconization and iconoclasm reveal insight into confrontations within audiences or fandoms. These may include racist statements, as seen in the protests against the ‘iconoclasm’ of actors-of-color starring as Hermione and Ariel in recent film or theater adaptations of *Harry Potter* and Disney’s *Little Mermaid*. As their skin color is not defined in the novel series/fairy tale, it is the media circulation of the filmic characters—visual repetition in films, corresponding marketing and media discourse—that makes skin or hair color key identifiers of the characters. In a broader imagological perspective, icons may solidify racist, orientalist, anti-Semitic, or gender-related collective phantasma (Mayer 2012; Barthes 2010; Link 1991). This volume critically reflects on this stereotyping potential and follows up on questions such as: Which



audience tries to adapt a specific cultural phenomenon? For what purpose? Which audience fights a specific adaptation, and why? What does this reveal about the audience itself and the corresponding cultural space? By foregrounding these concerns, our focus shifts from the static outcome—the representation—to the dynamic, process-oriented creation of iconic presence through repetition, seriality, fragmentation, and (at the same time) metonymic expansion of single elements, their reframing, recontextualization, and semantical enrichment.

As we have seen, practices of valuation are closely connected to the medium in which the icon occurs. The intermedia circulation of icons enhances status or self-iconization as a postmodern version of the renaissance *paragone*—the challenge of the arts. By integrating iconic elements from literature, art, and science, media often depreciated as entertainment or commerce (such as computer games, pop music, film genres, or advertisements) claim a higher quality or status for themselves and their products. A commercial that uses a Shakespearean quotation, an aria from a famous opera, or a biblical symbol insinuates that the products are part of a world in which masterpieces of art and the highest moral values set the standard (see Großmann and Cottin in this volume).

This observation aligns well with Pierre Bourdieu's ([1979] 2010) idea of the cultural capital. However, we cannot agree with the underlying idea of a hierarchy that establishes itself exclusively in the trickle-down movement from the so-called upper to the lower classes and consequently the associated media, fashion, and goods. This idea is informed by Georg Simmel (1905) and has been modified by concepts that identify not only trickle across (King and Ring 1980) but also trickle up movements (Field 1970). They are quite obvious, when the label Balenciaga adopts the Ikea bag "Frakta" and sells it for \$2000, or when a film director uses aesthetics that are typical for popular media to set the stage for an iconic piece of literature or biography (i.e. *Romeo+Juliet* by Baz Luhrman or *Amadeus* by Miloš Forman, see Bomnüter in this volume). It is the adaptation to new materials or aesthetics that ensures the cultural mobility of icons across geographical and social spaces. This, in turn, cannot be overestimated for the economic circuit that transforms icons into everyday commodities and makes them appear in changing materials, in this way contributing to the aestheticization of the living world. The cultural icon which obeys the economic commandment of growth is 'same same but different'. Media and goods echo iconicity as they make cultural value palpable.

Aside from the cultural hierarchy, valuation practices also depend on the specific material condition of the media. This condition includes space or time 'limits'; therefore selection, reduction, shortening, fragmentation, transformation, and metonymic extension are the central processes of iconizing—in past and present. Card games that strengthened the popularity of iconic writers around 1900 were subject to an internal numerical logic: there always had to be four writers in a group (see Hölter in this volume). Admiration of a certain painting tradition, for instance, meets its spatial limits when it is transported



into the individual living room. Huge 19<sup>th</sup>-century salon paintings (with several figures and detailed landscapes) were produced for aristocratic households; when they became popular among the bourgeois, they needed to be ‘modified’ in order to fit into their living rooms. However, even when fragmented into smaller elements, the painting can be reused to express admiration or participate in symbolic capital—and eventually become iconic itself (see Fritz in this volume).

In the academic and cultural world, symbolic cultural value manifests itself in the institution of the canon. In literary and cultural studies, the value of cultural artefacts is often linked to problems of canon formation, and is consequently considered to be made by and for elitists and ‘old white men’. Simone Winko’s and Gabriele Rippl’s works show that operations of selection and valuation are not fundamentally intentional and normative, but are based on emergent ‘invisible-hand’ processes (Rippl and Winko 2013; Winko 2002; Wojcik et al. 2019). Nevertheless, the canon as an institution keeps being normative as, in the end, it provides selections of works, authors, or concepts that ‘should’ be known (reading lists, art or literature histories, compendiums). Thus, in today’s societies, the canon remains an ideal of what literature, or even culture, is, or should be. Read or not, accepted or not, even as a subject of ‘canon wars’—the institution of the canon inscribes an emphasized cultural status into the implemented works, which is an atavism of the sacral canonical institution. Canonic status can operate as a catalyst for iconizing processes, but just as likely it works the other way around. For example, Stanisław Lem’s writings have become so iconic for the science fiction genre that they are included in literary studies canon. Thus, canonicity does not thoroughly explain iconicity, and iconicity does not fully explain canonicity.

In an internationally comparative perspective a big part of what is considered to be a cultural icon in the English-speaking world is a “lieux de mémoire” or “Erinnerungsort” in the French- respective German-speaking worlds. This points to the status of cultural icons as part of the collective memory of nations or other ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 2006). The compilations about ‘realms of memory’—published in different countries after Pierre Nora’s seminal *Lieux de mémoire* (2002–2004)—present examples of places, artworks, concepts, or figures with a nearly-sacred national (François and Schulze 2008; Hebel 2003; Kammen 1991) or transnational (Hahn et al. 2012–2015; den Boer et al. 2012) status. Research points to the importance of a ‘(trans-)media turn’ of memory studies (Erlil 2004; Erlil and Rigney 2009) and with the attention Michael Rothberg’s (2009) concept of a ‘multidirectional memory’ (as an epiphenomenon of decolonization) has received, it is time to highlight the sociocultural microstructure of cultural memory agency and, thus, move away from the solely national focus.

Analyzing the multi-layered processes of cultural adaptation, (re-)production, inter- and transmedia dissemination, and the connection between media and daily life through the lens of cultural icons provides an access to the study of culture that is focused on specific phenomena and their transgressive and

transversal connectedness. This compilation examines iconizing practices as an entanglement of intermedia adaptation and valuation in three sections along the disciplines of 1. literature, 2. art, and 3. humanities and science.

## LITERATURE

Focusing on literature through the lens of cultural iconicity provides insight into the popularity of literature in- and outside the literary field. Moreover, it highlights literature's international, transcultural, and transmedia entanglements in both former and contemporary culture. Besides this, the chapters in this section show that the popularity of literature is also due to literature's immense potential for becoming iconic. The poet-as-an-icon is a trope of European culture that can be traced back to Homer and his iconization during the Renaissance, as Daniel Syrový demonstrates in his chapter. Syrový untangles the intricate reception of the ancient Greek poet before the 19th century and shows that in earlier epochs Homer became an icon of poetry work because his work was nearly unknown—not because everyone knew it. Moreover, Homer's iconicity casts its shadow on the continuing debates over whether Homer really did exist or not, which can be understood in terms of iconicity and iconoclasm in the field of philology. In her chapter Martina Stemberger portrays how the fictional characters Lolita and Oblomov became icons that have been adapted in other fiction, movies, stage plays—to the point where they have made their way into everyday language, fashion, food, etc. This transfictional, transmedial, and transcultural dissemination of both characters does not lead to a semantic simplification, but actually serves a better understanding of the novels they stem from.

The iconization of fictional characters or their authors is usually due to (re-)productive practices on behalf of literature readers. However, literature itself can negotiate the mechanisms of iconizing. This is the case in Thomas Mann's novel *Lotte in Weimar*, as Alexander Löck presents in his chapter. He emphasizes that Mann at the same time criticizes iconic representation as inferior to high art, and accepts it as an unavoidable form of perception. This chapter is followed by chapters that focus more specifically on the transmedia movement of literary texts. Irene Husser analyses references to Kafka in television series. Such allusions to avantgarde literature demonstrate that contemporary, advanced entertainment does not turn away from former high-brow culture, but instead uses it as a tradition to which it belongs itself. Achim Hölter reconstructs how the names and images of authors in 19th-century card games served both didactical and national cultural purposes. They influenced the notion of literature as the product of a few genius national heroes—which has been present in academic reconstruction of literary history and popular understanding of literature beyond the 19th century. Jérôme Cottin opens a treasure trove on the prolific popularity of the Bible in French and German advertisement from the last two decades. His examples prove the ongoing but secular iconicity of former religious tales and characters. Sophie Picard turns to

the popularity of online literary quotes (especially meme culture). Quoting literature in social networks contributes to the iconization of the authors or works from which the quotes are taken, but even more to the iconization of quoting as a literary practice. Even if they seem to be iconoclastic, memes are no attack against literature but gestures of self-irony that fit into the contemporary habits of social media communication. This example reveals that literature in today's popular culture is neither outdated nor hip. Instead, it is so universally iconic that it can be used for issues ranging from social media self-expression to literary debates about high art. This insight is also presented in Paula Wojcik's chapter which focuses on forms and functions of conceptual icons using the example of literature. The chapter discusses in particular the role of literary knowledge that is necessary to decode the manifold metonymic references to the conceptual icon "literature" which are used to comment on the veneration and iconization in literature and film.

## ARTS

In the history of art, there are countless examples of works that have become icons. The most famous is possibly the *Mona Lisa* (Kemp 2011, 141–165), which is internationally recognized as the epitome of artistic perfection and inspires pilgrimages from millions of visitors every year. Almost as famous is the ready made by Marcel Duchamp, who added a mustache to the portrait in 1919 and thus created, so to speak, the icon for iconoclasm in art history. Discussing the French rococo painter Jean-Antoine Watteau in this volume, Elisabeth Fritz shows that not only images, but also pictorial language, can become iconic. She reconstructs the intermedia processes since the 18th century that have led to the circulation of elements from the paintings group known as *fêtes galantes* across everyday cultural settings. She argues that parts of the paintings signify a particular form of social interaction—the *galanterie*—that they metonymically represent.

As mentioned earlier, icons and their representations are not limited to visual arts. The first four notes of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* are similarly recognizable and condense as much meaning as the *Mona Lisa*. In our volume several chapters demonstrate how musical icons are being disseminated and re-functionalized in different settings via multimedia. Udo Bomnüter looks at Mozart—considered the musical genius par excellence since the 19th century—and shows how Miloš Forman's film, *Amadeus* (1984), was perceived as a desacralization of the composer. However, this iconoclasm was accompanied by a re-iconization of Mozart, who, as 'Amadeus', now circulated in popular culture as a childlike and selfish genius. In her chapter, Stephanie Großmann analyzes the use and function of opera music in advertising. She shows the different forms opera references—whose status as a quasi-sacred, highly-cultural practice is always assumed—can take. At the same time, she points to the fact that deciphering the references to specific operas can sometimes counteract the message of the advertisements. In his musicological analysis of two late

piano pieces by Johannes Brahms, Birger Petersen looks at iconization processes within music history. He shows that a certain compositional style—the ‘counterpoint’—functions as an intertextual reference in Brahms’ works, which is of particular relevance for composers and musicians.

Finally, two chapters address icons and iconization processes in the field of more popular arts. Anna-Sophie Jürgens reconstructs how the concept of the clown robot has been condensed in literature, film, theater, and comics using the example of the Joker character. She shows that this popular icon is a kind of reversal of the notion of the human machine, ironizing our fascination with technological progress. Thomas Scholz discusses the multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* and argues that the integration of iconic aesthetic, narrative, and interactive elements of the game serves an extradiegetic function. Through intermedial references to game-external genres and media, icons give players the possibility of reappropriating high- and pop-cultural content.

## SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES

The iconization of science is most obvious when it comes to the scientists. The image of Einstein—with wild hair, playfully showing his tongue to the world—is an excellent example of an iconized image of a genius who does not care about society’s conventions and manners. Scientists from film and literature are created according to this iconic archetype. However, science can become iconic in forms other than a person’s image. Martin Kemp, for example, includes the double-helix and the equation  $E=mc^2$  in his monograph. In this section the chapters elaborate on the emergence, forms, and functions of scientific icons and the problems and potentials of this cultural process.

In her chapter Nadja Gernalzick examines the iconization of the term ‘deconstruction’ against a deconstructive theoretical background. Using the example of Byung-Chul Han’s *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, she argues against a representational approach to a theory of icons—traditionally rooted in Western thinking tradition—and presents an actor-oriented understanding that emphasizes the (global) fluidity of meaning creation. Continuing the transnational perspective, Katharina Tyran presents the case study of the Glagolitic script. Tyran analyses how this archaic writing system—without a referential function that can only be read by a small academic circle—has been conventionalized as an autochthonous national heritage, and a special sign of Croatian cultural and national identity. In contrast to this particularistic case study from Croatia, Nikolai Münch and Paula Wojcik elaborate on the global icon of Dolly the sheep. Their chapter focuses on the question of how the interference of science, art, and religion produces a semantical and affective surplus of icons, and how this surplus feeds back on the work of scientists. Hannes Höfer’s chapter sheds light on iconization as an academic technique. Closely reading Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s treatise *Production of Presence* that is pro materiality and presence, and contra the implementation of meaning

(Gumbrecht's definition of hermeneutics in a nutshell), Höfer carves out how differently US and German scholars position themselves by iconizing the term 'hermeneutics'. While in the US-American context his iconoclasm has been largely unnoticed, in the German context (where humanities are still highly influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics concept) the reactions of critics were harsh. Stefan Alker-Windbichler focuses on an institution of knowledge organization: the library. His chapter examines its iconizing in various media and the feedback of this process on the institution itself. His conclusion is clear: the fact that some libraries do not have bookshelves anymore—and are, instead, decorated with picture-wallpapers of bookshelves—indicates that the more iconic the 'old fashioned' way of knowledge organization becomes, the more it loses its function as a living part of the scientific world.

The chapters assembled in the three sections of this volume reflect on history and present of visual and non-visual, material and conceptual icons of literature, art, humanities, and science. They demonstrate that "iconizing" is a common, however complex practice that involves dissemination, decontextualization, fragmentation, (re-)functionalization, (re-)valuation and various forms of (re-)usage (i.e. transformation, adaptation, appropriation). Icons are thus, object to a constant dynamic flow between academic disciplines, arts and the everyday. They transgress the borders of cultural fields and of what is considered to be high-brow and popular culture—but at the same time they (re-)establish them as their representatives.

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SECTION I

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Literature



# On Not Knowing Homer: A Poet as Icon

*Daniel Syrový*

“HOMÈRE: Célèbre par sa façon de rire : rire homérique.  
N’a jamais existé.”

“HOMER: Famous for his kind of laughter: Homeric laughter. Never existed.”  
Flaubert, *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (Flaubert (1999, 528)).

## INTRODUCTION

Homer today may be considered a contested figure. One of the renowned experts on Greek verse, Martin L. West, in *The Making of the Iliad* (2011), refers only to “its poet (whom I forbear to call Homer [...])” (West 2011, 3). Even after more than two hundred years of debate on the Homeric Question, West’s is not exactly a predominant opinion.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, while for specialists the problems of attribution remain very much unsolved, the circumspection of scholars is unlikely to make the popular notion of “Homer” disappear. For large periods of European history, most readers saw in him a signal for a common literary lineage. For equally large periods, however, many details that later scholarship would recover, including at one point the texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, were unknown or forgotten. How come, then, that *Homer* persisted—and still does?

<sup>1</sup>West calls the poet P, as opposed to Q, poet of the *Odyssey*, in *The Making of the Odyssey* (2014). Joachim Latacz is situated at the opposite end of the spectrum, seeing no reason to doubt the traditional Greek accounts (Latacz 2014, 543 and elsewhere).

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Though without much in the way of visual appeal, I argue that Homer may be analyzed as an icon, following Martin Kemp's indication that iconic images "accrue legends to a prodigious degree that is largely independent of how long they have been around." (Kemp 2012, 3). "Widespread recognizability" and "a rich series of varied associations for very large numbers of people across time and cultures" (Kemp 2012, 3) also apply. People, as we shall see, also "become caught up in the myths" (Kemp 2012, 3) of Homer. Homer is, in fact, above all a series of references or ideas. He was a Divine Poet—and came first or second only after the mythical Orpheus, a rank he was often said to have battled over with Hesiod (the outcome was solved diplomatically). He was renowned for having had only nature to imitate. Some maintained he was blind (and poor), thus the more dependent on his inspiration. At times, Homer was considered the fountain of Greek wisdom and poetry ("the source and origin of all divine invention", as Macrobius has it<sup>2</sup>). His texts offered moral examples and served as stylistic models, yet he was also the fraudulent historian of the Sack of Troy who never personally witnessed the war. In short, he was a foil for all sorts of concerns about what poetry should be or achieve. The manifold semantic and affective dimensions point as much toward Homer's iconicity as the iconoclastic impulse to look behind the quasi-mythical status. Homer changed alongside other cultural transformation processes and what readers thought they knew about him is often as fascinating as any verifiable facts. This chapter aims to untangle some threads of this long history.

### AN ICON IN THE MAKING

The stubbornness of Francesco Petrarca paid off eventually. The scholar and poet had a habit of keeping his friends on the lookout, internationally, for rare manuscripts. Anything by Cicero, by Livy, but also by other historians, philosophers and poets. His curiosity, Petrarca acknowledges, was piqued by references in other texts: he knew Varro, Terence and Ennius through Cicero, Cicero's Letters through Seneca, Apollonius through Servius and so forth. The poems of Homer were particularly intriguing, not least because of Horace's "judgment, universally acknowledged, proclaiming Homer the prince of poets" (Petrarca 1975, 158; *Rer. fam.* III, 18). Petrarca wrote this in 1346, some years after he had in fact started to take Greek lessons, which came to little, especially after his teacher Barlaam took up a bishopric in the south of Italy (this was 1342; he died in 1349). But in 1353, the diplomat Nikolaos Sygeros, whom Petrarca had met in Avignon, finally sent him a copy of the *Iliad* from Constantinople, which would become of crucial importance for the intellectual activity of the late 14th century, with considerable ripple effects. In a letter (*Rer. fam.* XVIII, 2), Petrarca effusively thanked Sygeros, emphasizing that the

<sup>2</sup> Cited after Petrarca (1985, 44). The original is "Homerus, diuinarum omnium inuentionum fons et origo" (Macrobius, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* II, 10). Plato (*Republic* X) already makes fun of the idea that according to his admirers Homer was the great educator of Greece.

“pure and unspoiled” text “from the very springs of Greek eloquence” was an “inestimable gift” (Petrarca 1985, 45). This was both an expression of emotion and a statement of poetics. Yet the difficult practical side is not lost on the poet: “But alas, what am I now to do?” Without Greek, “your Homer is silent for me, rather I am deaf to him.” (Petrarca 1985, 45–46)

It would take until the late 1350s that a welcome opportunity arose. In 1350, Petrarca had encountered a young admirer of his, Giovanni Boccaccio, and they immediately hit it off. During his stay in Naples, Boccaccio, too, had taken Greek lessons with Barlaam. Both were interested in ancient texts and keen on getting to know Homer. Eventually, they would commission a Latin translation of the Greek poet.

### ICONIC TRAITS: WESTERN KNOWLEDGE OF HOMER AROUND 1350

That Petrarca and Boccaccio were aware of Homer without having read his works is not at all surprising, given the countless references to his name, life, works, and influence in the tradition they were so familiar with. Homer is mentioned in classical Latin philosophy and poetry, for instance by Cicero, Seneca, Horace, Ovid, Juvenal.<sup>3</sup> Above all, there was Virgil, who did not cite Homer by name, but whose *Aeneid* depended upon Homer’s model. Virgil’s commentator, Servius, drew attention to the Greek poet right away: “Virgil’s intention is to imitate Homer and to praise Augustus by way of his ancestors.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, short recapitulations of the contents of Homer’s poems and other explanations familiarized readers with the Homeric tradition (Desmond 2020, 437). Parts of the stories told in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, of course, were also included in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (books XI and XII), as well as in the *Ilias latina*, a central school text for Medieval Latinity of about a thousand lines of verse, which even before Petrarca’s time was already known to be a summary, and which dates from the first century CE (see Curtius 2013, 48–54). Moreover, a wealth of information in the compilation literature of late antiquity (Aulus Gellius, Macrobius, minor figures such as Solinus) would have been easily available to someone with no Greek in the 13th or 14th centuries, not to speak of quotations in philosophical texts by Neoplatonists, Boethius, or Aristotle in translation. Homer was also present in the Patristic tradition: Saint Augustine references him not only in the *Confessiones* (I, 14), but also a handful of times in *De civitate Dei*. We also find his name in Isidore, Lactantius and Saint

<sup>3</sup> Cicero, among other places, in *Tusculan Disputations*, *Cato maior*, *De natura deorum* and *De officiis* (III, 97); Seneca the Younger in the *Letters to Lucilius*; Horace in *Ep.* I, ii (on rereading Homer) and *Ars poetica*; Juvenal describes the scales that weigh Virgil against Homer in *Satire* 6 (v. 437); Ovid mentions him in *Amores* I, 8, *Tristia* II, *Ars amatoria* II and III, and in *Remedia amoris*. Though little known at the time, Propertius, too, names Homer as the chronicler of Troy in *Elegy* III.1.

<sup>4</sup> “Intentio Vergilii haec est, Homerum imitari et Augustam laudare a parentibus”; *Comm. in Verg. Aen.* I 1, my translation.

Jerome. Yet the knowledge that could be gleaned from this tradition was partial, since most of these writers when quoting Homer quoted him in Greek. Over time, Homer's works changed from a concrete reading experience to a mere signifier. Even if writers and poets still might be said to have "an image of the *kind* of poet Homer was" (Lamberton 1989, 10), they did not know his words.

In a sense, this is a first step toward the iconization of Homer, because direct knowledge was replaced by a superficial familiarity, albeit one with a wide circulation. The Medieval European literatures usually reflect this change of status. Although "medieval poets had absorbed a concept of Homeric authority through contact with Latin texts" (Desmond 2020, 436), references became of a mostly general character. Even Homer's authority was not unquestioned. From Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* XVII, xxi) and others, it was known that Homer lived long after the Trojan War. Therefore, what could he know about Troy? A European tradition that believed itself descended from Trojan, rather than Greek, ancestors (analogous to Aeneas co-founding the Roman Empire), had no qualms to follow the prefaces of two Greek romances from late antiquity known in Latin translation; therefore, two writers other than Homer were considered the real authorities on the war: "Dictys of Crete" (himself Greek) and, even more importantly, "Dares of Phrygia", a Trojan. Their precedence was posited by Isidore of Sevilla (*Etymologiae* I, xlii, 1), and their reliability was taken for a fact. They inspired a rich tradition of revisionist Troy-texts, among which stand out Benoît de Sainte-Maure's verse *Roman de Troie* (approx. 1165) and Guido de Columnis' prose adaptation *Historia destructionis Troiae* (1287) (see Syrový 2020; Desmond 2020). Benoît in fact addresses the problem of Homer's late birth in his poem (vv. 123–130), while still considering him "a wonderful scribe (writer), a wise and learned man."<sup>5</sup> His influence goes as far as Boccaccio's *Filostrato* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Cryseide*, though by their time, the quarrel with Homer's authority was mostly a thing of the past.<sup>6</sup>

The date of Homer was also addressed by Isidore, who otherwise shows little interest in the poems. In his timeline of world history, he included Homer together with Solomon and Saul at the end of the Third Age ("Homerus fuisse putatur."). The same information is given in Saint Jerome's translation of Eusebius's *World Chronicle* and would end up in Wace's *Roman de Brut* ("Dunc esteit Samuel prophetes | E Homer ert preisiez poëtes." vv. 1451f.) and, via Wace, in the long prose romance *Roman de Perceforest* (I, 8). This date for Homer is mentioned as late as Polydore Vergil's *De Inventoribus Rerum* (1499).

Not all poets and writers had such a pronounced interest in the historical Homer, and the iconicity of the poet is much more clearly visible in the common lists of poets and authorities, where Homer was regularly

<sup>5</sup> "Omers, qui fu clers merveillos | E sages e esciëntos", vv. 45f.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, there was never just one opinion on Homer. On the way his works were received differently even in Greek antiquity, see Brunschwig et al. (2011).

mentioned—Chaucer names “Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace” in *Troilus and Cryseide* (Chaucer 1987, 584), the *Roman de Thèbes* has “danz Omers et danz Platons | et Virgiles et Quicerons” in the incipit, and so forth.<sup>7</sup> Even so, it was a learned kind of reference that made most sense when the texts treated matters relating to antiquity and perhaps in some cases reflected the writers’ knowledge of the *Ilias Latina*.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the absence of the name in the Arthurian tradition is striking but not surprising. Significantly, references to Homer often included the subject matter of the *Iliad*. Troy held a particular place in the Medieval tradition, after all, while the *Odyssey* appears to have been largely neglected.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the allusions to specific legendary details about Homer, in particular references to his life and person rather than his texts, are related to a revived interest in antiquity, and most of the commonplace observations about him (his fight with Hesiod; his blindness; his critic Zoilus; his death from not being able to answer a riddle<sup>10</sup>) already belong to the time of Petrarca and Boccaccio. Barely a generation earlier, Dante, whose information came mostly from Aristotle and Horace, mentioned Homer as an authority in almost all of his texts, yet included no biographical details.<sup>11</sup> Of course, Dante gave Homer prominence as the leader—“sword in hand” (Alighieri 1993, 62)—of the ghosts of heathen poets in *Inferno* IV (vv. 86–90), who welcome Dante into their midst. He mentions Homer once again as “that Greek | to whom the Muses gave more milk than to any other” (Alighieri 1993, 295),<sup>12</sup> but not, crucially, in the context of encountering Odysseus in *Inf.* XXVI. He was concerned above all with the epic tradition Homer stood for.

Dante died in 1321. Thirty years later, writing his *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, a short biography and appreciation of the poet, Boccaccio, on the other hand, prominently mentions the seven cities who claimed Homer as their own, in order to persuade Florence to give Dante his due as a famous son of the city, whom he considered Italy’s Virgil or Homer.

<sup>7</sup> Chrétien de Troyes mentions the language of Plato, Homer and Cato in *Philoména* v. 131f.; the *Roman de Dolopathos* mentions Homer together with Cicero (“S’encor vivoit Omers ou Tullies”). I take these indications in part from Flutré (1962, 105).

<sup>8</sup> A text like the early 13th century Spanish *Libro de Alexandre* mentions Homer’s name and writing in five instances relating to the pre-history of Alexander and the Matter of Troy, almost certainly in reference to the short Latin poem. The same might be true for the otherwise somewhat enigmatic reference in the *Roman de la Rose* vv. 6776–6778: “Quant il d’Omer ne te souvient, | Puis que tu l’as estudié. | Mais tu l’as, ce samble, oublié.”

<sup>9</sup> An exception is the moral-philosophical interest in various aspects of Odysseus’ career (his attempt to escape the war; his stratagem of the wooden horse; his stay with Circe and the transformation of his crew) that begins with Aristotle and Cicero, and is, in its later iterations, quite removed from Homer, focussing mostly on Virgil and Ovid. See Paetz (1970).

<sup>10</sup> As mentioned by Valerius Maximus, *Dicta et facta memorabilia* IX, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Twice in the *Convivio* (I, vii; IV, xx), where Dante mentions that because of the quality of his verse, Homer was never translated to Latin; twice in *Monarchia* (I, v; II, iii) via material from the *Nicomachean Ethics*; and twice in *Vita nuova* (ii, xxv) quoting Homer in Latin, once explicitly via Horace.

<sup>12</sup> “[Q]uel Greco | che le Muse lattar più ch’altri mai” (*Purg.* XXII, 101–102).

## TRANSLATING HOMER

In late 1358, a former pupil of Petrarca's and Boccaccio's old teacher Barlaam visited Padova, where he came into closer contact with Petrarca. His name was Leonzio Pilato and he might have originally been from Thessaloniki, though not much is known about him for certain (see Schwertsik 2014, 131–206). From what we can gather from Petrarca's and Boccaccio's own testimony (in the *Familiare*s as well as in *Genealogia deorum gentilium*), Leonzio's appearance was slightly disheveled and he spoke faulty Latin. But this hardly mattered, since he was exceedingly learned in Greek, which he also taught for money. Leonzio was asked to prepare a summary and prose translation of the first parts of the *Iliad*. Excitedly, Boccaccio and Petrarca hatched the plan to organize a chair of Greek at the University of Florence, in order for Leonzio to have time for a full translation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into Latin verse. Boccaccio would later claim this as his own doing, writing in *Genealogia deorum gentilium*:

[my objectors] may not know it, but it is my peculiar boast and glory to cultivate Greek poetry among the Tuscans. Was it not I who intercepted Leontius Pilatus on his way from Venice to the western Babylon [= Avignon], and with my advice turned him aside from his long peregrination, and kept him in our city? did not I receive him into my own house, entertain him for a long time, and make the utmost effort personally that he should be appointed professor in Florence, and his salary paid out of the city's funds? Indeed I did; and I too was the first who, at my own expense, called back to Tuscany the writings of Homer and of other Greek authors, whence they had departed many centuries before, never meanwhile to return. And it was not to Tuscany only, but to my own city that I brought them. \*I, too, was the first Italian to hear Leontius privately read out the *Iliad*\*; and I it was who tried to arrange public readings from Homer. And though I did not understand Homer any too well, I got such knowledge of him as I could; and if that wanderer had dwelt longer among us, I should certainly have learned much more. (Osgood 1956, 120<sup>13</sup>)

The two Italian writers managed to procure Leonzio the post at the university and he started serious work on his translation toward the end of 1360.<sup>14</sup> The appearance of the text was epoch-making. It was perhaps Boccaccio himself who wrote to Petrarca in the name of Homer (Dotti 2004, 329)—the letter is lost, but Petrarca's reply is not. Indeed it was included, before a brief conclusion, at the very end of his 24-book *Letters on Familiar Matters* (XIV, 13). Addressed to Homer himself, it is a strange conversation with the dead but

<sup>13</sup>I modified the passage between asterisks to confirm to Boccaccio's text: "Ipse ego fui qui primus ex Latinis a Leontio in privato *Yliadem* audivi." Osgood erroneously has "I, too, was the first to hear Leontius privately render the *Iliad* in Latin." At the time, *latinus* usually refers to Italians.

<sup>14</sup>A letter from Petrarca to Boccaccio in August 1360, concerns among other things the acquisition of a codex of Homer for Leonzio to work on (Petrarca 1994, 338–359). Further details from Santagata 2019, 206–211; 405–407 and Dotti 2004.

ever-present forefather, transcending what may be considered ‘normal’ communication, representing a sacralization of Homer, despite its overt tendency at the same time to turn him into a kind of contemporary:

Francesco sends greetings to Homer, the prince of Greek poetry. For some time now I have meant to write you and would have done so except for my feeble command of your language. [...] One man has once again restored you to our age in Latin dress; and by Jove, your Penelope did not wait for her Ulysses any longer or more anxiously than I have for you. [...] You utter many complaints about your imitators [...] Why should you not rejoice, being assured of always occupying first place. [...] You lament that your name, once held in great honor by the early jurists and physicians has now become subject to their successors’ contempt [...] [I]t is with you as with the sun, for which it is not considered a disgrace but the highest praise that feeble eyes and nocturnal birds flee from it. [...] For my part, although I may not be worthy of such a guest, still I have you in Greek in my home and, as much as has been possible, in Latin, and shortly I shall possess all of you, if your Thessalian [= Leonzio] would complete what he has begun. (Petrarca 1985, 342–350)

Before long, the relationship turned somewhat sour. Around 1362, Leonzio left behind Florence and went to stay with Petrarca in Venice for a year, from where he eventually departed in a bad mood, going back to Greece. Trying to return once more to Italy by ship in 1365, Leonzio was struck by lightning. He did not survive. His translations, however, were safe in the hands of Boccaccio, and Petrarca, too, would receive copies some time after Leonzio’s death (see *Sen.* VI, 1–2).

The Latin Homer opened new perspectives, as was visible above all in the work of Petrarca and Boccaccio themselves. Here were texts to work with, in the truest sense of the word.<sup>15</sup> Petrarca in fact started quoting passages from Homer in various places throughout his collection of *Letters of Old Age* (*Seniles*), where before he had had to limit himself mostly to allusions and incidental information. Sometimes this was extensive enough, as in his epic *Africa*, where Petrarca had the poet Ennius encounter a vision of Homer, who would show him the future: a young man in Vaucluse who would some day renew the epic tradition—Petrarca himself.<sup>16</sup> But literal quotations made a difference. Interestingly, Petrarca also was one of the first who again referred to Homer by way of mere allusion, without naming him—*Secretum* II, 76; *Trionfo della Fama* III (1371)—because, as he would know from Seneca, in antiquity “the poet” simply meant Homer.

<sup>15</sup>The *Bibliothèque nationale française* holds a manuscript, Cod. lat. 7880, containing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in Latin with marginalia by Petrarca. See <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10027324f/f9.item.r=7880> (Accessed 03 Dec 2021).

<sup>16</sup>Ennius’s borrowings from Homer are mentioned in Seneca’s *Epistle* CVIII. The other handful of references in *Africa* are less high-minded and more akin to the tradition described earlier, as are the quotations and references (via Cicero, John of Salisbury, Aristotle) in *Secretum*, *De viris illustribus*, *De ignorantia* and *De remediis utriusque fortunae*.



Boccaccio, too, who had briefly cited Homer in *De mulieribus claris* (1361) and *De casibus virorum illustrium* (c. 1355), now started to quote him extensively. The *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, Boccaccio's reconstruction of the genealogy of ancient mythological figures as a form of relevant knowledge in a thoroughly Christian context, puts Homer in a central place. He not only alludes to passages of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* a few dozen times, he also cites the Greek text in 45 places (mostly from book five onward). And while he justifies the obscurity, he is not apologetic ("I am sorry, then, for Latin learning, if it has so completely rejected the study of Greek that we do not even recognize the characters"; Osgood 1956, 119). Both also pioneered the references to Homer's circumstances that would soon again turn into clichés.

### THE ICON AS DAILY CURRENCY

By the late 14th and early 15th centuries, Homer's poems were returning to the center of Humanist activities, both as school texts (Grendler 1989, 203–204) and as a standard reference. Within the next century, a poet like Ludovico Ariosto might not only write about looking for a Greek instructor for his son (*Satire*, VI), but quotations abounded in all kinds of literary texts (see e.g. Rengakos and Zimmermann 2011, 336–343). The invention of the printing press soon led to the *editio princeps* of Homer, published in Florence in 1488 by Demetrius Chalcocondyles; but not only mechanical reproduction affected the status of Homer. The rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* around 1500 fueled new debates on poetry in which Homer played an important role, especially because a new preoccupation with precedence (Polydore Vergil's *On Inventions*, 1499) and originality (Alberti's preface to *Momus*, c. 1450) placed him on the highest pedestal. Intermittently, people such as Sperone Speroni would go as far as to disparage Virgil as a mere imitator (see Weinberg 1961, 169–170), but others looked for productive ways to integrate different traditions. One way to avoid religious conflict when dealing with texts about the Greek pantheon was to continue the allegorical readings of Homer that historically had played an important role in the way Christian theologians learned interpretive techniques from the Neoplatonists (Lamberton 1989), and allowed for a wide range of interpretations.

Still, the Early Modern Homer bears only superficial relation to our notion of the poet. Above all, he was known to have written additional works (the lost comic epic *Margites*, the *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, the *Homeric Hymns* and others<sup>17</sup>). Biographically, the *Lives of Homer* attributed to Herodotus (1st c. CE) and Plutarch, as well as the *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi* (2nd c. CE) were taken as more or less authentic, and references to Homer's background, the seven cities that vied for him (reconciled, incidentally, by Pseudo-Herodotus) as well as pseudo-facts such as his blindness, his poverty, his death, served

<sup>17</sup> In 1504, Aldus Manutius printed his edition of Homer with the *Iliad* in the first, *Odyssey*, *Batrachomyomachia* and *Hymns* in the second volume.

manifold purposes for commentaries and quotations. Writers would insist (with Horace), that even Homer nods. In addition, they would be aware (from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*) that Alexander slept with a copy of Homer under his pillow; and that he lamented not to have a poet to sing his deeds like Achilles had. A number of other anecdotes about Homer that Petrarca and Boccaccio had already gleaned from countless writers, finally became common knowledge.

It took more or less until the 17th century that iconoclastic tendencies came to the fore, and arguments arose that Homer not only violated the rhetorical "aptum" of Horatian poetics, but that the "ancients" did not set all standards, and that instead the "moderns" should have the last word about their own literature, leading to the extensive debate known as the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*. From then on, the fronts regarding Homer were divided. Young Werther would have his bilingual text with him at all times. Alexander Pope, who had no Greek himself, "translated" the poems into English and made a fortune of it, and most Romantics were infatuated in one way or another with Homer and Homerica, like in Keats's *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer* (for an overview, see Manguel 2007, 126–149). Others criticized the obsession with aesthetic values that might be seen as obsolete. But the big blow had already happened.

#### CODA: ICONOCLASM

At the same time that the Romantics indulged in their vision of Homer as the original genius of poetry following Robert Wood's *Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (1769), a text that was also enthusiastically received in Germany (Curtius 2013, 324–325), it was German scholarship that worked on dismantling this very idea, culminating with F.A. Wolf's *Prolegomena to Homer* (1795). The point they had in common was that both groups read Homer no longer for the timeless wisdom or for allegory, but as a historical writer. In fact, allegorical readings were already problematized in the first half of the 18th century, but it was the historical dimension that allowed scholars to focus more clearly on the way the texts were written, that is to say: not *written* at all, but composed and transmitted by memory (see Murrin 1980, 173–196, who also talks about the influence of Wood on Wolf). It was Wolf's conclusion, so pithily summed up by Flaubert's sarcastic dictionary-entry quoted at the beginning, that Homer never existed. Or maybe he did but he was somebody else.<sup>18</sup> What can be analyzed as an act of iconoclasm only made sense because it was directed at a figure as central to the literary tradition as Homer, and the effect this had can in itself be seen as a form of (re-)iconization. Accordingly, ever since, the Homeric Question has oscillated between extremes, where some tried to come up with alternative theories for who Homer was (e.g. Samuel Butler's *Authorless*

<sup>18</sup> Manguel (2007, 24) quotes a possibly apocryphal line by Oscar Wilde: "Homer, or another Greek of the same name".

of the *Odyssey*, 1897), while a whole branch of studies was dedicated to the poetic process itself: influences from Phoenician and Caucasian sources, Milman Parry's studies on oral literature and indeed so many other topics that there is hardly room to mention them. On the other hand, Western culture still trusts in Homer. Busts of the poet continue to be reproduced in plaster and as illustrations. Pliny already knew that they were inauthentic, yet fulfilled a particular need (Graziosi 2016, 10). There are 44 extant antique marble busts of Homer, dating as early as the 5th century BCE (Richter 1965, I, 47), and they remained popular throughout most of history. *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (once again without *Margites* and other works) are of course still seen as fundamental texts, even as proto-novels and as blueprints for all literature to come (thus Raymond Queneau in an essay included in Flaubert 1999, 45–48). In all of these instances, Homer's iconicity remains changeable but somehow also constant, for even an elusive notion can be central to any number of discourses, carrying "a rich series of varied associations for [...] people across time and cultures" (Kemp 2012, 3). Homer, apparently, does.

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# Lolita, Oblomov & Co.: Figurations of Literary Iconicity Between Transfictionality, Transmediality, and Transculturality

*Martina Stemberger*

## INTRO: A TALE OF TWO ICONS

Vladimir Nabokov's New England 'nymphet' and Ivan Gončarov's legendary lethargic Russian landowner: focusing on this mismatched—and, for this very reason, eminently enlightening—tandem, this article explores some crucial aspects of literary iconicity between transfictionality, transmediality, and transculturality.

Even if the author of *Lolita*, unflatteringly, classes his older colleague among the “stupefying bores” of Russian literature (Nabokov 2000b, 128), Gončarov's novel (1859), no less than Nabokov's (1955), inspires, up to the present, not only a lively critical discourse, but also multiple rewritings and intermedial adaptations. Having completed the process of “transfictional emancipation” (Saint-Gelais 2011, 373–383) from their respective source texts, *Lolita* and *Oblomov* function as “fluctuating characters” in Umberto Eco's sense, “migrat[ing] from text to text” (2011, 96), but also, in a dynamic process of transmedia circulation, from text to film, TV, theater, music, etc. Gončarov (1955a, 104) evokes a “world of creative types”, inhabited by Don Quixote, Hamlet, Lady Macbeth & Co., and endowed with “its own specific

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life". As citizens of said parallel world, Lolita and Oblomov have both made the "category leap" (Maar 2005, 12) from character to concept. According to Klein (2001), Nabokov's heroine constitutes a valuable addition to "the human meme-pool" (Maar 2005, 53), while Gončarov's portrait of Oblomov, for Neuhäuser (2008, 668), reminds of "an ancient Russian icon"; but it is even more promising to consider both protagonists' status as secular literature-based cultural icons.

An indicator of iconicity is the formation of a corresponding lexical field. Gončarov introduces Oblomov as an iterable, gradable type (*O*, 13); he uses the adjective *oblomovskij* and the adverb *po-oblomovski*, with regard also to Rajsij, "Oblomov's son" (Gončarov 1955a, 83) from his later novel *Obrjyv* (*The Precipice*, 1869). But above all, he coins the concept of *oblomovščina* (*O*, 382), by means of a pejorative suffix common in Russian (as in *karamazovščina*, with reference to Dostoevskij's novel). The same year, Nikolaj Dobroljubov publishes his essay *Čto takoe oblomovščina?* (*What is Oblomovism?*); by late 1859, Aleksandr Družinin establishes that Oblomov and *oblomovščina* are "forever ingrained in our language". In his native tongue, Oblomov generates a wide variety of derived words; but he has also been incorporated into English (*Oblomovism*, *Oblomovian*, *Oblomovesque*), French (*oblomovisme*, *oblomoverie*, *oblomoviser*), German (*Oblomowerei*, *Oblomowtum*, *oblomowesk*, *oblomowieren*, etc.), Italian or Spanish (*oblomovismo*, *oblomovizzare* resp. *oblomovizar*). As the namesake of "Oblomov's" or "Oblomov syndrome",<sup>1</sup> Gončarov's hero has found his way into popular science—as has Nabokov's nymphet with the "Lolita Complex" (Trainer 1966) alias *Lolicon*.

Just as Oblomov (*an Oblomov*, etc.), Lolita works as a generic term in different languages (*a Lolita*, *des lolitas*, etc.), with numerous derivatives such as *Lolitaesque*, *Lolitalization*, *lolitalisation*, *lolitización*, *lolitizacija*, *lolitalize*, *lolitaliser*, *lolitizirovat'* (etc.)—and, once again, *lolitorščina*. When Evgenij Evtušenko (2011) critically remarks that his fellow poet Vera Pavlova "decided to lolitize herself", the formula alludes to her alleged ingratiation to popular culture.

## MUSIC, SEX, FOOD & FASHION: ICONICITY AND INTERNATIONAL POPULAR CULTURE

Both icons enjoy indeed considerable presence in contemporary popular and everyday material culture. Dutch vodka brand Oblomov bets on the literary PR factor; a Russian food video blogger runs his business under the same pseudonym.<sup>2</sup> Between Moscow, Ulyanovsk, Bremen, Kiel, Berlin, and Vienna, a range of bars and restaurants pick Gončarov's protagonist as their patron; in this context, Oblomov stands for deceleration and decadent culinary delights. Meanwhile, an equally Gončarov-inspired project ObLoMoV (i.e. "Obesity

<sup>1</sup><https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Oblomov+syndrome>.

<sup>2</sup>[https://video-bloggers.ru/slavnyi\\_druzhe\\_oblomov](https://video-bloggers.ru/slavnyi_druzhe_oblomov).

and Low Motility Victims”) encourages sports and theater “to prevent the problem of physical inactivity [...] and related health issues” among preteens.<sup>3</sup>

As a popular label for nightclubs and brothels, Lolita emblemizes a different category of entertainment between Sardinian Alghero, Tbilisi, and Ulm. Several pop bands choose her as their namesake: Swedish *Lolita Pop* as well as Japanese *Lolita No. 18* or Austrian *Lolita KompleX*. Lolita is omnipresent in—often remarkably misogynous—discourses about female pop stars and starlets: Kylie Minogue, “minor icon”, is mocked as a “belated Lolita” (Goergens 2002), whereas Madonna made it in time “from provocative Lolita to sporty pop grandma” (*Express* 2012). In the cross-generational gaggle of “Pop Lolitas” (Köck 2012), Lena Zavaroni is followed by Britney Spears and Alizée, Lana Del Rey, Petite Meller, or Birdy.

Lolita thrives also in fashion. In 2015, a Prada campaign staging Mia Goth—two years after her debut in Lars von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac*—as a sexualized Lolita, is banned by the British Advertising Standards Authority (*Express* 2015). But the stronghold of Lolita fashion, beginning with the 1970s, is of course Japan. *Baby, the Stars Shine Bright*, *Metamorphose temps de fille*, *Moi-même-Moitié*: the labels’ poetic names point to this fashion’s crucial characteristics—its penchant for eclectic historicism (with a preference for the Rococo and Victorian ages), the joy of masquerade, including ludic gender transgression. In contrast to the Prada version, the Japanese Lolita style relies on “nonsexual charm and sweetness” (Hinton 2013, 1598); and yet, it represents a “powerful rebellion against the conventions of the contemporary society” (Haijima 2013, 32). This shift in emphasis also shapes the associated popular cultural production; suffice it to quote Novala Takemoto’s novel *Kamikaze Girls* (2002), adapted as a manga and a film (dir. Tetsuya Nakashima, 2004).

As blatantly shown by the examples above, our two literary icons are abundantly recycled in non-literary contexts, rather loosely connected to or—as in the case of Japanese Lolita fashion—even apparently disconnected from the source work. But even—or especially—such popular and/or commercial uses not only confirm and constantly reaffirm Lolita’s and Oblomov’s genuinely iconic status; paradoxically only at first glance, they fully participate in said icons’ complex transcultural and transmedial reconfiguration. Like Oblomov’s, Lolita’s reception history vividly illustrates that popular cultural iconization does not necessarily imply—and should not be normatively framed in terms of—semantic simplification; condensing manifold—even if, considered isolately, sometimes reductive—facets of meaning, these icons subsequently re-unfold, re-disseminate in various contexts, shedding new light on, possibly enriching our comprehension of the source texts in their historical and aesthetic specificity.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.oblomovproject.eu>.



## MAKING OF: INTERTEXTUALITY, INTRATEXTUALITY, AND ICONO-GENESIS

Both icons have a long inter- and intratextual prehistory. “Oh Lolita, you are my girl, as Vee was Poe’s and Bea Dante’s [...]” (*L*, 107), claims Nabokov’s narrator, posing as “Dr Edgar H. Humbert” (*L*, 118) or “I, Jean-Jacques Humbert” (*L*, 124). Between Poe and Rousseau, Dante and Petrarca, Baudelaire and Flaubert, *Carmen* and *Undine*, the novel displays a profusion of erudite references. Nabokov’s own *œuvre* features a series of “pre-Lolitas” (Maar 2005, 20), his early story *Skazka* (*A Fairy Tale*, 1926) as well as *Kamera obskura* (1932/1933; 1938 as *Laughter in the Dark*); *Dar* (*The Gift*, 1938) contains a concrete plot draft (Nabokov 1997, 209–210). In remarkably physical imagery, Nabokov dates “[t]he first little throb of *Lolita* [...] late in 1939 or early in 1940, in Paris”: with *Volšebnik* (*The Enchanter*) (Nabokov 2009), he composes a Russian-language “prototype” (Nabokov 2012a, 311). Ten years later, the future *Lolita*’s “ghost” (Nabokov 2012a, 312) returns to incarnate in his most famous novel—this time, in English.

The posthumously published *Enchanter* (1986 in English, 1991 in Russian) and *Lolita* offer a privileged constellation, inviting reflection on what determines a character’s iconic potential. Between the two texts, lies the rupture of definitive emigration, a change of literary language experienced, even by the polyglot Nabokov, as a “private tragedy” (*SO*, 15). Against this backdrop, the subject acquires new density, depth, and composite temporality: only here does Lolita’s “precursor” (*L*, 9), Poe-inspired Annabel Leigh, come into play; transported, Humbert gazes at “Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta” (*L*, 167).

At the same time, *Lolita* represents Nabokov’s literary ‘invention of America’ (2012a, 312). In addition to numerous canonical intertexts, his “first post-modernist novel” (Bouchet 2017, 2) abounds in popular elements: “Sweet hot jazz, [...] musicals, movie magazines and so forth” (*L*, 148). In Humbert’s eyes, Lolita, “the ideal consumer” (*L*, 148), epitomizes a US-American popular culture that Nabokov himself, between despised “vulgarity” and celebrated “vigor”, is very ambivalent about (Stringer-Hye 2002, 158).

This contextualization contributes to the protagonist’s iconization, contrary to her predecessor from *The Enchanter*, almost faceless—and still without a name. “Lolita [...] Lo-lee-ta [...]. Lo. Lee. Ta” (*L*, 9)—the novel’s incipit illustrates this name’s pivotal role as a catalyst of iconicity. In his 1964 *Playboy* interview, Nabokov gives all sorts of reasons why Lolita could only be Lolita (*SO*, 25); but in fact, the name appears very late in a decades-long process of icono-formation. At the beginning of the 21st century, it is still an object of literary curiosity and controversy, especially with Maar’s rediscovery of the “Ur-*Lolita*” (2005, 36) in Heinz von Lichberg’s (i.e. von Eschwege’s) *Die verfluchte Gioconda* (“The Damned Gioconda”, 1916). Ungureanu (2017) analyzes Salvador Dalí’s ‘Dulita’ as a possible co-model. Both cases, of course, are not about trivial plagiarism, as Maar emphasizes (2005, 37); it is Nabokov



who gave Lolita “a complex and omnipresent existence—like Goethe the chap-book’s Faust [...]” (Gasser 2007, 374). Nevertheless, this new Lolita affair causes a storm of indignation in the Nabokov community, stimulating Dmitri Nabokov to announce—carefully crafted “counter scandal” (Gasser 2007, 374)—the destruction of his father’s unfinished *Original of Laura*, eventually published in 2009.<sup>4</sup>

In Nabokov’s novel, though, the heroine’s ‘real’ name is *not* Lolita—by the way, also a toponym: after literary “Hurricane Lolita” (Nabokov 1992, 58), the pastor of the eponymous Texan town, maliciously rementioned in *Ada or Ardor* (Nabokov 2000a, 12), tries—unsuccessfully—to have the city renamed (Ammon 2009, 1). Howsoever: Lolita does not designate the diegetically real girl (Dolores, Dolly, Lo), but Humbert’s phantasm: “Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer” (*L*, 109).

In contrast to Nabokov’s protagonist, Gončarov’s hero has an eminently meaningful name almost right from the start: a sign of “fragmentation”, ‘Oblomov’ also implies its counterpart, a longing for wholeness (Koschmal 1994, 264), reflected in Schillerian terms (Thiergen 1989b). In 1849, the magazine *Sovremennik* (“The Contemporary”) publishes a preprint, *Son Oblomova* (*Oblomov’s Dream*), according to Gončarov (1955a, 76), the “overture of the whole novel”. However, delaying the rest of the performance, Gončarov has his audience wait for ten more years; eagerly anticipated, *Oblomov* becomes a subject of heated debates even before its publication, the cultural framework for the future icon being prepared in advance. Finally, in 1859, *Oblomov* appears in *Otečestvennye zapiski* (“Annals of the Fatherland”). The reception by Gončarov’s contemporaries constitutes an excellent example of a literary character’s instant conceptualization and iconization: *oblomovščina* offers a long-awaited “key to deciphering many phenomena of Russian life” (Dobroljubov 1859).

### LITERARICITY, VISUALITY, IMAGEABILITY: ICONIZATION ACROSS THE MEDIA

While an analysis of literature-based cultural icons per se extends the concept beyond purely visual phenomena, a character’s verbally conveyed graphic quality still acts as an iconicity booster. As a matter of fact, Oblomov and Lolita also share their pronounced pre-iconic pictoriality; Dobroljubov (1859) already insists on the imageability and imaginability of Gončarov’s “types”. “I think I

<sup>4</sup>With Flora and Aurora Lee, *The Original of Laura* continues the pre-iconic multiplication of characters culminating in *Lolita*; the entire fragment revolves around the impossibility of said ‘original’ not only of Laura, but also the text itself: “Everything about her is bound to remain blurry, even her name which seems to have been made expressly to have another one modelled upon it [...]” (Nabokov 2012b, 87). Here, too, appears a dubious “*chameur*” named “Hubert H. Hubert”, who, in a relationship with her mother, molests the adolescent protagonist (Nabokov 2012b, 55–77).

was born a painter [...]”, declares Nabokov, who affirms thinking “in images” rather than in words (SO, 17, 14). Lolita’s iconization is (p)retraced with striking visual sensitivity: “by stacking level upon level of translucent vision”, Humbert forms his nymphet’s “final picture” (L, 125). Perfectly aware that this “eternal Lolita” (L, 65) is just his “own creation” (L, 62), he envisages the alluring prospects of incestuous multiplication, reducing his reticent partner to the imaginary matrix of “a litter of Lolitas” (L, 300). To her recuperation as a reproducible “Lolita the First” (L, 174), the protagonist opposes her own tactics of duplicity and duplication, telling Humbert a (not so) white lie about her alleged meeting with a friend named “Dolly, like me” (L, 225).

The discrepancy between iconic and ‘real’ Lolita manifests itself over again and again. When Humbert picks up his stepdaughter from the summer camp, she seems, in his eyes, “less pretty than the mental imprint I had cherished for more than a month” (L, 111); it is this iconogenic “gap between the little given and the great promised” he strives to fill with “infinite perfections” (L, 264). To his final confrontation with heavily pregnant “MRS RICHARD F. SCHILLER” (L, 266), he symptomatically reacts with an attempt at re-iconization, bringing into play major artistic assets, from “Botticelli’s russet Venus” (L, 270) to “the famous Lolita smile” (L, 286).

“How did they ever make a movie of LOLITA?”, asks the teaser for Stanley Kubrick’s first cinematic adaptation. Despite *Lolita*’s “unfilmability” (Kilb 1998), an elaborate filmic imagery is deeply ingrained in the novel’s text. Humbert fixes Lolita as “a cinematographic still” (L, 44); he regrets not having captured her on celluloid (L, 231) and delivers hypothetical stage directions: “If you want to make a movie out of my book [...]” (L, 222).

With Kubrick’s *Lolita* (1962), Nabokov’s protagonist is given a first iconic face, with Adrian Lyne’s in 1997, an alternative one. Apart from the screen, she undergoes multiple reincarnations, in John Barry’s and Alan Jay Lerner’s—unsuccessful—musical (*Lolita, My Love*, 1971), Edward Albee’s dramatic (1981) and Rodion Ščedrin’s operatic adaptation (1992, première: 1994), from which the composer extracts his *Lolita-Serenade* (2001); in Davide Bombana’s ballet (2003) or Joshua Fineberg’s *Lolita, an Imaginary Opera* (2009). Thus, in terms of intertextuality (or intermediality) understood as “interaction” (Rabau 2002, 43), Lolita is transformed into a palimpsestic transmedia icon—an icon re-recycled in numerous literary texts, as in Kim Morrissey’s *Poems for Men Who Dream of Lolita* (1992), adapted by Sid Rabinovitch as an opera (1993), in Pia Pera’s novel *Diario di Lo (Lo’s Diary)*, (1995), or Emily Prager’s parody *Roger Fishbite* (1999), a “reply both to the book and to the icon that the character Lolita has become”.

In her metanovel *El funeral de Lolita* (“Lolita’s Funeral”, 2018), Luna Miguel portrays a protagonist reading Nabokov and looking for other “lolitas” in a Yahoo chat (FL, pos. 1364); she now flirts with her role, now rebels against it: “I am not Dolores Haze. [...] You are not my Humbert” (FL, pos. 1223). Entangled in a turbulent liaison with her literature teacher Roberto Díaz Díaz, hispanicized double Humbert, this Meta-Lolita has a penchant for concrete

and metaphorical book pilferage; on the traces of Nabokov, Baudelaire & Co., she plays her own cryptic games with “la verdadera Lolita” (*FL*, pos. 1638) and the “hipócrita lector” (*FL*, pos. 1154). “And, of course, the complete works of Dostoevsky, Neruda, Paz, Nabokov, Borges and James. All of them are men [...]” (*FL*, pos. 1884): in her fights with Díaz Díaz, representative of a doubly male world of canonical literature, she, too, recurs to popular cultural resources (*FL*, pos. 1325–1326). Years after, destroying her just buried ex-lover’s Lolita novel, she proceeds to an act of symbolic biblio-autophagy.

Imagining “the film of her life”, Miguel’s protagonist ponders her casting preferences: “[...] the actor playing Roberto had to be a kind of Jeremy Irons with longer hair [...]” (*FL*, pos. 759–761). Indeed, in the transfer of text to screen, such details are interpretationally relevant. This also applies to the most iconic Oblomov incarnation in Nikita Michalkov’s 1979 adaptation, *Neskol’ko dnej iz žizni I.I. Oblomova* (*A Few Days From the Life of I.I. Oblomov*). Casting popular actor Oleg Tabakov as an eminently likable Oblomov, Michalkov sets his own accents in an ambivalent character’s reception history.

On her way to the screen, Lolita is subject to an even more marked reinterpretation, not least for pragmatic, i.e. mainly censorship, but also marketing reasons. At the beginning of the novel, Nabokov’s heroine is twelve years old; Humbert defines precise “age limits” of nymphage: between “nine and fourteen” (*L*, 16). But in Kubrick’s film, fifteen-year-old Sue Lyon is paraded as a physically mature “Teenage Vamp” (Hinton 2013, 1585–1586); the director clearly states his intention to turn her into a “sex object” (qtd. in Kilb 1998), toning down Humbert’s desire to mainstream eroticism. 35 years later, Lyne’s version, starring then seventeen-year-old Dominique Swain, also relies on an older Lolita.

The iconic poster for Kubrick’s *Lolita* shows the protagonist with her famous red heart-shaped sunglasses and an allusive-alliterative red lollipop; a colorfully sexualized pose inexistent in the black-and-white film, but frequently recycled in the novel’s graphic paratext. Lolita’s first apparition in the Ramsdale garden, pre-iconized with a long blurred shot (Fries 2009), is largely quoted in popular culture (cf. the cover of Katy Perry’s 2008 album *One of the Boys*), as well as in the design of new Nabokov editions. To this Kubrick-inspired imagery, Lyne’s film adds a new repertoire, starting with an equally pre-iconic first encounter scene (this time, with an Ondinesque touch); both cases confirm Kemp’s conjecture that “moving images”, in order to “become truly iconic”, need to “crystalliz[e] into a memorable still” (2012, 4).

Crystallizing, thus, into “truly iconic” images, these two cinematic adaptations serve as potent amplifiers and multipliers of Lolita’s broad cultural presence. A collection of pre- and post-Kubrick/Lyne *Lolita* covers<sup>5</sup> illustrates their massive impact on the further reception of Nabokov’s novel, paratextually recoded as “The Book of the Film”—including one or the other inter-iconic

<sup>5</sup><http://www.dezimmer.net/Covering%20Lolita/LoCov.html>.

clash: both film *Lolitas* considerably differ from their literary predecessor (and re-successor) not only in terms of age; Nabokov's heroine, for instance, is not blonde, but equipped with a "chestnut head" (*L*, 39) of "rich brown hair" (*L*, 65).

### SUNGLASSES, DIVANS & DRESSING GOWNS: ICONICITY AND DISSEMINATION

A film cover combining Lyne's protagonists and the Kubrick *Lolita*'s sunglasses operates via iconic hybridization. These sunglasses, reappearing in Billy Wilder's film *Irma la Douce* (1963) as well as in Marilyn Manson's song *Heart-Shaped Glasses* (2007), demonstrate the metonymic emancipation and extension of iconic attributes; among these *pars-pro-toto* icons, one might also mention the foot/sock motif, referring to Nabokov's text (*L*, 9).

Let us, however, switch back to our other hero, presumably fast asleep on his divan. This piece of furniture constitutes "the ultimate Oblomov accessory" (Bischitzky 2012, 770), hardly less iconic, in a Russian context, than Sigmund Freud's couch—whereon Gončarov's protagonist finds himself in many a psychoanalytically framed 20th and 21st century interpretation (e.g., Rattner 1968; Baratoff 1990, 1994; Givens 1998; Rohse 2000). But Oblomov's divan also functions as an internationally recognizable icon, as in Italian Oblomov Edizioni's self-ironical presentation as "a lazy editor".<sup>6</sup> In Russia, the motif 'Oblomov na divane' has inspired countless artistic variations,<sup>7</sup> as well as the most strongly iconized, most frequently quoted and graphically adapted still from Michalkov's film.<sup>8</sup> An emblem of *oblomovščina*, the divan is also used autonomously, for instance, by an educational website dedicated to Gončarov.<sup>9</sup> In Oblomov's languid footsteps, Ikuru Kuwajima travels from divan to divan, documenting his journey in a photo book entitled *Ja, Oblomov* (*I, Oblomov*), an intermedial "ode" to Gončarov's novel.<sup>10</sup>

Another iconic Oblomov object is ubiquitous in pictorial art, cinema, and theater—the hero's *chalat*, his dressing gown, described in detail on the novel's first pages: Oblomov wears a "real oriental *chalat*" made of Persian fabric, "without the slightest allusion to Europe" (*O*, 8). Unsurprisingly, a present-day producer of personalized dressing gowns chooses Oblomov as his name-sake.<sup>11</sup> In an adaptation at the Moscow Mayakovsky Theater (2018), the *chalat* takes on all-engulfing proportions;<sup>12</sup> Mark Rozovskij's *Romansy s Oblomovym* ("Romances with Oblomov", 1992) already introduces it in popular music.

<sup>6</sup><https://www.oblomovedizioni.com>.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://oblomov.omsk.edu/karta.html#galereja>, <http://slovozaslovo85.blogspot.com/2012/11/blog-post.html>, <http://www.goncharov.spb.ru/gallery>.

<sup>8</sup><https://ruskino.ru/mov/664>.

<sup>9</sup><https://oblomov.omsk.edu/divan.html>.

<sup>10</sup>[http://www.ikurukuwajima.com/?page\\_id=1789](http://www.ikurukuwajima.com/?page_id=1789).

<sup>11</sup><http://oblomov-halat.ru>.

<sup>12</sup><http://www.mayakovsky.ru/performance/oblomov>.

The *chalat* is closely associated with Oblomov's *tufli*, his domestic slippers, soft as the gentle hero himself—and iconic enough to be incorporated into the Ulyanovsk “Ilya Oblomov sofa Philosophical Monument”.<sup>13</sup>

“We all came out of Gogol's *Overcoat*”, as the famous dictum—often misattributed to Dostoevskij, due, in fact, to Vogüé (1886, 96), quoting an unnamed Russian writer—claims. Between texts and textiles, Oblomov's dressing gown also proves a highly productive matrix: this “oriental *chalat*” epitomizes conflicting discourses on Russian identities between Asia and Europe, pointing, thus, to another essential iconicity factor, shared by our unequal literary pairing: their profound ambi- or rather polyvalence.

### THE CHARMS OF CONTRADICTION: ICONICITY AND AMBIGUITY

“His vice is also his virtue”, observes Ehre (1994, 207) about Gončarov's hero, “one of the supreme creations of modern literature”. Despised as a parasite and a failure, idealized as a sage, even a quasi-saint (Thiergen 1989a, 1), Oblomov, up to this day, provokes contradictory readings. Strikingly ambivalent also in terms of gender, he is metaphorized as an inert “Galatea”, towards whom his fiancée Ol'ga adopts an equally transgressive “Pygmalion's” role (O, 186).

As for Lolita, a masculinist literary criticism, often enough, mirrors Humbert's view of the protagonist as “a disgustingly conventional little girl” (L, 148) and, at the same time, a fatally seductive “demon child” (L, 20). Nabokov's text illustrates the ideological power of narrative structure: the particular “enchantment” cast by *Lolita*—in contrast to the former *Enchanter*—is also due to the rearrangement of perspective and voice (Gasser 2007, 372); as an autodiegetic narrator, Humbert unfolds his strategies of seduction, insidiously maneuvering the reader into an uncomfortable position of compromising ‘fraternity’. “Reader! *Bruder!*” (L, 262): the novel constructing the image of a prototypically male, sexually complicit recipient (“ah, if I could visualize him as a blond-bearded scholar with rosy lips sucking *la pomme de sa canne* as he quaffs my manuscript!”, L, 226), a critical feminist reading goes against the grain (Herbold 1998, 2008).

In transmedial transfer, this aspect is even reinforced. In both Kubrick's and Lyne's films, the empathy with the main male character is plainly evident. Lyne insists that *Lolita* remains a “love story” (qtd. in Kilb 1998); lead actor Jeremy Irons emphasizes that Humbert is “actually a good man with a huge character flaw” (qtd. in Fries 2009). In both adaptations, Lolita is shown as a “seductress” through the prism of Humbert's gaze (Fries 2009).

Oddly only at first glance, just such contradictory, polyvalent characters prove particularly suitable for cultural iconization: the icon owes its “lasting appeal potential” (Thiergen 1994, XIV) to the diversity of meanings that it is able to compress and to convey. Nabokov's and Gončarov's radically different

<sup>13</sup> <https://vsuete.com/ilya-oblomov-sofa-philosophical-monument>.

novels share a refusal of any unambiguous message: Dobroljubov (1859) already remarks that the author of *Oblomov* “does not give and, apparently, does not want to give you any conclusions”; Nabokov is very clear on this point: “I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and [...] *Lolita* has no moral in tow” (2012a, 314).

Nonetheless, *Lolita* touches on morally sensitive topics and taboos. Concerning the pedophilia question, public awareness has considerably increased since the novel’s first publication; the release of Lyne’s adaptation coincides with the medially omnipresent Dutroux affair (Gasser 2007, 371). In this respect, the icon, giving “a name to something which was largely unacknowledged—at least in polite society” (Klein 2001), signals a certain hypocrisy, between righteous indignation and preadolescent “Mini-Lolitas” eroticization (Stein 2011).

But Nabokov’s text also addresses the fundamental human challenge of coping with contingency and transiency. “[...] great novels are great fairy tales”, as Nabokov states (2017, 2); as a postmodern meta-fairy tale, *Lolita* is a melancholic story about a secularized eviction from paradise, i.e. the paradoxically limited timelessness of an idylized childhood world. For Humbert, the rapidly approaching expiration date of Lolita’s ‘nymphage’ is a constant obsession (*L*, 65); as a tale of multiple exile(s), the novel intertwines her final descent into abject femininity, culminating in her death in childbirth, and Humbert’s emigration history; even if (or precisely because) written in English, it is “a brilliant example of Russian 20th century émigré prose” (Zinik 2011, 255). *Lolita*’s iconic force also draws on this deeper existential dimension. In an interactive combination of textual and contextual factors, socio-cultural premises and aesthetic devices, a literary icon, thus, crystallizes when a suitable character meets a corresponding ‘void’.

#### LOST AND REGAINED IN TRANSLATION: ICONICITY AND TRANSCULTURALITY

How do such icons function in the process of transcultural transfer? “[...] the cultural icon defines a historically and often geographically determined representation of collective identities in which [...] discourses surrounding identity, self-assurance, membership, and affiliation are solidified” (Colombi et al. 2016, 2); not least in view of his representationality, *Oblomov* can be considered a cultural icon in the outlined sense. “No other novel has been used to describe the ever-so-elusive ‘Russian mentality’ or ‘Russian soul’ as frequently [...]”, as Diment confirms (1998, 3). In Gončarov’s eyes, his protagonist embodies “elementary characteristics of the Russian man” (1955a, 71); for Dostoevskij, though, he is a mere “Petersburg product” (qtd. in Tunimanov et al. 2004, 334). From the very beginning, *Oblomov* constitutes a projection figure of controversial cultural debates evolving, beyond the historical antagonism between Slavophiles and Westerners, up to the present day.

As a potent trigger character, Oblomov still haunts Russian ‘national’ self-reflection and self-criticism; various pedagogical websites offer a repertoire of readily recyclable treatises on subjects such as “*Oblomovščina* in our days”,<sup>14</sup> “Why is *oblomovščina* still a current topic in our time?”,<sup>15</sup> “Oblomov: yesterday, today, tomorrow”;<sup>16</sup> for deterrence purposes, Oblomov is brought to the stage as an antihero of “didactic theater”.<sup>17</sup>

In a much quoted letter to Sof’ja A. Nikitenko, Gončarov (1955, 388) insists on the fact that he writes for a Russian audience, and is averse to seeing his works translated. The early Western editions of *Oblomov* are instructive in terms of cultural translation: *Oblomow. Russisches Lebensbild* (“An Image of Russian Life”) is the title of the first German version (1868); *Oblomoff. Scènes de la vie russe* (“Scenes From Russian Life”, 1877) says the French one. This tendency towards exoticizing ethnicization persists well into the 20th century. But Oblomov is also ‘folklorized’ in Russia itself, up to our time: Vlad Furman presents his 1999 theater adaptation as a “*Bylina* about a son of the Russian lands” (qtd. in Tunimanov et al. 2004, 440). In contrast, Družinin (1859) already argues Oblomov’s internationality: “As soon as the novel [...] will be translated into foreign languages, its success will show how general and universal the types it depicts are.”

Indeed, this Russian icon has been exported, and extremely successfully, into other cultural contexts. In Thomas Mann’s *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (*Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*), *Oblomov* is interpreted as a “devastating critique of the Russian man” (1918, 288); and yet, as Mann concedes, the protagonist of *The Magic Mountain* rather closely resembles Gončarov’s hero (Tunimanov et al. 2004, 419–421). For Stefan Zweig, Oblomov, “Russian [...] with all his details”, nevertheless possesses an undeniable universality (1983, 227–228). 20th century German-language literature is rich in “Oblomov fictions” (Schümann 2005); one might quote Martin Walser’s farce *Das Sofa* (1961), Paul Nizon’s *Stolz* (1975), Uwe Grüning’s *Auf der Vyborger Seite* (“In the Vyborg District”, 1978), Günther Rücker’s *Otto Blomow. Geschichte eines Untermieters* (“History of a Subtenant”, 1991), or Bernd Wagner’s *Club Oblomow* (1999). German-speaking authors (Franz Xaver Kroetz, Otto Grünmandl, or Jörg Michael Koerbl) also make a significant contribution in the domain of dramatic adaptations.

Oblomov’s theater history is particularly revealing, as far as the transcultural negotiation of an icon, between alienation and appropriation, is concerned. In 1963, French director and actor Marcel Cuvelier transforms Gončarov’s novel into a character comedy in the style of Molière (Tunimanov et al. 2004, 441–442), whereas contemporary theater and TV Oblomov Guillaume Gallienne (2017) highlights the protagonist’s “typically Russian” nature.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.kritika24.ru/page.php?id=39107>.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.litra.ru/composition/download/coid/00040801184864208646>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://mamotvet.ru/oblomov-vchera-segodnya-zavtra>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://urok.1sept.ru/articles/513191>.



Traditionally, Oblomov is popular in Hispanophone countries, also in Latin America; for Ernesto Sábato (1979, 12), he incarnates an Argentine ‘type’ of not-too-good old days, the only thing lacking being a cup of maté instead of equally iconic Russian tea. Oblomov has met with great response in China (Diao 1994, 340); in Yù Dáfū’s work, we find a sinicized version of the “Superfluous Man” (Ng 1988, 96–121). In Western Europe, Gončarov’s text is subject to political reinterpretations in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at a time when “[t]he East finally awakens from its Oblomovian slumber [...]” (as stated on the occasion of a Stockholm performance in 1989, qtd. in Tunimanov et al. 2004, 444).

### OBLOMOV & OBLOMOVA: A REGENERATED ICON IN EXILE

The metamorphoses of Gončarov’s “fragmentary man” (Thiergen 1989b) in 20th century exile narratives are particularly enlightening. In Emmanuel Bove’s fiction, he reappears in declassed émigré characters (Stemberger 2013, 264–274): contemporary reviews associate Nicolas Aftalion in *La Coalition* (1927) with Gončarov’s prototype (Ouellet 2008, 54); Victor Bâton in *Mes amis* (1924)—a Frenchman, but uprooted upon his return from war—is as well an Oblomovian antihero. With Philippe Bohème in *Le Mauvais Sort* (1928), André Beucler creates another “Oblomoff de chez nous” (according to a NRF review, qtd. in Curatolo 2008, 31; also Stemberger 2013, 274–279).

Several decades later, Tecia Werbowski offers, with her ‘miniature novel’ *L’Oblomova* (*Zaspane życie*, 1997), a regenerated variation. As Miguel a Meta-Lolita, Werbowski invents a Meta-Oblomova familiar with Gončarov’s work. Narrator Maya owes her nickname to her late husband Andrzej, an adept of “*business with pleasure*” (2008, 14) and, as such, a revenant of Oblomov’s friendly antagonist Andrej Štol’c. Oblomov’s etymo- and literary genealogy is revisited against the historical backdrop of the 20th century. Born near Krakow, Maya has lost both parents, under traumatic circumstances, during World War II; having lived in Canada for years, she is, after her spouse’s death, once again “*absolutely alone in the world*” (Werbowski 2008, 12). Her *oblomovščina* oscillates between “apathy” and ataraxia, paralysis and protest (Werbowski 2008, 43); a stranger to the consumerist mentality of her Canadian environment, she adheres to an ideal of “*douce inactivité*” (Werbowski 2008, 21). Thus, this postmodern Oblomova functions—just like her “soul mate” in Gončarov’s text (Werbowski 2008, 22)—as a polyvalent icon of passive resistance against the all-encompassing rationalization and economization of life.



## LOLITA, REVISITED: ICONICITY, POLITICS, AND AN ETHICS OF FICTION

Lolita is as well invested with new meanings in new contexts. In China, Nabokov's novel undergoes an instructive process of cultural translation, belated for political reasons: in 1989, four different translations are published, followed by at least a dozen more over the next decades—an astonishing number that testifies to a need for successive reframings. The respective paratexts show a balancing act between marketing purposes and censorship, eroticized exoticization and tentative incorporation into the Chinese tradition (Bai 2018). Finally, from an allegedly 'pornographic' work, the novel is reinterpreted into a modern classic. But beyond the literary canon, *Lolita* alias *Luòlìtā* exerts "a significant impact on contemporary Chinese language and culture" (Bai 2018, 672), acting also "as a witness to the changes that took place and continue to take place in the political and cultural environment of China" (Bai 2018, 676–677).

Up to our days, *Lolita* continues to inspire political readings. Mizruchi analyzes its "holocaust subtext" (2003, 631), also present in the first cinematic adaptation; Kubrick's parodic "Sieg Heil" mini-scene (Abrams 2018) is discreetly censored for the German version.

A "study in tyranny" (Martin Amis, in Treisman 2015), *Lolita* serves as a key to the comprehension of and coping with life in another totalitarian society: Azar Nafisi's *Memoir in Books*, adapted, by Elisabeth Mehl Greene, as an opera (2011), retraces the experience of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). In a world that seems "more fictional than fiction itself" (LT, 241), in the midst of the Islamic Republic's "war against women" (LT, 111), literary fiction is valorized as a realm of "counter-realities" (Henry James, qtd. in LT, 216), an exercise in polyphonic democracy (LT, 187). With his own history of exile, his expertise in political *pošlost'* (LT, 301), Nabokov becomes a role model of "insubordination" (LT, 45), Lolita a symbol of rebellion against the patriarchal "*confiscation*" of female lives: "[...] in fact Nabokov [...] had taken revenge on the Ayatollah Khomeini [...]" (LT, 33). Certainly, *Lolita* is no "critique of the Islamic Republic", as Nafisi warns against reductive readings (LT, 35). And yet, the novel deeply resonates "in a world unknown [...] to Nabokov" (LT, 22), unfolding new facets of meaning far beyond the authorial intention—in the sense of Escola's (2012) "theory of possible texts which invites us to love in great literary texts not only the past from which they come but also the future they contain in germ".

Once more, Lolita—just as her lethargic Russian counterpart—displays a virtually inexhaustible creative and conceptual potential. Over and over again, elaborate literary rewritings, manifold intermedial adaptations, and even apparently plain popular cultural and commercial uses incite us to revisit the respective source texts, for instance, in new political and gender perspectives, adding to a dynamic palimpsestuousness that, between transfictional emancipation, transcultural translation, and transmedial transfer, can be fruitfully grasped in terms of literary iconicity.

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# The Goethics of Cuzzling: Literary Iconization in Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar*

Alexander Löck

## INTRODUCTION

There is no evidence that Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* is an iconic novel even though it was adapted for the screen in East Germany in 1975 (Blödorn and Brössel 2015, 390). It is, however, a novel by an author who—being the most renowned German novelist in literary history—has been the subject of numerous portraits and caricatures during and after his lifetime (Blödorn and Brössel 2015, 391). A semi-fictional three-part biographical film on Mann and his family that ran on German television in 2001 under the title “Die Manns – Ein Jahrhundertroman”<sup>1</sup> won several prestigious awards, most notably the 2002 International Emmy Award for the “Best TV Movie or Miniseries” and the *Deutsche Fernsehpreis* 2002 for the “TV Event of the Year” (*Die Manns* 2022). From April 2002 to January 2005, a life-sized statue of Thomas Mann was placed on the balcony of Weimar's foremost hotel, the *Elephant* (*rathauskurierr* 2005, 2459). It was part of an art project that, from 1999 to 2017, exhibited statues of, among others, Goethe and Schiller, Martin Luther, and Walter Gropius on that balcony. Its purpose was to create counter-images to that of Adolf Hitler's receiving the cheers of the crowd on the very balcony some 60 years before (Marx 2015, 64). Thomas Mann's status as an icon of an anti-fascist, cosmopolitan and humanistic post-war and post-cold-war Germany is evident in the fact that the German Federal Government purchased his

<sup>1</sup> “The Manns – Novel of a Century”.

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Californian mansion in 2016 and turned it in the “Thomas Mann House” in Los Angeles with the mission “to create a vibrant transatlantic space for debate, where outstanding personalities, in dialogue with each other and the host country, address fundamental contemporary and future issues related to politics, society, and culture” (*Mission Statement* 2022).

Of his status as a major representative of German culture Thomas Mann himself was well aware, and he reacted to it in a political and in an aesthetic way. On the one hand, he fully embraced it as a political weapon against Nazi-Germany in the 1930s and 1940s (Gut 2008, 259–260; Frizen 2003, 613). On the other hand, he aesthetically expressed a more ambivalent attitude in his 1939 novel *Lotte in Weimar*. Its main characters are an iconic author of an iconic novel and the woman on which an iconic character of that novel was modelled: The author in question is Johann Wolfgang Goethe whose status as the epitome of Western culture is paralleled only by the likes of Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Beethoven. His novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* caused a sensation in late 18th-century Europe with its eponymous character becoming an iconic representation of pre-Romantic sentimentalism (Trunz 1998, 558–563). Goethe modelled Lotte, the female character of his novel, on Charlotte Buff whom he had courted in vain in the years preceding his novel. In Thomas Mann’s novel *Lotte in Weimar*, the elderly Charlotte Buff, now a widowed Charlotte Kestner, becomes the eponymous second main character who is travelling to Weimar with the aim of visiting the elderly Goethe.

This chapter examines how *Lotte in Weimar* is essentially a novel about the iconizing of literature. By exploring the effect that iconicity has on the life of all the characters, the novel both takes a critical view of cultural icons and turns them into a device to poetically approach the core question of Modernist aesthetics: if and how an authentic literary representation of life and identity in the Modern world is possible. To that end, *Lotte in Weimar* does not simply reproduce cultural icons, but it presents them *as* cultural icons, drawing attention to their iconicity and to the process of iconization. While repudiating iconic representation of reality as inadequate, the novel not only dedicates ample space to the depiction of iconization as a process, but it also adapts the very techniques of iconization in its own literary form. In its treatment of cultural icons, the novel pursues three goals: Firstly, it presents cultural icons as an integral part of both popular culture and the formation of collective identities, thereby acknowledging their social and cultural relevance. Secondly, it supports the notion of a gap between high and popular culture, by suggesting that iconic representation is inferior to modes of representation cultivated in high art. Thirdly, it utilizes cultural icons and techniques of iconization as material for poetic transformation, in order to poetically convey Mann’s idea of what characterizes human experience of time and identity. Thus, the poetic deconstruction of cultural icons becomes the basis for the poetic emulation of iconization—as an adequately inadequate form of perception and representation, in a world to which human access is naturally inadequate.



## PRESENTATION AND AESTHETIC CRITICISM OF CULTURAL ICONS

The first references to cultural icons are found in the title of the novel: *Lotte in Weimar*. The town of Weimar, and its long-time resident Johann Wolfgang Goethe are both iconic representations of classic German literature (Mann 2003, 44–45); the name Lotte refers to the well-known female character from Goethe's most-famous novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* from 1774. Thomas Mann's novel tells the story of how, in 1816, the Goethe character's former love interest (Charlotte Kestner) visits the now famous, elderly poet in Weimar under the pretext of seeing her sister's family. No sooner does she check in at her hotel than she is recognized by Mager, the hotel's head waiter, as "Werther's Lotte" and gets subsequently involved in a series of conversations, each of which conveys a different image of Goethe. So does the scene in which Charlotte finally gets to meet Goethe. However, this meeting proves a big disappointment, and at the end of the novel, the reader is left at a loss for what to make of the many different images of Goethe presented in the text (Marx 2015, 63).

Yet, images are the real issue here. While Thomas Mann took some liberty with the historic facts of Charlotte Kestner's visit to Weimar in 1816 (Marx 2015, 64) he sought to truthfully reproduce iconic images of Goethe. A case in point is found in Chapter Eight, where Goethe's quasi-classicist image of an aloof deity of poesy—"marmorglatt und marmorkalt"<sup>2</sup> (Mann 2003, 291)—is symbolically mirrored in the description of the "marble" stairwell of his Weimar house (Mann 2003, 379). Another example is the ensuing dinner scene (Mann 2003, 386–387) where the description of Goethe's appearance echoes stereotypes of the iconography of the elder Goethe (Frizen 2003, 710). Perhaps the most striking instance is in Chapter Seven: Mostly consisting of interior monologue interspersed with short passages of dialogue, it is, in fact, a virtuoso pastiche of Goethe quotes and pseudo-quotes (Marx 2015, 65).

The novel shows the same care for iconographic accuracy in the description of two portraits of historic figures: Napoleon's "mit Querhut, Westenbauch und gespreizten Rockschoßen"<sup>3</sup> and Czar Alexander's "backenbärtiges, mit einer stark skurrilen Nase geschmücktes Bildnis"<sup>4</sup> (Mann 2003, 44). As with the iconic depiction of Goethe, the novel's descriptions of the drawings exclusively list attributes that are recurrent in contemporary portraits of the two monarchs (Frizen 2003, 231–233). This formal analogy in the treatment of Goethe, Napoleon, and Czar Alexander indicates that the novel presents literary icons as a subclass of historical icons. These historical icons are collected under the label "Sterne der Zeitgeschichte"<sup>5</sup> in Miss Rose Cuzzle's sketchbook. Miss Cuzzle is a lively character with modest artistic and intellectual powers. Her main function is to visualize the phenomenon and

<sup>2</sup> "smooth and cold as marble" (Mann 1947, 219).

<sup>3</sup> "with his cocked hat, his ventripotent waistcoat and spreading coat-tails" (Mann 1947, 29).

<sup>4</sup> "side-whiskered likeness adorned with a highly caricatured nose" (Mann 1947, 29).

<sup>5</sup> Literally: "stars of her time".

process of iconization. She is, herself, modelled after a literary cliché (Frizen 2003, 217–218)—the travelling Englishman on Grand Tour through Europe, in search of cultural sites and celebrities (Chaney 2000). Thus, she is depicted as a dedicated follower of iconicity in general, making no distinction between political, philosophical, or literary relevance.

The depiction of Miss Cuzzle and her sketchbook is the key to understanding the treatment of literary icons in Mann's novel. Her sketchbook contains portraits of personalities and sites that represent political, philosophical, and artistic greatness (Mann 2003, 43–45). It is presented by a combination of ekphrastic description, name-dropping, story-telling, and commenting on Miss Cuzzle's limited artistic abilities. Thus, the text does not only list iconic names, but it draws attention to their iconicity as well; it demonstrates their iteration through different media, their relevance to the formation and the expression of collective identities, and their link to popular culture.

On the one hand, the text reproduces icons in different media—the most important of which are literature, visual arts, real-life dialogue, and real-life experience—with special attention given to the relation of iconic names and iconic images. On the other hand, it shows how the iteration of cultural icons through different media serves as a means of identity formation. All these functions can be found in a passage that describes how Miss Cuzzle has drawn her flawed portrait of Napoleon departing for St. Helena aboard the *Bellerophon* amidst a cheering—or jeering?—crowd in the port of Plymouth. The collective enthusiasm of the victorious people is analogized by the waves of the sea and the jostling of the many boats carrying the spectators; this symbolizes how iconic images serve to affirm and express collective identities (Mann 2003, 43).

Significantly, the text suggests that this symbolic meaning is purely a poetic, narrative-added element and completely eludes Miss Cuzzle, who merely cites the dynamics of the situation as justification for the inferior quality of her picture. In doing so, the text draws attention to the difference between what Miss Cuzzle actually saw from her swaying jollyboat, and what she was able to capture on paper amidst the bustling crowd. In addition, the text mentions Miss Cuzzle could only briefly lay eyes on the emperor, so her portrait of him simply replicates contemporary Napoleonic iconography. Combined, this suggests that Miss Cuzzle's artistry relies more on the reproduction of iconic images than on the visualization of her own experiences. In short, the text juxtaposes Napoleon's appearance in Plymouth with Miss Cuzzle's imperfect drawing of him, and the description of that drawing by the narrator of the novel. In doing so, the text presents the iteration of the iconic image in real-life experience, and visual and verbal representation.

Likewise, the description of Charlotte Kestner's arrival in Weimar symbolizes the transfer of the Lotte icon from poetic fiction to prosaic everyday-life experience. For that purpose, the text draws attention to the difference of these two media by contrasting the humoristic allusion to a Romantic cliché with the visuals of provincial philistinism. The description of the coachman's blowing his horn sentimentally in front of the hotel (Mann 2003, 11) is followed shortly

thereafter by a detailed description of the hotel's owner, her physical appearance, her inventory at the reception desk, as well as the bureaucratic and mundane aspects of room distribution, carrying luggage, bringing coffee, and fetching washing water (Mann 2003, 13). This contrast between the poetic and the prosaic is also discernible in the design of her dialogue with Mager, where the head waiter's elation clashes with his unintentionally pseudo-bureaucratic lingo: The fact that Mager repeatedly uses the term "buchenswert"<sup>6</sup> (Mann 2003, 18, 446) to express his joy at meeting with "einer vom Schimmer der Poesie umflossenen und gleichsam auf feurigen Armen zum Himmel ewigen Ruhmes emporgetragenen Persönlichkeit"<sup>7</sup> renders his enthusiasm for books a touch of bookkeeping.

As with the scene in the port of Plymouth, the text associates iconic representation with the expression of collective identities. In her first reference to Goethe, Charlotte calls him "der Dichter Deutschlands"<sup>8</sup> (Mann 2003, 23), marking his national relevance. On a smaller scale, this is echoed in Mager telling Lotte that Goethe is a cause of local pride in Weimar (Mann 2003, 20). The response to his encounter with what he perceives to be the iconic female character from Goethe's *Werther* novel is Mager's class consciousness. Mager asserts that that novel's popularity and accessibility ("ein so sentimentalisches Werk")<sup>9</sup> make it the common man's share of Goethe—as opposed to elitist works like *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (Mann 2003, 20). Thus, nationalistic, localized, and classist identities are formed through icon association with Goethe.

Mager's assertion that Goethe's novel and its female heroine have a popular appeal is subsequently proven correct when, at the beginning of Chapter Three, a jostling crowd of soldiers, craftsmen, shop workers, town citizens, and their wives and children assemble in front of the hotel to catch a glimpse of Charlotte (Mann 2003, 53). A similar association of iconic images and popular culture is evident in the depiction of Miss Cuzzle's actions and physical appearance (Grötler 2019, 62–121). When the text calls Miss Cuzzle a "Reisekünstlerin"<sup>10</sup> and her drawing activities a "Kunstsport"<sup>11</sup> (Mann 2003, 46), it suggests that her Grand Tour has more to do with star watching, sports, and tourism than with any genuine interest in arts and culture (Mann 2003, 43). This notion is supported by the hunting metaphor that is consistently used to describe her travels (Mann 2003, 43–46). Moreover, the emphasis on her physical health and the sexual allusions in the description of her teeth, her lips and her bosom (Mann 2003, 42, 46) suggest a stark contrast to the intellectual aspirations implied by her pursuit of artistic greatness. This contrast is expressed symbolically when the text juxtaposes the "classic high waist" of Miss Cuzzle's frock (Mann 1947, 38; 2003, 42) with her lack of height (Mann 2003, 41, 45). The

<sup>6</sup> Literally: "worth entering in the books".

<sup>7</sup> "a being so surrounded with the effulgence of poesy" (Mann 1947, 9).

<sup>8</sup> Literally: "the poet of Germany".

<sup>9</sup> "a masterpiece of feeling" (Mann 1947, 11).

<sup>10</sup> "peregrinating artist" (Mann 1947, 31).

<sup>11</sup> Literally: "art sport".

discrepancy between her work and the greatness that she is chasing is made explicit both in the description of her portrait of Napoleon (Mann 2003, 43) and in Charlotte's condescending reaction to the drawing Miss Cuzzle makes of her (Mann 2003, 49). In short, the representation of Miss Cuzzle serves to denounce iconic representation as inadequate and, thereby, support the notion of an unbridgeable gap between high art and popular culture.

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL REHABILITATION OF CRITICISM OF CULTURAL ICONS

At the same time, however, the text rehabilitates cultural icons as a literary subject by demonstrating that they constitute an integral part of the human *Lebenswelt*, i.e., the dialectics of perspective and perception as the principal mode of experience (Lobsien 1988, 42–43, 212–214). That is, the text presents cultural icons both as part of the world in which individuals live and as part of their subjective consciousness through which they access the world. Hence, the iconic images assembled by Miss Cuzzle in her sketchbook are a metonymic portrait of the historical situation in which the novel is set: the reconstitution of the European political order after the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars. Her drawings almost exclusively testify to greatness gone by (Mann 2003, 43–45): The bridge of Arcole, Kant's birthplace in Königsberg and of the Acropolis are monuments of the beginning of Napoleon's fame, Kant's life and the history of European art and philosophy, respectively. In context, however, these monuments acquire an air of petrification when, by contrast, all her portraits of living people illustrate the triumph of mediocrity: She does not get to drawing Napoleon on horseback in Austerlitz or leading the charge, flag in hand, on the bridge of Arcole. Instead, she gets to draw him as a prisoner of war on the very British ship that is going to transport him into a region of insignificance, leaving Europe's fate to all the potentates and diplomats at the Congress of Vienna that also find their way into Miss Cuzzle's sketchbook. And while the text makes an issue of her missing all the four writers on whom Weimar's literary fame rests—the inaccessible Goethe, and the late Herder, Wieland, and Schiller—it names all the secondary writers, actresses, and local semi-VIPs whose portraits she does manage to add to her sketchbook—among them Schiller's widow.

So Herder, Wieland, and Schiller are dead—as are Homer, Aristotle, and Kant, while Miss Cuzzle's remarkably un-intellectual vitality symbolizes the rise of a popular culture that threatens to displace high art, by trivializing its motifs and forms when it turns them into cultural icons.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the

<sup>12</sup> By reproducing existing canonization, the novel may well be seen as a symptom of what has been regarded by—among others—Andreas Huyssen as mass culture's feminization. However, the novel itself does not make a point of gendering the distinction of high art and mass culture, i.e. of 'masculinizing' the former and 'feminizing' the latter: For both Miss Cuzzle and the hotel's male head waiter Mager represent the rise of popular culture, while the novel emphasizes analogies between Charlotte and Goethe when it explores the potential of high art in the modern world (see below).

description of the sketchbook is not only a portrait of the historic situation in which the novel is set but also a character sketch of Miss Cuzzle herself; her personality is ironically mirrored in the defects of her drawings. Just as her life is exclusively devoted to the hunt for cultural images, talking about her sketchbook becomes a vehicle for talking about the character's life and identity. In this regard, Miss Cuzzle's sketchbook serves as a symbol for the way in which all characters of the novel affirm and express themselves with respect to the two most important literary icons in the text: Goethe and the heroine of his *Werther* novel, Lotte.

Chapters Three to Six demonstrate how calling on Charlotte at the hotel to talk about Goethe is only a pretext for other characters—Riemer, Adele Schopenhauer, and August von Goethe—to talk about themselves—starting from the very beginning of each conversation when Charlotte's visitors introduce themselves. Indeed, this motif of self-identification is explicitly established at the beginning of the text when Charlotte is signing in at the hotel and Mager, the head waiter, is peeping over her shoulder “aus Kleinstädter-Neugier und mit jener von Bosheit nicht ganz freien Genugtuung darüber, daß für jemanden der Augenblick gekommen war, die gewissermaßen dankbare Rolle des Unbekannten aufzugeben und sich zu nennen und zu bekennen”<sup>13</sup> (Mann 2003, 15). Accordingly, his ensuing dialogue with Charlotte establishes the relation between what he calls “die Lotte Werthers” and “die Lotte Goe[thes]”<sup>14</sup> (Mann 2003, 22)—between the literary icon from Goethe's novel and what he perceives to be its reincarnation in real life. Moreover, the detailed description of Charlotte filling in the registration form (Mann 2003, 14), and a later remark by her daughter on that situation (Mann 2003, 25), make it clear that Charlotte expects to be recognized by her name as the model of a literary icon. That, however, suggests that the prospect of being associated with the iconic Lotte—“Werther's Lotte” from Goethe's novel and/or her real-life model in Thomas Mann's novel, i.e., “Goethe's Lotte”—is what inspired her visit to Weimar in the first place, and that seeing her sister's family is little more than a pretext.

In short, the text suggests that Charlotte's visit to Weimar is motivated by her desire to come to terms with herself and her life, by reconnecting with the literary afterlife of her youth (Marx 2015, 64). As with Miss Cuzzle's sketchbook, the reference to cultural icons, thus, connects the motifs of identity and time; for both Goethe and Charlotte, confronting their iconic images is to confront their earlier selves and memories. In both cases, interior monologues in the text suggest that these memories are indelibly linked to their literary representation in Goethe's *Werther* novel.

In Charlotte's monologue in Chapter Two, she claims that—because her own life and person have acquired iconic status through Goethe's novel—she

<sup>13</sup> “from small-town curiosity and the malicious satisfaction one gets when somebody has to abandon the grateful role of incognito and admit to proper name and status” (Mann 1947, 6)

<sup>14</sup> Literally: “Werther's Lotte” and “Goethe's Lotte”.

appreciates her life and person enough to be able to do them justice in her memories. It is as though it were actually true that her iconic counterpart was, in fact, “die Eigentliche und Wahre von uns beiden”<sup>15</sup> (Mann 2003, 21)—despite having denied this in the dialogue with Mager. Therefore, the text makes it clear that, regardless of her protestations to the contrary, her own iconicity is not an obstacle in seeing her sister—dragging her into unwelcome conversations revolving around Goethe—, but it is the actual reason for her visit to Weimar. That is why she writes the letter to Goethe about her visit (Mann 2003, 31), hoping to renew their mutual acquaintance in light of shared memories—which exist due to the iconicity bestowed on them by Goethe’s novel and its fame. This connection is most apparent in the passages concerning a frock with a missing ribbon, which is a replica of a dress from which Charlotte once took a ribbon and sent it as a keepsake to the young Goethe after he had departed for good (Mann 2003, 36). The frock is aptly called “[die] Nachahmung des Lottekleides”<sup>16</sup> (Mann 2003, 36), as both an allusion to Charlotte’s past and a reference to her iconic counterpart in Goethe’s novel, where, similarly, the Lotte character is introduced to the reader wearing “a robe of simple, white trimmed with pink ribbons”, one of which is later given to Werther as a keepsake (Frizen 2003, 213).

As for Goethe, his monologue in Chapter Seven starts with questioning his whereabouts: “Wo kommst Du zu dir?”<sup>17</sup> (Mann 2003, 283). That question symbolically announces the awakening Goethe’s quest for his own self as he continues pondering the dream he just had and its implications for his present state of affairs. This subsequently provokes a series of memories and reflections revolving around the question of his physical, spiritual, intellectual, and public identities. Significantly, that quest does not take its cue from his own public image, but from numerous other cultural icons, including Schiller, Byron, Hans Sachs, Dürer, Moses, Jesus, Martin Luther, Napoleon, the Cologne Cathedral, and—at the very beginning—allegorical representations of beauty, youth, and erotic love (Mann 2003, 283, 284, 285–289, 290, 310–311, 318, 327, 329–330, 331). Goethe’s monologue is as much a collection of ‘stars’ as Miss Cuzzle’s sketchbook. These iconic images provoke the old poet’s musings on the relationship between time, life, art, and identity—the very question that is on Charlotte’s mind at the beginning of Chapter Two when she ponders whether time changes one’s identity (Mann 2003, 32). Evidently, this creates an analogy between Goethe and all the other characters in Thomas Mann’s novel who define their own identities with reference to his public persona and other cultural icons. Thereby, the text suggests that its treatment of cultural icons is not primarily about the burden of fame, but about the essential connection between identity formation and the reproduction of images. It is about how everyone’s share of Goethe is Goethe’s share of everyone.

<sup>15</sup> “between us two she was the real and more substantial one” (Mann 1947, 11).

<sup>16</sup> That is, a replica of “Lotte’s frock of yore” (Mann 1947, 23).

<sup>17</sup> “Where are we?” (Mann 1947, 212).

What the novel seeks to demonstrate, then, is how, in the main characters' quest for self-discovery, these characters refer to cultural icons in order to define a self-image and visualize values and attitudes. In doing so, however, the novel also shows how juggling time-bound images make identity painfully and palpably elusive to both the reader and, to some extent, the characters themselves. Thus, the text suggests that identity is constituted by the struggle to find one's identity. The depiction of characters failing to fix their own identities by reproducing iconic images is, therefore, an adequate way to artistically represent these identities. This conforms to the core principle of Thomas Mann's humorist poetics: To poetically transform the inadequate into an adequate means of expression for human existence, with all the experiences of inadequacy it entails (Löck 2012, 155–156).

### THE POETICS OF TRANSFORMING CULTURAL ICONS

The theory behind this poetic transformation of cultural icons is scattered over the first half of Chapter Seven, which means it is presented as reflections by the Goethe character. For reasons both textual and contextual, these reflections are to be taken as Thomas Mann's own poetics (cf. Reed 1996, 358). As poetological statements, Goethe's musings have no equivalent anywhere else in the novel, so the text does not juxtapose them with conflicting artistic positions that would be given equal relevance. Furthermore, the text makes its author's identification with his character evident when it explores the political implications of art. Thus, the Goethe character's conflict with contemporary German nationalism mirrors Thomas Mann's own fight against Germany's Nazi government in the 1930s. In February 1938, the *New York Times* published a statement, in which Thomas Mann had challenged Germany's Nazi government for the role as the true representative of German culture: "Wo ich bin, ist Deutschland. Ich trage meine deutsche Kultur in mir"<sup>18</sup> (quoted after Gut 2008, 260). Significantly, the novel has the Goethe character all but quote this very statement: "Sie meinen, sie sind Deutschland, aber *ich bins*, und gings zu Grunde mit Stumpf und Stiel, *es dauerte in mir*."<sup>19</sup> (Mann 2003, 327, italics AL) As an expression of Thomas Mann's humoristic poetics, the Goethe character's reflections express three interrelated ideas: (1) the power of names and images, (2) art must use names and images that please the crowd and transform them, so as to selectively reveal the secrets of human existence, (3) the essence of art is a combination of love and parody.

The novel repeatedly points to the power of names. This is apparent when Charlotte confuses her husband's real name—Hans Christian—with that of his pendant in the Goethe's novel—Albert (Mann 2003, 34, 35, 37). The same applies when Mager speaks of all the celebrities he has met as "hochgestellten,

<sup>18</sup> "Where I am, there is Germany. I carry my German culture in me."

<sup>19</sup> "They think they are Germany—but I am. Let the rest perish root and branch, it will survive in me." (Mann 1947, 250).



ins Weltgeschehen verflochtenen Personen und Trägern respekt einflößender, die Einbildungskraft aufregender Namen”<sup>20</sup> (Mann 2003, 19). Likewise, the description of Miss Cuzzle’s sketchbook consists to a large extent of name-dropping. Thus, the novel’s interest in cultural icons largely rests in the fact that iconizing is an omnipresent way of producing and reproducing names. This is true of Charlotte, who is recognized as the model of “Werther’s Lotte” by name only, with no recognition stemming from her appearance (Mann 2003, 15–16). Significantly, however, recognition of the iconic name does conjure up the corresponding iconic image in Mager who pictures the famous scene in Goethe’s novel where Werther first lays eyes on Lotte (Mann 2003, 23).

As to the power of names, Goethe could not be more to the point: “Name ist Macht”<sup>21</sup> (Mann 2003, 301). Here, Thomas Mann’s Goethe is referring to the specifically-human ability to create identity (Mann 2003, 301), thus, getting a handle on life’s state of flux: “[U]nd so mögen wir das Unbeständige anreden und ihm auf den Kopf zusagen, zu welcher Klasse und Art es gehört”<sup>22</sup> (Mann 2003, 301). At this point, the text touches on the fundamental question of Modern art: whether life’s state of flux can adequately be represented in artistic forms, which are inevitably fixed (Willems 1996, 685–686). As an answer to that question, the text presents a poetics based not so much on invention but on the transformation of material taken from life. Accordingly, Thomas Mann’s novel treats cultural icons as material for poetic transformation: As elements of popular culture, iconic names and images ensure art’s vitality and social relevance, while the poetic treatment of cultural icons endows them with the intellectual significance that is necessary to make art the life-enhancing experience Goethe wants it to be: “Leben ist Steigerung, das Gelebte ist schwach, geistverstärkt muß mans noch einmal leben. [...] Leichtigkeit, Leichtigkeit ... höchste und letzte Wirkung der Kunst ist Gefühl der Anmut. Nur nicht die stirnrunzelnde Erhabenheit, die, sei’s auch in Glanz und Schiller, tragisch erschöpft dasteht als Produkt der Moral! Tiefsinn soll lächeln ... Er soll überhaupt nur mit unterlaufen, sich für den Eingeweihten heiter ergeben,—so wills die Esoterik der Kunst. Bunte Bilder dem Volk, dahinter für die Wissenden das Geheimnis”<sup>23</sup> (Mann 2003, 307–308). The malicious pun on Schiller’s name indicates that this passage harks back to the beginning of the chapter when Goethe criticizes Schiller’s serious treatment of the iconic Wilhelm-Tell

<sup>20</sup> “the claims of even the most resounding names and the most prominent actors on the stage of world history” (Mann 1947, 10).

<sup>21</sup> “to name is to command” (Mann 1947, 228).

<sup>22</sup> “So now we can nail down these changeable humours and tell them to their faces what species and class they belong to” (Mann 1947, 227–228).

<sup>23</sup> “Life is growth, what has been lived is weak, strengthened of the spirit it must be lived anew. [...] But only the light touch, the light touch! Last and highest effect of art is charm. No scowling sublimity—even at its best and most brilliant, even in Schiller, it falls tragically exhausted, betrays itself the product of moral feeling. No, no, the depths must laugh! Profundity must smile, glide gently in, and smiling yield itself to the initiate alone—that is the esoteric of our art. For the people, gay pictures; for the cognoscenti the mystery behind” (Mann 1947, 233).



story in his eponymous drama (Mann 2003, 284). There, Goethe also mentions his plan to write himself a “real, easy-going, [...] ironic” Wilhelm-Tell epic (Mann 1947, 213). This reference to Wilhelm Tell indicates that the Goethe character—as Thomas Mann’s mouthpiece—counts literary icons among the “gay”—literally: “colored”—“pictures for the people” under the surface of which life’s “mystery” must be revealed by the artist.

The way in which this is to be achieved is illustrated when Goethe has a moment of poetic inspiration in the bathtub, in which he uses a popular verbal expression of piety in a different context, thereby transforming it into what he calls a “Schau- und Daseinsbild”<sup>24</sup> (Mann 2003, 307–308). Thereupon he suddenly starts declaiming an impromptu ode to his sponge as a symbol of life itself (Mann 2003, 308). The setting of the scene—Goethe reflecting and making up verses while taking a bath—presents poetic invention as something akin to singing in the bathtub, giving a prosaic image of the essence of poetry that could not be more different from Goethe’s ‘marble’ image. This incongruity is exaggerated to the point of parody in Goethe’s declaiming verses on the former existence of the sponge (Mann 2003, 308); this, surprisingly, serves as a convincing symbolic representation of Goethe’s—and the novel’s—central theme: the experience of time in life and art. While, on the surface, the bathing poet is just a comic image—a colored crowd pleaser, as it were—it illustrates, through parody, Goethe’s claim that profundity in art must carry a smile and that art, therefore, is essentially parodic (Mann 2003, 308). This parodic illustration is all the more effective as the situational comedy that proves his point seems to elude the character himself; he does not notice that his squeezing of the sponge over his head and relishing of the resulting cold shower (Mann 2003, 308) may be a somewhat-comic symbol for the life-enhancing potential of art.

### THE POETIC TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURAL ICONS

As for the novel’s treatment of cultural icons, therefore, the squeezing of the sponge is the paradigm. The text presents them as “colored pictures for the people” and, at the same time, transforms them into symbols of a deeper meaning that is not dreamt of in the philosophy of the masses. Once again, Miss Cuzzle’s failed portrait of Napoleon proves this point. For a writer as subtle as Thomas Mann, the text is remarkably blatant about the limitations of Miss Cuzzle’s artistic talent and the inferior quality of her portrait of Napoleon (Mann 2003, 43–44). Taking up Goethe’s poetological metaphor, one could say that the color of the picture is so intense that it provokes questions as to the secret meaning behind it. Indeed, the way the drawing is described by the narrator renders its defects poetically meaningful: The dilettante compression of the emperor impressively visualizes Napoleon’s defeat (Mann 2003, 44). In contrast, the drawing’s ridiculous widening of Napoleon’s figure symbolizes

<sup>24</sup> Literally: “image of existence”.

the ludicrousness of the Napoleon-cult that is so effectively mirrored in the narrator's description of the scene in the port of Plymouth (Mann 2003, 43).

Both the manipulation of proportions and its symbolic meaning are characteristic of iconic representations of Napoleon, as found in Thomas Mann's sources: in C.L. Eastlake's painting *Napoleon on Board the Bellerophon* from 1815 and in the descriptions of the *Bellerophon* scene in historical novels by Joseph Roth and French novelist Octave Aubry (Frizen 2003, 230–232), both of which came out when Mann was beginning to work on *Lotte in Weimar*. What sets Mann's treatment of the *Bellerophon* scene representations apart from his sources is that he makes the symbolic meaning appear to be the result of artistic failure. The narrator's explicit criticism of both Miss Cuzzle's talent and her portrait of Napoleon make it clear that the symbolic meaning is beyond the character's grasp: What she perceives as a failure to adequately capture Napoleon's greatness (Mann 2003, 43) is turned, by narrator's description, into a symbolic expression of Thomas Mann's skepticism towards Napoleon's greatness. In doing so, the text questions any attempt at capturing greatness in iconic images, suggesting that cultural icons reveal more about those who produce and reproduce iconic images, rather than what they ostensibly represent. By involuntarily making Napoleon even smaller than he really was, small Miss Cuzzle has unwittingly recreated the emperor in her own image. However, it is not Miss Cuzzle's pencil but Thomas Mann's pen that is mightier than the emperor's sword here.

The aesthetic point is that the text makes Miss Cuzzle and her pursuit of iconicity the counterimage to—and, by a humoristic twist, an application of the poetics expounded by—the Goethe character in Chapter Seven. Therefore, the description of Miss Cuzzle's portrait of Napoleon transcends the caricature (Grötler 2019, 130–160) of lost greatness that Mann found in his sources and becomes representative of the essentially-human need for greatness as a point of reference. That is why cultural icons in *Lotte in Weimar* are not merely denounced as instruments of commercial or political propaganda, but are presented as a means by which human beings come to terms with the world and their own identity.

This is evident in the analogy the text creates between Miss Cuzzle's sketchbook and Charlotte's failed attempt at reproducing a cultural icon: Lotte's "frock of yore" with the missing ribbon in Goethe's *Werther* novel. Wearing a replica of her own dress on which Goethe modelled that frock, Charlotte—on her visit to him—seeks to present the old poet with a vivid reminder of their mutual past. Chapter Eight clarifies that this attempt to reconnect with Goethe fails. In Chapters Two and Seven, however, the novel redeems that failure by connecting the two characters on a poetic level by creating analogies exclusive to Charlotte and Goethe: both characters are given a scene where—in a similar setting: lying alone in bed—they are reflecting at length on their life, in particular, and on the relationship of time, life, and art, in general. At one point both characters touch on that episode when, some 40 years earlier, the young Goethe, while they were alone picking raspberries in summer, spontaneously

kissed the young Charlotte for the first and the last time (Mann 2003, 34, 315). Their shared memories of that single kiss associated with the taste of raspberries momentarily create for the reader the very sense of communion between the two characters that their real-life encounter in Chapter Eight is so sorely missing. In Thomas Mann's novel, the frock with the missing ribbon is transformed into a symbol of artistic autonomy in a world where high art is threatened to be displaced by its iconic representations. *Lotte in Weimar* reacts to that challenge—not by turning its back on popular culture, but by turning the tables: by exploiting cultural icons as material for an affirmation of high art.

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# Kafka Goes TV: Franz Kafka and the Kafkaesque in Contemporary Television Series—Popular Iconicity and the Making of Quality TV

Irene Husser

There are few classical authors who arouse as much popular interest as Franz Kafka. Kafka's work and biography have inspired various cinematic, musical, comic-strip, and video-game adaptations; his place of birth is a tourist attraction; the term 'Kafkaesque' has entered everyday speech. The author's omnipresence in popular culture has repeatedly been ascribed to illegitimate appropriations that "come at a cost" and "transform important ideas and images into 'catchy' popular icons for the thrill-hungry public" (Bruce 2002, 245). Unlike critical viewpoints that identify popular culture with the trivial and superficial, this chapter focuses on the cultural energy that is unleashed in popular adaptations of canonical art.

It is at first necessary to figure out the aesthetic traits of popular culture. In what follows, I argue that a key to understanding popular culture is *iconicity*. After general remarks on Kafka's work and its associations with the aesthetics of the popular, I examine references to Kafka in the television series *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), *Fargo 2* (2015), *Breaking Bad* (2008–2014), and *The Wire* (2002–2008). This focus on television shows is due to the medium's cultural impact that has, in some ways, replaced the novel as socially-representative art and outpaced the cine film as the leading entertainment format. Though these attributions must be treated with caution (Frizzoni 2012), there is no doubt that contemporary television series challenge traditional borders between high and low culture. In the following, I show that these intra- and intermedia

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negotiations provide the context in which references to canonical literature take place and that these references mainly operate on iconicity. Therefore, this chapter will close with the role of literary icons in the making of Quality TV.

### POPULAR CULTURE AND ICONICITY

John Storey elaborates on the dilemma of defining popular culture: “An obvious starting point in any attempt to define popular culture is to say that popular culture is simply culture which is widely favoured or well liked by many people. [...], what is clear is that any definition of popular culture must include a quantitative dimension. The *popular* of popular culture would seem to demand it. What is also clear, however, is that on its own, a quantitative index is not enough to provide an adequate definition of popular culture” (Storey 2001, 6). Storey points out that while popular culture must undoubtedly be thought of in terms of (quantitative) reception and consumption, the question is whether or not there is an aesthetics of the popular: Are popular artifacts inherently distinct from other works of art? I argue that popular culture can be regarded in terms of production as well as reception, and that these two modes are mutually dependent. A concept to bring these together is developed by Jochen Venus, who distinguishes three prominent types of representation in Western cultural history: reference (in realism), non-reference (in abstract art), and spectacular self-reference (in popular culture) (Venus 2013). According to Venus, the popular mode of spectacular self-reference, like realistic art, employs figurative representation, but inverts it; the figuration does not reflect reality, but a self-sufficient, spectacular artistry (Venus 2013, 65). Popular artifacts operate on signs that are highly stylized and eccentric—in John Fiske’s words: “excessive” and “obvious” (Fiske 2006, 114)—and thereby draw attention to their ‘over the top’ means of depiction.

Venus therefore associates the popular with the gestural. For Walter Benjamin, the main function of the gesture in Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater is the interruption of the plot (Benjamin 1977, 521). Gestures highlight, and thereby isolate, the things said and done, producing an effect of self-awareness; Brecht’s epic theatre shows that something is shown. Popular signs work in a similar way; they produce presence by theatricality, self-referentiality, and contextual isolation. But—whereas in Brecht’s theatre, gestures reveal social injustices that are usually ideologically disguised and encourage viewers to reflect upon what they see on stage—popular culture utilizes techniques of *showing* spectacular virtuosity in order to captivate and stir emotion (excitement, shock, disgust, etc.).

Admittedly, spectacular self-reference is not exclusive to popular artifacts. Many works of art that are considered high culture (for example, in Mannerism or Romanticism) also excessively showcase virtuosity. Whereas the exposition of formal subtlety in high art pays homage to the artist, their imagination and originality, popular culture defies the concept of the autonomous, original author who is ahead of their time. Popular artifacts are generally co-productions

that “metastasize” (Venus 2013, 67) and inspire reproduction, engaging more and more recipients in the self-referential spectacle. Correspondingly, transmedia “style communities” (Venus 2013, 67) emerge around popular artifacts and their exalted, quotable features and actively participate in the expansion of the popular universe.

Dean MacCannell thinks of the spectacle in terms of iconicity: “A spectacle is a semion (cluster of associated signs) ultimately based on iconic representation. In spectacles, beauty is represented by spectacularly beautiful actresses, [...], strength is represented by bulging muscles and the act of pulling down in the Temple, etc.” (MacCannell 1986, 422). With popular iconicity, the signifier resembles the signified (Peirce 1955), eliminating the referent. This quality of the iconic sign to evoke presence is exactly what Venus describes as spectacular self-reference—the stylized popular sign draws attention to the means of depiction, to the point where the depicted object converges with the means of depiction. For example, explosions in blockbuster action movies are stylized, exaggerated and ‘larger than life’. They do not pretend to represent real-life explosions and therefore do not usually arouse awe and shock; rather, they let the audience take pleasure in the spectacle of the explosion and the virtuosity of the special effects.

Therefore, I conceptualize popular culture in terms of iconic sign production. The popular iconic sign is highly stylized and self-referential, showcasing artistry and thereby transcending narrative contexts. It blurs the line between signifier and signified, which allows the audience to partake in an intense experience that it wants to relive. This desire for repetition is also why popular artifacts prioritize spectacle over content (Baßler 2015). According to Moritz Baßler, popular artifacts do not call for interpretation, for a decoding of the ‘actual’, ‘hidden’ meaning of a text; instead, they work on an affectional level. It is not the various narratives and storylines that get the audience excited about a fictional world—rather, these elaborations primarily enable a permanent “dwelling on and enjoying of the diegesis” (Baßler 2015, 39).

Nevertheless, although the production of spectacles is central to popular culture, this does not mean that popular objects categorically refuse the hermeneutic code. In fact, certain popular artifacts willingly expose aesthetic ambiguity. They can be enjoyed without any “experience of truth” (Gadamer 1975), but might as well engage the audience in the quest for a deeper meaning of the text. That is why TV shows such as *Twin Peaks* or *The Sopranos* inspire cult followings and, at the same time, appeal to audiences who are (casually) invested in the serial narratives, themes, and their socio-cultural implications. That is also why popular television series like *Game of Thrones* cannot simply count on their branding to inspire multiple, profitable seasons of fanatical commitment; the crushing reviews of the final season are partially due to the creators relying too heavily on the charm of the diegesis and its spectacular extension, neglecting consistent development of the narrative.

It is biased to denounce the spectacle-oriented or the hermeneutic approach to these shows by claiming that either one group lacks the intellectual capacity

to understand or the other group lacks the sensuality to enjoy. Rather, it is necessary to acknowledge that certain popular artifacts oscillate between spectacle and meaning. A historical view of television—which also applies to other entertainment media—shows that in periods of upheaval, mostly due to the emergence of new media, established media are forced to redefine their social compatibility and relation to reality (Engell 2004). Hence, with the rise of the internet around the turn of the millennium, television came up with innovative narratives that proved it to be a culturally-relevant medium that could compete with new media. The content of these narratives is relevant to wider discourses about society, politics, and culture. Nevertheless, these new TV formats—also termed “Popular Quality TV” (Jancovich and Lyons 2003), “High-End TV” (Nelson 2007) or “Complex TV” (Mittell 2015)—do not renounce the spectacular; they expose iconic, quotable features that mobilize cult followings.

A common device to draw distinctions between new and old media or art forms is to engage with high culture and obtain value from staging dis/continuities with high-cultural traditions. Using insights from Bourdieu (1992), I define high culture as a mode of production that is characterized by ‘pure aesthetic’ (primacy of form over function) and the pursuit of creative autonomy. Bourdieu identifies structural analogies between autonomous art and the religious field; in dismissing the economic logics of demand and supply, high-cultural artifacts draw value from the “illusion” of the significance and distinctiveness of artistic production (Bourdieu 1992, 227–231). This illusion is ensured by the religious-like process of “transubstantiation” (Bourdieu 1984, 6): “The collective belief in the game (*illusio*) and in the sacred value of its stakes [...] [are] fundamental to the power of consecration, permitting consecrated artists to constitute certain products, by the miracle of their signature (or brand name), as *sacred* objects” (Bourdieu 1992, 230). Popular artifacts can participate in or repel these author- and work-centered practices of consecration, but, either way, their intermedia engagement negotiates the cultural legitimacy of the popular artifact. Before this chapter further explores the function of literary references in television’s quest for recognition and cultural allegiance and thereby contributes to understand the concept of Quality TV, I outline some aspects of Kafka’s work and persona that have affected its/his popular appropriation.

### WHY KAFKA?

When it comes to literature, there are, broadly speaking, three kinds of popularity. There are texts that enjoy popular attention but this attention does not extend to their creators—even an audience that is not educated in literature is likely to know the names Lolita, Don Quixote, and the Sandman, but is less likely to know the authors of these characters. On the other hand, there are artists who are more prominent than their literary output, whose cultural relevance transcends a single artifact—this is the case for Marquis de Sade, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Edgar Allen Poe; the mere



mention of these authors evokes an image of what they aesthetically, culturally, or morally represent. In some cases, the work of these writers has inspired eponyms (sadistic, masochistic, Lovecraftian). And thirdly, there are authors who achieve both forms of recognition—who create iconic characters or lines and, at the same time, are well known to a broader audience: Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet, Oliver Twist and Scrooge, Werther and Faust all have the same popular reach as William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Johann Wolfgang Goethe.

For the most part, Franz Kafka fits in with the second category of literary icons. He does not owe his popularity to a single protagonist or text—though the novella *The Metamorphosis* and, to a lesser extent, his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* are known to a wider audience—but, rather, an association with a type of character and the situation these characters find themselves in. Gregor Samsa, Josef K., and K. are similar insofar as they face situations in which they are confronted with an anonymous, ominous power that they cannot make any sense of. These situations and experiences are not only recurrent in Kafka's writings, but have been identified as the essence of his work: the Kafkaesque.

The first record of this term in the US dates back to the year 1938, when a book review of Edward Upward's novel *Journey to the Border* was referred to as "Kafkaesque in manner" (Niehaus 2009). About ten years later, in 1947, the term was listed in the Oxford English Dictionary; in 1973 it was included in the Duden, the dictionary of German language. Therefore, the concept of the Kafkaesque—having been coined and initially used in a literary context—evolved, over the decades, into a term used to describe situations and experiences that are slightly reminiscent of Kafka's work and "can be deployed to designate a plethora of meanings" (Grammatikopoulos 2017, 3). In fact, the criticism of its ubiquitous usage—some would argue, misuse—has become a cultural trope itself, but these complaints overlook that ubiquity is an element of Kafka's work. An aesthetics of the archetypical is characteristic of his prose. Kafka's texts are almost entirely devoid of historical markings; one cannot usually tell when the story is set, as the narrators withhold information about context. Furthermore, Kafka's characters do not really show individual features; they are one-dimensional characters, reminiscent of mythological and biblical figures. Indeed, Greek mythology and the Bible are central reference points in Kafka's writings, thereby evoking a sense of universality. His texts appear to depict situations and experiences that are existential or archetypically modern, through themes of alienation (Nägele 2006), (bureaucratic) power, law, and art.<sup>1</sup> This existential-archetypical dimension of his work is the reason why it has inspired a term—Kafkaesque—that transports a generic experience that anybody can intuitively relate to.

<sup>1</sup> It is important to mention that this technique of abstraction, though it claims universality, has a distinct cultural- and socio-historical context.

The anti-realist<sup>2</sup> aesthetics of the archetypal also explains Kafka's presence in popular culture. For Leslie Fiedler (1977), a basic function of (American) popular culture is producing mythologies that promote national, cultural, or social identities. Similarly, Umberto Eco argues that artifacts are transformed into popular cult objects when they partake in an "ancestral intertextual tradition" (Eco 1985, 5) by evoking a multitude of arche- and stereotypes: "When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths" (Eco 1985, 11). Therefore, one could argue that Kafka's writings resonated so well with popular culture because they present supposedly archetypal situations and experiences that perpetuate the image—and, to some extent, myth—of the obscure modern world. This is also reflected in the hermeneutic indeterminacy of Kafka's fiction.

Though Kafka is not the only author whose name has become an eponym, his popularity nevertheless differs from authors like de Sade or Lovecraft. His persona did not vanish behind the concept that his name represents (Niehaus 2009); he is, rather—like Shakespeare or Goethe—venerated as an ingenious artist. This focus on his author-persona goes back to Kafka himself, who repeatedly reflects on the relationship between life and art in his journals, correspondences, and fictions. Kafka's writings create "biographical legends" (in Tomashevsky's sense) that were immediately explored by the holder of his estate, Max Brod, and fellow contemporaries (Klein 2008), and shape his modern-day image as a writer who renounces life and worldly pleasures for the sake of art. These views on art and authorship—that reflect the cultural archetype of the exceptional, eccentric, and, at times, tragic artist—made Kafka's name synonymous with the tormented and misunderstood genius.

In the following sections I show that references to Kafka in the selected television series mainly focus on the aforementioned aspects of his notoriety: the Kafkaesque, the existential-archetypal tone of the writings, and his author-persona. Nevertheless, the function of the quotation dictates which of these aspects is foregrounded and whether the reference serves to affirm the aura of the ingenious author or open his work up for other purposes.

### STAGING AFFILIATIONS: *TWIN PEAKS* AND *FARGO*

David Lynch's and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks: The Return* was released in 2017, years after the show's first two seasons were broadcasted in 1990–1991—as predicted by a character in the last episode of the second season: "I'll see you again in 25 years." The third season of the cult series does not simply pursue

<sup>2</sup>The technique of generalization fits into Kafka's aesthetics of anti-realism, that, according to Manfred Engel, is characterized by the disposal of fantastic elements, a dream-like narration, a lack of psychologically-driven characters, and a narrative mode that is not structured by plot (Engel 2010). Engel argues that these anti-realist techniques—joined by the aesthetics of the archetypal—evoke the sense of a deeper meaning behind the surface. Kafka's texts thereby traditionally inspire parabolical or allegorical readings that, however, do not quite add up; tropological speech implies a 'proper' meaning that Kafka's writings refuse.

unfinished storylines and answer open questions, but also reflects on the show's mediality and status in popular culture (Husser 2022). The season's self-reflective tone serves as the framework for the reference to Franz Kafka; a portrait of the author hangs on the wall in the office of the FBI Deputy Director Gordon Cole, who is played by David Lynch himself.

The display of the portrait follows the logics of popular iconicity. It is presented without any context, as Kafka is neither mentioned by the characters nor explicitly referred to on any other aesthetic level. In fact, this short scene in the third episode is the only time the author is alluded to. While Kafka's portrait formally belongs to the setting of the scene, it attracts attention and unfolds an auratic presence through its positioning and unexpected presentation. The visual exposition causes hermeneutic uncertainty and makes the audience wonder what Kafka has to do with *Twin Peaks* or the oversized picture of a nuclear bomb explosion (that can be seen in episode 8 of the show) displayed directly across from the author's portrait. Yet, this scenic juxtaposition of Kafka's portrait, the self-referential image of the atom bomb explosion, and the character of Cole—in whom Lynch repeatedly blurs the line between character and director—make clear that the reference to Kafka transcends the diegesis, and showcases affinities between Lynch and Kafka. The author-centered reference pursues a *politique des auteurs*, that relates the director of the television series to the canonical writer. Furthermore, it ranks Lynch's work within the tradition of the Kafkaesque, identifying Kafka's work as a model for the Lynchian aesthetics of the surreal, absurd, and grotesque.

Another reference to Kafka that showcases aesthetic affinities is in the second season of Noah Hawley's anthology series *Fargo*, which is loosely based on the black comedy crime drama *Fargo* (1996) by Ethan and Joel Coen. In the series, the titles of Kafka's writings inspired the season's episodes' names: The titles of the second (*Before the Law*) and ninth episode (*The Castle*) of Season 2 refer to Kafka's texts. With references to Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Eugène Ionesco, Søren Kierkegaard, Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, and others, whose works and quotes have inspired the names of the other season's episodes, *Fargo 2* paratextually presents the canon of literary and philosophical existentialism and its related movements of absurdism, surrealism, and dadaism. The subsumption of Kafka in this high-cultural lineage recalls the existential tone of his writings. Though the series directly names two of Kafka's texts, it is less interested in foregrounding a particular text and, instead, evokes the entire tradition itself. Except for Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*, that is extensively mentioned throughout the series, the other works of art relate to the plot in associative ways. Instead of pursuing a poetics of intertextuality, the series relies on the popularity of the overall cultural perception of what Kafka's (and the other authors') work is about: the show's recurring theme of the individual's struggle against life's odds. The absurdity of these struggles can be identified as Kafkaesque without any specific knowledge of his writings.

In *Twin Peaks*' third, and *Fargo*'s second, seasons, the references to Kafka construct a cultural tradition to which the shows adhere. The author- (*Twin*

*Peaks*) and work-centered (*Fargo*) approaches are characteristic of high culture and show that the series align with the high-cultural concepts of art. Thereby, the appreciation of Kafka and his work does not only serve an intermedia purpose traversing media differences, but also pursues an intramedia agenda by setting both series apart from entertainment mass media. In doing so, the shows nevertheless favor a popular approach; they rely on popular knowledge on Kafka's work and persona, and—through the stylized and decontextualized presentation of the references—perform his transformation into a popular icon.

### PERFORMING POPULARITY: *BREAKING BAD* AND *THE WIRE*

Episode 9 of the third season of the crime drama series *Breaking Bad* (created and produced by Vince Gilligan) is called “Kafkaesque”; the term is also used by the characters in the episode. The protagonist, Jesse Pinkman, attends a group therapy session where he complains about his job at a corporate laundromat: “It’s, like, rigid. All kinds of red tape. My boss is a dick, the owner a super dick. I’m not worthy to meet him, but I guess everybody’s scared of the dude. The place is full of dead-eyed douche bags, the hours suck and nobody knows what’s going on, so ....” The description of the tristesse and anonymity makes the group leader refer to the Kafkaesque nature of his work routine, with Jesse responding, “Yeah! Totally Kafkaesque!” This exclamation has inspired internet memes and GIFs that work on the ambiguity of Jesse’s utterance. Jesse is not employed at a laundromat, but cooks methamphetamine for a high-level drug distributor who also owns the laundromat to cover his illegal business. Jesse’s description of his Kafkaesque work routine therefore actually relates to the corporate drug business he is involved in.

This extensive use of the Kafkaesque produces a comic and yet critical effect. The scene operates on the ubiquitous dimension of the Kafkaesque, parallelizing modern-day capitalism and drug trade. But, the series also willingly over-stretches the term’s ubiquity. Later in the episode, Jesse describes the professionalization of the drug business—which forces him to launder his money (so, ironically, he is metaphorically involved in the laundry-business) and pay taxes—as Kafkaesque: “What’s the point of being an outlaw when you got responsibilities? [...] I gotta pay taxes now? What’s up with that? That’s messed up, yo. That’s Kafkaesque.” Throughout the series Jesse repeatedly mispronounces and uses foreign words and technical terms in an incorrect way, so the show’s audience is likely to identify his reuse of the Kafkaesque as a misconception. But, this incorrect use also works on a level that transcends the diegesis; the contamination of the term self-referentially showcases the series’ humor and comical virtuosity. *Breaking Bad*, in its iconic presentation (scenic accentuation, title of episode, self-referentiality) of the concept, popularizes the Kafkaesque and explores the effects of such ‘loose’ appropriations, without actually condemning these. On the contrary, *Breaking Bad* humorously stages the popularizing of the eponym and—with pleasure—displays its participation in it.

Another television series that playfully showcases Kafka's popularization is David Simon's *The Wire*. In the last episode of the show (Season 5, Episode 10) a drug rehabilitation counselor, Walon, pulls an old piece of paper out of his wallet and hands it over to his fellow recovering heroin addict, Bubbles. Bubbles reads the quote aloud—"You can hold back from the suffering of the world. You have free permission to do so, and it is in accordance with your nature. But, perhaps, this very holding back is the one suffering you could have avoided."—and quotes the name of the author written on the paper—"Fonzie Kafka". Bubbles asks who this person is, and Walon replies "Some writer"; when asked whether he has read some of his books, Walon says, "Fuck no." This interaction is a textbook example of cultural profanation; the mispronunciation of the author's name and his association with the iconic character of Fonzie from the sitcom *Happy Days* (1974–1984) playfully deconstruct the image of the artistically-complex and unattainable writer.

Kafka is not the only high-level author who is mentioned in the last season of *The Wire*. In Episode 6, the executive editor of *The Baltimore Sun* demands the newspaper to cover the 'Dickensian Aspect' of homelessness. The fifth season of the show deprecates a journalism that is mainly interested in emotionally appealing to readers, instead of analyzing the roots of social problems; the show itself has been praised for its realistic depiction of the socio-economic decline of the postindustrial metropolitan city. Dickens is thereby used as a synonym for the sentimental tradition of social realism that the show's creators reject. Comparing the reference to Dickens with the quote by Kafka, one can tell that the show does not mention Kafka to aesthetically distance itself from the author and his work, but, instead, refers to him iconically. The scene is self-referential, showcasing the series' popularization of the canonical writer—explored as a process of transferring fine art into a magic object. The quote by Kafka serves a ritual purpose which has nothing to do with its meaning (which Walon and Bubbles do not even discuss); Walon explains that he was handed the paper the day he started to lead the Narcotics Anonymous meetings, regarding it as a kind of talisman that helps him to stay clean. Paradoxically, with the paper and its inscription being assigned supernatural powers, the profane use of Kafka's quote turns into an act of sacralization.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS: LITERARY ICONS AND POPULAR SERIES

The above analyses show that references to literature (in this case Kafka) in contemporary television shows are mainly based on iconicity, and that these references reflect the series' status in popular culture. In all four examples (*Twin Peaks*, *Fargo*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Wire*), the author—who is already widely known—is mentioned following the semiotics of popular iconicity (spectacular self-reference, stylization, and contextual isolation). The series know and show that they are referring to a prominent artist and build on the notoriety and familiarity of the quotations. But Kafka is just as much addressed as a high-cultural author; in *Twin Peaks: The Return* and *Fargo 2* the allusions

to Kafka showcase artistic influences and construct cultural traditions that the series resolve to sustain.<sup>3</sup>

As is the case for *Twin Peaks* and *Fargo*, the references to Kafka in *Breaking Band* and *The Wire* oscillate between profanation and sacralization. Both shows refer to Kafka in a profaning, yet light-hearted, way and explore this popular appropriation. These series self-confidently affirm their affiliation with the popular while also redefining it. Popular culture is no longer associated with the trivial, but seen as a mode of reviving the high-cultural canon and opening it up for other purposes. Still, the serial popularizations of Kafka do not destroy his status as a consecrated author, but, rather, endorse the relevance of his work—or, to paraphrase this contradictory nature of cultural transgressions with Bruno Latour's words, iconoclasm confirms the icon's cultural value (Latour 2002).<sup>4</sup>

These serial examples shed light on the semiotic dimension of the making of cultural icons. These are formed through a cultural item undergoing processes of reduction, shortening, and fragmentation that lead to its transformation into a self-referent, stylized sign. These series perform this operation and thereby partake in the iconizing of Kafka. In turn, literary icons like Kafka play a major role in ennobling mass media as television and turning them into a high-end product. Quality TV shows build on the dual nature of cultural icons that “concentrate ‘hermeneutic energy’” and suggest “inexhaustible hermeneutic depth”, yet, at the same time, “are charged with a power of attraction that eludes a strictly hermeneutic-interpretative approach and is thus often described with terms that center around the semantics of the numinous” (Leypoldt 2010, 11–12). Because cultural icons oscillate between presence and meaning, concision and suggestiveness, they perfectly fit in with Quality TV's agenda to achieve aesthetic ambiguity—to simultaneously provide pleasure *and* produce meaning, and to provide pleasure *through* meaning. The references to Kafka perform an integrative function, in the sense that these appeal to a broad audience. They do not intervene with an immersive experience—and thereby can be easily missed—yet they hold hermeneutic potential for other (social, political, existential, etc.) readings.

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<sup>3</sup> Congruously, Lynch and the Coen brothers are considered contemporary representatives of the auteur-cinema and are also known for their own brand of absurdity. Lynch's and the Coen brothers' styles of directing and storytelling have been given the eponyms “Lynchian” (Wallace 1998) and “Coenesque” / “Coening” (Blum and Schmitt 2005).

<sup>4</sup> For the interplay between iconicity and iconoclasm, see the introduction of this volume.

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# “Do you know these poets?” Literary History in Quartet Games of the 19th and 20th Centuries

*Achim Hölder*

Knowledge of literary history is known to manifest itself not only in discursive texts, but also in manifold forms of everyday or celebrative material culture (Samida et al. 2014). In cultural practice, this means the erection of monuments to poets in public spaces (Weddigen 1904; Selbmann 1988), the naming of streets, the minting of coins (Strümpel 2008), the printing of banknotes and stamps (Feustel 1987), and so on. In all these and other manifestations of literary knowledge, a visual canon is the underlying epistemic matrix. This means two things: literary knowledge expresses itself linguistically and iconically, and mostly person-centered, and it is not diffuse or amorphous, but takes on distinctive forms of organization that align with names and numbers and allow for corresponding hierarchizations. One of the hitherto little-noticed variants of material canon culture are parlor games whose content is derived from national or international literary history. These parlor games differentiate themselves according to the usual elementary forms such as, in particular, board games vs. card games. Thereby the likewise usual elements like participant representative (game figure) and random generator (dice) are to be considered. Literary board games like Trivial Pursuit or quiz games, which aim at the recognition of quotations (*C'est dans quoi déjà?* by Gallimard), shall not be mentioned further here. In the case of card games, real memories are also excluded, because in them the cultural technique of recognition dominates and the pair formation

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does not convey any symbolism or message other than the mere importance of the duplicate icon together with its learnability through the matching process.

This chapter is only about quartet card games, whose peculiarity is based on arranging poets of a specific cultural area in such a way that groupings of four elements on playing cards arise. It bears witness to the specific opportunities and problems encountered in the study of material culture within the horizon of literary studies: on the one hand, a relevant, largely open field of investigation; on the other, a practice that does not conform to the conventions of disciplinary research. Anyone concerned with the scientific as well as the popular cultural manifestations of literary historiography knows that little research exists on the specific variants of material culture, (a) because the methodological field and the associated terminology first had to recode itself from classical folklore via cultural anthropology precisely to material culture, (b) because the documentation of samples in the pre-digital era was rather laborious and unattractive, but also (c) because it is precisely here that small museums and eager private collectors are more at work, and they only engage in academic methodological discussions to a limited extent. In fact, the bibliography on the subject is restricted (Schweiger 2014), and a second dilemma is that places like the Vienna “Literaturhaus” can only show loose sample copies of poet quartets or publish observations on websites tied to personal initiative. Niels Höpfner (1943–2016) reproduced private individual collections along with some information from collector and connoisseur Ernst Krumbein (1935–2017), whose gathering, including English and French copies, comprises about 100 different games. Here we can only hint at what literary studies, where practices of popularization and iconization have lately come into view, can do with these corpora.

Only recently the cultural technique of games was discussed anew under current, but digital aspects. Of course, there was no talk of quartet games, but “gaming as a scientific format” (Bruhn 2018) was at least discussed, whereby literary scholarship was not concerned, only the “gamification” of knowledge. As early as 2005 a symposium had been dedicated to the anthropology of play and had dealt with the “aesthetic formalization” (Casale 2005) or “recognition” and “archives” (Adamowsky 2005), but without reference to our question. Poetry quartets also have surprisingly little to do with Gundel Mattenklott’s (2009) “Games in Aesthetic Educational Processes”. Basically, on the play-scientific side, the study of them rather belongs to the historical anthropology of play (Sandl 2014, of course, after J. Huizinga), even more precisely probably to K. Ludwig Pfeiffer’s “media anthropology” (Kulesa 2013), because playfulness is exactly the point: How much play is there actually in the quartets, how much creativity, how much chance and risk? To cut it short in this context: The ludic potential of poets’ “happy families”, to use the British analogy, is by far overshadowed by the iconic value in itself.

The poets’ quartet is a so-called “game of catch or prey” whose goal is to accumulate cards or points by discarding them (Depaulis 2010, 159). It can be described roughly like this: Poets or even their works are arranged into groups of four, and the game principle does not specify a fixed number of cards.

Therefore, games exist from 8x4 to 19x4 cards. As a rule, the back of the cards is designed neutrally, while the side facing the player contains more or less detailed textual information and, without exception, a centrally arranged picture. The groups can be identified by numbers and letters. Depending on the technical effort and price, the games differ in the quality of the cardboard, in the colorfulness and in the design of the case, which usually privileges one of the picture motifs represented in the quartet, in German culture often bearing Goethe's portrait (see the vast collection of Goethe iconography on popular collectibles: Vogt and Protte 2016). Some games contain information in very scanty form; elementary are only name and dates of life, sometimes place of birth and death, and possibly references to major works and historical rank. Individual games have outsourced the information to supplements, thus tackling the limitation of space and highlighting a distinctive didactic function. The structure of the image and text pages resembles that of early modern emblems with their triad of motto, pictura, and subscriptio, and as far-fetched as this may seem, the sequence of order cue, visual illustration, and explicative expansion, viewed from top to bottom, appeals in principle to the same cognitive processes as the decoding of an emblem (Henkel and Schöne 1978).

The rules of the game have no relation to the literary-historical content. Quartet games function in principle in such a way that groups of four are closed and profitably discarded and incomplete quartets are to be completed. The procedure of trial and error adds a mnemonic component to chance. All this would work just as well with other occupations, with objects, and with any groupable elements. Alternatively, quartet cards can be used to improvise a kind of memory or, as suggested in some of the games at hand, a literary quiz as well as, in the case of some particular 19th century games, a quotation retrieval. So everyone knows how a quartet game works: a player, out of at least three people, asks for a matching card from his/her neighbor, continues, when he/she can receive it and otherwise draws a penalty card, passing the right to demand cards along, discarding complete quartets and trying to remember who is looking for what and base a tactic on it. The monostructural game threatens to become boring quickly, so that as a makeshift, when playing quartet in twos, recourse is taken to technical parameters (engine capacity, maximum speed) of cars, airplanes, etc. Such overtrumping possibilities are basically not present in poetry quartets, except a novel solution to this problem (*Des Pudels Kern*, 2015). The only game in which different ranks are assigned to the authors, as in the case of stamps by different postage rates, is an English card game (*Writers & Poets*. 54 playing Cards. Vienna: Piatnik) that does not function as a quartet, but rather allows the hierarchy Jack, Queen, King, Ace; so poets' quartets are peculiarly not set up a priori for poets' competitions. There is evidence though, that they were indeed played according to the rules. Elias Canetti (1979, 136, translation AH) recalled: “only when the poetry quartet was completed” were we “allowed to turn to other quartets and games”. Niels Höpfner (see website) also mentions Hermann Hesse, Klaus Mann and Erich Kästner as players. And yet quartets are at least as much objects for display as

for play and thus strongly resemble, not only graphically, the aforementioned stamps, serving an official purpose, but also an aesthetic function alongside or above it. This is why quartets on cardboard fit better into the genealogy of popular prints, as outlined for Vienna by Reingard Witzmann (1997), and are moreover subordinate to a widespread canon iconography, or more particularly: canon graphics and diagrammatics.

Quartets as objects have in common that they are packaged as small-format, technically easy-to-produce cardboard sets in associated boxes or cases and usually with short rules. Manufacturers were or are, as far as can be determined, the usual game producers of the pre-digital era. It is obvious that especially the reproducibility of already existing image material, initially as chromolithography, favored the economically reasonable production. The Vienna Literaturhaus displayed one of the earliest quartets of poetry, produced in 1834, during the Biedermeier period, called "Scenes from Literature." Until pretty much 2000, there is still evidence of paper poetry quartets, after which, it seems, the whole thing tends to be converted into an ironic art concept. Two logics seem to intersect nowadays: that of the pleasure of civic knowledge in the form of competition and ranking rediscovered shortly before the turn of the millennium, and that of the reorganization of the canon with the familiar combative concomitants. It is therefore easy to predict that future quartets will be more female and more diverse. What will remain stable, is, curiously enough, the purely formal structure.

When the game type became established in the 2nd half of the 19th century, the available canon of German literature was still under construction. An undated game from the 19th century therefore unites several poets with canonical composers from Bach to Wagner, so that the principle of performative art rather than that of fiction seems to underlie it. A little later, on the other hand, a clearly differentiated national canon has already become stable between the 17th/18th centuries and the imperial pride of the years around 1900. The range of the individual quartets and their professional ambitions diverge especially in the definition of German-language classics, which can include the Middle Ages, and in the question of how much epoch differentiation one allows before and after the Goethe period.

Another somewhat typical observation is not surprising if one takes the reception-historical lines, that belong to the basic knowledge of comparative literature, seriously, namely that even in the strictly national quartet games Shakespeare is always and as the only foreign author represented. Shakespeare is "all ours", as August Wilhelm Schlegel (1962, 99) put it in 1796, thus creating the much-cited topos of the simplistic Romantic reception. Two selected plays expand the framework of German literature (the problematization of national affiliations to Switzerland, Austria, GDR, FRG never plays a role) to a panorama of world literature from antiquity to the near-present, or at least across all the major language areas of Western culture. As a typical phenomenon of canon history within the last hundred years, it can be registered that especially in Wilhelminism certain authors, who are little known today, were

very quickly elevated to classics. Höpfner (website, translation AH) sums up: “It is true that every poets’ quartet gathers an exclusive gentlemen’s club (ladies are hardly admitted, except for Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Selma Lagerlöf and Ricarda Huch), but some memberships expire in the storm of time (Wildenbruch, Sudermann, Victor von Scheffel, Uhland and others), and new members move up. Only the thrones of Goethe & Schiller do not waver. Both also hold the box cover record”.

These observations are based on a cross-section of ten authors’ quartets from the German-speaking world (annex), whose production spans over a century and whose content is situated between recent German literature and classical world literature. Thereby, technical feasibility, private playing culture, and the consolidation of a strongly nationally colored literary canon in the decades after Goethe’s death converge in the second half of the 19th century. The quartets surveyed correspond to the competing editions of the classics of the German Empire published by major publishers (Kürschner, Hesse & Becker, Meyer, Bong, Cotta). Among other things, Krumbein has evaluated the frequency of names, that is, the appearance of authors in collections. This creates a kind of empirical evidence for literary canons, which is reproduced in a circular fashion, because the next quartet will probably again be based on the existing canon or only slightly modify it. Thus, a postulate of literary studies is to provide quantitative evidence of a narrower canon based on the quartets and parallel media. In doing so, it can be predicted that the expected grouping is affirmatively repeated in all forms of material mass culture. A further possibility for analysis, which can only be addressed in perspective, is to reconstruct the respective materially represented canon of a specific epoch in a cross-sectional manner, i.e., to view, for example, the generally very conservative literary image of GDR cultural policy (Goßens and Schmitz-Emans 2015), as it appeared simultaneously in specialized publications, parlor games, and postage stamps in the 1950s.

The literary quartet as a mass product is based on the multiple iconicity of canonical authors. First of all, an iconographic tradition was established quite early, namely for the tops of the international canon, which in the case of authors such as Homer (blindness, hair, priest’s bandage; Schefold 1997; Hölter and Hölter 2013) or Dante (laurel wreath, red hood, aquiline nose; Körte 2019) was based on a few attested images or image types. In the case of authors of the early modern period and even of the photographic age, the pictorial material is more abundant. However, it is aligned with powerful models such as Shakespeare or Schiller and always reduced to a few available documents. Thus, even individual photographs that keep repeating themselves in the media, possibly already favored by the authors themselves, become iconic (e.g. James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf). Also, the economic advantage of iconization by conversational encyclopedias, by stock photos from image services like Ullstein, is obvious. The iconicity of poet portraits in itself bundles the functions of dissemination, recognizability, and a quasi-religious status in terms of technology and use value,

based on the popular forms of the Catholic image of the saint. For a long time, a counter-example was Friedrich von Logau (Bircher 1979, 110–111), as no portrait of this Baroque author, who belongs to the second rank within the canon of early modern German literature, seemed to have survived, so that he was, as it were, omitted from every possible iconic exchange or activity, from the illustration of literary historiography to the choice of German Baroque writers in a deck of cards.

Now for the medial practice: The completion of a quartet can be paralleled with a peculiar variant of pleasure, for which indeed a cultural-scientific foundation exists (Brandt 1998), following the scheme  $3 + 1 = 4$  through diverse arts and cultural techniques. The quartet game, especially with a larger number of cards, promises the player a sequence of single satisfactions, similar to the tricks in most card games. The monotony of the gameplay, corresponding to the uniformity of the structural orders, is of course not conducive to keeping the progression of the game or even winning the game attractive in the long run. Paradoxically, this draws attention back to the similar but different individuals of the canonical authors. It may surprise, that the keyword ‘narrative’ is used at this point, but it is worth noting in addition that a card game in itself really generates a narrative sequence, which, however, it should be admitted immediately, bears little resemblance in the quartet to the strategic and therefore retellable stories that represent a successful game of German skat or English bridge, or of working oneself through the levels of a computer game. In the poets’ quartet, the narratio shifts in an elementary way towards the completion process and the confirmation of analogies between the four members of each group or the fulfillment of expectations.

Small wonder that the titles of several of the existing quartets made it explicit that they claimed a didactic value, which was simply based on the principle of repetitive practice and could rely in particular on visual aid, but also on that of numerical schemata, the analogical preparation of data, and the simplifying selection of less salient information. Canon per se is not only not problematized in these games, but systematically affirmed and stabilized by an even-numbered cognitive schema. Basic knowledge and iconography produce an educationally desirable overlay of knowing and recognizing. The canon of literary quartets, even more than that of written literary history, is a closed society. As always, an elucidation would lie not only in examining and justifying the existing elements, but also in asking about those that do not exist. The possibilities of assignment are predetermined, the game is therefore not open, but limited to a docking according to yes/no coding. This creates a strong affirmative effect through the training of ‘belonging’ under the dictation of iconicity. The early rehearsal of image recognition as a technique of inclusion or exclusion leads to an immensely socially, and depending on the canon, also politically desired automation of cultural knowledge.

A quartet opens up a medial space on the player’s hand or on the table. The rectangular logic of the quartet means: canon corresponds to a controlled space without infinity or even openness, even if the real literary system could

theoretically generate an unlimited amount of cards, at least counting by thousands, imagining the real text production translated into picture cards. Strange as it may sound, the very broad approach that interprets the game as a factor of communal cohesion (Dippel 2018) is probably more accurate here, because the quartet of poets allows to confirm the social connection through communal negotiation or rather: pseudo-negotiation of a non-contentious canon, which in turn, for instance in the Wilhelmine era as an example of strongly conformist social formations, is associated with pleasure, like the completion of quotes from the classics in bourgeois conversation best known from Theodor Fontane's novels.

Although the canon, which is built up according to at least four guiding aspects (singularity, classicity, innovativeness, exemplariness), can be conceptualized as an economic miniature mapping of the literary system, it seems that the formal framework dominates. Hence briefly for the numeric principle: the canons embodied in the quartets either focus on the category of literary texts and exhibit about 8 or 9 or 16 poets in 4 of their works each. So the number 4 stands for the whole, for the totality of a life's achievement. Or they group 4 authors each to an epoch or a style concept. In principle, we can distinguish three modes of operation: A quartet is formed from 4 works of one author, from 4 national authors of an epoch or genre, or from 4 authors of a language area in contrast to other cultural areas.

Brandt (1998, 32) also quotes some of the multiple primary and secondary authorities, on the particular symbolism inherent in each number. His scheme  $3+1=4$  implies that within a quartet one element can be privileged, at least inasmuch as the fourth card is yearned for as the completing one, but this role shifts freely, so that no card stands out by principle. Rather, the arrangement by fours produces an equalization. Only through the choice of, say, Goethe or Shakespeare for the title of the cassette is one figure singled out. The basic pattern of canon grouping within the Western literary cosmos is unsurprisingly and most likely that of the four Evangelists, whose iconography including their competitive situation compared to the 12-group of the Apostles is well known. Thus, two aspects are at stake: the specific semantics of the constellation of four and its possibly specific relationship to the canon. The former can be deduced culturally and historically, the latter speculatively or empirically. Basically it is true for all simple numbers between 1 and 12 that a complex, multiform and partly also contradictory symbolism can be assigned to them, through epochs and in different cultural areas. It is almost redundant to ask whether the canonization of four Gospels further promoted a special role of the four or whether the qualification of exactly four (not three or five) Gospels among a larger number of text corpora subsequently classified as apocryphal could already be a consequence of special persuasiveness of the 4 on the cognitive basis of spatial-physical categories like the division of the cardinal points. In Dante (*Inf* 4, 64–105) one encounters the ancient canon: Homer as leader, Horace, Ovid and Lucan. Opposite them are Vergil and Dante, so the formula is  $4 + 2 = 6$ , but the view as a group provides the basic order of 4. Here it should only be



pointed out that even in the Carolingian Middle Ages, written literary history obeyed poetological patterns that favored groups of four. The early modern, mainly compilatory lexicons on numerology, but also the descriptive reference works as produced by medieval studies (Meyer and Suntrup 1987), gather a number of recurrent symbolic values or associations traditionally, i.e. in the Christian context, associated with 4 since late antiquity: the regions of the world, ages of life, seasons, elements, temperaments, etc. (Brandt 1998, 32). The moral interpretation of 4 structures is yet another step in this process (“*quadrata aequalitas*” in Otfrid von Weißenburg, *Ad Liutbertum*, 1973, 5).

It is easy to appear convincing, but difficult to find a scientific basis for an anthropology- or biopoetics-based explanation of canons. About all small integers, one can speculate splendidly and almost everything can be found in and ‘proven’ out of the cultural tradition. Still, there is no satisfactory comparative canon research so far, i.e. we largely recur to the varieties and formulas of Western canons about which it can at least be said that they like to privilege the 4. Even this would only become quantitatively valid by comparing canon images, texts, etc. in very large numbers and in contrast to the other numerals in question, mainly to 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12. From the point of view of media economics and cognitive psychology, what speaks for 4, apart from the reference to the four playing colors of numerous card systems, is that it is still relatively small, but even-numbered, more precisely: the first even number after the mere and inherently antithetical pair formation. So it combines several advantages: Manageability *and* elementary complexity, symmetry *without* privileging an element, equilateralism, which can be understood as equal rank. If this is so, however, it has strong consequences, namely that literary historical constructions did not start so much from the material to be integrated, the elements (authors or texts), but from the cognitive value to be achieved, the shape, the familiar canon model, the quartet. An example of this interpretive possibility would be a view cast from the German-speaking area on world literature: Since the early 1800s, the German vision operates with the quartet Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare—Goethe (3 + the one who makes it a “German century”). To impose this as a German canon is partly a strategy in an on-going canonization process and for the later 19th century (which often preferred Schiller; cf. Fahrner 2000) anything but self-evident. We find exactly this constellation, for example, in the *Garden of Poetry* scene of Ludwig Tieck’s “Prinz Zerbino” (1828, 281; cf. his brother Friedrich Tieck’s famous hand drawn playing cards with the characters of medieval heroic sagas, 1982), where Goethe’s position in the canon is predicted like a quartet to be staged in the future:

Der große Britte hofft ihn zu umarmen,  
Cervantes sehnt nach ihm sich Tag und Nacht  
Und Dante dichtet einen kühnen Gruß,  
Dann wandeln diese heil’gen vier, die Meister  
Der neuen Kunst, vereint durch dies Gefilde.



The great Brit hopes to embrace him,  
Cervantes longs for him day and night  
And Dante composes a bold greeting,  
Then these holy four, the masters  
Of modern art, will walk united through this realm.

The consequence of all this, however, is that the previously dominant and, of course, name-rich French literature cannot be given a personal place in the canon. Here, seen from the outside, no one individually has played sufficiently into the foreground. In France itself, however, towards the end of the 19th century, Victor Hugo clearly occupies the first place among the canonized writers, which comparatism has demonstrated with ample proof from popular iconography and material culture (*La gloire de Victor Hugo* 1985; Garval 2004; Picard 2022). So there, the quartet either looks different—or there is no quartet. Here exactly lie true tasks for comparative distant reading: to filter canon texts in the broadest sense in large quantities and to check them for constellated names and numerical structure. What can be gained eventually is a critical insight into the functioning of our patterns of rank and order, into the need for uniformity and the production of the same, even if one has to fill a free seat ‘below value’ or turn away a notable guest because there is no more room at the table of four.

From the point of view of a skeptical literary science, the literary canon not only seems difficult to justify, but is considered to be subject to and in need of revision at any time. The present plays have, astonishingly, hardly anything to do with this questioning. Rather, they illustrate that the critical canon discussion of literary studies does not keep in touch with the cultural canon practice of the public. The latter relies on clichés, simplifications, accepting injustices. One could even say that it is about the opposite, i.e. not at all about a selection that can somehow be justified by comprehensible criteria, but about the structure itself, symbolized ultimately by the number 4, without metaphysical optimism, rather out of media-historical pragmatics. This becomes transparent through the example of the next even, symmetrical numbers 6 and 8, that also lend themselves to canon images, even if not with the same frequency: For the 6, it can be briefly noted that it directs book illustrations, for example, six poet portraits as national canon in conversation encyclopedias at the turn of the 19th century. The poetological-technical basis here is the duplication of an ancient principle, namely the golden section, which dominates most book formats and likewise already most picture formats, at least as far as portraits are concerned. So it is easiest and aesthetically most satisfying to fill a book page with six poet portraits. The canon of the encyclopedias therefore tends to 6. For the 8 (and, less frequently, 10, too), on the other hand, reference should be made to the ‘iconobiography’-type of image (Hölter 2015), that is documented specifically as a visual canon illustration in the 19th century almost for each individually canonical author: the representation of the life’s work in one sheet, which in turn, of course, again obeys the ‘golden’ book page or broadsheet ratio. The special feature there, however, is that a central portrait is

usually framed by scenes from the respective canonical texts, resulting in the scheme 1 + 8 or even 1 + 10.

Poetry quartets thus testify to a dominant will to visual fourfoldness, which orders, superimposes, and confects the real social system of literature, and makes this simplifying, complexity-reducing, and thus pleasure-occupying image storable. With a deck of cards, one puts the national or global literary canon in one's pocket. In conclusion, let us only note that the principle of kinship, of similarity, which endows the quartets, is also the primal ground of comparative literature, as Michael Eggers (2016), of course, without placing the games or the number four-principle at the center, proves in detail in his archaeology of comparative episteme.

German literary quartets cover German literature, more or less chronologically, or world literature, in black and white or color, stylized/simplified or true to the original portraits of the timeless masters (with Shakespeare almost always present), but stably referring to the most popular iconographic patterns (cf. Kanz 1993). It can only be recapitulated here by way of explanation that canon is always also text (Hölter 1997, 28; cf. Hölter 2001), whether in the broad understanding of cultural representation or in the narrow sense as an organized sequence of content elements like narrative or drama. Completing a quartet therefore does not only mean the constantly repeated confirmation of a wholeness (which also stands for meaning/relevance/rank in itself), but, especially where four different authors and not four works of one author are bundled, constellations are offered whose plausibility is presupposed and proven in the learning process. At both ends of the decoding procedure, familiarity with the icon is key—identification of the image evokes a cluster of information that is mnemonically activated and in turn archived. The cultural use of the 'happy poet's families' is mainly corroborating knowledge via the recognition of prefabricated icons, which retrieve the same degree of iconicity: either that of four times one identical picture or of four similar/analogous portraits, which, in turn, produce the impact of the universally known author effigy and the lasting impression of the 'band of 4' constellation, out of which a group iconicity is likely to develop, in total: a *double* iconicity.

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# Biblical Symbolism in Advertisement: History, Context, and Related Controversies in Switzerland, Germany, and France

*Jérôme Cottin*

## BACKGROUND

This chapter's origins can be traced back to a personal experience, dating quite some time ago: in 1997, I co-published a somewhat-modest but abundantly-illustrated book, *Dieu et la pub!* (*God and advertisement!*), that was well received by the media in France, Switzerland, and Italy (Cottin and Walbaum 1997). It was, as far as I know, the first book of its kind published in French on this specific issue. A Swiss friend of mine (Rémi Walbaum, who co-authored the book with me) initiated this endeavour when he reached out to ask if the slogan “Toi, suis-moi” (“You! Follow me”) was of biblical origin. Having confirmed to him that it was, indeed, a call from Jesus to his disciples,<sup>1</sup> I asked him for the reason of such a request. He explained that he and some other advertising creatives had been trying to find a slogan to promote a brand of jeans, but that none of them could agree on one single idea. Out of the blue, he had suggested “You! Follow me”, and this contribution was widely accepted. This highlights that in late 1990s, the Bible acted as a common cultural ground in Western Europe—even if there were differences between francophone Switzerland (a country which, whilst undoubtedly secular, was still thoroughly

<sup>1</sup> John 21:22; Matthew 8:22, 9:9.

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defined by its Christian roots) and France (where the debates on topics such as laicism altered the cultural relationship to religious content).

Of course, I am not the first to nourish an interest in the symbolic language of advertisement. Indeed, in France, the advent of semiotics (developed within the fields of language, images, and aesthetics) led to the study of advertisement (Cornu 1992; Joly 2000) and the archetypal symbols it promotes (Sauvageot 1987). However very little, if anything, has been written from a religious perspective (except in Germany Tremel 1986). Roland Barthes, who was among the first to analyze advertisement semiotically, inspires my own thoughts:

One might have wonder what is left of the great Christian symbols such as the cross in a technical society such as our own. Have these great symbols disappeared, or gone into hiding? [...] Even within the prosaic formulae of advertisement, one might have to seek the organization of this very ancient form of symbolism. (Barthes 1985, 255)

An even older quote from the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre expressed something similar in 1965 during the polemic that followed the projection of Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*:

Even a movement that positions itself as non-Christian [i.e. the political Left] has need for the development of Christian doctrine as myth. The problem of its connection to our tradition cannot be erased. (quoted after Naldini 1991, 228)

Other important factors of this biblical and Christian symbolism are found in cinema, promotional material for films, and more recently, TV shows. For example, the Franco-German channel *Arte*'s show *Ainsi soient-il*—whose advertisement uses Christian religious symbols in a provocative manner—is quite popular.<sup>2</sup> Putting aside these themes of filmed advertising, I focus solely on image and poster-based advertisements—those found outdoors, in train stations, bus stops, newspapers, and magazines.<sup>3</sup>

## TWELVE TOPICS

Within the scope of this chapter, I will not be able to expand on all notably-frequent advertisement topics. I have therefore decided to briefly highlight twelve examples:

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.purebreak.com/media/affiche-de-la-serie-ainsi-soient-ils-156000.html>. Accessed 22 Feb 2021. The title refers to the French expression '*ainsi soit-il*'—'so be it', a common translation of the biblical exclamation *Amen*—suggesting '*ainsi soient-ils*' could be translated as 'let *them* be'.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter requires the reader to see the images mentioned. Since it is not possible to publish them here, the greatest effort has been made to describe them, and links to relevant websites and works are provided. The notes in square brackets in this chapter refer to a presentation that can be accessed at: [https://www.protestantismeetimages.com/IMG/pdf/biblische\\_symbole\\_in\\_der\\_werbung.pdf](https://www.protestantismeetimages.com/IMG/pdf/biblische_symbole_in_der_werbung.pdf)

- (a) *Creation*: The seven days of Creation, also known as Adam, Eve, and Temptation [7]. The two stories of Creation (*Genesis* 1 and *Genesis* 2–3),<sup>4</sup> as told in the first three chapters of *The Book of Genesis*. The creation of Adam (as painted, for example, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and subsequently pastiched in various forms within advertisement) [8 and 9].
- (b) *The heavens as a metaphor for God*: The atmospheric sky, depicted as the place where God hides and reveals himself. An invisible, omnipresent, and all-powerful divinity. Bright rays which pierce expansive and cloudy skies.
- (c) *Moses and the Ten Commandments*: Moses, the tablets of stone, and the Ten Commandments<sup>5</sup> as a pledge of ethical behavior in the fields of business and commerce. For example, just as the Ten Biblical Commandments establish a just order and a moral law, so does the company Eurest commit to respecting its customers and providing high-quality products; next to a text that plagiarizes the Ten Commandments, there is a face of Moses sculpted by Michelangelo [10]. Sometimes the tablets of stone are simply used in a humorous way. For example, an advertisement for the popular German newspaper *Bild* [11] shows Moses holding a tablet in his left hand, while his right hand points to the brand of the newspaper; the slogan reads: “If you have something important to say, don’t make long sentences.” (*“Wer etwas Wichtiges zu sagen hat, macht keine langen Sätze.”*)
- (d) *Biblical citations, often quoted as liturgical expressions*: A few ‘popular’ characters from the Bible (Noah, Moses, the Twelve Apostles, Mary); memorable quotes from the Bible and the Gospel, often quoted in Christian liturgy, most notably ‘Hallelujah’, ‘Amen’, ‘Peace on Earth’, ‘Blessed be...’, parts of the Our Father, the prayer of Jesus, and the entire Christian community.<sup>6</sup>
- (e) *Fault, guilt, and forgiveness*: The topic of Evil, fault (‘sin’), and the capacity to be freed from guilt through the forgiveness of God. It is at the heart of Christian theology, and is also found, playfully and subversively, in advertising.
- (f) *Christ: his physical representation, and, more rarely, his deeds*: Representations of Jesus can be found in certain advertisements (albeit, subtly): Jesus as a child, in a manger, or as an adult, represented as we commonly imagine him—or have become accustomed to imagining him—approximately 30 years old, with average features, long, brown hair, and a light beard (Finaldi 2000; Krischel 2005).
- (g) *The Christian cross (bare, or with Jesus crucified upon it), the crucifix*: As a symbol, the cross carries multiple meanings in advertisements. It can

<sup>4</sup> In popular culture and iconography, the two separate stories of Creation in the Bible are often told as one, although they differ in origin, era, and content.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 20:2–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4.



simultaneously be a geometrical object, a (wearable) symbol of Christianity, a decorative or architectural element, a historical sign-post calling attention to the death of Christ, a piece of jewellery, and so on.

- (h) *Gestures, rituals, and sacraments (the gesture of praying; the objects of bread, wine, and water; blessings)*: Notable ritual gestures which evoke meditation, prayer, calm, a 'zen' attitude: hands clasped together, the lotus position, hands turned-out to give a blessing. Gestures harking back to Christian sacraments—the most popular of which are baptism, marriage, and the Holy Communion (the Eucharist).
- (i) *Mary, mother with child (sometimes in the context of Nativity and Christmas)* [12]: The image of Mary and Christ as a child can be read as emblematic of the mother-child relationship; it derives its enduring success because it is universally understood. A Christian interpretation here is possible, but not mandatory.
- (j) *Life after death and the afterlife; a new beginning*: Advertisement's goal is usually to share a message which is unambiguously positive. It is not surprising, then, that advertisement exploits the Christian conception of a new life after death—a potent source of hope and consolation for believers. [13] For example, an advertisement by the French bank *Crédit Agricole* for a death insurance policy depicts a family inside the leaves of a tree. The 'tree of life' is indeed the central symbol in the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, the final vision with which the book of Revelation—and therefore the Bible itself—ends.<sup>7</sup>
- (k) *Angels, devils, and demons*: Angels and demons are ubiquitous in present-day Western advertisement. There are winged characters, *putti* (representing the character of the messenger, and symbolising all that is miraculous). On the opposite side of the spectrum, devils embody the tempter. There are also representations of Good and Evil, Heaven and Hell, 'good' or 'bad' temptations... This pre-Christian imagery—also present in certain parts of the Bible and Medieval art—gets a new lease of life within the world of advertising.
- (l) *Saints: source of sanctity/saintliness and devotion; haloes, apparitions*: Many figures of saints have been placed alongside famous biblical figures within the canon of Catholic culture in advertisements. Protestants, on the other hand, mainly look to the reformer Martin Luther as their preferred figurehead to be used in advertisements.

### ART AS A FACTOR FOR RELIGION

These topics are part of an everyday religiosity, which itself is promoted through works of art that are part of a common Christian cultural heritage. This offers a twofold advantage for advertising creatives: symbolism and visual messaging.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 22:2.

The symbolism works on cultural (or artistic) and spiritual (or religious) levels; the transition from one level to the other is smooth. A strong visual message is common, for example, by replicating the composition of figures and gestures by the Old Masters; to pastiche them is to quasi-elevate an advertisement to the rank of an art-work.

There are many examples of classic biblical art employed in advertising: pastiches of the *Madonna* [12]; Michelangelo's *Pietà*, *David*, or *Moses* [10]; or representations of Adam and Eve in Paradise [7], under the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Among these works of art, two are so ubiquitous that their use has become stereotypical: *The Last Supper* (1495–6) by Leonardo da Vinci (especially the announcement of his betrayal by Judas), and *The Creation of Adam* (1508–1512) by Michelangelo. The advertising world's use of these two motifs highlights the biblical origins of these characters and stories, and how they can transform the practice of advertising.

Using these biblical images in advertising creates what one might call a double decontextualization—both of art history, and the biblical narrative depicted in the art itself. As shown by Jean Baudrillard (1972), the references become interchangeable signs—mere clichés—which randomly, and all at once, refer to Western culture, the Arts, human genius, 'Italianness', and Renaissance. The images and symbols of Christian Art impart a symbolic force that is difficult to ignore (Saint-Martin 2006; Kemp 2012).

### DIFFERENT LEVELS OF SYMBOLISM

An image—especially one that is aesthetically pleasing—consists of multiple levels of symbolic potential. A spiritual dimension augments the intrinsic quality of the image. Religious symbolism within advertisement is variably expressed, which I summarise in three main ways: (1) verbally: a religious saying can be quoted verbatim, or modified according to the advertisement's message (e.g. a biblical verse, liturgical expression, prayer, etc.); (2) visually: an easily-identifiable Christian image (e.g. a cross, Jesus, Moses, a monk, a man or woman of the cloth, a church, an abbey, etc.) is contrasted with the advertisement's non-religious context; (3) metaphorically (i.e. through the use of a sign): either the original meaning of the religious symbol is different to the one projected by the advertisement, or a seemingly-unimportant detail shifts the meaning of a common object to a religious one—a circle can represent a halo; a pizza or medication, the host; a glass of water, the Communion chalice; a table, the church altar; the feature of a cross-window, a cross, etc.

#### *Double Meaning, or Multiple Meanings*

Like all types of imagery, advertisements can add layers of meaning to a pre-existing image; the layers mutually reinforce one other, although they can also create semantic inconsistencies. In this sense, advertisement allows us to shift

from one level of meaning to another, using connections, correspondences, and oppositions.

The advertisement for Thierry Mugler's *Angel* perfume is an example of this [16]. It shows a woman in a black suit, standing out against a blue sky and overlooking skyscrapers. She holds out her left hand, which is covered with a blue veil adorned with bright stars. One of the stars is in the palm of her hand. The image offers various potential symbolic readings. For example, the woman may be a representation of Europe (the starry blue material evokes the European flag) or the figure of Marlene Dietrich (a reference to the actress in Joseph von Sternberg's film *Der blaue Engel*). There are also religious readings: the woman may be the figure of an angel, where the starry blue material represents wings; or she may be the figure of Mary, as the same material refers to the Marian cloak. The woman can be seen as a Christ-like figure, because the star in the palm of her hand reminds us of a wound or stigma. These examples of the possible interpretations in this one image illustrate the power of symbolism in advertisement and make an unambiguous interpretation of the image nearly impossible. This is a "symbol [which] makes you think" (Ricoeur 1959) (and subsequently, 'makes you spend').

### *Coherence Versus Subversion*

The religious symbolism found in advertisement can either be aligned with the advertisement itself (it is thus 'coherent') or misaligned. Although symbolism is rarely aligned, there are examples. In an advertisement for an Ecumenical Christian charity called Brot für die Welt ('Bread for the World') [17], a cross is made out of cutlery (fork, spoon, knife, chopsticks). The tone of the advertisement is consistent with the subject matter, as it is a call for solidarity towards those who suffer from hunger ("[For] I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat", said Jesus to those who are hungry). However, the Christian symbolism is not dominant; it is so subtle that many might not even pick up on it, especially since the slogan does not include a religious element. Similarly, an advertisement for blood donation by the Red Cross uses the slogan "*My blood... for you*" [15]. A man's face stares at the viewer very close-up. The words "my blood" are under his right eye, and "for you" are at the bottom of the poster, under the logo of the Red Cross (which is indeed a cross). Here we also have a double message: a humanitarian one—giving blood to save lives—and a Christian one—Christ gave his blood for us.<sup>8</sup> But, although the Christian message is not dominant, this advertisement is consistent with the religious and humanitarian origins of the Red Cross (founded by Henri Dunant, a protestant from Geneva). While the slogan is reformulated to give it a humanistic, rather than Christian, meaning, the Red Cross' message is coherent with the Christian symbolism.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 14:22–24; Corinthians 11:23–25.

In contrast, in subverted symbolism, there is no link between an image, the religious symbols it borrows from, and the context in which it is placed; the Christian symbolism is undermined and decontextualized. This is part of advertising's *modus operandi* (as is also the case for artistic creation). The symbol is present only to grab the audience's attention, and to add substance to the object being advertised.

For example, an advertisement for a rock concert, addressed to a young audience in francophone Switzerland, uses the slogan "*Couleur 3: La Bible des festivals*" ("Colour 3: the Bible of festivals") [19]. The poster shows a Christ figure dressed in a red tunic, his feet (with holes in them) resting on a globe, smiling and playing guitar behind a microphone. His body is surrounded by red and gold rays that could signify musical stage lighting or a luminous mandorla. The Christian references are omnipresent. The word 'Bible' and the representation of Christ are used solely to draw the audience's attention to the event. This type of symbolism is, first and foremost, eye-catching, as it detaches the symbol entirely from its original religious context and meaning. However, in a region where Christianity still plays an important cultural role there is—as profane as it might be—a surplus of meaning: the use is meant to playfully increase (and exaggerate) the festival's importance.

Another example of subverted symbolism is an advertising campaign against the danger of cars parking on pedestrian pavements [19]. Using a pastiche of Jesus' words "Render unto Cesar the things which are Cesar's (and to God the things that are God's)",<sup>9</sup> the advertisement's tagline—"*Rendez aux piétons ce qui appartient aux piétons*" ("Render unto the pedestrians the things which are the pedestrians")—lends a quasi-sacred dimension to a rather trivial public-service announcement.

### *Narrative and Imagery*

The aim of using Christian imagery in advertising is to stimulate the viewers' imagination by using religious narrative elements they have to build up to or complement into a new, coherent, typically-non-religious/profane narrative. For example, an advertisement from 1998 for generic pharmacy drugs by the company Ratiopharm uses the slogan "*Pharmadies*" ("Pharmadise") [20], combining the words 'paradise' and 'pharmacy'. This encourages the spectator to think back to the story of the first meeting between Adam and Eve in Paradise, on the eighth day of Creation, the Day of God's rest.<sup>10</sup> Another example of religious narratives in advertisements is in the English advertising agency McCann Erikson's 'mini-play', which refers to a parable that has been adapted to a present-day context: an advertising agency. Three graphic designers present Jesus (dressed as a 1<sup>st</sup>-century Palestinian) with different logo proposals that could symbolize his message. One shows a cross, a second a square.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 20:25; Mark 12:17; Matthew 22:21.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis: 1.

Jesus opts for the third logo, with three concentric circles to represent his message and his persona. Thus, the story of Jesus' crucifixion—which led to the central symbol of Christianity—is replaced by a banal PR marketing story.

### DIFFERENT TYPES OF INCULTURATION

A striking feature of advertisements with religious elements is that they are clearly adapted to the dominant culture of the country, region, group of population, reader, or audience. This inculturation—the adaptation of a universal message to a specific context—may be historical, cultural (i.e. a sporting event), or religious. Religious inculturation adapts the symbols, vernacular, customs, rituals, and imagery of the audience's dominant religion to new contexts and subject matter. I identify four different types of inculturation, along with their corresponding religious symbols: those based on the majority religion of a given country or region; the educational and socioeconomic level of the audience; local traditions and political or cultural contexts; and a particular historical period.

#### *Inculturation Based on the Majority Religion of a Given Country or Region, e.g. Catholicism Versus Protestantism*

An advertisement for car tires—depicting a rosary and a Saint-Christopher medal (the Catholic patron saint of travellers) [23]—is a strong reference to typically-Catholic practices that can only be fully deciphered/understood in an area dominated by Catholicism. This kind of advertisement would not have the same effect in a Protestant-majority country or region, such as Switzerland or parts of Germany. Conversely, in areas with higher rates of Protestantism, references to saints and the Virgin Mary are less popular. Instead, the Bible is (more or less explicitly) quoted, and plays a major role in messaging [24]. Sometimes, full biblical references (book, chapter, and verse) are given. In Germany, for example, the car brand *Audi* advertises with the slogan “*Es kommt ein Schiff gefahren*” (“A ship is coming”). A good knowledge of the Protestant singing tradition and the German Advent canticle “*Es kommt ein Schiff geladen*” (“A ship is coming, laden”) is essential in order to understand the reference made here. Thus, this advertisement can only be fully understood in a region where Protestant or even pietistic religious practices are still alive.

Taking a global view, there are differences in religious symbol use across continents. For example, in Europe, references to Christ in advertisement are subtle, and often suggestive or metaphorical. This is not necessarily the case in the Americas, where advertisements explicitly depict Christ's face [26]; he might be represented as a play-boy eating an ice-cream in an American advertisement, or smiling and relaxed on a crucifix in a Brazilian advertisement.

***Inculturation Based on the Educational Level of the Audience:  
Learned Versus Popular***

The images used in advertising are chosen according to the (real or assumed) cultural knowledge of the target audience. An advertisement published in the French newspaper *Le Monde* (12 May 1993) [27]<sup>11</sup> plays to *Le Monde*'s primarily-educated audience by referencing C.D. Friedrich's painting *The Monk by the Sea* (1808–1810). It depicts a businessman looking towards the sky in a prayerful attitude, alone, facing the sea, his silhouette highlighted by a light ray coming out of the clouds. If we compare this visual to the famous painting of the German romantic painter, the transfer is almost perfect. It seems to be deliberately addressing *Le Monde*'s readership with a higher educational background by drawing on their knowledge of classical art.

Another advertisement, for a North German bank (Die Nord/LB), depicts a camel walking through the eye of a needle, and stock market prices are written on the camel's back [28]. This was published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (24 July 2001), a newspaper for entrepreneurs and educated people. This is suggested in the text under the picture, which mentions "*Unternehmensphilosophie*" ("Business Philosophy"). Indeed, the advertisement draws on a basic knowledge of the story of Jesus and the rich young man<sup>12</sup> and, importantly, Jesus' response: "And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."<sup>13</sup>

Other advertisements, on the contrary, make quasi-excessive use of religious references and seem to address a more general audience [29]. For example, an advertisement for *City-disc* shows a music fan praying, with a CD forming a halo behind his head. Another one, for the domain provider *amen.fr* in the Paris underground, depicts a woman praying. The posture and facial expression of the models on both billboards show that they are grateful for the benefits of the discount (City-disc) and the optimized visibility of a website. This type of advertisement addresses a broader public as they require no deep knowledge of the Bible, art, or literary history. Their meaning can be accessed spontaneously—however, only in a region or context in which people are familiar with the meaning of religious practices such as praying.

***Inculturation Adapting to Local Traditions, and Political  
or Cultural Contexts***

The brand *Calvinus Beer*<sup>14</sup> [30] created an advertisement that uses a portrait of the historical Calvin and a slogan of "Joannes Calvinus in Birale Predestinas".

<sup>11</sup> This advertisement can be found, alongside a commentary of it, in Cottin and Wallbaum (1997, 44–45).

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 19:16–26.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 19:24 (King James translation).

<sup>14</sup> <https://calvinus.ch/>

This advertisement can only work where it was released—Geneva, where Calvin is considered to be a humanist reformer. The beer could not be marketed in France—Calvin’s own country—because there, Calvin is widely considered to be a divisive and authoritarian figure (at least, if he *is* known).

“*Peut-on encore rire avec la religion?*” (“Can one still laugh about religion?”) [31] was a slogan for the private French radio station *Europe 1*, known for a liberal approach and devotion to societal issues. This advertisement was first released in October 2006; it followed the censoring of newspapers that—after being threatened—refused to publish caricatures of Mohammed. Without a background knowledge of the local, political, and cultural events which preceded the publication of the advertisement, it is hard to fully grasp the meaning of this particular slogan.

***Inculturation Linked to a Particular Time Period (in This Specific Case: Pre-2000s)***

An advertisement for a *Rocher Suchard* chocolate (1996–1997) depicts Black model Naomi Campbell, who had posed nude for *Playboy* magazine in 1992 [32]. In this advertisement, much like in the 1992 feature, she is naked, but ‘transformed’ and ‘metaphorized’ into chocolate. In variations of the billboard, different slogans of biblical origin appear alongside the sexualised and racialised image of the model, based on the themes of forgiveness and sin: “*Pour pardonner il faut avoir péché*” (“To forgive, one must have sinned”) and “*C’est une épreuve que le Seigneur nous envoie*” (“Here is a challenge that God has sent us”). It is important to note that these advertisements were displayed on enormous billboards in France (thousands of them, potentially viewed by anyone). This series of advertisements is—one might argue—typical of the ‘liberal’ climate in France during the 1990s and 2000s. It seems unlikely that such explicit advertisements—combining religious citations with misogynistic and racist imagery, by reducing a black woman to a tasty and sin-worthy piece of chocolate—could be published on huge billboards today.

Religious values, tendencies, and practices have changed in the last 30 years. From a religious perspective, the chocolate advertisement is antiquated as it reflects an outdated Christian practice that was centered around guilt and forgiveness. In 2020 France, few passers-by would spontaneously associate ‘the Lord’ with the biblical God and would readily understand a slogan which paraphrases liturgical Christian acclamations. Furthermore, the growth of both atheism and Islam within French culture suggests that slogans so deeply influenced by the Christian tradition, published in public space, in such a big a format, might not be so readily accepted.

## MEDIATIC CONFLICTS

The world of advertisement functionalizes the symbolic foundations of society in order to add value to the offered goods and services. This attracts people's attention—especially a customer who is already overwhelmed by a constant deluge of slogans and images (often clichéd and insignificant). But advertising creatives—and, most importantly, advertising executives—do not always want to reveal their methods or the implicit and hidden symbolisms present within their advertisements. This means they may eschew conflicts and/or provocations in order to avoid media attention.

I, myself, have had first-hand experience of a mediatic conflict, which ended with me having to censure an image that I selected for my book, *Dieu et la pub!* [34] I asked the German company Bayer for their permission to publish an advertisement for fungicidal medicine—which had been displayed on huge posters in German towns in 1996. The advertisement depicted a woman, shoulders naked, hair undone, leaning towards a foot to kiss it. The accompanying slogan was “*Liebe deine Füße*” (“Love your feet”). This seemed an obvious reference to the story told in Luke 7:36–48—wherein a woman kisses Jesus’ foot, and Jesus says to his disciples (who are angered by her actions), “she has shown great love”. The company’s answer to my request to publish the image was an unmistakable “no”. I wrote to ask the reason for their refusal, but received no further information. I was therefore unable to publish the image, save for a small part of it (Cottin and Walbaum, 76) [35]. A year later, I met a Lutheran pastor from Württemberg, who told me he was well acquainted with a member of the board of directors of the company. I told him my story, and he promised that he would ask for an explanation. A few days later, I received my answer: at the time of my request, Bayer had been in the process of negotiating important contracts with Muslim-majority Arabic countries. A neutral religious stance was, in this context, of the utmost importance. In strictly denying my request, the German company revealed its *own* awareness of the biblical symbolism present in its advertisement, and its desire to avoid a media conflict by ensuring the advertisement would not undermine its cross-cultural business dealings.

Beyond my own experiences, two important mediatic conflicts took place in France around the year 2000, regarding the use of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* in advertisements. In both cases [36], the Catholic Church launched an attack on the advertisement’s backers in court, and partially won. The first controversial advertisement was published in November–December of 1998 for *Volkswagen France* [37] and was displayed on 10,000 billboards throughout France (for more details see Cottin 2007b, 246–250). It depicts an updated version of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, with an arguably-gauche, unsubtle slogan: “*Mes amis, réjouissons-nous car une nouvelle Golf est née*” (“Friends, let us rejoice, for a new Golf is born”). Following complaints from the Catholic Church (who, in the act of complaining, appropriated both the painting and its symbolism), Volkswagen removed the advertisements and made a donation to



*Secours Catholique*, a French non-profit organisation providing help to people in need. I personally defended the idea that the symbolism had become a universally-recognizable reference; because of the widespread fame of the artwork, one *could* have a purely aesthetic and cultural appreciation of the famous Milanese mural without degrading the Catholic symbolism (Cottin 2007a, 219–255).

The second controversy was more complex and subject to a long trial. Furthermore, the visual aspect of the advertisement was a lot more sophisticated [38]. It was an artistic creation in the true sense, realized in February 2005 for the upscale prêt-à-porter clothing brand *Marithé et François Girbaud*. The artist depicted a feminized Last Supper: Jesus and his disciples are women, except for John who is depicted from behind, bare-backed, leaning on the lap of a female disciple. The female figures are soberly dressed on a uniform grey background. The table—on which there is a fish, fruits, and rolls spread—is metallic, without legs. Under the table sits a dove. The female disciples are all similar, as if cloned, but their gestures echo those of the mural by da Vinci. The photographer of the advertisement, Brigitte Niedermair, explained to me that she had taken care *not* to shock her audience [39]; the female Jesus figure is soberly dressed and is not partaking in the Holy Communion, and neither bread nor wine chalice is on the table. I have described the entire story of the trial elsewhere (Cottin 2007b, 250–255)—but, in short, the Catholic Church won two legal proceedings, and lost the third. The argument was that the *Last Supper* was not considered a religious symbol, but a cultural one, and that therefore it was not sacrilegious to use it for advertising purposes. Indeed, even in Leonardo da Vinci's day, the fresco was already partly removed from its biblical and religious context; the patron of the mural was the Duke Sforza of Milan, rather than the Prior of the Abbey (Cottin 2007b). The clothing-company advertising campaign and the trial show that since the mid-2000s there has been a return to such a secularized view of religious symbols.

#### EVOLUTION INTO A UNIVERSAL AND CONSENSUS-FORMING SYMBOLISM

After the early 2000s, following a series of mediatic scandals linked to the use of Christian religious imagery in advertisement, this unbridled (and perhaps excessive) artistic creativity ended. Advertisements which include religious references—especially Christian ones—have become far safer, more neutral, opting for clichés and consensus-building imagery [41]. The aim is to create something which might please anyone: Christians and non-Christians, atheists and agnostics, Europeans and people from continents and regions all over the world.

Does this current state of affairs mark the end of the use of Christian symbolism in a more general sense—and thus the end of the subversion and transformation of biblical tales (taking them out of their original context in order to

imbue them with new meaning)? Only time will tell, since archetypal images do have the tendency to endure—and many Christian figures have, in fact, become well and truly archetypal. In any case, the number of advertisements with Christian symbolism seems to have dwindled in the last few years. ‘Religious’ advertisement nowadays mostly consists of images that promote ‘wellness’ [42], in which spirituality merely signifies tranquillity: the focus is on zen, peace, harmony, and personal well-being. The image of someone meditating in the lotus position (a yoga pose which evokes well-being, rather than religiousness, to a Western audience) has overtaken the image of the believer, knelt in prayer. People are still using religious imagery, but it has become more generalised as well-being and trans-religious spirituality.

This humanistic dimension of religion which has been promoted in advertising seems to contradict the fact that social media (and even media in general) present religion predominantly in terms of intolerance, excess, and a return to traditionalist and pre-modernist values. Already Olivier Roy’s sociological and best-selling study *Holy Ignorance* (Roy 2012) points to this common understanding of religion as being genuinely intolerant and even degenerated. It may strike as odd at a first glance that advertisement does not address this understanding. However, as it aims at a broad public (i.e. families), advertisement focusses on the humanist or spiritual idea. The positive message of love and charity provides a gratifying connotation to the products. The decision to promote or use this picture of religion is a clearly economic strategy.

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# “To meme or not to meme, that is the question”: Literary Quotes and Memes in Digital Culture

*Sophie Picard*

The digital age has accelerated a trend observed since the industrial revolution: literature is not only disseminated in entire works but also in fragments in all domains of popular culture. Its everyday pervasiveness is attested by the presence of names and portraits of authors (see Husser and Löck in this volume) and characters (see Stemberger in this volume), but also of literary quotations in various supports and contexts. We need only mention the innumerable websites and blogs that collect, reference, and classify quotations as well as the many social media accounts that share quotes, some of which have hundreds of thousands of followers. These quoting practices, which have become commonplace in the digital age, coexist with more old-fashioned usages based on the compilation of extracts from literary works in anthologies such as Bartlett’s famous *Familiar Quotations* (Bartlett 1868)<sup>1</sup> or even more application-oriented collections such as *A Treasury of Business Quotations* (“over 1,500 sayings you can do business with!”) (Thomsett 1990) and *Literary Wit and Wisdom: Quips and Quotes to Suit All Manner of Occasions* (Benson 2016). Indeed, to borrow someone else’s words or show off one’s love of literature, literary messages can

<sup>1</sup> *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* continues to be regularly updated. It is even available as an application, which allows illustrated quotations to be shared directly on social media. Cf. <http://www.bartlettquotes.com/>. Accessed 29 Nov 2021.

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be written on any type of everyday item: calendars, notebooks, postcards, t-shirts, mugs, etc. In this chapter, I will focus on the dissemination of literary fragments in digital culture in general and in the genre of memes in particular and explore how meaning and value are created through this circulation of literature. I will first examine quotes as representations of more abstract icons such as their authors, works, or literature in general, before turning to famous quotations that became icons themselves.

## QUOTATIONS IN POPULAR CULTURE

As the quotations shared on the Internet and social media are not always easily identifiable, they do not respond to the first criterion of iconicity defined by Kemp, namely “wholly exceptional levels of widespread recognizability” (Kemp 2012, 3). On the contrary, the chosen phrases or thoughts frequently seek to surprise on account of their spirit, unexpectedness, relevance, or practical applicability. Some social media users even present original quotations, which had never been previously detected in a literary text. To stage this novelty, they might publish photos of the passage highlighted in the book or hand-copied into a notebook.<sup>2</sup> What is iconic here is not so much the quotation but rather the act of quoting itself: by placing the words on a support or background, using quotation marks, or mentioning the author’s name (sometimes accompanied by a portrait), the reader can immediately recognize the text as a quotation. This distinctive layout is used to present the quotation as an authoritative declaration extricated from the whole, with its meaning to be deciphered by readers.

Because quotations in popular culture prioritize the author’s name while frequently remaining vague about the precise reference, they contribute to the iconicity of the writer’s persona. In his reflections on epigraphy, Gérard Genette observes that the chosen text tends to be less important than the identity of its author, who endorses, as it were, the contents of the book to which he or she is indirectly linked (Genette 2002, 161). The same applies to popular culture in which the quotation, no matter how mundane, is presented as important, simply because it was formulated by a great name. One example is the simple “No” pronounced by Hamlet in Act III, Scene 3 of the eponymous tragedy (*Hamlet*, 3.3.92),<sup>3</sup> which is ironically framed as a quotation and used in a humoristic way to express a refusal endorsed by none other than Shakespeare himself. Indeed, quotation practices in popular culture seem to attest to the iconicity of literature, viewed as a panoply of written creations to which a certain cultural capital is attributed (Bourdieu [1979] 2010, also see Wojcik in this volume). As soon as words are taken from a printed book (or presented as

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the account book.poets on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/book.poets/>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021. Screenshots of the examples mentioned in this article are stored on a secure server and can be provided upon request.

<sup>3</sup> The passages quoted from the works of William Shakespeare are taken from the online edition *The Folger Shakespeare* (Shakespeare n.d.).

such<sup>4</sup>), they resemble sacred or revealed language. In this sense, a quotation is a metonymic representation of literature that refers not only to the quoted content but also to the symbolic cultural value ascribed to literary works and their authors.

The decontextualization triggered by the act of quoting allows profound meaning to be attached to a text, which, in its original context, would have been minimized by narrative devices or the author's own explanations. This is the case with the famous words of Friedrich Nietzsche, “Without music, life would be a mistake,” which are quoted (and transformed) in popular culture to express an unconditional passion for music or any other artefact, with this passion being endorsed by the great German philosopher. The original expression appears in *Götzen-Dämmerung*, a text written in 1888 following the controversy with Richard Wagner: “*How little is required for happiness! The sound of a bagpipe. – Without music, life would be a mistake. The Germans even imagine God singing songs*” (Nietzsche 2005, 160). Between the bagpipes and the grotesque idea of God singing in German, the phrase does not resemble a profession of faith but rather a kind of platitude. By coining this empty kitsch phrase, Nietzsche thus invented the perfect formula for music lovers around the world. Viewed in this light, we can only imagine the philosopher's exacerbation upon seeing the use of his quotation today.<sup>5</sup>

Quotations may also be used to desacralize literature in a playful manner. The “insults of Shakespeare,” which are found in countless dictionaries (e.g., Hill and Ottchen 1991), social media posts, games, and giveaways, are a prime example of this desacralization. Quotes from his plays such as “What, you egg. *Stabbing him*” (*Macbeth*, 4.2.94–95) or “I do desire we may be better strangers” (*As You Like It*, 3.2.263) run at odds with what typically characterizes classical English works and great literature. Their publication is therefore an act of both de-iconization and re-iconization, since they convey the underlying message that “Big Will” is a modern author, as stressed by the illustrations depicting the portrait of Shakespeare with sunglasses or another contemporary element.

Some users present quotations as words of divine wisdom in an attempt to ridicule certain authors, deemed unworthy of the status of great authors. Under the hashtag #notrupikaur, quotations or pseudo-quotations are attributed to the Indo-Canadian poet Rupi Kaur whose “instapoems” are extremely popular on social media. In one photo shared on Instagram appear the words

<sup>4</sup> Genette highlights that many epigraphs are fanciful quotations. He cites the example of Walter Scott, who, in his introduction to *Chronicles of the Canongate*, declares himself to be the inventor of some of its epigraphs (Genette 2002, 150).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that a second source for Nietzsche's famous phrase points to his more serious intention. In a letter written to the composer Peter Gast at the time, he recounts the exhilarating experience of listening to Bizet's *Carmen*, thus quoting himself: “*Musik giebt mir jetzt Sensationen, wie eigentlich noch niemals. Sie macht mich von mir los, sie ernüchtert mich von mir, wie als ob ich mich ganz von ferne herüberblickte, überfühlte ... Das Leben ohne Musik ist einfach ein Irrthum, eine Strapatze, ein Exil*” (quoted from Reschke 2000, 209).

“I was sad, so I ate food. – Rupī Kaur,”<sup>6</sup> beautifully written in calligraphy and presented as a quotation with the comment “Basically Rupī Kaur.” The creator of this parody emphasizes the contrast between what is presented as a literary quote—reminiscent of sacred language—and the sheer banality of its contents. He evidently seeks to offend the community who respects Rupī Kaur by fervently sharing quotations from her book *Milk and Honey* (2014). While stirring the outrage of the poet’s followers, he draws attention to their misuse of the act of quoting, an act that should, in his view, only be reserved for what he considers true literature. This negative example highlights how the use of quotations can be perceived as iconoclastic, as it goes against a certain preconceived idea of literature.

### VERBAL ICONS

Besides quotations that attest to the iconicity of a specific work of literature, an author, or literature in general, there are some popular expressions that function as verbal icons in their own right. Far beyond their literal meaning, these quotes refer to *the* culture or *the* tradition. Their distinctive characteristic is their ability to bypass the use of markers that would otherwise allow them to be identified as quotations (e.g., layout, quotation marks, mention of the author): these unmarked quotations are nevertheless identifiable by many people, even when they are modified, adapted, or parodied. The opening phrase in the famous monologue in *Hamlet*, “To be or not to be—that is the question” (*Hamlet*, 3.1.64), is perhaps the most notable example, because it transgresses linguistic, cultural, and discursive boundaries. Based on the formula “to X or not to X,” where “X” can be replaced by any verb in the infinitive form, the quotation did not have to wait for the advent of the Internet to be refashioned in the most diverse contexts for a multitude of different purposes: book titles, academic or newspaper articles, caricatures, advertisements, and even material culture (Mieder 2008, 2014).

This usage can help us to understand what defines a verbal icon compared to a proverb or other phraseologism. As shown by Daniel Shore, the linguistic form “to X or not to X” is by no means a Shakespearean invention, as it already existed in the linguistic culture of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, particularly in the reformist discourse regarding the freedom of Christians. Along with “to be or not to be,” the formulas “to do or not to do,” “to believe or not to believe,” or “to marry or not to marry” are all encountered prior to 1600 (Shore 2015, 131). This type of expression designated “actions that, because they are neither commanded nor prohibited by Scripture, good nor evil in themselves, Christians are free to perform or omit” (Shore 2015, 131). Hamlet’s soliloquy can be read in light of this fundamental theological question: in his despair, the character considers his own existence beyond the moral and philosophical framework of religion and envisages suicide—the ultimate

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.instagram.com/p/B9Cf\\_yjnZSa/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B9Cf_yjnZSa/). Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

sin according to the church—as an act that is neither commanded nor prohibited. By putting the expression “To X or not to X” into the mouth of the fallen prince, Shakespeare makes it the formula par excellence to express an existential choice between two contradictory alternatives.

But unwittingly and unwillingly, Shakespeare did more than that. He coined a phrase that became intrinsically linked to his persona and work. “To be or not to be” became metonymic for the character of Hamlet, the tragedy in its entirety, and the figure of Shakespeare (as the representative of English literature or great literature in general). Whenever the formula “To X or not to X” occurs, one of these three elements forcibly comes to mind. Thus, in the midst of the German offensive against Great Britain during the Second World War, a caricaturist from the satirical German newspaper *Simplicissimus* quoted Winston Churchill, renamed “Hamlet Churchill,” as saying “Sein oder Nichtsein, das ist jetzt die Frage!” (“To be, or not to be, that is now the question!”) (quoted after Mieder 2014, 526). This was not merely a sarcastic commentary on the country’s situation: the verbal icon targets the country itself using Shakespeare as the representative of the English nation. This is even more striking given that the famous expression was used at the time to celebrate the resilience of the English people and their resistance to Hitler and even to ridicule the Nazis, as in the case of Ernst Lubitsch’s famous film *To Be or Not to Be* (USA 1942). “To be or not to be” or even “To X or not to X” is thus not only a formula used to express an existential choice but also the very embodiment of Shakespeare as the representative of the English nation, the summit of literature, or the incarnation of human genius.

This word play differentiates the verbal icon from a phenomenon used in journalistic language and popular culture, which linguists suggest calling “snowclones” (Whitmann 2004; Hill 2018), that is, fixed expressions that follow the model “X is the new Y” but lack a double meaning. Snowclones are rhetorical banalities. By using “To X or not to X” and other verbal icons such as the aforementioned quote of Nietzsche “Without Y life would be a mistake” or even the Cartesian principle “I X therefore I am,” Internet users do not simply play with language. They allude to what these formulas represent more broadly, be it a fundamental life principle or the zenith of literature or philosophy. At the same time, they portray their own relationship with these representations.

## LITERARY QUOTES AND MEMES

Verbal icons are used in one of the most distinctive phenomena of the “participatory digital culture” (Wiggins Bowers 2015, 1891): the genre of memes. Their usage is far from marginal, since many social media accounts are dedicated to literary memes: for example, the popular Instagram accounts *english\_shituration* and *lit.memery*. Indeed, the profile picture of *lit.memery* is a portrait of Shakespeare smoking a joint. Hashtags like #literarymemes and #shakespearememes, each mentioned tens of thousands of times, suggest that they



represent their own genre or subgenre of memes, which, following Limor Schifman, involve its own “levels of literacy” (Schifman 2014, 100). In what follows, I will demonstrate how this subgenre uses verbal icons to express an irreverent and reverential attitude to literature. In other words, literary memes affirm the cultural capital of literature all the while symbolically desacralizing what is viewed as an elitist cultural practice.

At first sight, literary memes appear to have a subversive intent: the encounter between literature and memes performs a clash of cultures. The presentation of a literary quotation with the graphical codes of a meme—most commonly an image macro, that is, a background image framed by text in capital letters—is akin to the appropriation of the elite culture by popular culture. This interplay between text and image gives the impression that the quote is being said by the character or animal depicted in the image, which is often borrowed from audio-visual culture (television series, films, cartoons, etc.) or meme culture (e.g., Grumpy Cat). Literary memes thus function like classical art memes, which stress the incongruity between the classical paintings and the modern commentaries (Piata 2020). However, in literary memes, the image rather acts as a commentary to the quotation. In both cases, by adopting and transforming what is viewed as almost sacred by the traditional gatekeepers of culture (e.g., museums, schools, and universities), Internet users poke fun at institutionalized and ritualized cultural practices.

At the same time, the multiplication of art or literary elements from the elite culture within meme culture perpetuates their existence. In this process of appropriation, adjustment, and sharing that is specific to memes (Denisova 2019, 10), these traditional elements become popular. For example, since its inception as a meme (Wiggins and Bowers 2015), Joseph Ducreux’s painting *Portrait de l’artiste sous les traits d’un moqueur* (around 1793) has become one of the most coveted works by visitors to the Louvre, who frequently show themselves on social media looking at the original. The cultural gatekeepers have clearly understood this dynamic, thus adopting the codes of meme culture to promote what is perceived by young people as an elitist culture. In this respect, we may mention the inclusion of memes in the curricula of literary history courses (e.g., Hartman et al. 2021).

Although literary quotations tend to be used to comment on images from current affairs, memes are more often conceived as an (ironic) commentary on the quotation itself. For example, the slightly modified words of Shakespeare “TO BE OR NOT TO BE. / THAT IS A QUESTION?” are used in an image macro with a portrait of the writer Samuel Johnson, who has appeared in a series of memes since 2012 (Knowyourmeme.com 2021h).<sup>7</sup> Another meme uses the photo of Grumpy Cat, one of the most popular memes since the invention of the genre (Knowyourmeme.com 2021d), who responds “WHATEVER” to the same

<sup>7</sup><https://imgflip.com/i/yahcv>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

question.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, aside from the encounter between the verbal icon and what could only be described as meme icons, the literary text is subjected to a seemingly inappropriate reading given its literal interpretation. Literary memes are presented as trivial commentaries—‘completely off the mark’ so to speak—on invaluable contents that are borrowed from a culture far removed from the meme culture. The effect of the meme will be even more striking if a wide gap separates the two cultures.

What could be labelled an inappropriate use of literature by professional readers is not specific to meme culture, as it is found in all types of popular culture that “apply” the content of quotations to diverse situations without taking the original context into account (Gerhard 1994). Nevertheless, memes tend to exaggerate this process in a comical way. In an image macro from the series *Condescending Wonka* (Knowyourmeme.com 2021b), the title character from the film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (USA 1971)—which is itself an adaptation of Roald Dahl’s classic children’s book—uses a quotation from Goethe to share his thoughts about so-called “woke” thinking: “GOETHE SAID, ‘WE ARE ACCUSTOMED TO PEOPLE MOCKING WHAT THEY DO NOT UNDERSTAND’ / I GUESS THAT IS WHY I MOCK THE WOKE, AND WHY THE WOKE MOCK SCIENCE, REASON, LOGIC, AND COMMON SENSE.”<sup>9</sup> The funny effect stems from the sarcastic commentary on the “woke”, which is reinforced by the usage of Goethe’s quotation from *Faust I* (Goethe 2019, V. 1205–1206). While the character’s words in the play have a fairly limited scope, they are presented in the meme as a general truth. Yet this is done in such an ostentatious manner that it can only be viewed as an example of irony by the meme’s author, as highlighted by the image of the condescending Wonka.

The clash of cultures is thus feigned. To be funny, literary memes have to emphasize the status of literature as the culture of the elite while exemplifying the memes as part of popular culture. This particular feature is characteristic of memes in which modified and/or modernized quotations are put into the mouth of an author or character. In a self-referential game, the portrait of Shakespeare thus declares “TO MEME OR NOT TO MEME, / THAT IS THE QUESTION.”<sup>10</sup> In a clever blending of language from the Elizabethan era and the spoken language of today, another one states “AUDIENCE GONNA LOVE / WHAT IMMA MEME NEXT.”<sup>11</sup> Once again, the equivalence between literary language and meme slang is so evident yet incongruous that it can only be regarded as self-irony. The desired effect is similar in an image macro based on a scene from the television series *The Office* (USA 2005–2013). With his glaring ambition to rise through the ranks of his company, Dwight Schrute, as the main character in the series and also a popular meme (Knowyourmeme.com 2021f), is identified

<sup>8</sup> <https://memegenerator.net/instance/55268832/grumpy-cat-to-be-or-not-to-be-whatever>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

<sup>9</sup> <https://imgflip.com/i/54fc25>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

<sup>10</sup> <https://imgflip.com/i/jfr2k>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/englishliteraturememes/photos/a.453838948309612/453841918309315/?type=1&theater>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

with Shakespeare's Coriolanus when he declares: "THERE'S A NEW SHERIFF HERE IN THESE OFFICES, AND HIS NAME IS ME."<sup>12</sup> Here, the entire play of the same name is summarized using a quotation from contemporary audio-visual and meme cultures. This is similar to another practice in which quotations are invented to encapsulate the work or thought of an author in a single sentence. A collection of image macros based on television series is thus used to illustrate the philosophers Hegel (alias Taylor Armstrong from *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, see Knowyourmeme.com 2021i) and Kant (alias Paul Teutul Sr. from *American Chopper*, see Knowyourmeme.com 2021a) quarrelling with pseudo-quotations ("REASON IS IN ALL THINGS!" vs "REASON IS WITHIN US!"), while dumbstruck Schopenhauer (alias Ms. Juicy from *Little Women: Atlanta*, see Knowyourmeme.com 2021e) and sarcastic Nietzsche (alias Smudge the Cat, see Knowyourmeme.com 2021g) look at them.<sup>13</sup> With such strategies, the meme's author suggests that the intrigues of great literature or the thought of great philosophers can be translated into a few words and reduced to a mime or attitude. This exaggerated act of iconoclasm can only be interpreted in a satirical sense. The public must nevertheless have a minimum knowledge of the quoted works, authors, and television series to understand the jokes.

This knowledge is also a prerequisite for deciphering literary memes that use what can only be described as hidden quotations, which allude to a longer passage in a text or sometimes an entire literary work. Several memes thus refer to volume 2, book 5, from *Les Misérables*, in which Victor Hugo provides a graphic description of the sewers of Paris over six chapters. Akin to commentaries, the images comically show the absurdity of the enterprise: a screen shot from *Mean Girls* (USA 2004), which has given rise to a series of memes, shows the character Cady saying, "I could hear people getting bored with me, but I couldn't stop."<sup>14</sup> Another depicts an outstretched hand ("Victor Hugo" according to the meme) giving some broccoli a man with a disgusted look on his face ("me"), with the commentary "6 whole chapters about the Paris sewer system."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, countless literary intrigues are used as memes, such as the very popular Distracted Boyfriend (Knowyourmeme.com 2021c), where each person in the photo is identified with a character from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* (Olivia, Sebastian, and Antonio).<sup>16</sup> The link to Shakespeare is only indirectly made through the Instagram account, which is dedicated to Shakespeare Memes; it is therefore up to the followers of this account to decipher the reference.

<sup>12</sup><https://me.me/i/coriolanus-there-s-a-new-sheriff-here-in-these-offices-18863c1e3fb3441d884f8be81230da71>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

<sup>13</sup><https://m.facebook.com/superuovo/posts/2208379002802773>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

<sup>14</sup>[https://www.reddit.com/r/LiteratureMemes/comments/kuzday/victor\\_hugo\\_describing\\_the\\_paris\\_sewer\\_system/](https://www.reddit.com/r/LiteratureMemes/comments/kuzday/victor_hugo_describing_the_paris_sewer_system/). Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

<sup>15</sup><https://me.me/i/me-6-whole-chapters-about-the-paris-sewer-system-victor-4fad0aa7470a4488b0e836ed06b3afee>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

<sup>16</sup><https://www.instagram.com/p/BYreevclWFs/>. Accessed 10 Dec 2021.

As “incomplete, half-baked jokes” (Denisova 2019, 10), memes require a knowledgeable audience capable of understanding the allusions on several levels. This applies no less to literary memes, which require not only the mastery of meme communication codes—Ryan M. Milner introduced the idea of a “meme literacy” required to create and understand memes (Milner 2016); Anastasia Denisova speaks of memes as the “slang of a group” (Denisova 2019, 32)—but also the ability to reproduce the original context of the quotations, pseudo-quotations, or hidden quotations. A distinction should be made here between direct literary quotations, adaptations of literary texts, quotes from audio-visual culture in the broadest sense (i.e., movies, television series, musicals), and expressions derived from meme culture in which the texts and images have been appropriated, adjusted, and shared. Literary memes and their variants—such as Shakespeare Memes or even *Les Misérables* Memes—are thus a collective phenomenon: by drawing on a corpus of common references and endlessly modifying them, users create virtual communities to affirm their identity (Milner 2016, 33–37). Unlike the communities described by Noam Gal et al. (2016) or even Denisova (2019), the purpose of literary memes is not to embrace a political identity. Moreover, they rarely contain a “critical component of society, politics, etc.” as meant by Bradley E. Wiggins (2020, 1). Users instead attempt to position themselves in relation to literature, which they conceive in a caricatural manner as a ritualized and institutionalized cultural practice with a strong cultural heritage. This position may be translated metaphorically as “one foot out and one foot in”: it is bibliophiles (or “shakespearophiles” or “misérabophiles”) who observe the ways of their own communities with irony. More precisely, they show their affiliation to the community through their self-deprecating parody on the one hand and their respect for its rules on the other.

In these communities, the literary, audio-visual, or even meme quotations function as icons: due to their multiple meanings that can only be deciphered by those who hold the codes, they demarcate a boundary between those who belong to the community and those who do not. This twofold process of inclusion and exclusion evidently occurs to varying degrees, as a meme based on Shakespeare’s “To be or not to be” or volume 2, book 5 of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* does not target the same audience.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In popular and digital cultures, literary quotations can epitomize entire works of literature, their authors, or even literature in general. Internet users attribute a near sacred value to these literary fragments, with the act of quoting itself almost resembling a form of devotion. The integration of quotes in popular culture can also strengthen the cultural capital of literature, which is donned by users. Digital culture playfully engages with these representations and attributions of value. The creative play with literary quotations, notably in meme culture, is an effective means to enhance the popularity of this new genre. Despite the subversive intent of literary memes, they nevertheless affirm the

cultural capital of literature, which is always presupposed. By using references that users are invited to decipher, literary memes recreate the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and thus perpetuate the representations of literature as an elitist cultural practice.

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# Forms and Functions of Iconizing Literature: Authors, Works, Discourses

*Paula Wojcik*

Developments in media technology—and its accessibility, distribution, and marketing structures—challenge the traditional understanding of the reception of literature. The hierarchy between professional readership and amateur fandom which seemed hitherto somehow naturally given is substituted by a variety of practices that range between ‘authorized’ literary analysis in feuilletons and academic publications and personalized reading experience in blogs or other digital platforms. There is a remarkable trend towards a literature reception that is increasingly individualized and adjusted to a plurality of interests (Bradway 2017; Collins 2010; Felski 2008; Green and Jenkins 2011; Griswold et al. 2011). This is happening within, and beyond, the original medium of the book or in the literary field. We are observing a ‘convergence culture,’ as it is described by Henry Jenkins (2006): Since the 19th century, the ‘old’ medium of the book has been converging with ‘new’ digital techniques, forming an alliance with new printing methods, materials, radio, PC games (and so on). This has two main consequences: (1) a fragmentation of literary works into elements, such as a title, quotations, characters, author and (2) their emancipation from its literary origin, with a largely uncontrolled intermedia circulation and a value creation that does not have to pass the established gatekeepers and institutions (Jenkins et al. 2018).

Fragmentation and decontextualization are the first steps towards iconicity (see Stemberger in this volume). Through fragmentation and decontextualization, artefacts become “distinct, durable, reproducible” (Parker 2012, 12) and

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gain what Martin Kemp calls a “widespread recognizability” (Kemp 2011, 2). As elaborated in the introduction to this volume, cultural artifacts require recognition to be charged with additional meaning and emotion in the process of intermedial circulation.

Most of the theorists on cultural icons (Parker 2012; Kemp 2011; Latour 2002) assume that only images or statues can become icons, whereas I argue in line with the introduction to this volume that this also applies to quotations, concepts, or literary characters that have no fixed image at all (e.g. Faust, Anna Karenina). This chapter confirms what we discuss in the introduction: icons do not only appear as iconic, indexical, or symbolic signs but, rather, as sign complexes whose individual parts can metonymically represent the whole icon. Iconization is, then, based on a mechanism Saint-Gelais (2010) defines as transfictionality. Being basically an unmarked intertextuality or intermediality, transfictionality is a tool that indicates the presence of an icon. This needs then to be confirmed through further criteria, e.g., the representational function, condensed meaning, and, explicitly, the iconoclasm. This last criterion is the most valid one: If a single representation takes an author or a work off its pedestal—and thus affects a group’s collective memory—then we can safely speak of it as an icon. The iconoclastic gesture is more important than the question of whether the intended effect actually takes place.

In this chapter, I argue for the iconicity of literature. Literature, as a creative-artistic achievement, is ascribed a cultural capital (Bourdieu [1979] 2010, also see the introduction to this volume) that can be recalled in different forms. This means that literary works and their creators have a symbolic cultural value—an aura as Walter Benjamin describes in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* ([1936] 2018) which stems from a surplus, a hypertrophy of meaning that can trigger different affects and emotions. This hypertrophy manifests itself, for example, in the stylization of authors as seers / prophets (*poeta vates*), learned men (*poeta faber*; *poeta doctus*), or original geniuses. Culturally maintained to this day, these concepts are represented by metonymical extensions (e.g. by the idea of the kiss of the Muses or the *furor poeticus*)—but they are also long-since deconstructed and ironized as cultural constructs. However, this does not affect the value that surrounds literary creation. The fact that unmarked references to literary works, such as character names or quotations, can be found where they are least expected (the spectrum ranges from children’s books and movies to the porn industry) suggests that literature retains a high cultural capital—even if the representation aims at an iconoclastic gesture. How else can we explain that an Indian action film about a bill collector is called *Shylock, the Moneylender* (2020, directed by Ajai Vasudev), that a porn actor adopted the moniker Jean Valjean, or that Shakespearean quotations are used in gin commercials? What these different references to literature have in common is that they apparently refer to a cultural knowledge that stands, above all, for high-cultural education. The group that represents this culture is no longer the so-called educated *Bildungsbürgertum* (which is, by the way, considered to be an exclusively-German concept; Conze and Kocka 1985–1989), but a global

academia. I elaborate on these considerations, focusing primarily on how an abstract concept can be condensed into an icon and represented culturally. First, I examine the example of iconization of authors, focusing on iconizing practices in literary works—which helps to invalidate the possibly-hasty judgment that iconization is a matter of popular culture. I concentrate on two contrasting, yet iconic, authors: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Edgar Allan Poe. Then, using a more popular cinematic example—the Netflix film *Vampires vs. the Bronx* (2020)—I demonstrate that not only character names or types function as representations, but also references that belong to the discourse of knowledge about literature. Their presence in popular culture indicates that the concepts of literature itself is an iconic one.

## TWO UNEQUAL ICONS: GOETHE AND POE

The novel that comes to mind, at least to literary scholars, in connection with the iconization of the German national author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) is Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* (1939) (see Löck in this volume). Mann creates a collage of perspectives on Goethe that, while reflecting the icon's status, are so divergent, and so vacuously laudatory, that no single 'Goethe' can be grasped through the sheer contradictions. In only one chapter is the reader exposed to Goethe's stream of consciousness, which reveals the trivial rather than the divine. The novel is transfictional because a cosmos of historical persons surrounding Goethe (though not necessarily familiar with him) is mixed with factual, transmitted statements and references to Goethe's work, whose origins or context are unmarked. Although the poet is at the center, the novel can only be understood through a precise knowledge of the historical situation of Goethe's lifetime and the history of his reception until the publication of Mann's novel. The result is a work that both reflects and ironizes Goethe's iconic status. Although *Lotte in Weimar* is primarily aimed at an educated audience, the iconoclasm it contains is directed towards the German nation, which still views Goethe as a cultural flagship in 1939. This is evident in the novel, because it displays that (and how) the worship of Goethe unites all social classes in the microcosmos of Weimar.

During Thomas Mann's lifetime, Goethe was an icon of the German nation—for better or worse. It is therefore not surprising that Mann dwells on him. It is more surprising, however, in the case of the Czech dissident and Frenchman-by-choice Milan Kundera, who, almost 60 years after Mann, includes Goethe in his novel *L'Immortalité / Nesmrtnost* (1990). Goethe appears as a character in the afterlife who discusses the advantages and disadvantages of fame outlasting death with Hemingway. Historical persons from Goethe's universe also appear in Kundera's work—above all, his wife Christiane and the young romantic writer Bettina von Arnim. Kundera's examination of these two women and their relationship with one another and with Goethe occupies more space than of Goethe, who remains fairly pale. Like *Lotte in Weimar*, *L'Immortalité* reveals how elements from the Goethe cosmos take on

a life of their own, without becoming icons themselves and, instead, are constantly referring to the icon standing in the background—in this case, Goethe. Of course, this is particularly striking in the case of someone like Bettina von Arnim, who has an independent literary oeuvre to her credit. Her role in *L'Immortalité* reflects her intellectual independence only to a limited extent; she appears rather dubious. Bettina is introduced as the administrator of Goethe's afterlife; her goal is to become immortal on the steed of his immortality. This is—according to the novel—the only reason why she gets close to Goethe and his mother and writes the largely-invented *Correspondence with a Child* in 1835—her best-known work until today.

This characterization could be read as misogynistic, but such an interpretation misses the point of the text. The intention behind this deconstruction of Bettina becomes apparent in the final pages, where Kundera reproduces statements by European intellectuals about Bettina and Christiane. Rainer Maria Rilke, Romain Rolland, and Paul Eluard paint a rapturous picture of Bettina, while they refer to Christiane with the unflattering terms “ruddy and corpulent,” “fat,” “jealous,” or “importunate” (Kundera 1991, 209). They consider Goethe's decision not to support Bettina as a decision not to pursue passion but to pursue the comfort of home. Kundera's novel is a counter-voice to the iconoclastic tendencies that increased in the 20th century: Goethe the anti-revolutionary, Goethe the apolitical, Goethe who prefers the uninspired Christiane and the comfort she promises over a charming and intellectually stimulating woman. Kundera's deconstruction of Bettina—as stylized by French and German intellectuals—re-evaluates the elements in Goethe's cosmos. The scandalous marriage to Christiane is presented not as convenience and philistinism, but as a conscious decision. The text thus intervenes in the iconoclastic discourse surrounding Goethe without fully confirming or refuting it.

Compared to Mann's novel, we find the circumstances and conditions of receptions drastically changed in 1990; also in terms of the geographic scope. While the audience confronted with *Lotte in Weimar* had a living memory of Goethe and his cosmos so that they could decipher, maybe not all but still a lot, of the references placed in the novel, by the time Kundera's novel was published most of this knowledge had been largely transferred from the so-called “functional memory” to “stored memory” (Assmann 2001)—even in Germany. Added to this we have to consider the transnational—or at least European—scope of *L'immortalité* which makes it even more unpredictable what references a potential audience may or may not recognize when confronted with this historical expert's knowledge. The fact that and the manner in which Kundera's novel disregards the historical and geographical distance and lustfully plays with these elements indicate Goethe's iconic status.

Today, Goethe is still iconic, insofar as he is the poet who is namesake for the most street names in Germany, a university and the German cultural institute; his portrait is depicted on commodities, guidebooks—such as *Goethe for Managers*—and he is still considered a representative of German-language

literature. In recent academic discourse Goethe has—again—become a reference for cosmopolitanism as he coined a phrase that has probably become the most important field of comparative literary studies: World Literature. An interesting use of Goethe-the-icon is in the Polish Netflix production, *The Black Mercedes* (2019, directed by Janusz Majewski). Here, Goethe represents a ‘good Germany’. In the opening scene, a Goethe book is burned by the Nazis; his portrait by Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein (*Goethe in der Campagna* 1786/87)—one of the most significant representations of Goethe—can be seen in the burning book. This interpretation is remarkable, because Goethe was worshipped by the Nazis—a fact that caused much academic debate by US-American German scholars in the 1970s (Grimm and Hermand 1971).

These appropriations of Goethe show that icons are indeed “distinct, durable, reproducible” (Parker 2012) and at the same time they “develop into veritable ‘palimpsests’ of overdetermined and multilayered sociopolitical inscriptions” (Leypoldt 2010, 9). This palimpsest permeates Thomas Mann’s *Lotte in Weimar*. Kundera’s book, on the other hand, picks up on another characteristic of the icon: “Cultural icons reveal discernible tragic-dramatic narratives that are formed and received by communities particularly receptive to the development of iconic meaning” (Parker 2012, 13). The love affair with the young and intelligent Bettina—which never went much beyond infatuation—and the scandalous marriage to Christiane—who was no intellectual match for him—is just such a narrative. It is typical for the narratives of iconized historic persons to concern scandalous details of their lives (Wojcik 2022); illegitimate relationships or forbidden love (with younger or same-sex partners, who then belong to the icon’s sign complex) are among the most popular topics. Other tropes include difficult upbringings, mental illness, or excessive lifestyle, often associated with alcohol or drug use.

This mechanism is also adaptable to an iconic writer who, at first glance, appears to be quite different from Goethe: Edgar Allan Poe. His canonization has been a long time coming and is due to the interest of French poets such as Baudelaire (Elmer 1996). He has become the epitome of a *poète maudit*: a depressed drunk whose marriage to his childlike cousin gave rise to speculation about a disturbed sexuality. This picture became popular by the psychologizing portrayal by Marie Bonaparte in *The life and works of Edgar Allan Poe: A psychoanalytic interpretation* (*Edgar Poe, Etude psychanalytique*, [1929] 1949). Bonaparte suggests that Poe’s social and sexual deviance was caused by the early death of his mother, and that his alcoholism had its roots in infancy, when Poe was sedated with alcohol by his father. The fact that this father later left the family is another component of the story of the disturbed genius.

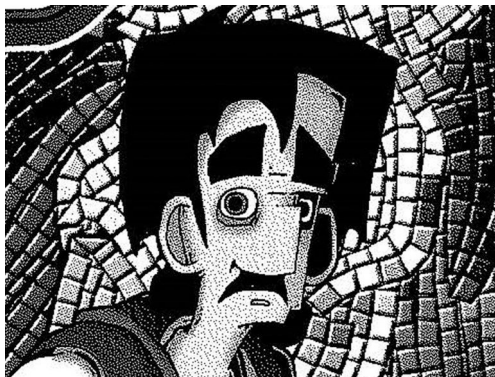
Poe has become the icon of the maladjusted poet who draws inspiration from his misfortune; this is an image of the poet that has attracted other writers (i.e. the Beat Generation) and is still popular today. The archetype of the dark original genius does not seem to have lost its appeal. His stylized portrait—which can be seen on shopping bags (Fig. 1), notebooks, and sticky notes (Fig. 2)—is supposed to reflect his melancholic mood, with a high forehead

**Fig. 1** A bag with a schematized portrait of Edgar Allan Poe. Taken 2019 at The Seattle Public Library by P.W.



**Fig. 2** Sticky notes with images of writers: Edgar Allen Poe, Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, Oscar Wilde (beginning at the left, picture taken by P.W.)

**Fig. 3** Edgar Allan Poe  
in Jason Asala's Comic  
Poe (1998)



and dark eyes, overshadowed by dark and dense eyebrows. It is even recognizable when reduced and exaggerated, as in Jason Asala's comic strip (Asala 1998) *Poe* (Fig. 3).

Angela Carter uses the “key identifiers” (Kemp 2011, 3) that form the iconic Poe in her story *The Cabinet of Dr. Allan Poe* (1985). She parodically adopts the psychologizing biography that constitutes the dramatic-tragic narrative: death of his brother and sister in infancy; a love of theater implanted early by his mother, a member of a traveling company; death of his mother; disappearance of his father; adoption; asexual marriage to his infantile cousin, who also dies at an early age; the depressive states; and, finally, the alcoholism that leads to his death. What is fact and what is fiction is not evident in Carter's work; all elements from the Poe cosmos are treated equally.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Carter employs her typical poetological technique, adapting and modifying Poe's style which Maggie Tonkin (2004) termed ‘Poe-etics’. The short story, which is actually focused on Poe's biography, repeatedly slips into the fantastically gruesome:

Edgar looked out of the window and saw him [...]; he thought their father must have reconstituted himself at this last extremity in order to transport them all to the better place but, when he looked more closely, by the light of the gibbous moon, he saw the sockets of the coachman's eyes were full of worms.  
(Carter 1985, 54)

As with Kundera and Mann, Carter shifts focus from the icon to an associated person—in this case, Poe's mother. Unlike Kundera and Mann, however, there is a feminist tendency here to individualize the character and give her more space. Despite the fantastic elements and the almost fairy-tale-like language, the passages about Poe's mother are of an almost-painful realism: “she milks her sore breasts into a glass; this latest baby must be weaned before its mother

<sup>1</sup>This is another characteristic of Poe's iconography, even on the sticky notes; the raven from Poe's most famous poem sits on his shoulder (Fig. 2).



dies” (Carter 1985, 54). In this way, Carter disenchant the mother, who, in Bonaparte’s account of Poe, was elevated to the status of a celestial muse. At the same time, the parody emphasizes the reduction typical of icons. Thus, Carter exaggerates Poe’s supposed fear of sexuality with an image of the vagina dentata: “Taking from his back a pair of enormous pliers, he now, one by one, one by one by one, extracts the sharp teeth just as the midwife did.” (Carter 1985, 61). Poe only dares to approach his wife who has already died—and even then, only to castrate her. Carter’s text is a parodistic reflexion on the characteristics that underlie Poe’s iconization. She addresses popular fragments and alienates their perception, reinterprets, straightens. The fragments which have become a common representation of the icon are being de-naturalized as new meanings are ascribed to them. A similar effect can be observed in Mann and Kundera. All texts adopt a metaperspective on cultural iconization of authors.

In all three examples elements from the semiotic complex of the icon are adopted without marking whether they actually belong to the historical person or are a product of reception. These elements are not only other people related to the icon (e.g. Lotte Kestner or Bettina von Arnim to Goethe or Virginia and his mother to Poe), but also incidents from their lives of the authors or ‘facts’—some of them real and some created by the reception history. All these elements form a transfictional universe that surrounds the icon and creates its aura. They are based on knowledge of the work, knowledge of the historical contexts, and knowledge of its reception. The plethora of allusions (of varying quality) draws the readers’ attention: all texts stage a literature-centered discourse that is hardly available not only to literature-savvy but even to highly professionalized readers. The decontextualized elements can be reintegrated with the help of literary knowledge; its function is, to varying degrees, culturally critical. This procedure can be considered as a form of high-cultural fan service: Intellectuals who are familiar with German and French literary history have ‘more fun’ when they can discover those obscure ‘Easter eggs’ that are probably unrecognized by the vast majority of readers. For other readers a full disclosure of the references is not necessary for an understanding of the text’s intent—the mere idea that they refer to the icon is already sufficient as it adds the surplus of knowing that there may be a deeper meaning.

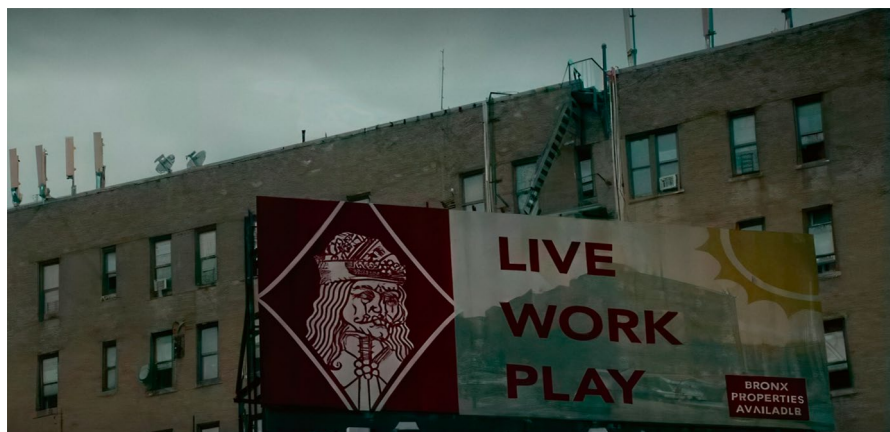
#### LITERATURE AS AN ICON IN POPULAR CULTURE: RE-WRITING *DRACULA* IN *VAMPIRES VS. THE BRONX*

An example that illustrates the practice of integrating literary knowledge unmarked into a cultural product—which cannot be explained merely by a highly-educated audience and a high-cultural phenomenon—is found in the US-American horror comedy *Vampires vs. the Bronx* (2020). With a vampiric subject matter, a first intermedial reference is set, which points to the most famous example: Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). However, the film has little to

do with the novel. The story is centered around a group of children, all Persons of Color, living in the Bronx, who protect their neighbourhood from vampires—all of whom are White. This is combined with a gentrification story, because the gateway for the vampires is a real estate company that plans to displace the local population. Stoker's colonially-influenced narrative—which thematizes the threat of the foreigner to the British Empire—is thus reinterpreted as a White threat. The sexual dimension, which is very pronounced in the novel, takes a back seat in the film; it works across age groups, but is still a family film. The allusions are remarkable; they not only concern the novel and its reception history, but also presuppose advanced, and in some cases, specialized knowledge.

The first reference is rather obvious, as the vampires' real-estate company is called 'Murnau Properties,' referring to the 1922 *Nosferatu* film's director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau. The logo, meanwhile, is a well-known portrait of the historical Prince Vlad III who is considered to be the historical Dracula (Figs. 4 and 5). In order to decipher this, knowledge of the genesis of the vampire theme in the Western- and Eastern-European world is necessary.

The second reference is better hidden. The managing director of the real-estate company is named Frank Polidori. His appearance, especially his hair-style, is reminiscent of Count Dracula, as portrayed by Francis Ford Coppola or Mel Brooks. That, however, is an intentionally false trail. In the course of the story, Polidori turns out to be analogous to the character of Dracula's slave-like servant Renfield, while the supreme vampire is a beautiful blonde woman. Polidori's name itself also contains an allusion. To understand this, it is necessary to know that John William Polidori was the physician of the famous Lord



**Fig. 4** Billboard advertising the real-estate company 'Murnau Enterprises' with the portrait of Vlad III. Still from *Vampires vs. the Bronx* (2020), TC: 1:22:01





**Fig. 5** Advertisement of the real-estate company ‘Murnau Enterprises’ with the portrait of Vlad III. Still from *Vampires vs. the Bronx* (2020), TC: 1:24:56

Byron; in 1816 he spent time—during the global temperature drop—with Mary Shelly (then, Godwin), Percy Shelly, and Lord Byron in a villa on Lake Geneva. This community of writers shortened the so-called *year without a summer* by writing scary stories. The best-known product of this short-term commune is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, Or the modern Prometheus*. At the same time, Polidori wrote *The Vampyre*—a precursor of Stoker’s *Dracula* novel, because it features, for the first time, a cultivated nobleman as the vampire. However, the novel is almost completely forgotten today.

References to the intermedia history are as decontextualized as they are obsolete to the plot of *Vampires vs. the Bronx*. If they are recognized as references at all their function is to provide intellectual pleasure in decoding them—in the very same way that we have observed in Mann’s, Kundera’s, and Carter’s novels. However, these manifestations of Western intermedia knowledge can also be understood in terms of a adding a new layer to the palimpsest of the ‘White’ narrative. And this, in turn, is entirely consistent with the story’s outcome, in which the children are victorious over the White intruders. The references to intermedia history and the discourse of knowledge surrounding *Dracula* recur to literature as a cultural phenomenon and its presence in society and global culture. They can be understood as an iconoclasm aimed at the Western—and especially White—literary tradition. Here, literature is iconic because of its place in a knowledge order in which the underprivileged (socially-weak Persons of Color) still too rarely find a place. The ironic diagnosis that *Dracula* has been interpreted as a symbolic “figure of perversion, menstruation, venereal disease, female sexuality, male homosexuality, feudal aristocracy, monopoly capitalism, the proletariat, the Jew, the anti-Christ, and the typewriter” (Ellmann 1996, xxviii) is extended with the film; the vampire is the White person who uses the promise of progress to act in a colonial manner, in a postcolonial era.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Literature as a phenomenon or concept—condensed into a cultural icon—can be represented in different marked likewise unmarked ways: through pictorial elements, such as authors whose portraits are widely known, but also through non-pictorial references to the work, its reception, or the cultural knowledge surrounding it. Whether these references reflect the status affirmatively or critically, and whether or not they intend an iconoclasm, they confirm the cultural capital of literature. Moreover, the references are not a mere reproduction of the status, because they modify—enrich or reinterpret—the icon. Thomas Mann, Milan Kundera, and Angela Carter correct the solidified perception of the poets by revealing the solidification processes. The film *Vampires vs. the Bronx* shows a comparable tendency by appropriating the subject of the vampire, which has been dominantly shaped by White cultural actors. The difference here is that in Mann, Kundera, and Poe something like a historical truth is recognizable as a distant goal. The authors want to show that what is condensed into a cultural icon is not everything—that there is a richer perception of iconic authors, even if it is impossible to depict the real person. This endeavor is not evident in the horror comedy. It uses the icon of Dracula by establishing references to a transfictional discourse that evolved around it over the decades of reception history. This discourse is represented by a semiotic complex: it includes pictorial elements such as images that are linked to Dracula's representation (portrait of Vlad III or the hair cut known from the filmic adaptation) and also non-pictorial elements such as names (Murnau, Polidori). Most of these references are hidden and they link to a knowledge that is not likely to be shared by the target audience's majority. But, if they are being recognized and deciphered they can not only add some intellectual fun to the act of reading or watching but offer an alternative narrative of self-empowerment for the socially underprivileged. And so, *Vampires vs. the Bronx* offers also an example of how icons are being used to adjust cultural products to a plurality of interests.

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## SECTION II

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# Arts



# Made for Any Cabinet: Watteau's *Fêtes galantes* as Adaptable 'Icons' of Sociability

*Elisabeth Fritz*

The German daily soap opera *Sturm der Liebe* (*Storm of Love*) has been airing since 2005. It is currently in its 21st season (over 4300 episodes so far), has been sold to over 20 television stations worldwide, and is considered to be one of the most successful everyday series in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Following the Latin-American format of *telenovela*, the plot is set at the fictive Bavarian five-star hotel 'Fürstenhof', where the ploys of the powerful owner family (Saalfeld) complicate everyone's lives. In each season, a variety of storylines are interwoven with the twists and turns of the central 'dream couple'. After mastering numerous obstacles and drawbacks—such as love triangles, scheming villains, doppelgangers, or unexpected strokes of fate—the two protagonists find one another, and celebrate their 'true love' in a wedding ceremony that usually closes each season's finale and opens the field for a new couple to enter the 'storm of love'.

As is typical for the melodramatic *telenovela* format, the main plot and stereotypic characters of *Sturm der Liebe* are rather repetitive and interchangeable. Thus, suspension and surprise are not built around content, but rather by the specific stylistic devices of daily soap operas—sweeping landscape views, recurring musical themes, close-ups of emotional faces, cliffhanger moments, and short previews at the closure of each episode. The series' high viewer attention

<sup>1</sup> *Sturm der Liebe* is produced by *Bavaria Fiction* and the episodes premier on the German public broadcasting network *Das Erste*. For further information see the series' official website (<https://www.daserste.de/unterhaltung/soaps-telenovelas/sturm-der-liebe>) as well as its entry on Wikipedia ([https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturm\\_der\\_Liebe](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturm_der_Liebe)). Both accessed 23 June 2021.

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is reflected in its fan community, who discusses each episode extensively in the commentary section of the broadcaster's website. Viewers post not only questions regarding the storyline or personal judgements of the intradiegetic moral conflicts, but also debates around the general plausibility of the plot, bridging errors in light of previous seasons, or observations regarding the stage and costume design.<sup>2</sup>

Looking closer at the setting of *Sturm der Liebe*, one might notice that a lot of the halls and corridors of 'Hotel Fürstenhof' are decorated with reproductions of paintings and drawings by the French artist Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721). For instance, the hotel's foyer (Fig. 1) features main works—such as (from left to right): *Embarrassing Proposal* (1715–1716, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg) or *The Dance* (1719/1720, Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Berlin).<sup>3</sup> Copies of real paintings, which are conserved in internationally-renowned museums and



**Fig. 1** Setting in the studio of the daily soap series *Sturm der Liebe* (Germany, since 2005, Bavaria Fiction). View: Lobby of 'Hotel Fürstenhof' with reproductions of works by Antoine Watteau in the background on the left (© FTA/Christof Arnold, <https://www.fta-fundus.de/newsletter-microseite/headlines-2019-ii/interview-claudia-walter-sturm-der-liebe>, 14 August 2024)

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, the commentary section of the current season (<https://www.daserste.de/unterhaltung/soaps-telenovelas/sturm-der-liebe/sendung/index.html>). Accessed 23 June 2021.

<sup>3</sup>The reproductions of Watteau's works are displayed on the left wall of the setting. At the very right we furthermore see a copy of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's famous painting *The Swing* (1876, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). French Impressionism is—besides eighteenth-century rococo art—the second art movement which is strongly represented within *Sturm der Liebe*'s production design.

form part of the approved canon of Western art history, literally become the backdrop of contemporary entertainment television. Yet, neither the historical context of French rococo, nor Watteau as the creator of the reproduced works, play any role within the series. Comparing the view of the setting (Fig. 1) to the original paintings' dimensions,<sup>4</sup> it appears as if even the initial proportions have been unified for the purpose of coherent hotel lobby decorations.

One might describe this case as an appropriation of 'high art' by popular 'mass culture', replete with its supposedly-typical mechanisms of trivialization and decontextualization. As the editors of this volume stress in their introduction, the intermedia circulation of 'cultural icons' can affect the detachment of originally-inscribed meanings and open up new realms of interpretation for the users or viewers (Wojcik, Picard, and Höfer in this volume). With their understanding of 'icon', the editors differ from the art-history denotation of *eikon* as an effigy or likeness of a higher spiritual being for the purpose of worship (Jahn and Haubenreißer 1995, 379–380). Indeed, the *fêtes galantes*—as Watteau's paintings of open-air sociable gatherings are known today<sup>5</sup>—do not bear any sacred dimensions of icons in this narrower sense. If one would nonetheless like to accuse their application within a television set design as an iconoclastic act, this 'blasphemy' would have to be seen in the missing appreciation of the singularity of the artworks, their historical specificity, or the ingenious accomplishment by the artist. Yet, such an appearance of unified art reproductions does in principle not defer from nowadays interiors of real-life hotels comparable to the 'Fürstenhof' in *Sturm der Liebe*. Turning the originals into 'middlebrow' wall art that is not worth any further notice this act hence also enhances the soap opera's claim for reality. In doing so, the masterpieces are in fact neither glorified as icons nor degraded iconoclastically, but rather pass through a process of neutralization to become 'unmarked'—and consequently also unremarkable—works of background decoration. However, the repetitive and somewhat arbitrary usage of Watteau's 'compliant' figures and paintings in any type of setting or medium is not merely the result of a reckless mass-cultural adoption; those principles represent central characteristics of the artist's own working methods and substantiate the audience's fascination with his work since the early eighteenth century until today.

### COMMON PLEASURE: THE EARLY RECEPTION OF WATTEAU'S 'POINTLESS PAINTINGS'

After Watteau's death in 1721 (as a not-quite 37-year-old), his works continued to prosper in the following decades. Thus, the artist achieved a 'celebrity' status in the first half of the eighteenth century, where several biographical

<sup>4</sup>The original dimensions are 65 × 84.5 cm for *Embarrassing Proposal* (Grasselli and Rosenberg 1985: cat.no. 39), and 97.5 × 116 cm for *The dance* (Vogtherr 2011: cat.no. B 3).

<sup>5</sup>For an overview of the development of the term *fête galante* and its relation to Watteau's acceptance at the *Academie royale de peinture et de sculpture*, see Eidelberg (2004).



essays were written and hundreds of graphic reproductions of his paintings, drawings, and decorative designs were created for the emerging Parisian art market (Michel 2008, 13). Primarily produced without commission, *fêtes galantes* were particularly popular within circles of ‘common’ people of the lower nobility, higher functionaries, and the urban *nouveau riches* like financiers and merchants (Posner 1984, 121).

As objects of more or less moderate private collections and decorations of *hôtels particuliers*, Watteau’s middle or small-scale paintings were regarded as ‘modern’—hence transitory—and interchangeable goods of consumption (Wunsch 2018).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, they frequently changed owners and hanging locations in the early decades of their reception. Remarkably, one of the major perceived qualities of the *fêtes galantes* was their adaptability to any gallery surrounding and their feature of “pleasing generally everybody”<sup>7</sup> (Caylus 1748/1984, 86–87). This could even compensate for the fact that Watteau’s art was not considered to be of the highest grade; as Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d’Argenville writes: “It is true, that his paintings are not of first rank, but they nevertheless offer a certain merit: [...] there is hardly any cabinet where they couldn’t enter”<sup>8</sup> (Dezallier d’Argenville 1745/1984, 50).

Whereas early admirers of Watteau were highly appreciative of the flexible character of *fête galante* paintings within a range of interior decoration practices, Dezallier d’Argenville’s remark also hints at a certain critical stance confronting the genre. In another quotation by the Comte de Caylus—Watteau’s former companion and an influential *connoisseur*—the artist’s figures are reproached for lacking “a certain greatness”<sup>9</sup> (Caylus 1748/1984, 73). Ultimately, Caylus critiques that his friend’s compositions did not express “any object”<sup>10</sup> (80). These accusations can be understood in light of the conventions established at the Parisian *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* in the last decades of the seventeenth century. The norms for the highest genre of multigure painting included a central represented object, namely a main narrative action performed by a single protagonist, who is clearly distinguished within the picture’s compositional hierarchy, with all other figures formally and thematically subjugated (Kirchner 2004; Wile 2014, 324–328). Watteau’s depictions of un-hierarchical social gatherings in barely-defined parks or landscape settings did not measure up to those expectations.

<sup>6</sup>This may be one of the reasons why a considerable amount of Watteau’s work is presumably lost and known only from reproduction prints or copies today.

<sup>7</sup>“Les ouvrages de Wateau plaisaient généralement à tout le monde [...]” If not noted otherwise, all translations have been made by the author.

<sup>8</sup>“Ses tableaux, il est vrai, ne sont pas du premier ordre, ils ont cependant un mérite particulier [...]: il n’y a même aucun cabinet où ils ne puissent entrer.”

<sup>9</sup>“cette insuffisance [...] le mettait hors de portée [...] de rendre les figures d’une certaine grandeur”.

<sup>10</sup>“[...] ses compositions n’ont aucun objet.”



**Fig. 2** Antoine Watteau, *Embarrassing Proposal*, 1715–1716, oil on canvas, 65 × 84.5 cm (The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg / Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum / photo by Vladimir Terebenin)

For example, Watteau's *Embarrassing Proposal* (Fig. 2)—one of the paintings appearing on Hotel Fürstenhof's walls—neither shows iconographically-identifiable figures nor depicts a concrete plot. With three women and two men, a final pairing in the sense of twosome 'lovers' is excluded. Moreover, the gestures, viewing axes, and body postures do not give clear evidence about the inter-figurative 'inclinations'; the women sitting on the ground do not pay attention to the man next to them and the standing lady shows a rather ambivalent attitude towards the hand offered by her male companion. His 'proposal' could be read as an invitation to dance or promenade, or to enter a more or less serious relationship. Multivocal music and couples' dance, as traditional emblematic motifs to signify intersubjective harmony and male-female unity (Mirimonde 1961), are not successfully performed yet and may thus lead to a dissonant, 'unhappy' ending.

Hence, the 'problem' of Watteau's compositions 'without objects' is not that the viewer is precluded from recognizing anything on the painted surfaces, but, rather, that a fixed narrative is not apparent and the implied actions are not carried out to their very end. Concluding that the *fêtes galantes* have no overall subject would, nevertheless, be misleading. In actuality, the contemporary

definition of *galanterie* includes being “a thing without consequences”<sup>11</sup> (Furetière 1690). The ‘concrete’ subject of a gallant ‘action’ thus actually represents—as the posthumously given title of Watteau’s *Embarrassing Proposal* suggests<sup>12</sup>—a vague interpersonal offering, whose outcome is dependent on the assessor. This could be a pictorially-represented counterpart, or the viewer in front of the painting.

### MOVEABLE FIGURES: SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND RELATIONALITY OF WATTEAU’S SOCIABLE ACTORS

A certain impression of randomness and interchangeability of constellations of figures in *fêtes galantes* is directly linked to Watteau’s working methods. As Caylus reports, his painter-friend did not follow the usual academic procedure of creating a painting by pre-designing concrete figures and preparing composition sketches. Instead, Watteau was an ‘objectless’ drawer. He randomly created views of people on the spot and collected his loose drawings in a folder, from which he would choose spontaneously for inspiration when later working on a painting (Caylus 1748/1984, 78f).<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the pairing of a certain ‘couple’ was in many cases not preconceived by the artist, but rather he found two matching figures from his folder stock and tried out different combinations while simultaneously working on several canvases and using techniques of decalcomania (Vogtherr 2011, 113). This experimental approach primarily follows formal criteria of deliberate pictorial arrangement instead of a cohesive pre-conceived narrative (Lajer-Burchard 2015, 3–4). It caused not only Watteau’s typical reuse of the same figures in different constellations,<sup>14</sup> but it also made the ‘sociable actors’ of *fêtes galantes* very well suited for their later adoption by subsequent artists and artisans.

While Watteau’s unconventional composition practices can be explained partly by his early artistic training in the decorative arts—instructing him to

<sup>11</sup> “On dit aussi [...]: Cette affaire-là n’est qu’une pure *galanterie*, pour dire: Ce n’est pas une chose de conséquence.”

<sup>12</sup> The painting received its title *La proposition embarrassante* after 1746 when it was reproduced as part of the collection of the Count of Brühl (Dacier et al. 1921, vol. IV, plate 274; Grasselli and Rosenberg 1985: cat.no. 39). Even though the title was not given by Watteau himself, this later-attributed-title gives insight to how the painting may have been interpreted by the contemporary viewers.

<sup>13</sup> “Je dis que le plus ordinairement il dessinait sans objet. Car jamais il n’a fait ni esquissé ni pensé pour aucun de ses tableaux [...]. Sa coutume était de dessiner ses études dans un livre relié [...]. Quand il lui prenait en gré de faire un tableau il avait recours à son recueil. Il y choisissait les figures qui lui convenaient le mieux pour le moment.” For an overview of the different drawings that have been combined in *Embarrassing Proposal* see Grasselli and Rosenberg (1985: cat.no. 39).

<sup>14</sup> For example, a variation of the man on the ground in the left corner of *Embarrassing Proposal* can be found again in Watteau’s later work *The Shepherds* (about 1717 / 1719, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin; Vogtherr 2011: cat.no. 4), and a comparable sitting woman with a guitar is also used in *The attractions of life* (ca. 1718–1719, The Wallace Collection, London; Vogtherr 2011, 139).

become an artist-*bricoleur* rather than a creator-genius (Pullins 2016, 221–223)—the popular recurrence of figures “à la manière de Watteau” (Eidelberg 2004, 23) in the designs of porcelain, textile, and furniture throughout the eighteenth century<sup>15</sup> is attributed to Jean de Jullienne, another of the artist’s former patrons. In his ambitious project to distribute Watteau’s work posthumously, this collector published not only reproduction prints of the artist’s paintings (*Œuvre gravé*, 2 vols., 1735), but he also commissioned engravings of Watteau’s ‘object-less’ drawings that appeared in two volumes entitled *Figures de différents caractères* [...], published in 1726 and 1728.<sup>16</sup> In his introduction, the editor emphasizes the artistic quality and self-sufficiency of Watteau’s figures: “Every figure coming from the hand of this excellent man [...] could alone absorb and satisfy attention, and does not seem to need the support of the composition of an overall subject”<sup>17</sup> (Jullienne 1726, n.p.).

Yet, whereas Jullienne cherishes the independent value of Watteau’s figures, their typical presentation in print—like a cut-out against a blank background, enclosed by a slim rectangular frame, and mostly separated on a single sheet—reinforces their status as sociable *interactors*. For example, the profile view of an upright woman in elegant clothes, lifting her skirt with one hand and offering the other one to an imaginary partner as if to join her for a dance (Fig. 3), strongly suggests flipping through the two volumes of *Figures de différents caractères* and looking for a suitable counterpart to the viewers. And indeed, private owners of such print collections took their scissors and pasted their own *découpage* versions of gallant gatherings onto cardboards or furniture (Scott 2003, 244–246; Tillerot 2011).

As an advertisement in the influential eighteenth-century magazine *Mercure de France* demonstrates, a rather free usage of the pictorial language of *fêtes galantes* was already commonplace in 1731. In this context, Watteau’s originality is detected within his way of “adjusting his subjects to his ornaments and his ornaments to his subjects, varying it all infinitely in a genius, hilarious and new way [...]”<sup>18</sup> (*Mercure de France* 1731, 1564). The artist’s figures were thus regarded as mobile elements to be applied in painting, ornamental design, or craftwork and expected to potentially appear on any surface of the rococo interior, such as wallpapers, fans, or tapestries. The improvisational and multifunctional quality of *fête galante* painting hence led to its continuous re-use in

<sup>15</sup> For a selection of different decorative media reproducing works of Watteau and other representatives of the *fête galante* in the eighteenth century, see Salmon 2015, 209–317.

<sup>16</sup> Taken together, the four volumes of the *Figures de différents caractères* and the *Œuvre gravé* are today known as the *Recueil Jullienne* (Dacier et al. 1921–1929; Tillerot 2009).

<sup>17</sup> “Chaque figure sortie de la main de cet excellent homme a un caractère si vrai et si naturel que toute seule, elle peut remplir et satisfaire l’attention, et semble n’avoir pas besoin d’être soutenue par la composition d’un plus grand sujet.”

<sup>18</sup> “[...] les ornemens [...] [gravé] d’après Watteau [...] étoient d’un grand usage pour les Peintres, Eventailistes, Sculpteurs, Orfèvres, Tapissiers, Brodeurs [...]. Watteau par la fertilité de son génie [...] a su si bien ajuster ses sujets à ses ornemens, et ces ornemens à ses sujets, en variant le tout d’une manière infiniment ingénieuse, riante et nouvelle [...].”



**Fig. 3** François Boucher after Antoine Watteau, Woman with her skirt and arm raised to offer a dance, reproduction print, 1726, in: Jean de Jullienne, *Figures de différents caractères de paysages et d'études dessinées d'après nature par Antoine Watteau*, vol. 1, Paris 1726, plate 19, n.p. (© Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques, Paris/Angèle Dequier, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl020548634>, 14 August 2024)



different media, thereby guaranteeing the persistence of Watteau's vocabulary throughout the rococo's rejection in times of Enlightenment, (neo-)classicism, and the French Revolution.

### FLOWS OF FORM: ROCOCO AS FLEXIBLE AESTHETIC MODE WITH TRANSITORY CONTENT

In general, the versatile character of rococo art was fully acknowledged during its reception in the nineteenth century, when the term itself and its typical features were first consolidated as a sense of style and cultural epoch (Bauer and Sedlmayr 1992, 8–9). Different phases and movements of 'rococo revivals' could be related to political intentions, strategies to fabricate class-identity, or even the promotion of bohemian aesthetic programmes. Returning to models of eighteenth-century art, fashion, and interior decoration could thus be understood as a restoration of aristocratic ideals and court society, just as it was perceived to be a suitable decoration for bourgeois apartments of the 'new nobility' (Hyde 2008).

Rococo connotations of femininity, excess, pleasure, freedom, imagination, and love are especially reformulated in the romantic movement around Gérard de Nerval, Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, and Paul Verlaine. They revived the ambiance of the *fête galante* poetically and literally resurrected it in the form of their own *fêtes* and the interior design of the circle's meeting place (Sheon 1978, 17–18). However, in their reinterpretation of Watteau's work, the romantic poets mostly saw it as an expression of *weltschmerz* and the individual's estrangement from society (Posner 1974; Mölk 2006). This melancholic 'cult' of the *fête galante* put a new focus on Watteau as a person, who was now perceived as a prototype of the modern 'outsider-artist' offering a deeper understanding of reality because of his exclusion from it.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, in the visual arts of the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth century—particularly within impressionism and classical modernism—a return to the fluid brushwork and sensualistic style of eighteenth-century French painting articulated a more formal interest in predecessors such as Watteau, François Boucher, or Jean-Honoré Fragonard (Rand 2007). The issue of their typical 'Frenchness' also brought back the experimental approach, as it had been coined by Watteau and the early recipients of his 'objectless' pictures.

This short overview can only hint to the variety of Watteau's recurrence in modern art.<sup>20</sup> It should nevertheless make apparent that the iconicity of *fêtes*

<sup>19</sup> This is related to a predominance of references to single figures in Watteau's work in the nineteenth century, such as his *Pierrot* (formerly *Gilles*, ca. 1718–1719, Musée du Louvre, Paris; Knowles 2014).

<sup>20</sup> For further information on the phenomenon of rococo reception and a selection of the numerous adoptions by artists of the eighteenth–twenty-first centuries, see Sheon 1978; Rand 2007; Hyde 2008; Quast 2010; Hyde and Scott 2014; Vogtherr et al. 2014.

*galantes* paintings lies neither in their specificity as single original works nor in their potential to condense a certain meaning. Rather than enabling a “flow of content” (Wojcik, Picard, and Höfer in this volume), they could be described as icons that enable a floating of form. As Hermann Bauer has pointed out, the “critical form” of eighteenth-century art—the autonomously conceived and multifunctionally-applicable *rocaille*—characterizes the rococo as a “meta-art” style, reflecting its own artistic potential to create transitory images (Bauer 1962/2011; Bauer and Sedlmayr 1992, 136–137). It is this focus on the form of an adopted ‘icon’, instead of its contents, that distinguishes the reception of the *fêtes galantes* from other types of cultural appropriation.

### ICONIC SOCIABILITY OR THE RETURN OF THE *CONNOISSEUR*?

According to an essay by sociologist Georg Simmel, sociability is “the play-form of association” within society, and it is “related to the content-determined concreteness of association” similar to how “art is related to reality” (Simmel 1911/1949, 255). Sociable interaction is thus not understood to figure the interests and agendas of individuals (as they are pursued in real life), but rather to feature the structural qualities of social relations in a more general and abstract sense. Performed as sociable—yet inconsequential—acts for their form’s sake, even interpersonal conflict or male-female discord can be experienced with mutual joy. Despite its mere formality, sociability (like art) is deeply linked to reality for Simmel—not by representing its contents, but by detaching its founding structures from their functional meanings and turning them into an independent aesthetic constellation. Rendering gallant sociability an autonomous object of representation within panel painting, the *fête galante* also brings to light the basic pictorial qualities of social processes in general. Thus, this genre realizes society’s genuine character of being an open-ended, dynamic, and interdependent relational fabric in the form of aesthetically-pleasurable paintings with rather ‘light’ content.

Coming back to Watteau’s reproduced paintings in the stage setting of *Sturm der Liebe*, it has become evident that these copies actually build a very suitable ‘backdrop’ for the series. Eventually, typical *fêtes galantes* motifs like amorous approach or refusal—in combination with the implied utopia of a ‘happily ever after’ and the fulfilment of romantic love—correspond well to the intrigues, stereotypical characters, and circular storylines of the *telenovela* format. Furthermore, on a generic level, daily soap operas can be regarded as a continuation of narrative matters of eighteenth-century French comedy, the *opéra-ballet*, or impromptu fair theatre like the *Commedia dell’arte*, all of which had an important influence on the development of the *fête galante* (Tomlinson 1981; Crow 1985/2000, 45–75).

One could also argue that a certain ambiance of French *ancien régime* culture—as it was adapted throughout the centuries by aristocrats and bourgeois who aimed for a fancy lifestyle—fits quite well with the idea of a powerful family clan and the type of noble hotel represented in *Sturm der Liebe*. Considering

that an important part of Watteau's paintings is nowadays presented in museums and palaces in Berlin and Potsdam—due to the fact that one of their collectors was Frederick II, King of Prussia (Vogtherr 2011)—reproductions like the ones seen in the series' stage setting could indeed be found in today's German hotel lobbies or private living rooms.

Based on information given by the series' production company, the above reasons may have subconsciously influenced the set designers' decision to use Watteau's work for *Sturm der Liebe*; indeed, those reproductions were mainly chosen because of their decorative, easily matchable, and bright qualities (in addition to subjective preferences and favourable copyright).<sup>21</sup> It is thus, again, the adaptable quality of the *fête galantes* that has effectuated their appropriation. In this context, the copies are still regarded as simply a very common and pleasant form of artistic surrounding.

However, fandom culture can bring historical specificity and connoisseurship back from the unconscious backdrop of a daily soap opera set design. In the 15th season of *Sturm der Liebe*, a storyline revolves around the discovery and burglary of an oil painting. And, again, an existing original from the context of eighteenth-century *fêtes galantes* has been reproduced by the set designers (Fig. 4). The 'dream couple', whose professional interest in art history is in



**Fig. 4** Production photo of the daily soap series *Sturm der Liebe* (Germany, since 2005, Bavaria Fiction), episode 3199 (premiere: Das Erste, 6 August 2019). View: The 'dream couple' identifies the discovered painting as being the work of a famous artist (© ARD/Christof Arnold, <https://www.daserste.de/unterhaltung/soaps-telenovelas/sturm-der-liebe/sendung/bildergalerie-sturm-der-liebe-3199-100.html>, 14 August 2024)

<sup>21</sup> Telephone conversation between the author and the public relations editor of *Sturm der Liebe*, Bavaria Fiction, on 29 June 2021.



Olga am 06.08.2019 um 22:26 Uhr

### Das Bild

Was wird hier wieder für ein Unsinn dem User verzapft, von dem berühmten Maler Soundso. Das Bild ist eine Kopie des Malers Jean Antoine Watteau mit dem Titel Die Pilgerfahrt nach Kythera oder die Einschiffung nach Kythera aus dem Jahr 1770 und sollte nicht mit Malerei von irgend einem unbekannten Möchtegernmaler bezeichnet werden, der angeblich sooo berühmt sei. Auch wenns eine TN ist, sollte man keine Urkundenfälschung betreiben, liebe Ard Redaktion. Ich hoffe, es wird hier eingestellt. Danke

**Fig. 5** Screenshot of a commentary by the user ‘Olga’ in the viewer forum of *Sturm der Liebe* on the broadcaster’s website, posted on 6 August 2019 below the synopsis of episode 3199 (Screenshot taken by the author from <http://daserste.de/unterhaltung/soaps-telenovelas/sturm-der-liebe/videos/folge-3199-video-100.html>, 29 June 2021)

this case part of the intradiegetic narration, identifies it as the work of a made-up famous artist, instead of referring to its real creator Nicolas Lancret (*La Camargo Dancing*, ca. 1730, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). While an intentional misattribution by the series’ authors may be explained by copyright reasons, an identification of the rather arbitrarily-chosen work is in fact irrelevant to the storyline.

Still, a fan commenting on the episode on the broadcaster’s website seems to have been rather outraged about this ‘disrespectful’ act (Fig. 5). Admittedly, the fan ‘Olga’ misattributes the copied painting in her post as a copy of one of Watteau’s most iconic works—his reception piece *The Embarkation for Cythera* (1717, Musée du Louvre, Paris)—and dates it to nearly 50 years after the artist’s death. Nevertheless, she criticizes the general fact that a fictitious “wannabe” painter is here taken for the originator of a renowned masterpiece, which she calls a “forgery of documents”. Eventually, nearly 300 years after the artist’s death, Watteau’s mass cultural appropriation is regarded as an ideological act of iconoclasm. On the other hand, the *fêtes galantes* are again not appreciated as genuine single artworks; a closer look at the canvases to differentiate the paintings ‘without objects’ still does not seem to be considered relevant. Thus, they remain interchangeable, but in this case not so much due to their decorative qualities, but more because of their attribution of being representative ‘icons’ of high taste and (presumed) bourgeois connoisseurship, which needs to be protected from a re-usage by ‘lower’ cultural practices. Perhaps, it is this potential to provoke a negotiation of social status, competence, and belonging that renders an artwork culturally iconic.

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# “That Giggling, Dirty-Minded Creature”: The Re-Creation of an Iconic Figure in Forman’s Film Adaptation of *Amadeus* (1984/2002)

*Udo Bomnüter*

## INTRODUCTION

Everything you heard is true. (Tagline from *Amadeus*; IMDb [2021](#))

According to recent *YouGov* ratings, Americans regard Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to be the second most popular classical melodist, right after Ludwig van Beethoven and even ahead of Johann Sebastian Bach (YouGov [2020](#)). The *Encyclopedia Britannica* grants him to be “widely recognized as one of the greatest composers in the history of Western music” (Sadie [2020](#)). Adding to his enduring popularity are prestigious cultural events, e.g., the *Mozartfest* in Würzburg, the *Salzburg Festival*, the *Johannesburg International Mozart Festival*, and the commemorative *Mozart Years* (most recently in 2006). His works have enjoyed a continued performance at concert halls and operas all over the world and have a firm presence in the media: through airings of musical performances and operas on TV and radio and their recordings in forms of music streams, long-play records, compact discs, et cetera. His pieces have been regularly featured in movie soundtracks, e.g., Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1985), Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* (1993), or Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut*

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(1999). Whereas Mozart himself has been the subject of numerous feature and documentary films, starting 1921 with Otto Kreisler's *Ein Künstlerleben: Mozarts Leben, Lieben und Leiden* (Graf 2019) and, possibly most prominently, in Miloš Forman's *Amadeus* (1984/2002) discussed below. We even see his portrait on the packaging of a sugar confection named after him, the famous *Mozartkugel*.

This brief overview indicates the iconic character of “Mozart” in its function as a cultural symbol (Truman 2017). Mozart's familiar picture manifested on portraits, posters, record covers, websites, packaging, or even as a pictogram is easily readable by people with a western cultural background. He has become an iconic celebrity, an “anthropomorphic figur[e]” that embodies a society's “values, ideologemes and structures of feelings, being, as they are, particularly suited for public identification and desire” (Rieser 2013, 3). As such, the present-day “Mozart”, the personified musical genius of Austrian rococo, is a construction largely brought about by the media (Solaroli 2015), thus greatly contributing to its visibility. Evidently, his iconic figure is “represented in various forms” and “circulating through a variety of networks (social, material, digital) in popular culture” (Truman 2017, 841). Having become separated from its object, it “substitutes—mediatizes—the original person or object into something else that becomes progressively susceptible to commercial exploitation” (Scott and Tomaselli 2009, 18).

In this chapter, I present Forman's feature film *Amadeus*, a screen version of Peter Shaffer's play by the same name, as a genuine example of such mediatization and substitution. Through the application of filmic means, the movie successfully creates an illusionary image far from a factual biography. Instead, its creators resort to organizing principles of fictionalization such as self-referentiality, essentiality, and dramatization (Schubert 1982). In the process, representational (iconic) features are varied and refashioned: Mozart becomes “Amadeus”. Hence, when the movie achieved commercial and artistic success, it consequently reshaped the popular perception of the historic musician to a lasting effect (Kenyon 2011; Brown 1992). Correspondingly, musicologist Richard Taruskin spells out *Amadeus'* impact on the “Mozartean self-reflection” in a *New York Times* essay (1990, 35):

The careless god-child of Romantic legend has become the braying ass of ours, glorified in the popular imagination as a boorish bumpkin who was “good at what he does,” a cynical Gladstone Gander, gifted and successful far beyond his moral deserts—and to be loved for it.

Based on concepts of film adaptation, my analysis of *Amadeus* elaborates on the creative decisions that have shaped the image of the Mozart character and his representational features. In doing so, I highlight differences between the character in the movie and the historical person to emphasize the effected construction of reality. Differences between the original play and its film adaptation are included for better understanding.

Following a brief compilation of biographic-historical details regarding the “real” Mozart, I give an overview of the movie *Amadeus*. Based on descriptions of major creative choices, I focus on selected central concepts of the movie and illuminate the use of narrative strategies and filmic devices in the construction of the Mozart character. Lastly, I take a conclusive look at the reception of *Amadeus* and indicate its effects.

## MOZART: THE PERSON

The basic facts of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s life (1756–91) can be coherently structured in different ways, besides merely chronological as in Kenyon (2011), depending on the biography’s underlying concept: Around the stations of his career, around his major musical works, or through a varied combination of the above, as in Peyser (1951).

For an idea of Mozart as a person, we depend mostly on contemporary reports and what biographers made of them. There are few portraits, which give only a vague impression, despite their iconic qualities. His appearance was said to be that of a small man with a plain, pockmarked face, and a pair of intense blue-gray eyes. He has been described as quick-witted and sociable, but at the same time all too humanly weak, inconspicuous, problematic, obscene, and childish. In short, a person, whose conduct does not seem to agree with his musical genius (Hofe 1994; Ross 2006).

This indistinct description offers several degrees of freedom for posterior interpretation. After Mozart’s death, 19th-century literati contributed to the Romantic-poetic myth of Mozart as a divine child prodigy; an artist genius who died tragically—and mysteriously—at the climax of his life and creative power (Hofe 1994). Many legends have formed around the circumstances surrounding Mozart’s death, including a masonic plot and poisoning, which ultimately inspired the works of Pushkin and Shaffer discussed below (Ebeling 2006).

## AMADEUS: THE MOVIE

In October 1984, the 160-minute movie *Amadeus* was released in US cinemas, which had been realized the year before under the direction of Miloš Forman. Nearly 20 years later, a 20-minutes longer director’s cut of *Amadeus* premiered at the 52nd Berlin Film Festival (IFB 2002).<sup>1</sup>

The movie is based on Peter Shaffer’s two-act memory play bearing the same name, first performed in 1979, which in turn was inspired by Alexander Pushkin’s verse drama *Мойарт и Сальери* from 1831. Pushkin based his story on rumors that circulated in Vienna after Mozart’s death, hinting at Salieri’s having murdered him (Ebeling 2006).

In Shaffer’s highly stylized, metaphorical play, the aged composer Antonio Salieri looks back on his time with Mozart and confesses his deadly plot against

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, my analysis is based on the 2002 director’s cut of *Amadeus*.

him. It is built on interrelated concepts addressing the search for meaning and God as well as the tense relationship between genius, talent, and mediocrity (Gianakaris 2001; Tibbetts 2004) in a concocted music-historical context.

In writing the screenplay, Shaffer closely collaborated with Forman (Gianakaris 1985). Already at the beginning of their cooperation, Forman and Shaffer had agreed that under no circumstances did they want to create a “stagey hybrid” but rather a new work: “another fulfilment of the same impulse which had created the original” (Shaffer 2007, 110).

Forman convinced Shaffer to pursue a naturalistic approach for their adaptation that would meet moviegoers’ expectations rather than a formalistic narrative, which Shaffer initially would have preferred (Shaffer 2007; Jersey 2002). Consequently, they decided to employ conventional narration, using suitable cinematic codes and historical details to create a verisimilar fictional world. Yet the resulting movie, *Amadeus*, was never meant to be a documentary biopic, even though it distinctly refers to the real Mozart’s life. Both play and film are expressly not designed as factual biographies. Shaffer admits, however, that he integrated numerous facts from the composer’s life into the plot (Shaffer 2007). These include childhood events and the wedding of Mozart, his musical career, the death of his father, and the existence of most of the characters in the film.

Mozart’s music occupies a cardinal role: in Shaffer’s words, “music almost becomes a character, the most important character” (Kakutani 1984, 20). *Amadeus* is principally structured around the composer’s central works and their performance, which act as a self-referential scheme of correspondence (Schubert 1982). Like the play, the movie consists of two acts, which can be further divided into ten sequences and 38 subsequences (Bomnüter 2013) as outlined in Table 1.

The first act begins in wintry Vienna of 1823 to the sounds of the overture from *Don Giovanni*: Salieri tries to commit suicide while loudly proclaiming his guilt for Mozart’s death. The next day, in a mental asylum, the aged composer

**Table 1** Sequence protocol: *Amadeus* (2002)

Sequence	Content	Time code	Subsequences
1	Exposition and First Encounter	00:00:00	01–03
2	The Emperor’s Assignment	00:23:24	04–07
3	Il Seraglio and Mozart’s Wedding	00:37:09	08–09
4	Salieri’s Declaration of War on God	00:52:26	10–13
5	Mozart’s Hopes Obstructed	01:07:09	14–15
6	The Father’s Visit	01:14:33	16–19
7	The Marriage of Figaro and Salieri’s Scheming	01:28:33	20–26
8	Don Giovanni and the Father’s Ghost	01:51:25	27–28
9	The Magic Flute and Mozart’s Downfall	02:02:46	29–34
10	Requiem and Mozart’s Death	02:27:05	35–38
	The End (Fade out)	02:48:11	

Source: Bomnüter (2013, modified)



begins his life confession to a young priest (Father Vogler), which serves as a frame story for the movie. Salieri's subjective narration starts with alternating flashbacks from his and Mozart's childhood. The first act ends with Salieri's declaration of war on God in subsequence 13, the turning point of both play and movie.

The second act begins with Salieri's recommendation to the emperor not to employ Mozart. It culminates in the finale, which, in dramatic irony, shows the two musicians spending the night at Mozart's deathbed to complete his *Requiem*. After his ensuing death and burial, the film cuts back to Salieri and Father Vogler. As they part, the mischievous Salieri declares himself the patron saint of mediocrity and, addressing the priest and his fellow inmates to the sounds of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor*, gives absolution to "Mediocrities everywhere".<sup>2</sup>

Despite the movie's above-average length, the plot is told in a lively manner through subjective camera shots, frequent scene shifts and flashbacks, as well as numerous rapid, high-contrast cuts. Further creative choices that have largely shaped *Amadeus* focus on characters, dialogue, production design, and music. In casting the two lead roles, Forman deliberately forewent well-known stars because he wanted the audience to perceive Salieri and Mozart in an unbiased fashion. Given the different contemporary portraits of Mozart, the role was cast with the rather inconspicuous, 30-year-old Tom Hulce. Salieri was cast with the 44-year-old Fahrid Murray Abraham whose distinctive acting and physiognomy corresponded to Forman's idea of a lonely Italian court composer (Jersey 2002). The fact that Hulce is shorter than Abraham and other actors in the film was used for the staging: Like a child, Mozart must look up to everyone else, and the aged Salieri mockingly refers to him as "that little man". The visual contrast is further enhanced by the costumes: Mozart's colorful clothes and extravagant wigs give him an eccentric, playful look, whereas Salieri is characterized by dark, plain clothes and a modest wig, giving him an austere appearance.

While Shaffer's play is designed as a two-person drama with only minor supporting characters, the secondary characters in the movie are developed lifelike, and various new characters are added. Nearly all are based on real-life people. One of the major supporting roles added is Leopold Mozart, portrayed as a strict, dominant father figure. The role of Mozart's wife Constanze was enhanced through additional scenes, e.g., in their marital apartment. Furthermore, Emperor Joseph II and his court were significantly expanded and fully fleshed out in the movie. Being newly added, Father Vogler serves as a figure of reflection for the narrative.

A few characters, such as the Venticelli, were deleted as their function, to inform the audience of events that cannot be shown on stage, has been taken over by the narrative of the movie.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed plot synopsis see IMDb (2021).

For the operatic stylization and elaborate rhetoric of the dialogues in the play, filmic and musical equivalents were created accordingly. Beyond any changes required by the adding, changing, and removing of characters, Shaffer and Forman intended to make the formalized language of the play accessible to a broader cinema audience without losing its quality (Kakutani 1984; Shaffer 2007). Complicated dialogues were simplified to approximate everyday language. Numerous foreign language dialogues and terms, intended to express the cosmopolitan atmosphere at the Viennese court, were radically shortened. Only salutations and addresses like “Herr Direktor” or punctual phrases like “You are cattivo, court composer” in subsequence 4 have been preserved (Kakutani 1984).

The visual aesthetics of *Amadeus* are based on a naturalistic production design, through which the audience is given a closed, seemingly authentic illusion of Rococo Vienna. The decision to shoot most of the film in Prague also contributed to this effect. Under the socialist regime of the time, the building fabric of the 18th century had been largely preserved. Streets and squares provided an authentic, historic look (Culshaw 2002). Furthermore, Forman and his team used unique locations, including a former hospital from the Thirty Years’ War, the baroque *Gryspek Palace*, and the classicist *Estates Theater* (formerly *Tyl Theater*), in which *Don Giovanni* was first performed in 1787 (Jersey 2002).

The locations’ authentic appearance is accentuated by naturalistic lighting and continued through set decoration, costumes, and make-up. The actors’ clothes and hairstyles largely correspond to the fashion at the time, presumably except for Mozart’s extravagant wigs (Yatt 2002). They convey a colorful, sensual image of the presumed lifestyle of Vienna’s high society. At the same time, they serve for characterization, especially in the cases of Mozart and Salieri.

The most consequential stylistic device in the movie is ultimately the use of film music. Shaffer rejected repetitions that focus on a central musical theme: “I did not want the Mozart theme” (Jersey 2002, 00:06:39–42). For enabling the audience to hear the qualitative difference between Mozart’s music and that of his contemporary rivals, he wrote detailed instructions for incorporating musical works into the screenplay. More than 40 percent of the scenes contain explicit information about the timing and function of each musical piece. Moreover, the renowned Neville Mariner was hired as chief conductor for the music recordings. Afterward, the sound of the pieces was amplified to further increase their effect (Tibbetts 2004; Gianakaris 1985).

Excerpts of selected works are diegetically performed in the film: several of Mozart’s operas, Salieri’s *Axur*, the *Piano Concerto No. 15 in B flat major*, etc. The performance scenes are accurately fitted into the plot, just as whole plot sequences were developed based on Mozart’s central works (Gianakaris 1985). Other works are placed extradiegetically, but always with direct reference to the plot, e.g., the *Mass in C minor* for Mozart’s wedding (subsequence 9); various works when Salieri sifts through Mozart’s music samples (subsequence 11); *Don Giovanni* referencing his father; and the *Requiem* while Mozart dictates it

to Salieri. Forman uses the musical pieces for scenic transitions and the creation of atmospheric moods, such as during Mozart’s return from Schlumberg to the cheerful tune of the *Piano Concerto No. 15 in B flat major* in subsequence 15, which abruptly changes into the overture from *Don Giovanni* when he runs into his father. The resulting effect is a close association between Mozart’s person and his iconic music in the audience’s mind.

## FROM MOZART TO AMADEUS

The movie’s particular combination of a naturalistic approach with conventional narrative patterns generates an appearance of non-fictionality, far different from the operatic play. The historical locations, the detailed set design and costumes, the naturalistic lighting of the scenes, and the historicizing musical performances contribute to an impression of utmost authenticity. Against this background, *Amadeus* creates a coherent, albeit largely distorted, and reduced image of the “real” Mozart and the circumstances surrounding his death. This is being reinforced by the distance of around 200 years from the movie’s realization, which impedes a comparison with other, more credible sources of information.

This re-created image is largely shaped by the central, interrelated concepts of *Amadeus* that are conveyed to the audience through cinematic narration. Beyond the search for meaning and God, the relationship between genius and mediocrity, and mental disorder, which are already laid out in the play, the movie also focuses on artist’s cult and popular music—issues I will elaborate on in the following section.<sup>3</sup>

### *Genius vs. Mediocrity*

At the center of the movie’s plot are two rival representatives of musical theater in the late 18th-century: Mozart and Salieri as his antagonist.

*Amadeus* portrays Mozart as a musical genius with an innate, prodigious talent. We see him composing exceptional music pieces effortlessly in his head and putting them on paper without any need for corrections. Even though the real Mozart was certainly able to work rapidly, false starts and composition sketches are documented (Brown 1992).

Mozart’s characterization in the movie thus conforms to the 19th-century romantic notion of a musical genius “possessed” with abilities beyond his understanding, linking him to other musical prodigies like Beethoven and Rossini. Such iconic representation ties in with Schopenhauer’s corresponding concept based on Plato’s ideas (Tibbetts 2004; Hofe 1994). According to Schopenhauer (1819/1966), a genius is naturally blessed with an “abnormal excess of intellect” (377), a “surplus of the power of knowledge” (378), and a

<sup>3</sup>Except for the search for meaning/God embodied by the Salieri character, as it has limited impact on the representation of Mozart.

corresponding imagination. At the same time, Schopenhauer attributes a “childlike character” (393) to genius and points to various disadvantages: a genius easily falls into “mere extremes” through his “enhanced power of knowledge”; his intellect also frequently eludes voluntary control, so that he may become useless for life, and “by his conduct we are sometimes reminded of madness” (389).

Forman and Shaffer overtly dramatize these disadvantages by showing Mozart’s difficulties in behaving adequately within court society. For example, in subsequence 3 he undiplomatically defies the instructions of his employer, Archbishop Colloredo; and in subsequence 6 he confuses Van Swieten with the emperor and, as in the other official encounters, is unable to articulate himself in proper language and tone. In addition, he does not reflect in any way, whether the themes and source materials chosen for his operas seem appropriate. As Brown (1992) convincingly argues, such behavior is highly unlikely as it would have resulted in banishment from court or worse. It can be assumed that the real Mozart knew to some extent how to approach the emperor and his entourage. In the movie, however, his childlike naivete seems to render him helpless in the face of courtly intrigues.

Furthermore, he is introduced as an immature, bawdy, and narcissistic person with a penetrating, crazy laugh that stands in stark contrast to the brilliance of his works. This contrast is brought to the point through his dialogue: “I’m a vulgar man. But I assure you, my music is not” (Forman 2002, 1:35:22–31). Visually, his colorful costumes and eccentric wigs clearly distinguish him from his austere opponent, Salieri.

In the movie, Salieri has a perfect command of the manners and intrigues at the imperial court. He also proves to be an accomplished composer who, apparently, is the only other person able to recognize the divine genius of Mozart’s works without ever being able to match them with his own “mediocre” pieces.

By emphasizing the disparity of the two musicians, Salieri is assigned to Schopenhauer’s (1819/1966) species of “mere men of talent” whose works are just able to meet the needs of the current zeitgeist, with which genius is often in conflict, and for which they receive “reward and approbation”; however, in contrast to the works of genius, without significance for posterity: “But to the next generation their works are no longer enjoyable; they must be replaced by others; and these do not fail to appear” (390).

### *Mental Disorder*

Shaffer designed *Amadeus* as a psychological drama. In the movie, Salieri’s life confession, addressed to the audience in the play, takes the form of a “real” confession to a priest. At the same time, it bears the characteristics of a psychotherapeutic session, with Salieri as the client. We learn how his initial curiosity turns into pathological envy when he meets Mozart and learns about his musical genius and human deficits. In retrospect, he expresses his consternation:

"That was Mozart. That! That giggling, dirty-minded creature I had just seen, crawling on the floor!" (Forman 2002, 00:20:15–24).

Harsono (2017) attests Salieri a narcissistic personality disorder. Turning into "mediocrity madness" (76), his envy triggers a series of destructive actions that destroy Mozart and ultimately also himself. The real Salieri, however, seems to have been on rather friendly terms with the six years younger composer (Brown 1992).

Even more than with Salieri, the film points to psychological defects in Mozart, which are essentially explained from his childhood story. At the beginning of subsequence 2, the movie shows Leopold Mozart having his young son perform piano tricks blindfolded in front of ecclesiastical dignitaries. The scene leaves no doubt as to how accurate the description as "trained monkey" by Salieri's father is. From Mozart's controlled, most likely unhappy childhood, the movie draws a direct line to his display of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) assumed also for the real Mozart (e.g., Ashoori and Jankovich 2007). This includes his suggestive, scatological puns, e.g., in subsequence 3, which at the same time indicate an anal fixation, as well as his excessive, crazy laughter, hyperactivity, and other forms of odd behavior.

Additionally, the plot reveals a pronounced father fixation. Leopold Mozart appears as the dominant character, whose influence his son cannot escape, neither through his musical accomplishments nor through his relocation to Vienna and marriage to Constanze, not even after Leopold's death in subsequence 27. His father's presence is visualized by his grim portrait in the apartment. Plagued by severe remorse, Mozart creates the character of the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni*. Salieri's appearance in Leopold's mask finally triggers delusions in Mozart. Even before, Salieri's characterization, e.g., his show of austerity, had suggested parallels with Leopold and made it easy for him to win Mozart's trust as a fatherly "friend". In the climactic final, he takes on Leopold's role at last.

### *Artist's Cult and Popular Music*

Through its disparate representation of the main characters, *Amadeus* hints at two different artistic self-concepts. Whereas Salieri, a keen, dutiful craftsman, dedicates his works to his clients' fame and the aspiration of sublime, eternal values, Mozart sees himself as a free, creative artist. He rather strives for self-actualization and is not ready to let himself be curtailed in his artistic vision. When Orsini orders him to remove the ballet scene from his *Figaro* in subsequence 24, he desperately complains: "They say I've got to re-write the opera, but it's perfect as it is. I can't rewrite... what's perfect" (Forman 2002, 01:39:33–43). In contrast to Salieri, Mozart cultivates an excessive lifestyle that contributes significantly to his ruin.

This is illustrated when Leopold visits his son and daughter-in-law in Vienna in subsequence 16. He finds wine glasses and dishes from the night before, discovers Constanze still in bed, and brings up unpleasant questions regarding

their financial situation. The scenes are historically not accurate and rather catered to 20th-century notions of an artist's lifestyle (Brown 1992). In a similar vein, Forman does not portray Mozart as a Classical composer-conductor. Instead, he is leading his orchestra like modern conductors from a central pedestal, rather than of the harpsichord as was customary in the 18th-century (Yatt 2002; Walsh 1984). Furthermore, with his shrill wigs and clothing, eccentric habits, boasting, alcoholic escapades, and affairs with musicians, he rather appears like a modern pop star. It is quite compelling that Prince Rogers Nelson (1958–2016), formerly known as “Prince”, had been repeatedly compared to Mozart (e.g., Pareles 1996). The similarities between Mozart's wigs and costumes in the movie and the look of the so-called “New Romantics”, represented in the music charts of the early 1980s by bands like *Duran Duran* and *Culture Club*, are also unmistakable. Adding to its pop-cultural references, the movie dramatizes Mozart's untimely death, ranking him among other tragically deceased musical icons like Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, or John Lennon.

These references are decidedly not accidental. They reflect on the booming artist's cult of the 1980s, boosted by the emergence of the music-video channel MTV at the beginning of the decade. Forman already tried to consider the influence of music television on the audience's viewing habits in his editing (Sweet 2002).

## RECEPTION AND LASTING EFFECTS

Forman's and Shaffer's approach of conveying the play's central concepts through naturalistic cinematic means and conventional narrative techniques and, instead of relying on well-known actors, by foregrounding the power of Mozart's music proved to be extremely successful.

At the 57th Academy Awards in 1985, *Amadeus* was nominated eleven times and received a total of eight Academy Awards, including best film, best director, best male lead actor (Abraham), best costume design, and best adapted screenplay. Its numerous other awards include four BAFTA Awards, a French *César* for best foreign film, and three Italian *David di Donatello* Awards (IMDb 2021).

After its theatrical release, *Amadeus* quickly enjoyed great popularity with cinema audiences: With a modest production budget of USD 18 million, the movie achieved a box office of USD 51.97 million in the US alone (The Numbers 2021). In Germany, more than 3.27 million viewers had watched *Amadeus* by 1986 (FFA 2021).

In view of its successes and convincing story world, it is hardly surprising that Forman's movie shaped Mozart's image among numerous viewers (Melograni 2007; Brown 1992). At the same time, it gave new impetus to conspiracy theories about his murder (Ebeling 2006; Tibbetts 2004). In their plainness, such forms of reception can be understood as evidence of Luhmann's (2009) thesis that reality is objectively not accessible but constituted by the

system of mass media. Speaking in terms of iconicity, we can observe how additional meaning is accumulated and transformed.

Several critics, however, severely denounced the circumstance that *Amadeus* does not depict accurate facts. Fixated on a conventional image of Mozart and his music as representatives of high culture, they perceived Forman’s fictionalized interpretation, combining genius, deviance, and popular culture, as iconoclastic,<sup>4</sup> in the “tradition of spreading mis- and disinformation about Mozart” (Walsh 1984, 52). Criticism centered on the ahistorical representations of Salieri and especially Mozart, as in Kael’s (1984) scathing review in the *New Yorker*, which condemns *Amadeus* for “showing you Mozart as a rubber-faced grinning buffoon with a randy turn of mind” (122) what aligns with Walsh’s (1984) verdict “‘Amadeus,’ Shamadeus”. Further criticism was directed against invented storylines, particularly the climactic sequence on Mozart’s deathbed (Kael 1984; Nachman 1984; Walsh 1984); and, finally, against the anachronistic musical performance practices shown in the movie (Vineberg 1985; Walsh 1984). However, these responses not only indicate shortcomings in recognizing Forman’s imaginative artwork as a fictional biography but also, in their obstinacy, indirectly illustrate the effectiveness of his iconoclastic approach.

Despite those negative reviews, *Amadeus* received largely positive press coverage (Townsend 1986). Canby (1984), in the *New York Times*, described it as “handsome” and “fascinating” (22) and expressed satisfaction that Shaffer’s “ability to celebrate genius” has been retained in the film adaptation. For the 2002 director’s cut the rating platform *Metacritic* (2021) even gave it a “must see” designation based on a calculated top score of 88 points from 28 film reviews. *Time Magazine* lauded the movie as “grand, sprawling entertainment that incites enthrallment” (Corliss 1984, 74–75) and is only surpassed by Ebert (1984), who gave *Amadeus* his maximum rating and tellingly praises Mozart’s presentation as “eighteenth-century Bruce Springsteen”. Particularly this last voice echoes Forman’s strategy to parallel Mozart with contemporary icons of pop and rock music.

The worldwide commercial success of *Amadeus*, furthered by its release for home entertainment, aroused great, widespread interest in Mozart and his music. Quickly, he became the most popular classical musician (Marshall 1997; Taruskin 1990). As an aftermath even the enrollment in college music courses allegedly increased (Marshall 1997).

The movie’s transfictional qualities are also evident in its influence on the contemporary music scene: The pop-rap song *Rock Me Amadeus* by fellow Austrian Falco (1957–98) was released the following year and became the first and, so far, only German-language single to reach number 1 in the US billboard charts (Borgmann 2018). In the associated music video, historically and modernly dressed actors are contrasted in open allusion to Forman’s film, while the eccentric Falco himself poses as “Mozart”.

<sup>4</sup> Here understood as the attempt of contesting an icon by reframing it (Carnes 2013).



Given *Amadeus*' enormous commercial and artistic accomplishments, it is hardly surprising that later biopics about historical musicians attempted to imitate its style, though usually without notable success. These include Corbiau's 1994 *Farinelli* and two Beethoven films, Rose's 1994 *Immortal Beloved*, and Holland's 2006 *Copying Beethoven* which also recalls the climactic sequence of *Amadeus* through the device of transcribing notes (Keillholz 2007).

Forman's movie can also be regarded as a forerunner for a new type of feature film, which uses the biography of a well-known personality merely as an inspiration for a lightly narrated, largely fictional plot with a detailed historical production design, such as Madden's 1998 *Shakespeare in Love* or Sofia Coppola's 2006 *Marie Antoinette*.

Finally, *Amadeus*' lasting effects on the reconstruction of the "Mozart" icon are corroborated by instances of its creative appropriation and re-articulation (Solaroli 2015), e.g., cinematic references, as in McTiernan's 1993 *Last Action Hero*, or parodistic recontextualizations, as in the episode *Margical History Tour* in the 15th season of the animated TV series *The Simpsons* (Burton 2013).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, it can be said that Forman, with his movie version of *Amadeus*, has managed to reshape the historical Mozart image into a modernized icon through the skillful use of cinematic narrative techniques. His "Amadeus" is reduced to a few easily recognizable, iconic characteristics that were adapted and reassembled to create a coherent portrayal. Due to the movie's overwhelming success, the image of Mozart as a childish, narcissistic musical genius, plagued by OCD and oedipal conflict, and leading the life of a pop-rock megastar, has been disseminated internationally. In a constructive iconoclastic act, *Amadeus* thereby successfully contested and partly substituted the predominant Mozart icon with its own.

The underlying representation mode might well be criticized for its intermingling of historical facts and fiction. As Keefe (2009) observes, however, the movie should rather be valued "as a reading of Mozart reception and our collective roles in it" (53) whose metareferential quality validates a self-reflective approach to media iconization.

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# “Advertising Is the Art of Aiming at the Head and Hitting the Wallet”: How Blindly Do Commercials Shoot Cupid’s Arrows?

*Stephanie Großmann*

## INTRODUCTION

In its many different medial manifestations,<sup>1</sup> advertising is a concept that tends to tie into the popular and draw on the field of popular culture—after all, its aim is to endow products with a surplus value that makes them appear particularly innovative and desirable to a broad mass of people. It is precisely these values which are found primarily, and *par excellence*, in popular and mass media.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, advertising takes its inspiration from the field of pop culture; on the other hand, it also forms and shapes popular culture by being disseminating within mass media.

Advertising, for both economical and attention-psychological reasons, is designed to transmit as much information—be it facts, incentives, or emotions—as possible in a memorable way within an extreme time limit. It often includes signs that can potentially unfold a larger context of compressed meaning. Therefore, advertising is a prime resource for exploring concepts of cultural icons.

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed analysis of advertising from a semiotic perspective, see Borstnar (2002) and Beasley and Danesi (2002); for audio-visual advertising, see Grimm (1996), Krah (2020), and Krah and Gräf (2013).

<sup>2</sup>This is based on a concept of popularity as outlined by John Fiske (2012), which the editors also refer to in their introduction to this publication.

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In this chapter, I address the question of how cultural icons can be marked and serve as complex signs in advertising. To heuristically limit the field of research on cultural icons, I focus on audio-visual formats that are broadcast as commercials on television, in cinemas, or on the internet (and leave out other advertising formats), and on cultural icons that use opera as a discursive field; this distinction allows me to emphasize cultural icons which are initialized on the auditory level, and then spread to the visual level. This allows focus on cultural icons from the sonic field that have received less academic attention than names, quotations, and portraits of famous people. Furthermore, this chapter explores how the texts of reference are exploited in the deep structure of an appellative advertising message via cultural icons.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the chapter sheds light on how blindly Cupid's arrows are being shot in some commercials. Based on selected case studies,<sup>4</sup> I propose a typology that can be used to grasp different reference levels of auditory cultural icons and their semantic potential. In the examples examined by this chapter, there is a specific tension at work that is perhaps inherent to all cultural icons. On the one hand, the reference text must be identified and known in order to be able to decipher the meaning, but on the other hand, knowing the original text or narrative too well may prove to be a hindrance, because it distorts or even contradicts the intended advertising claim. Before I turn to these issues, I briefly give a theoretical outline of the term 'cultural icon' underlying this chapter, and point out key signification systems and the formative framework of audio-visual commercials.

### *The Cultural Icon*

Within the framework of the cultural icon, the focus is not on iconic signs on the level of a primary sign system, in the sense of a direct connection between signified, signifier, and referent (as described by Charles Sanders Peirce 1983). Instead, the focus is on sign processes at a secondary level.<sup>5</sup> This means that an image, a word, a stroke of writing, a quotation, or a sound refers to a whole set of meanings—and sometimes an entire narrative or a whole field of discourse. Icons of this secondary order stand out from the surrounding field of other

<sup>3</sup>The term 'text' is not meant to refer only to text in the narrower linguistic-written sense, but more broadly to all communicates that are structured multimodal webs of signs with an intention to mean (Krah 2015, 36).

<sup>4</sup>My research follows a qualitative approach and focuses mainly on paradigmatic aspects of the advertisements. It is based on 35 commercials broadcast between 1985–2020, with a focus on German-speaking origins (23 commercials). It also includes 12 commercials used internationally and in several languages, primarily promoting perfume. A quantitative evaluation is not the focus of my analysis.

<sup>5</sup>Regarding the basic semiotic terms, see Krah (2015, 50–55).

signs through this surplus in meaning. In other words, this happens through their overdetermination; from this approach, second-level signs can be described as super-signs that refer widely beyond themselves. This is the very reason why these types of signs can acquire an auratic quality. Although all icons require a learned recognition of meaning, secondary signs differ from primary signs because their characteristic surplus of meaning must also be deciphered; in a semiotic sense, they represent a combination of iconic and symbolic sign. In this chapter, the term ‘cultural’ regarding the icon is not referring to a general, ethnological concept, but is applied to a specific (but not sharply-defined) thematic area: namely, literature and art. These fields of discourse serve as the source of second-level icons and their cohesion of meaning.

### *Key Signification Systems and Formative Framework of Audio-Visual Commercials*

In terms of media semiotics, the surface structure of audio-visual formats—including the commercial—is composed of various information channels which interact with each other both simultaneously and successively. The auditory information channels comprise speech, sounds, and music and the visual information channels comprise images and writing. The commercial is multimodal, with signs from separate sign systems emerging from the different information channels.<sup>6</sup> Advertisements’ specific formatting in the overall field of audio-visual media includes: (1) appellative and persuasive alignment; (2) reference to extra-filmic reality established through the advertised product; (3) creation of a specific added value that differentiates the advertised product from others and makes it appear desirable; and (4) a discourse framework that is limited in several ways, subordinating the content to a (sales) goal, but also subjecting it to historical, cultural, moral, and legal conditions (Krah 2020, 483–484). Cultural icons in advertising are embedded in this formative framework. They can initially manifest themselves on any information channel and then spread to the other channels by coherently fitting into the frame of reference provided by the cultural icon. Cultural icons that are initiated via the information channel of music and incorporate the opera<sup>7</sup> emerge as direct and largely-unchanged adoptions of musical material from operas; this direct adaptation serves as a reference to, and demonstrates a sacred status of, the opera in society.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>For more information on media semiotics, its methodology and its descriptive inventory, see Gräf et al. (2017).

<sup>7</sup>On the process of producing meaning through music in film, see Großmann (2008).

<sup>8</sup>Of course, certain modifications are conceivable, such as a change in instrumentation, the transformation of arias or choral movements into solely-instrumental movements, new texts replacing the original libretto text, prolongations, or repetitions of central themes, or even abridgements and omissions that reduce the auditory segment to key musical themes.

## CULTURAL ICONS, ADVERTISING, AND THE OPERA

*Musical Genre*

Quite fundamentally, certain semantics are associated with the musical genre of opera in the Western cultural framework, many of which are invoked when using opera music in commercials. These semantics include ‘high cultural value’, ‘dignity’, ‘stability in value’, ‘richness in tradition’, and—in contrast to purely-symphonic music—perhaps also ‘passion’, ‘emotion’, and ‘drama’. To evoke these semantics, an advertisement does not even have to use real opera music; it is sufficient to use music that has an operatic gesture—in other words, music that sounds like opera. This could be insinuated by a classical orchestral instrumentation, a *bel canto* vocal style, and musical complexity in thematic and harmonic arrangements.

*Emotional Gesture*

Additionally, the emotional gesture of the musical structure can be included as a point of reference for advertisements. Music is particularly well suited to convey emotions because emotions are associated with certain patterns of movement, which can be signified through melody, rhythm, harmony, agogics, and instrumentation. These parameters give music a ‘gestural form’ that correlates with the gestural form of emotions (Bierwisch 1990). In Western society, for example, mourning tends to be associated with a slow, introverted, dull gesture, which can be reflected by a rhythmically calm, slowing melody in a minor key with rather quiet dynamics. Joy, on the other hand, is expressed in a more lively and powerful way, which can be emphasized by a dotted rhythm, an ascending melody line, and a major key.

Advertising can use this emotional gesture from individual opera pieces to associate them with the advertised product. Thus, the powerful, dissonant choral movement in *fortissimo* and the demanding timpani beats from Carl Orff’s “O fortuna”—the opening and ending piece from *Carmina Burana* (premiere 1937)—transfers its intensity to Nestlé chocolate (Nestlé 1991a). A montage with multiple fast cuts supports and channels this auditory intensity by correlating the consumption of chocolate with the values of ‘vitality’, ‘powerful speed’, and ‘captivating agility’ via images of a galloping horse, spinning tire rims, and a man with an épée. Thus, overall, the almost-overwhelming auditory and visual experience of the advertisement is associated with the experience of taste.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>The commercial described depicts a man eating a piece of dark chocolate. There are three other advertisements by Nestlé for Milk Cream (1991b) and Cream Truffle Chocolate (1992, 1993) that also use Orff’s “O fortuna” and associate the consumption of the chocolate with visual concepts in a montage. However, these commercials are about women consuming the chocolate and the taste experience is redirected here into the erotic experience of their own bodies. The investigation of (quite problematic) gender concepts is also worth exploring but is not discussed here due to limitations in space.

At the other end of the emotional spectrum, the duet “Viens, Mallika!” from Léo Delibé’s opera *Lakmé* (first performed in 1883)—featuring a soft, flowing sound of two female voices moving in bound coloratura at intervals of a third, and *pianissimo* accompanied only by gentle strings—forms a musical counterpart to the tenderness and sweetness of the apricots used to create Darbo jam (2017). Visually, the advertisement correlates the growing and ripening of the processed fruit with the maturation of three girls into pretty, young women who flourish because they are “*gut behütet, mit viel Zeit und noch mehr Liebe*” [“well cared for, with lots of time and even more love”]. However, further intertextual references to Delibé’s opera cannot be coherently integrated into the commercial’s added-value construction. For example, immediately following this duet in the opera, Lakmé—the enchanting daughter of a Brahmin priest—realizes the sacred grove where she lives has not protected her from invading English officers, and she ultimately kills herself by eating a poisonous jimsonweed blossom. This is certainly not a piece of information that would inspire confidence in a jam. It shows that knowing the opera’s narrative too well could actually be a hindrance to the advertising intent, because it contradicts the intended message. Moreover, it exemplifies that advertisers can pick and choose the motifs they transfer without taking too much of the original into account when using iconic opera.

### *Language*

As a further reference level, the language of a song can be included and involved in the advertising message. For example, frozen pizza commercials from Dr. Oetker’s Ristorante brand promote their products as authentically Italian with the canzone “La donna é mobile”—from Giuseppe Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (premiere 1851)—to refer to Italy both in terms of language and sound. The structure of the commercials is based on heterosexual couples eating a pizza together as a prelude to erotic seduction. In the commercials from the 1990s (Dr. Oetker 1994, 1995), the canzone is embedded intradiegetically—a record player musically accompanies the pizza preparation—to give an Italian-restaurant flair. The suggestive power is heightened in a 2006 version of the advertisement which adds to the Italian ambience visually as well as auditorily—the man and woman now dine to the sounds of the canzone from *Rigoletto* directly in front of the Trevi fountain, which ultimately turns out to be a film being projected onto a screen in a (non-Italian) backyard (Dr. Oetker 2006).

The basic model is significantly enhanced in the 2019 version of the ad. Now a variety of men are shown preparing pizza for their girlfriends, partners, or wives. The fact that men are doing something for the women is also emphasized by how the canzone is embedded in the advertisement, because now it is sung by the men themselves as they prepare dinner (Dr. Oetker 2019).



Furthermore, the implication that it is a ‘genuine’ Italian seduction—implied by the men speaking Italian—is coherently continued insofar as the overall setting of the commercial seems to be located in Italy, based on the city architecture shown in a panoramic shot.<sup>10</sup> However, like with Delibe’s opera, if one considers the meaning of the Italian text, or even the plot of the opera, an intertextual conflict arises that cannot be coherently integrated into the added-value strategy of the advertising. The lines of the opera—“*La donna è mobile / Qual piuma al vento, / Muta d’accento—e di pensiero. / Sempre un amabile / Leggiadro viso, / In pianto o in riso è menzogner*” (Verdi 1870, 23) [“The woman is capricious / Like a feather in the wind, / She changes her words / And her thoughts. / Always a lovely, / Pretty face, / Crying or laughing / Is it lying?”]—are certainly not suitable for seducing a partner. Furthermore, in *Rigoletto*, this piece is sung by the Duke of Mantua in the third act, when his own unstable enticing and unscrupulous abandoning of women is already evident. Therefore, these semantics contradict the image of men portrayed in the advertisements. It is indeed clear that eating pizza is staged as an act of seduction, but it is based on authentic affection between partners and not immoral, deceitful intent.<sup>11</sup> This shows that the language of an opera can signify the advertising message without simultaneously integrating the linguistic content or the context of the opera’s plot.

### Text

On another reference level, and in contrast to the above examples, the meaning of the libretto text can be made coherent. An example of this is found in the Austrian commercial for the detergent Ariel (2016), which overlays the beginning of Figaro’s cavatina “Largo al factotum” from Gioachino Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville* (premiere 1816). Under the headline “*Der große Ariel Waschtest*” [“The Great Ariel Wash Test”], a huge white cloth is spread on the ground in the square of a historic city center. A soccer-playing crowd appears and moves towards this cloth with a soccer ball; the ball and shoes become increasingly covered with brown mud along the way. The soccer game continues on the cloth, as those around cheer the players on, drinking and spilling wine. This causes a wide variety of stains. Once the game is over, the cloth is

<sup>10</sup> On closer inspection, however, the city backdrop turns not out to be an Italian city, but Lisbon, which is, nonetheless, staged here as Italian due to its Mediterranean characteristics.

<sup>11</sup> This may also be the reason why the advertisements for Choco Crossies—which have also been using “La donna è mobile” as music since 1985—have given the melody its own lyrics (“*Oh wie verführerisch, sind Choco Crossies*” [“Oh how seductive Choco Crossies are”]), which redirects the paradigm of seduction exclusively to the advertised product (e.g., Nestlé 1985, 1990, 1996). From the mid-1990s onwards, the overwriting of the cultural icon with a brand’s own lyrics is so firmly anchored in the cultural knowledge of the time that, from that point onwards, some variations of the Choco Crossies commercial replace long text passages with humming or whistling (e.g., Nestlé 1994, 2010).

cut in half; half is washed with Ariel and the results are presented: on one side, there is the unwashed, completely dirty cloth and on the other side, the bright white cloth.

On the auditory level, the extradiegetic cavatina connotes the playful element of the football game in its cheerful, agile, almost upbeat mood. Even though only the prelude and the introductory “La ran la lera” by Figaro can be heard in the commercial, the entire text of the cavatina can be meaningfully incorporated into the advertising message. The text emphasizes that the opera’s barber protagonist combines the highest and highly-demanded qualities—he is, so to speak, the best of the best: “*Bravo bravissimo / Fortunatissimo / Per verità! / [...] Pronto a far tutto, / La notte e il giorno / Sempre d’intorno, / In giro sta*” (Rossini 1940, 7) [“Bravo bravissimo; / Most fortunate of men / Indeed you are! / [...] By night and by day, / Ready for everything / Always in commotion, / Always in constant motion”]. It is precisely these outstanding qualities of being better than all other detergents that the product claims for itself via the libretto text. This is a real benefit for the product’s added value. On the visual level, it is the very aspect of competition that is alluded to but not acted out; in neither the football match nor the comparison of the cloth panels do two opponents compete against each other, so there are no winners or losers in this constellation. Thus, visually, the commercial does not emphasize competition, but a harmonious situation; this allows it to claim the semantics of ‘humility’, ‘community’ and ‘unity’ for itself. In contrast, the competitive advertising message of being better than all the others is shifted to the implied text of the song, and transferred into the deep structure of the commercial. Both messages are crucial for the detergent.

### Plot

The embedding of opera music as a cultural icon can produce an even broader frame of reference if—in addition to the immediately-audible verbal and musical signs—it also uses the plot context or narrative structure for its advertising message. In doing so, however, it relies on a more comprehensive knowledge of the recipients, who must recognize the origin and the story of the opera piece.

This is illustrated by an advertisement for the optician Fielmann (1997). The commercial shows a short episode between a bespectacled woman and a man who are both in a sold-out opera house during a performance. While the woman and the audience are watching what is happening on stage, the man fixes his gaze on the woman sitting a few seats away from him. She notices the look, smiles, and writes something on a piece of paper. During the applause, she hands the note to the man, on which he reads: “*Von Fielmann.*” [“From Fielmann.”]. The visual data create a punchline structure (Gräf et al. 2017, 302–304), because the syntagmatic arrangement of the information misleadingly suggests that the woman wrote down her telephone number for the man.

The opera that is heard (and in some shots, also seen on stage) is Wolfgang A. Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (premiere 1787)—namely, the duettino of the ninth scene, in which Don Giovanni ensnares a peasant girl, Zerlina. Against

the backdrop of Zerlina's naïve seductiveness in Mozart's opera, the commercial reverses the situation between stage action and events in the audience. The female spectator with the glasses does not allow herself to be taken in by the man's flirtatious looks, but reacts in a superior manner; with these glasses she achieves perfect vision and, metaphorically, sees right through him. She even sees the art of seduction clearly and, unlike the female characters in the opera, she does not allow herself to be lured in by a would-be Don Giovanni.<sup>12</sup>

Implicitly, the advertisement also negotiates the relationship between tradition and progress and integrates this meaning to increase the product's value; just as the woman obviously enjoys the art in the opera house, she also appreciates the traditional craft of the optician. At the same time, however, within this framework, she can autonomously emancipate herself from the norms and values conveyed by art, just as she chooses (what appears to be) a modern glasses frame. Fielmann glasses thus homologously link traditional craftsmanship and progressive design in the advertising message. Nevertheless, the commercial counteracts these emancipatory developments by placing the woman's décolleté in the center of the frame not only in the shots that match the perspective of the flirting man, but also in the shots that convey impartial information. Furthermore, the commercial establishes an analogy between the stage action framed by gilt balustrades and the female décolleté, which is also highlighted by a richly decorated, golden braid on the dress. Because of this, the woman herself is staged as a work of art (and degraded to an erotic object). By incorporating the opera's storyline by means of cultural icons, advertisements can address multi-layered perspectives and even link semantics that initially seem incompatible.

A more recent example of cultural icons including the plot context are the commercials of the Spanish-French label Paco Rabanne for the perfumes *Pure XS* (Paco Rabanne 2017) and *Pure XS for her* (Paco Rabanne 2018). Both advertisements use an instrumental and modern version of the "Habanera" from Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (premiere 1875) and show how a person (on one occasion, a man and on the other, a woman), who is the focus of erotic interest by others, does not respond to their advances. The commercials thus pick up the aria with which Carmen enters the stage and in which she expresses her indifference to the amorous affirmations and erotic advances of numerous suitors. Being perfectly irresistible and aware of it is the message of these advertisements, and this is conveyed through the use of the plot within *Carmen* and specifically in the aria "Habanera".

<sup>12</sup>The fact that the advertisement is explicitly about the opera *Don Giovanni* (and not just about the context of opera per se) is also evident from the geographical location of the event. At the beginning, parts of the Rudolfinum façade in Prague can be seen in a long shot, and the lavishly-decorated Prague National Theatre was chosen for the interior shots in the auditorium. In this way, the city of Prague—the city in which *Don Giovanni* premiered in 1787 (in today's much smaller Estates Theatre)—is repeatedly and recognizably referred to.

### *Historical Context*

As the most sophisticated level of reference, advertising can also refer to a particular historical origin associated with a piece of music, which is usually no longer part of general cultural knowledge, but, rather, part of a more-selective, specialized knowledge.<sup>13</sup> In the advertisements for the beer brand Radeberger (1993, 1994, 2000), for example, it is initially irritating to hear a choir paying homage to “Thüringens Landgraf” [“Thuringia’s Landgrave”], while the Semper Opera House dominates the visual scene alongside freshly-tapped beer. As is well known, this opera house is in Dresden—in the German state of Saxony, not Thuringia. A coherent context of meaning can only be established by those who have the cultural knowledge—guided, above all, by the visuals of the Semper Opera—that the chorus comes from Richard Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* (premiere 1845), which was first performed in Dresden. This context does more than only link the visual and the music—it ties both to the advertised product; Radeberger Pilsener has been brewed in the Dresden area since the middle of the 19th century.

Similarly, complex concepts of historical meaning are present in a commercial for the sports-apparel brand Nike (2007), even if the cultural icon is from Mozart’s *Requiem* (first performance 1793)—not an opera—and thus belongs to the genre of sacred music. The last seconds of a basketball game are shown; the home team, the Wildcats, are leading by one point. While the Wildcats are confident of victory in possession of the ball, an opposing player comes out of nowhere and dunks the ball at the last millisecond, winning the game for the nameless opponents. Auditorily, this scene is extradiegetically underscored with the first eight bars of the “Lacrimosa” in D minor, which commence *piano* with sighing motifs in the strings, then transition into a softly-intoned, painful-choral sound, before allowing the melody line to rise in slow, diatonic steps over one and a half octaves in a *crescendo* to *forte*. Overall, the music expresses a deep melancholy and an unfulfilled longing as an emotional gesture. As a result, the musical structure of the “Lacrimosa” resonates with the painful feeling of losing the game at the very last moment, which is shown on the faces of the Wildcats players, cheerleaders, and fans.

On a more abstract level, however, the commercial also forms a homology to the particular context of the “Lacrimosa,” as Mozart died while composing his *Requiem*, and it remained an unfinished fragment of eight bars.<sup>14</sup> In its deep structure, the Nike advertisement functionalizes this knowledge by equating the death of the musical genius Mozart with the Wildcats’ failure to win, thereby implicitly exaggerating the game as a masterpiece of genius and portraying the players (including their equipment) as virtuosos, prodigies, and exceptional talents. This commercial works even without this specific knowledge, which makes sense for the presumed target group of Nike’s products.

<sup>13</sup> I am referring here to the concept of “cultural knowledge” (Kulturelles Wissen) as it has been conceptualized by Titzmann (1989). See also Kley (2018) for an English summary of this concept.

<sup>14</sup> On the genesis of the *Requiem*, see Schick (2016).

This is because the other reference levels of the cultural icon (especially the emotional gesture of the music) lead to an intensification and dramatization of the emotional expressions of this painful loss, shown in slow-motion. They also induce an aestheticization and nobilization of the product, since the Wildcats were ahead until the end. By knowing the history of the origin of “Lacrimosa,” the advertising message can be extended in another meaningful dimension.

### *Status*

The fact that the different described reference levels do not always build on each other hierarchically, but can also be addressed independently, is illustrated by an advertisement for the car brand Volvo (2019). This commercial shows a woman in a long orange dress intradiegetically singing an aria. She stands in front of a very large, white backdrop, located in an industrial-looking factory building. These shots are counter-cut with interior shots from a moving Volvo XC90, which show the loudspeakers and the control panel for the sound system, mainly in close-ups. The aria sung is the so-called “Rache-Arie” [“Aria of Vengeance”] from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (first performed in 1791). On a musical level and lyrics-wise, this aria represents an aestheticized outburst of rage by the Queen of the Night, who literally puts a knife to her daughter Pamina’s chest and threatens that if she does not murder her father Sarastro, “*so bist du meine Tochter nimmermehr*” (Mozart 2014, 48) [“like that, you are my daughter nevermore”]. Within the plot structure, the Queen of the Night is a thoroughly negative, vengeful figure who wants to seize power illegitimately and who is ultimately punished with a descent into hell.<sup>15</sup>

However, these reference levels are suppressed in the context of the advertising message to generate a sense-making interpretation, as it is certainly not Volvo’s intention to associate its potential customers with a desire for revenge and power. Rather, it is merely about the pragmatic context of the aria—rich in coloratura and treble—which is considered a bravura piece *par excellence* in the opera repertoire and an expression of the highest artistry. It is precisely this aria that is used to demonstrate the exceptionally-good sound quality of the Volvo’s new sound system, which is presented as being so outstanding that it is comparable to hearing the artist sing live. As with previous examples, the inclusion of cultural knowledge about the libretto text and the opera’s narrative context contradicts the intended advertising message. Thus, opera can be iconically exploited on a level of meaning so as to transfer the extraordinarily, sophisticated vocal artistry and status—characterized by precision and virtuosity—to the advertised product.

The only exception among my sample of positive portrayals of the status of opera is a commercial for a German brand of butter cookies, Leibniz Butterkekse (Bahlsen 1993). During a very dramatic aria, a man sitting in the auditorium

<sup>15</sup> For more information on *The Magic Flute*, especially on gender constructions, see Großmann (2020, 94–98).

interrupts the opera performance by noisily biting into a cookie. This is exploited within the advertising message by presenting the opera as ‘conservative,’ ‘dry,’ ‘not fresh,’ and ‘artificial’—as evidenced by the man’s facial expressions—so that it is only natural to give in to little hunger pangs. At the same time, the advertisement also uses the opera’s plot structure for its sales message; we hear Lady Macbeth’s cavatina during the first act of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Macbeth* (premiere 1847), in which she incites her husband to murder Duncan. Jokingly, the commercial suggests that the cookie-eating man averts the tragic outcome of the plot by interfering with the performance. But, this negative signification of opera is a deviation from the dominant conception of positive signification. Therefore, in the context of the cultural icon, this example is an iconoclasm which implicitly and *ex negativo* highlights and vouches for opera’s status as culturally sacred and, thus, iconic.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the case studies, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, opera music is continuously used as a cultural icon in audio-visual commercials from 1985 to the present, but advertisements of the periods 1990–1995 and 2015–2020 occur in my sample more frequently. Second—with a few exceptions (e.g. Darbo’s ad with Delibe’s *Lakmé*)—the commercials use popular music from operas, and the best-known tunes are always selected from these operas. Third, the reference level of the emotional gesture almost exclusively dominates the formation of meaning. Other reference levels can be realized, but their relevance is secondary. This may be due to the special impact of music, which evokes immediate and unconscious somatic and emotional reactions in the sense of co-experience. Fourth, this phenomenon seems to be particularly effective for the construction of a value-added strategy for confectionery and perfumes, since a taste or smell experience cannot be directly conveyed and experienced audio-visually. In these cases, the intensity of auditory, musical conceptions serves as a metaphorical ‘redirection,’ which is then interpreted as equivalent based on the learned transfer lines of the recipients. Fifth, in general, the operatic source of cultural icons studied in this chapter is used as a positive vehicle for advertising, and its music transfers a desirable, added value to the promoted products. Sixth, most advertisements only use the first through third reference levels (genre through language) of the seven potential levels of meaning described in this chapter; sometimes these levels are created hierarchically and sometimes not, as in the example of the Volvo commercial, in which neither the emotional gesture nor the text or the plot of the cultural icon are part of meaning, but particularly the artistic status of the aria. These are, precisely, the components of meaning that are directly provided by the musical excerpt itself and are not (or are only weakly) dependent on the cultural knowledge of the targeted group.

In many of the examples discussed, it is apparent that including additional intertextual data of the cultural icon—such as plot or information about

characters—would contradict the intended, positive promotional message. This suggests that advertisers assume these sets of knowledge are unavailable to the recipients, or at least that the knowledge is so latent that they can pragmatically ignore it. Conversely, this indicates that commercials could well use cultural icons in a more far-reaching potential. Therefore, advertisers can avoid Cupid blindly shooting misplaced arrows if higher reference levels of cultural icons were included in their advertising message.

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# Counterpoint as Icon: Music and Intertextuality in the Late 19th Century

*Birger Petersen*

With this chapter we find ourselves in the rather hermetic expert's discourse of music theory. This may surprise in a publication on cultural icons which are considered to be popular rather than 'exclusive'. However, as the editors of this volume describe it in the introduction, icons are particularistic with respect to different milieus or communities. Therefore, I understand the further considerations as a contribution to the discussion on the possibilities and limits of the concept "cultural icon" to describe categorization and identification processes as well as the creation of cultural value within academic communities.

Aside from discussing terminological differences of terms such as 'type', 'topos', 'model' or 'icon', understanding the inextricable interconnections and interactions of contrapuntal and harmonic principles seems to be among the most decisive new findings regarding tonal music in current musicological discourse. In the 20th century, Carl Dahlhaus's research on compositional types and formulas in the 15th and 16th century facilitated an understanding of musical structures beyond dogmatic systematics for the first time (Dahlhaus 1968): Progressions of interval movements remained important for compositional history far into the 19th century. Identifying these made it possible to determine recurring structures beyond an established harmony. Johannes Brahms explored contrapuntal studies both in his early as well as in his late work. Accordingly, Ariane Jeßulat argues in her analysis that Brahms was inspired by Bach when composing the *Intermezzo* op. 116 No. 5 (Jeßulat 2015). Similarly, the composer's interventions in the slow movement of his Clarinet Quintet in B minor, op. 115, represent another instance of

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counterpoint in his late works. Thus, the frequently expressed assessment that counterpoint played only a minor role in Brahms's quintet is quite surprising (Krämer 2009).

By approaching Brahms's compositional practice from a work-centered perspective, I will show how Brahms stages counterpoint in various contexts. Subsequently, I will transfer these into an interdisciplinary context: Intertextual analysis has become a common approach in the study of 19th-century music. In addition, however, the question will be pursued to what extent a compositional technique can also assume the role of a cultural icon.

### 'SCHEMA'—'TOPOS'—'ICON'

In the 21st century, music research has primarily analyzed the relationship of these terms at the level of musical settings. Due to its great flexibility the generic term 'schema' is explored here first. Schemata are to be understood as music-historical phenomena that partly originate from the musical practice and theory of the late Middle Ages (Sachs 1984; Petersen 2018, 21–37). As improvisational scaffolds or variation foundations, they initially tend to be static but gain structural flexibility at the latest during the 18th century (Fuß 2007; Menke 2009). In this context the concept of the schema belongs to a larger group of music-theoretical terms that paradoxically overlap and simultaneously originate from different historical contexts, accentuate different aspects, imply different conceptual contexts, and possess different extensions (Schwab-Felisch and Fuß 2007, 291).

'Topic / topos' designates an inextricable unity of contrapuntal and harmonic principles throughout music history expanding to nearly all genres and styles, which are charged with historically grown levels of meaning (Fladt 2005). While Fladt derives his terminology from literary studies, the term is rather uncommon in art theory and history but is already used by Carl Dahlhaus in the late 1960s (Jeßulat 2014). The term 'schema' thus primarily describes an abstract structure, while 'topos' denotes the unity of structure and an historically specific meaning or function.

It is likely that future discussions concerning phenomena such as 'schema' and 'topos' will continue to highlight processes of signification through topoi, the relevance and range of historical terms and categories, as well as the meaning of topoi as an aesthetic experience (Aerts 2007, 155). 'Schema' thereby refers to its exemplary character and raises the notion of being 'prefabricated' and 'pattern-like' while simultaneously expressing a more abstract meaning (Menke 2009). In general, the context decides whether a schema is semantically charged. Thus, schemata do not necessarily evoke older styles (Diergarten 2010, 141).

From here, the path towards the 'icon' lies clearly ahead because schemata must be instantiated in order to be used: Schemata, understood as abstract constructs, are not quoted in their respective compositional contexts but are rather "instantiated". An 'instance' signifies the musical concretion of an

abstract general through which the musical parameters such as absolute pitch, meter and rhythm are specified (Schwab-Felisch and Fuß 2007, 9; Kaiser 2007, 275). Hence, the individual form given to the abstract schema in the musical work distinguishes itself from the general model by emphasizing its concrete instantiation.

Hans-Ulrich Fuß has convincingly demonstrated that applying polyphonic schemata was just as important for Mozart's compositional process as his use of thematic work: Consequently, working with and shaping pre-existing material significantly defines the compositional process also of other composers; at the same time, the value of this individual (and thus individualizing) use of schemata should not be underestimated—just as the identification of a compositional model does not necessarily have to result in recognizing work structures and attributing value to them (Fuß 2007).

In turn, the use of compositional processes can be understood as the instantiation of a compositional icon beyond its actual compositional facture or texture, the musical surface: The use of counterpoint, which in the context of the respective works does not necessarily have a primary but a secondary character, can have a signifying, intertextual function and thus contain both structural and topical elements (Grimes 2019, 51, 158). After all, phenomena of iconization can be observed not only in broad culture, but also in particular, sometimes highly specialized circles. In this case, the group of communicators is relatively small: For example, Brahms initially communicates only with Clara Schumann, and both have an extraordinarily elaborate idea of counterpoint. At the same time, however, Brahms communicates with his compositions with an incomparably higher number of people—and their conception of counterpoint is strongly differentiated. At the same time, in view of the work, many listeners are united by the impression of a composition that is strongly influenced by contrapuntal considerations and at the same time related to older music—and that of the present. This specific intertextuality can not only be recognized by knowledgeable or expert audiences.

### BRAHMS AND COUNTERPOINT: ROMANCE, OP. 118 No. 5

At this point, a composition by Johannes Brahms shall serve as an example. Brahms's own proficiency in music history is undisputed (Sandberger 2009). At the same time, the discussion of 'counterpoint' in his work is often strongly ideologically charged. It is striking, however, that Brahms's preoccupation with contrapuntal studies touches his early compositions as well as his late works. Brahms writes to Clara Schumann on March 21, 1855:

What I am particularly looking forward to is that, besides taking walks, we shall also kill time with counterpoint. We ought to set each other exercises, the same for each, and then make a collection of them. If [Joseph] Joachim should come, he must join us in this. We have often talked of doing such studies together. It

seems to me it would be wonderfully interesting and amusing, and I shall see if I cannot find some fairly good exercises.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Brahms published thirteen of his early canon studies as op. 113 in 1891. His works also include the early *Missa Canonica*, not published until 1981, an entire mass in canon form, of which Brahms completed the last three parts ('Sanctus', 'Benedictus', and 'Agnus Dei'); the second part of the motet *Warum ist das Licht gegeben den Mühseligen* op. 74 No. 1 is based on the 'Benedictus' of this mass (Meurs 2008).

The Romance, op. 118, No. 5 clearly exhibits the use of contrapuntal techniques in his intimate late piano pieces. The title of the piece, one of the few examples in the late piano works in which Brahms abandons the neutral designations 'Capriccio' or 'Intermezzo' in favor of a conventional genre name, seems inappropriate at first glance. For only the main part of the piece serves that sentimental character associated with the genre 'romance', historically deriving from the originally Spanish literary genre of popularly narrating strophic songs (Breyer 2009, 58).

In fact, Brahms had wanted to designate this movement 'Intermezzo' as well (McCorkle 1984, 473) but changed the title only when correcting the engraver's copy to make reference "to the wellspring of the past" (Breyer 2009, 58–59). Brahms supplements the two-part outer voices, which are arranged in a parallelism schema, with a conspicuous middle part orchestrated in parallel octaves (Fig. 1).

After a change in figuration (m. 5–8) crossing voices confirm the part-writing in double counterpoint (Fig. 2).

In the middle section, titled 'Allegretto grazioso', Brahms works with a much simpler imitative couplet at the fourth below, accompanied by an organ point, which reappears a few measures later and includes inversions.



Fig. 1 Brahms op. 118, 5 – m. 1–4

<sup>1</sup> Berthold Litzmann (ed.), *Clara Schumann – Johannes Brahms. Briefe aus den Jahren 1853–1896*, 1, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel 1927 (Reprint Hildesheim: Olms 1989), 100f.: "Auf eines freue ich mich recht, womit wir uns die Zeit vertreiben sollten, außer mit Spazierengehen – mit Kontrapunkt! Wir sollten uns Aufgaben setzen, beiden die gleichen, und dann sammeln und zusammentragen. Kommt Joachim dann, so muß er mit. Wir sprachen oft davon, zusammen solche Studien machen zu wollen. Ich denke es mir wundervoll und lustig, für erträgliche Aufgaben will ich schon sorgen." Translation: Litzmann (1971, 35).



Fig. 2 Brahms op. 118, 5 – m. 9–12

Ariane Jeßulat's detailed analysis of the Intermezzo op. 116 no. 5 argues that Brahms was inspired by Bach's Fugue in E major BWV 878, for which she finds evidence in a scaffolding setting based on a 5–6 consecutive in combination with a canon at the lower fifth. This consecutive is also constitutive for op. 118 no. 5: The conspicuously staged middle voice at the beginning accordingly relates to the bass voice, complementing the parallelism schema with a particular rhythmic-metrical form. In turn, this schema itself bears the title "Romanesca" (Petersen 2018, 33–34; Gjerdingen 2007, 29–33) referring to the dance form of Spanish origin. Thus, Brahms composes an historical arch from the Romanesca to the Romance (Jeßulat 2015, 120–124; Breyer 2009, 58).

The Intermezzo op. 118 no. 4, which he composed shortly beforehand, also makes use of two voices in various canon forms, functioning as a framework for the most part of the piece. Comparable, moreover, are the composer's interventions in the slow, second movement of his Clarinet Quintet in B minor, op. 115: In its first part, the melody featured in the clarinet is taken up by the first violin in a syncopated form as a canon—a voice that, however, occasionally deviates from the original and is hardly noticeable in the dense movement of the accompanying voices. In the context of this quintet, the frequently expressed idea that counterpoint only plays a minor role here but is nevertheless characterized by a saturated harmony seems surprising (Krämer 2009, 464). Ultimately, this assessment rather corresponds with Adorno's dictum that Brahms exhibits "a magnificent, uncomfortable *absence of naïveté*—a *reflective posture* of composition" (Adorno 1984, 201–202; Petersen 2025).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, »Brahms aktuell«, Rolf Tiedemann and Klaus Schultz (ed.), *Musikalische Schriften* V, Frankfurt 1984: Suhrkamp (= *Gesammelte Schriften* 18): 200–203; 201–202: Eine »großartige, unbequeme [...] Unnaivität des Komponierens«. Translation: Grimes (2019, 252).

## INTERTEXTUALITY AND ICON: THE INTERMEZZO OP. 119 NO. 1

By indicating a level of intertextuality within the Intermezzo op. 116 No. 5, Ariane Jeßulat argues that the contrapuntal processes in Brahms's works serve an extra-diegetic function beyond a strict compositional sense by pointing to a superordinate context as point of their origin (Jeßulat 2015, 120). For the beginning of the composition, she identifies a canon at the lower fifth between the main voices separated by a dotted quarter note (Fig. 3).

Within this first setting at the beginning of the Intermezzo, the arrangement is very conventional, constituting a tonal answer (Ickstadt 2014). This procedure, combined with the inscription of a hidden (and gradually revealed) hexachord cantus firmus, leads Ariane Jeßulat to assume that the Intermezzo op. 116 No. 5 is related to Johann Sebastian Bach's Fugue in E major BWV 878. Referring to the question of motivic work, Jeßulat states that if an underlying narrative was to be assumed, then it would be one of a transformation. An initially presented state is revealed to be something quite different after walking through a contrapuntal labyrinth (Jeßulat 2015, 120).

In conclusion, Brahms's most discussed composition from his late work will serve to illustrate that contrapuntal processes can be perceived not only as a work's compositional foundation or in the context of a narrative but as an icon inscribed into the composition: If Cultural Icons are understood as community-building and as representants of identity, it is the process of combining or structuralizing the setting with means of schemata leading to the understanding of a cultural icon. In this regard, Brahms uses counterpoint as a cultural icon without destroying or desecrating it: Composing processes hold potential for cultural icons as they are culturally valued (introduction of the editors).

Johannes Brahms's late piano compositions were generally not well received by his contemporaries. Eduard Hanslick understood the piano pieces op. 118 and 119 as "monologues that Brahms conducts with himself and for himself on lonely evenings, in defiantly pessimistic rebellion, in brooding ruminations, in



Fig. 3 Brahms op. 116, 5 – m. 1–2

romantic reminiscences, at times in dream-like wistfulness”<sup>3</sup> (Fellinger 1999). Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann in May 1893 about the first Intermezzo in B minor from op. 119:

The little piece is exceptionally melancholic, and ‘to be played very slowly’ is not an understatement. Every bar and every note must sound like ritard[ando], as if one wanted to suck melancholy out of each and every one, lustily and with pleasure out of these very dissonances!<sup>4</sup>

In downwardly alternating major and minor thirds, a multitone chord is established at the beginning. This chord or field of thirds contains six notes; the resulting sound can best be described in its twofold function: While it oscillates harmonically and eludes functional-harmonic analysis, it is not heard as a functional sound, but rather as a sequence of thirds (Fig. 4). The field of thirds is not merely a mood-setting conceit but the first stage of developing the core material (Schlothfeldt 2001). The first bar is rendered structurally constitutive by establishing the third as the starting material for the whole piece.



Fig. 4 Brahms op. 119, 1 – m. 1–11

<sup>3</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *Fünf Jahre Musik [1891–1896] (Der »Modernen Oper« VII. Teil). Kritiken*, Berlin <sup>3</sup>1896, 258–259: “‘Monologe am Klavier’ [...], wie sie Brahms in einsamer Abendstunde mit sich und für sich hält, in trotzig-pessimistischer Auflehnung, in grüblerischem Nachsinnen, in romantischen Reminiscenzen, mitunter auch in träumerischer Wehmut”. Translation in: Johannes Brahms, *Klavierstücke op. 119*, Katrin Eich (ed.), Urtextausgabe, München: G. Henle Verlag 2015: V–VI.

<sup>4</sup> Berthold Litzmann (ed.), *Clara Schumann – Johannes Brahms. Briefe aus den Jahren 1853–1896*, 2, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel 1927 (Reprint Hildesheim: Olms 1989): 513: “Das kleine Stück ist ausnehmend melancholisch, und »sehr langsam spielen« ist nicht genug gesagt. Jeder Takt und jede Note muß wie ritard.[ando] klingen, als ob man Melancholie aus jeder einzelnen saugen wolle, mit Wollust und Behagen [...]!” Translation: Litzmann (1971, 570f).



Stefan Rohringer states that although it is conceivable to hear the beginning of the composition through various foils of 18th-century continuo harmony, all of them pose their own problems (Rohringer 2013, 80–81; Diergarten 2003). Reducing the composition to the conspicuous layering of thirds in the first measures falls considerably short—even if they determine the reception of the composition and, moreover, of the later compositions including both the opening measures of the 4th Symphony op. 98 (Petersen 2013) or the late song “O Tod, wie bitter bist du” op. 121 no. 3.

At first glance, Brahms intersperses the initial regular phrasing characterized by its distinctive layers of thirds with a striking bass melody from m. 4 onwards. On the one hand, its shape resembles a bass cantus firmus, on the other hand it corresponds with the upper voice reached in the same measure to which it forms a simple counterpoint determined by sonorous imperfect consonances. The middle voices are subordinated both with respect to their sonority as well as to their rhythm and meter.

Brahms retains this type of movement until m. 8 in order to achieve a superficially clear eight-measure period, which despite the recognizable cadence can be divided into 3 + 5 measures depending on the different textures. Brahms retains these textures as well as the internal structure within the ensuing eight-measure consequent. However, the coordination of the upper voice with the dominant bass voice causes a striking collision of the upper voice with the suddenly independent tenor part in the cadenza measure 16, which imitates the bass (Fig. 5).

In the letter to Clara Schumann quoted above, Brahms emphasizes the special effect of the dissonances in this composition: “It’s raining dissonances! While they may be right and explainable, they may not meet your taste.” Brahms did indeed have a preference for chains of dissonances, especially towards the end of his life (Floros 1997), exaggeratedly expressed in a field of tension with a preference for sequences of rising and falling fifths. A particularly striking example can be found in the piano interlude of the third song of op. 121 (Petersen 2008) (Fig. 6).

Schoenberg’s analyses of Brahms in his apologetic paper “Brahms the Progressive” from 1933 approach this very song from a different point of view (Schoenberg 1950, 90–96), but the linking of dissonance chains and sequences is paradigmatic of Brahms’s late work—in op. 116 as in op. 121. Ultimately, it



Fig. 5 Brahms op. 119, 1 – m. 12–17

18

O Tod, wie

21

wohl tust du dem

*p*

Fig. 6 Brahms op. 121, 3 – middle section (beginning, m. 18–22)

is the idea of imitation that accounts for the special effect of the cadence formation at the end of the first period of the Intermezzo op. 119 no. 1. Whereas Brahms's various attempts to recompose by applying traditional procedures manage to reproduce basic harmonic structures—especially by drawing upon descending fifths sequences—, they do not achieve either the special effect of Brahms's characteristic setting nor the intended dissonant effect mentioned by Brahms himself (Rohringer 2013, 84–89).

Just as the Intermezzo op. 116 No. 5 exhibits intertextual relations to a fugue by Johann Sebastian Bach, the use of contrapuntal procedures in the two late piano compositions discussed here provides insight into the process of a transformation of schemata under topical aspects. While 'topos' means the semantic cast of the musical material, the concept of 'schema' refers primarily to aspects of craft—beyond the intertwining of contrapuntal and harmonic perspectives. The concept of cultural icons may have wider reach here: Since iteration is the decisive criterion of iconicity, the concept of counterpoint in its reference to the music of the past—even without the necessity of intermediality—seems to be appropriate as an icon. Counterpoint becomes recognizable—even if it is only for a smaller peer group like composers or musicians.

The processuality of counterpoint should not be underestimated: The recipients of the compositions ultimately remain unaware which approach—associated with a specific compositional idea—was the trigger. Both the omnipresence of relationships of thirds in Brahms's late work and the dominant reception in this regard since Arnold Schoenberg's apology obscure the fact that Brahms very consciously decided to use contrapuntal procedures even beyond

(functional) harmonic issues. So, the expert knowledge of Brahms can render counterpoint a cultural icon: As instances, the conceptual parameters of contrapuntal approaches determine the iteration of an icon, not least because of their inherent intertextuality. The analysis emphasizes the special task of music research to identify creative processes: Here, counterpoint appears as an icon inscribed into the work.

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# Intermedia Genealogy and Interrelation of Icons: Clowns, Robots and the Joker

*Anna-Sophie Jürgens*

In the Joker universe, techno-clowning has many faces. For example, in “The Last Laugh” (4th episode of *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992)), the Joker—the Clown Prince of Crime and most iconic super villain in DC comics and animated films—uses a clown robot called Captain Clown to pilot a ship that sprays laughing gas into Gotham City.<sup>1</sup> In the second part of the 2013 animated film *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (directed by Jay Oliva), Joker deploys child robots as weapons to fight Batman (his eternal nemesis) on the grounds of an amusement park. In the famous 1988 comic story *The Killing Joke*—also set at a fairground—Joker stares at himself in the looking glass of a laughing clown automaton; and in Brian Buccellato and Fernando Blanco’s 2015 *Detective Comics* #44, another Joker incarnation terrorizes his city in the form of a giant Jokerbot. These clown robots, whether funny or not, represent comic visions of a technological humanity and tap into our technology-related uncertainties and desires about how we embrace, tame and enhance our technological world and future. But what does the presence of clown robots reveal about their cultural context and value? How can the cultural background and genealogy of these widely known clown-robot characters in comics and animated film be described?

<sup>1</sup> Although he meets his end in a trash compactor in this episode (resting in pieces, so to speak), he does make a cameo appearance in a nightclub in the 2017 *Batman and Harley Quinn* animated film (directed by Sam Liu): not as a weapon, but as a dancer.

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Robots and clowns are pop cultural icons (see e.g. Brooker 2000). Drawing on Boudana et al. (2017) we can call them *popular icons*: although originally from the circus world, even in the above-mentioned, rather dark and technologized Joker contexts, clowns and their iconography are recognized by a large public, recycled and recasted across media, and (thus) have a broad cultural significance beyond the referential origin. Surviving change over time, they exhibit the capacity to redefine themselves in the midst of technical and cultural change (Hall 2008, 6). Compared with that of a painting or sculpture, popular icons have “an entire fantasy world that surrounds them” (Rupert 2010, 70–71). In the fantasy worlds discussed in this chapter, clowns and clown robots use technology for comic effect, or are comically created by technology. But if clowns and robots are popular icons, and icons are (inter)medially condensed signs (see introduction of this volume)—what do they actually condense? What ‘ideas’ of technology do they *represent* or *embody*? How can the relationship and interrelation between the clown and robot icon be defined—beyond the fact that they are artificially-created beings representing human life transformed into artifice?

Exploring these questions by intertwining literary, theatrical and pop cultural history with the history of technology in entertainment, this chapter investigates comic performance and the cultural icon of the comic performer (the clown) as sites through which engineering and technology are represented in Joker-related comic book stories, animated films<sup>2</sup> and (historical) clown robot performances from the popular stage. Examining a mosaic of historical examples (many of which are excavated from German-language archives), references and interrelations, this chapter explores the ways the braiding of (an idea of) machinery and clowning has contributed to creating popular icons, and clarifies their intermedial circulation, transformation and meaning.

### TRACING BACK THE GENEALOGY: COMIC ROBOTS AND PERFORMING HUMAN AUTOMATONS

Our fascination with the creation of non-threatening robots in the human image for delightment and entertainment is rooted in a long history of real automata, reaching from elaborate early clockwork mechanism to creations resembling Vaucanson’s celebrated mechanical duck, and all sorts of real and imaginative robots (see e.g. Telotte 1995). In the early 20th century, humanoid machines included automatons that were able to speak, move and/or play musical instruments, such as Bodson’s “Pneuma Accordeon Jazz”—a combination of pneumatically operated accordion and drums—and Gastaud and

<sup>2</sup>This chapter focuses on Joker’s worlds, however, there are clown robots in other comic book narratives/animated films too, see e.g. the first issue of *The Avengers*, in which Hulk disguises himself as a clown robot; *Futurama* features a clown robot (c.f. the episode “Bendin’ in the Wind”); and clown robots appear in *Rugrats* (‘born’ in a true Frankenstein creation scene: <https://www.vidio.com/watch/135237-rugrats-the-mysterious-mr-friend>).

Raubaut's "Accordeo Boy"—consisting of instruments apparently operated by puppets that, thanks to compressed air control, could turn their heads, move their eyebrows, cheeks, arms, hands and feet, thus giving a very lively impression (Sänger 2007, 83).<sup>3</sup> Diverting machines and the pairing of clowns and automatons—the word "robot" would not replace "automaton" until its appearance in Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.*—were attractive not only for the medium of the musical stage but also for (early) cinema. Featuring a clown bewildered by the mechanical movements of an automaton created by a scientist, the 1897 French short silent film *Gugusse et l'Automate* (*The Clown and the Automaton*) by Georges Méliès, is an example. Significantly scientifically-themed, *Gugusse* is one of the earliest films exploring "scientific experimentation, creation and transformation" (Johnston 2011, 55) and "may be the first true S[cience]F[iction] film" (Menville and Reginald 1977, 3; for an overview of robots in early film, see Telotte 1995, 56–57). Early machine-men in silent films of that era (for examples see Dinello 1985, 48, 51) were often turned into slapstick characters, for instance, suddenly going out of control with comic ramifications. Alternatively, comic performers imitating mechanical bodies easily tapped into comedy (Telotte 1995, 101). This is perfectly embodied by Charlie Chaplin imitating a comic machine (a carnival automaton) trying to imitate human laughter in *The Circus* (1928; c.f. Gunning 2010, 424).<sup>4</sup>

Film and fiction draw on this tradition throughout the 20th century and since; for example, Woody Allen's 1973 film *Sleeper*—exploring the comic substance of a human clown pretending to be a robot—and Stanisław Lem's "cosmic constructors" Trurl and Klapaucius from the humorous short stories of *The Cyberiad* (1974). The latter follows the adventures of two fictional rogue inventor-engineers who have been compared to slapstick comedians Laurel and Hardy: "the Laurel-like Trurl causes the snafu and the Hardy-like Klapaucius has to rescue him" (Rothfork in Ziegfeld 1985, 90). The actions of these comic characters lack common sense (which makes them funny); their social interactions are clumsy, and they seem unaware of their repetitive behaviour. Alternatively, such comic protagonists express 'superhuman' qualities by (apparently) defying gravity, body size and expectations—which is exactly how humans comically imitate robots on stage (Nijholt 2019, 231). In fact, 'playing' the robot (or automaton) was a crowd-pleasing performance routine at the beginning of the 20th century, not only in film but also on the popular stage.

Building on and adding to the early 20th-century cultural discourse and trope of the human machine, between about 1900 and the 1930s so-called "Human or Machine?" performances appeared in circus arenas, on variety (vaudeville) stages, funfairs and village festivals in Western Europe. They explored the entertaining dimensions of apparently automatically-working hybrid human-machine contraptions and mechanical puppets. As their title

<sup>3</sup> For a more recent example see the robot orchestra in the 1971 British dark comedy *The abominable Dr Phibes* (directed by Robert Fuest).

<sup>4</sup> The scene is online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G09dfRrUxUM> (1:30).



evokes, these performances capitalized on the play with uncertainty, and their framing sets them apart from earlier, turn-of-the-century versions of this act featuring marionettes (coming to life), dolls (starting to move), puppets (becoming flesh and blood) or “androids”<sup>5</sup> (see Jürgens 2023) populating *Variété* shows as well as circuses. Before actual robots (machines) appeared in the late 1920s and 30s on the popular stage and in other exhibition venues (such as World’s Expositions), performers who challenged the human-machine divide regularly toured Europe and the US. The mysterious “Phroso” act was one of their most sought-after incarnations.

Of obscure origin,<sup>6</sup> Phroso acts appeared on the Viennese stage in 1903. The act featured a motionless subject in a tuxedo with a white vest; along the right leg he had a wire. The act was refashioned and renamed continuously over the first decades of the 20th century—Phroso was called Phoso, Motho-Phoso, Moto Phéno, MoTo HoMo and Elektro Homo, among others. He spoke, made music and rode a bicycle; and, as part of the show, he was tickled, hit with a stick, poked with pins and singed with cigarettes “by particularly inquisitive spectators” (Roseck 1935, 7). Spectators thus also became actors; they were ‘designed’ to be an element of the display, to *participate* in the exhibit, to be *part* of this form of theatre.

Although the act often culminated in the revelation that he was, indeed, a human being, speculation flourished as to how the performance was brought about, whether the performer was human or (what kind of) machine. Some observers doubted that there was a “mechanical mechanism that can drive an artificial human being to such perfection” (*Allgemeiner Tiroler Anzeiger* #155); others praised him as “a masterpiece of the art of self-control!” (“Moto-Phoso – Mensch oder Maschine?”) Reviewers speculated about the performer being *under hypnosis* during the act, “otherwise it is inexplicable how a human being can spend so much time in this rigid automatic state” (“Moto-Phoso? A human being!”). According to one contemporary writer, “[i]n a way, the character was both man and puppet. A man, but a cripple with only one arm. The right arm was an artificial one and worked in such a way that it could be used to perform those unnatural, amazing movements” (Roseck 1935, 7).

Although one of the last Phrosos seems to have appeared on the popular stage in 1918—in the form of “Motophen—Human or Puppet?”<sup>7</sup>—the act lived on in various guises. Perkeo, “the Enigma”, for instance, performed in 1931 in a Viennese sound-cinema, transcending the trope of the human machine into the comic, as a review reveals:

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that in 1911 a show entitled “Fritz Schwiegerling’s Androids” presenting “The best existing people of the whole world with new quick-metamorphosis figures” appeared in Munich, Germany (*Programm*#493), obviously referring to a comic play by famous playwright Frank Wedekind.

<sup>6</sup> Historical sources contradict each other. The following historical material, excavated from German language archives, is translated by the author.

<sup>7</sup> At least according to the digitized historical newspapers of the Austrian National Library, which do not show signs of any more Phroso acts.

On the stage [...] stands a small fauteuil. In it sits a strange doll—a cross between clown and harlequin. And a charming lady in an evening gown gives Perkeo orders. What can this enigmatic puppet not do?—which has become known under the stage name Perkeo even in Australia and South Africa and which shares its name with its creator, so that today you do not know anymore if Perkeo is the puppet, or Perkeo is its owner. But no matter what, Perkeo is and remains Perkeo, and will always remain a mystery. Perkeo plays virtuoso concertino [Konzertino], zither, moves, smokes, and (not even a little) lets his eyes glow, lets his head be torn off and yet plays the most beautiful songs until the charming announcer even takes his hands away. Puppet or human being? For twenty years the whole audience has been dealing with this question when Perkeo starts working on stage. Of course there is human inventiveness behind this amazing magic, of course this doll is not just a robot. (Kretschy)<sup>8</sup>

Fred Corwey (also known as Ferry Corwey), another comic performer active in the 1930s in Europe and the US, took this kind of act to a new level. The “Austro-American Grock”<sup>9</sup> became famous for his strange musical instruments—including a musical garden fence—and for one special trick including what in contemporary reviews is called a “Robott” or “Clown-Robott” (in German, HSC1 & 2). After he had played the fence (aka the pipes and bellows built into its metal poles) for a while,

he had a robot step onto the stage that exactly imitated his own shape. The audience had to get the impression that the robot was now making music on the garden fence. But this was just a very clever trick, in reality Corwey himself was playing backstage. One evening in Chicago, however, when the trick was discovered by some mistake, the audience tore the robot to pieces. Not out of anger, but to have a souvenir. (HSC3)<sup>10</sup>

Corwey’s celebrated robot copies of himself—a clown—and performances by maybe-automatons carrying on the performance routine of Phroso acts indicate that comic productions of robots were still well-received on the popular stage even in the 1930s.<sup>11</sup> The cultural interest in human-robot performances was accompanied (if not fuelled) by illustrious ‘real’ robots appearing in films and exhibition spaces, such as the humanoid Elektro, who, built by the Westinghouse Electric Corporation in 1937 and prominently displayed at the 1939 New York’s World’s Fair, entertained his audiences by blowing up

<sup>8</sup>The material in the digitized newspaper database ANNO (the AustriaN Newspapers Online Archive of the Austria National Library; a collection of 22 million digitized pages from 1689–1949) does not indicate that this performance had been staged before, let alone for over 20 years (see ANNO, using the keyword “‘Perkeo’ ‘Variété’”).

<sup>9</sup>Grock (1880–1959) was a Swiss clown and musician, known as one of the greatest (and most highly paid) entertainers in the world.

<sup>10</sup>An ingenious inventor, Corwey also performed inside of a huge puppet, see Erich Kästner’s description in *Prager Tagblatt* from 1928.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. the male robot performer in “Zoro’s Nudist Gardens” which was part of an exhibition in San Diego in 1935, and a 1934 striptease act with “le robot” in Bülow 2007, 59.

balloons, smoking cigarettes and moving his head and arms, among other things. In contrast to such technically-animated machines, clown robot performers—such as Perkeo or Corwey’s clown—did not embody or deliver on the scale of futuristic technology and their audiences did not witness technological feats. Rather, Perkeo’s and Corwey’s ‘mechanical’ motions and limited robo-actions were somewhat antique and funnily-outdated at their time. A humorous response to technological advancement, the adaptability to a technological society and the human-machine relationship, such clown robot performers explored the playful potential, charm and sensation of retro-futurism. They can be read as offshoots of the Frankenstein family<sup>12</sup>—encouraging their audiences to ask: Is it (fully) human? What is it made of? Is it alive? Although, in contrast to Shelley’s well-known storyline, clown robots in the form of comic “Human or Machine?” performers did not ‘turn against their creators’ in their physical storytelling on stage, and were neither linked to an unfortunate humanity besieged by an uncontrollable technological monster, nor created by irresponsible science forces for hellish entertainment. However, in other contexts and media, these links have been made.

#### INFLUENCES AND INTERRELATIONS: CLOWNS, ROBOTS, BEING THE ICON

In contemporary Western pop culture, one of the most lionized clown figures is the Joker, who first saw the light of day in a 1940 comic book. Up to mischief in countless comic book stories and films ever since, the Joker character shares the visual style—“if not a cultural background” (Brooker 2000, 49)—of Hollywood films from the late 1920s and 30s; he has also been associated with German Expressionist cinema. The creators of the Joker were inspired by films like Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) (Couch 2010, 8, 9, 36, 47; Jürgens and Visconti 2024; Jürgens et al 2021). Written during the winter of 1918–19, the famous Caligari-story about a doctor who uses a manipulated—hypnotically controlled—minion to commit murders was partially inspired by a circus sideshow that one of the writers, Carl Mayer, visited in Berlin. It is interesting to note that this show featured a man performing feats of great strength after becoming hypnotized—and the show was entitled “Human or Machine?” (Praver 1995, 25; Jürgens et al 2021). Cesare, the man-machine in the film, “is the forerunner of that multitude of robots in or out of human form, from *Metropolis* onwards, which culminates in the computers that play such as banefully ‘human’ part in *2001* and *The Demon Seed*” (Praver 1995, 180).

The Joker character is evocative of the manipulative machinations of Dr. Caligari, and (indirectly) popular performances transgressing the human-nonhuman or machine divide in the style of Phrosos. However, he is also associated with outright megalomaniac, obsessed engineer-inventors, who *create*

<sup>12</sup>This is epitomized by the comic Frankenstein toy automaton in Steven Spielberg’s 1977 *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* that moves like a robot and loses his pants (11:42).

artificial life for destructive purposes in a Frankenstein-like manner—such as Rotwang, the protagonist in *Metropolis*. Rotwang builds a dangerous human machine—“the most important of early robot figures” (Telotte 1995, 16)—to get revenge against a rival in love matters, and then embarks on an all-encompassing destruction spree. It is fascinating that “the great inventor” in Thea von Harbou’s novel *Metropolis* (Telotte 1995, 54), on which Lang’s film is based, is constantly laughing in his madness. In fact, one might be tempted to read the way this mad scientist-engineer laughs—“The noiseless laughter drew back his mouth to his ears” (Telotte 1995, 54)—as a blueprint for the iconography of Joker’s bestial smile, which also stretches from ear to ear (cf. Jürgens 2014, 2018). Given this web of connections between the Joker character and the discourse of human-machine creators, it is not surprising that his own clown robots—such as Captain Clown, Joker’s robotic stooge in the 1992 animated Batman series mentioned in the introduction<sup>13</sup>—evoke a rich cultural background. However, as in the context of historical human-machine performances mentioned earlier, Joker’s robot creation is not an unapproachable future figure or larger-than-life being. Thus, when robots and clown intertwine, it seems, robots do *not function as icons of progress* as one might expect.

Eric Radomski and Bruce Timm’s 1993 animated film *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (a spin-off of the animated series) remarkably adds to this phenomenon. Drawing on and participating in the human-machine context, in this film, Joker lives among the decaying robots of the “Science Land” on the dilapidated grounds of Gotham’s World’s Fair. Gotham’s World’s Fair is explicitly modeled after the 1939 New York’s World’s Fair; it directly refers to the historical exposition’s iconic buildings and illustrious robot attractions. Products of a specific historical context, the fair’s exhibits were recognized and widely reproduced (at their time and ever since) because they were endowed with extensive social and cultural meaning, thus functioning as repositories of collective cultural values (Truman 2017, 830). In other words, they converted abstract ideas into sensory experiences: visions of our technological future, the megalopolitan dream of the city of Tomorrow, the decade’s faith in unlimited technological progress (for more detail see Jürgens 2020b). On the grounds of Gotham’s “Science Land”, Joker’s robot dog Rusty appears as an animated comic book version of Sparko, the ‘real’ robot dog that accompanied Westinghouse’s above-mentioned Elektro at the 1940 fair, an icon of new visionary technologies. Robot romance on his mind, Joker is also shown flirting with a decrepit (meat-chopping) robot lady, who, like Captain Clown, is an unreliable and quickly-broken machine. Living among and inhabiting iconic buildings and interacting with robots, techno-icons, Joker appears as a part of the iconic or, at least, can be seen as participating in its fictional reality—and as a reflection of *being* an icon. It seems that these robot-related Joker contexts and “Human or Machine?” performers embodying the machine quite literally revolve around the notion of the icon as “the embodiment of a procedure for

<sup>13</sup> See “Joker: Captain Clown Is Better Than Captain America!” at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I\\_E04MCq1BE&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_E04MCq1BE&feature=youtu.be).

the production of sense”, which is how David Porush—drawing from William Barrett’s definition of a machine as a manifestation of logical systems of thought—describes the icon in culture. The icon as a kind of machine “designates instructions for the production of a complex of ideas about mechanism” and “almost universally stands for the various deterministic and mechanistic descriptions of experience and the world that our culture has invented” (Porush 1985, 16).

#### THE CLOWN ROBOT ICON AND THE (RE-)PRODUCTIVE INTER- AND TRANSMEDIAL CONDENSATION OF MEANING: CONCLUSION

Comic human automatons and clown body-machines (and thus the making of comic performers through technology) that were so popular at the beginning of the 20th century have been recasted in other media ever since. For example, the infamous animatronic clown presented at the 2018 Haunted Attraction Trade Show in St. Louis (based on Stephen King’s monster clown It), clutching a dismembered, screaming child figurine,<sup>14</sup> is a clown robot of sorts, similar to the eponymous protagonist in Peter Carey’s 1994 novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. A performer of comic roles, Tristan travels between two antagonistic circus cultures (one featuring a futuristic high-tech “Sirkus” with cyborgs, holograms and high-tech animations) and rearranges his body contours by being sewn in the husk of an eviscerated, holy but archaic Sirkus-cyborg. By means of the greatest possible artificiality, through virtuoso techno-costume, Tristan thus becomes a godlike super-puppet. ‘Adopting’ futuristic entertainment technology, he enhances his autonomy through technomorphic performance.<sup>15</sup> Yet another example of how to ‘become a robot’ or automaton in fiction, here again, the human machine serves as a shortcut for complex ideas (see Jürgens 2019; cf. Jürgens for the novel’s link to modernist theatre). But what cultural imagination and meanings are compressed or condensed, and reproduced throughout time and different media in the clown robot image or icon?

The popular icon of the clownbot appearing in literary fiction, comic book stories and films is an (inter)medially condensed sign, promiscuous in its formats and narratives, that is associated with a performance tradition of humorous, non-threatening human-machine embodiments, and interrelated with the forces of modernity. The clownbot is not acting as a metaphor for science’s efforts to inscribe its Frankensteinian power on the human, or to pose dangers

<sup>14</sup> See “Pennywise It” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lw7iL3CSBro>.

<sup>15</sup> See Telotte (1995, 101) for the robot-as-costume theme. *Tristan* can also be read as part of a transmedial narrative tradition featuring humans (or their body parts) embedded or ‘transplanted’ into machines in order to navigate them, cf. e.g. the 1958 film *The Colossus of New York* or the *Pacific Rim* series.

to the survival of humanity. Approaching the body as a plastic medium and the self as a variable construct, clownbots, it seems, emerge as a touchstone for how the braiding of engineering for entertainment and clowning may create new comic forms through the rearrangement of body contours, and for how technology creates new performance styles with the potential to defamiliarize and restructure the experience of what the spectator defines as ‘human’ and ‘machine’. While cultural explorations of the figure of robot might be read as symptomatic of the desires and anxieties built into our fear about being displaced or replaced, comic robots appear to be no worthy ersatz beings; they do not embody technologically-guaranteed eternal life nor serious responses to our ability to control reality. Rather, the opposite: comically assaulting the imagination of Tomorrow and its status of a cultural fetish, in line with the genuinely disruptive nature of the clown, clown robot performers carnivalize the human machine as a vision of our technological future through what might be called, with Boris Groys, a cheerful iconoclastic power (Groys 2013, 52).

Gaining in popularity when “mobilization and acceleration, increases in productivity and performance maximization [were] the keywords of the time” (Klein 2012, 10) and when the dream of working as self-realization or self-fulfillment was “an icon of modernity that has been constantly haunted by a nightmare in which the body becomes a machine” (Kusser 2013, 105, transl. ASJ), the humanoid machine simulators and robotic creatures with human-looking clown physiognomies discussed in this chapter condense a sort of humorous retro-futurism in their performances; they can be read as technologically backward or problematically advanced. If the fascination with robotic human bodies is an expression of the “longing to become objectlike, mechanical, and thus free from normal human constraints, limitations, and even responsibilities” (Telotte 1995, 33), clownbots explore the fictional quality of the machine-body as a site of fantasy and the dubiousness of its dignity and (potential) autonomy. Putting the pleasurable at odds with the utilitarian (and principles of productivity, rationality, etc.), they are signs of imperfection registering an uncertainty about work: they do not conceal the act of working by making an impression of not-working. Clownbots represent—and this is their humorous momentum and suprahuman charisma—deficiency *and* excess, over- *and* underperformance. In so doing, they participate in the culture of resistance that resisted the reduction of people to the factor of labor power. From today’s perspective, clown robot performances—as well as robot references in contemporary clown-featuring narratives like *Mask of the Phantasm*—can be read as an ironic homage to the popularity of utopian imaginings, aesthetics and cultural consciousness in a modern industrial age, and its technological utopianism. Thus, ultimately, the clown robot icon-machine is a communicative entity: “The icon is invented by an author and then ‘operated’ by a reader who, no matter what his biases are, will ‘read’ the icon as intended” (Porush 1985, 15).

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# The Un-Reality of Quoted Icons: Reduced Representativity in Ludic World-Building

*Thomas Scholz*

Throughout the history of video games, cultural icons have been adapted from linear-narrative media to games. In return, games brought forth cultural icons of their own, which eventually were adapted to other media. While this exchange might seem like any other form of the “flow of content” described by Henry Jenkins (2006: 2), it bears a significant difference. Unlike linear-narrative media, games can prominently incorporate cultural icons that are semantically incongruous into their narrated worlds without compromising the player’s process of actualizing the ludo-narrative content. This ability to integrate semantically incongruous material stems from the predominantly interactive nature of video games. Games are narrative only to a degree. The hegemony of the ludic aspects in games cues players to perceive their narrative aspects differently compared to non-interactive media. In particular, semantic continuity, the cohesion between plot and diegetic environment, and narrative unity in general are less relevant for a player’s actualization of a functioning narrated game world than for a reader’s actualization of a novel’s narrated world. The fact that it is possible to graft cultural icons onto game worlds that are semantically highly disparate without challenging the players’ immersion reveals the medium-specific idiosyncrasies of the ludic/narrative-hybrid that video games are. The icon’s iconicity – not in a semiotic sense, but rather its attribute of being recognizable as an icon – cues players not to perform an extensional operation, i.e., to consider the icon a necessary semantic part of the diegetic environment.

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Instead, the iconicity cues the players to perceive the icon's extratextual reference as a poetic function within the ludo-narrative experience of the game. In the following, I will show how such seemingly unfitting icons are successfully incorporated into gaming worlds, how they cue players to perform inferential operations, and how ludo-narrative unity is sustained throughout this process.

Every critical approach to video games must be based on a profound understanding of the fundamental dual nature of the medium, i.e., the amalgamation of narrativity and interactivity in games. Fortunately, a completely refined theoretical framework is not necessary for the analysis of cultural icons at hand.<sup>1</sup> Based on the thoughts of Aarseth (1997), Thon (2007a, b) and Eskelinen (2012), I understand digital games as a composition of two interrelated aspects, i.e., the narrative aspect and the ergodic or ludic aspect.<sup>2</sup> The composition of a specific game from these aspects depends entirely upon the genre of the game and its respective design. The game classic *Tetris* (1984), for example, is primarily determined by its ludic concept and does not explicitly cue any narrative. The detective game *The Wolf Among Us* (2013), on the other hand, strongly emphasizes the narrative over any ludic function.

The two aspects manifest equally in *World of Warcraft*, the massively multiplayer online game (MMORPG) that will be the subject of my observations. In the game, players explore multiple fictional three-dimensional worlds via their avatars, fulfill quests arranged in various storylines, and engage in armed conflicts with non-player characters (NPCs), monsters of all makings, and other players alike – hence the title. The avatars and NPCs are divided into two hostile factions, the Horde and the Alliance. Their conflict is central to the entire franchise. Each of the multiple iterations of the gaming world currently online is shared by thousands of players. *World of*

<sup>1</sup>“Fortunately,” because such a framework does not exist yet. The dichotomy of ludic and narrative aspects in games manifested itself ab initio in the founding debate of game studies between ludologists and narratologists. The former, among them Espen Aarseth (1997), Jesper Juul (1999), Antonio Frasca (1999), and Markku Eskelinen (2001), argue that the ludic aspects of games primarily cue their meaning. The latter, among them Janet H. Murray (1997, 2005), Henry Jenkins (2004), and Marie-Laure Ryan (2001), make the case for the dominance of the narrative aspects of games. From this debate, complementary approaches have emerged that aim to reconcile the opposing schools. Gonzalo Frasca's concept of a duality of “simulation versus representation” (2003) has developed some traction (e.g., Jan-Noël Thon 2007a, b, 2009). Ryan more recently highlights that “connecting the strategic dimension of gameplay to the imaginative experience of a fictional world” should “do justice to the dual nature of video games” (2006: 203), and Kai Matuszkiewicz proposes the concept of “internarrativity,” a combination of interactivity and narrativity (2014). Unfortunately, no complementary theoretical approach has been developed into a comprehensive theoretical framework yet.

<sup>2</sup>In the heated discussion between narratologists and ludologists, aesthetics has been undervalued as a necessary category for game analysis. Considering that games are audiovisual displays, sometimes as much as films are, this theoretical shortcoming is quite surprising. Though it is high time to abandon the duality and arrive at a trinity of narrative, ludic and aesthetic aspects, this paper is not the right occasion to engage with this task.

*Warcraft* offers a “persistent world,” i.e., all iterations of its virtual worlds continue to exist and develop (within very limited parameters) even when players are not playing. At the release in 2004, the fictional world Azeroth, which is the starting place for all avatars, was mostly a typical heroic fantasy world with magical swords to find, dragons to slay, and gold treasures to loot. Since then, each of the ten expansion until now has either opened an additional world, added new continents to an already existing world, or has reconfigured existing worlds significantly, thus always altering the totality of the gaming world. At the same time, elements from other popular genres, such as science fiction and steampunk, have seeped into the setting. The main narrative focus, however, still lies on heroic fantasy and its never-ending battle between good and evil.

Most of the icons included in the game originated in popular cultural, and some are not even pictorial. Nevertheless, they are icons. Within their respective culture and for the respective milieus, they bear the necessary aspects, i.e., a “fame of the subject,” a “memorable look” (Kemp 2012: 340), and a community-building aspect for a specific group, from subcultures to entire (trans-)national cultural communities. Despite the lack of academic recognition, popular cultural icons do contribute significantly to the construction of the identity of a specific subculture that has been overlooked far too long in studies of the consumption of Western media of all kinds. What has been identified in Japanese culture as “otaku,” the subculture influenced by manga, anime, video games, and other media (Azuma 2009; Otsuka 2010; Steinberg 2012), has its transcultural equivalent in the community of gamers, comic-aficionados, and TV-show fans that colloquially is being referred to as “nerd culture.” This community has constructed its own canon and cultural icons from highbrow, middle brow and low brow culture alike. These icons are as iconic to gamers as secular icons or the original, religious icons are to the respective communities. After all, if a Coke bottle is an icon, as Martin Kemp has shown (2012: 253–277), why shouldn’t Super Mario be iconic?

One such icon is subtly hidden within the world of *World of Warcraft*. In the game’s second expansion, *Wrath of the Lich King* (2008), the continent of Northrend was introduced. Here, players can explore eight distinct regions. One of these regions, the Sholazar Basin, is a tropical jungle that houses the Bittertide Lake. On an island in the lake, players will find a hatch with a glowing window. Though the hatch cannot be opened, hovering the mouse cursor over it reveals the numbers “5 9 16 17 24 43.” These elements have no interactive functionality or narrative significance within *World of Warcraft*. They do not advance the plot, connect to the story’s semantic fields, or refer to any aspect of the Warcraft universe. In Umberto Eco’s terms, they do not correspond to any entry within the players’ *World of Warcraft* encyclopedia.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they reference the TV show *Lost*

<sup>3</sup> Eco develops the concept predominantly in *Lector in fabula* (1990).

(2004–2010), from which both the numbers and the hatch are borrowed. In *Lost*, the story revolves around plane crash survivors on a remote island where a mysterious hatch plays a critical role in the plot. Additionally, a sequence of numbers, “4 8 15 16 23 42,” holds significant meaning within the show. The numbers in the game are each one digit higher.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing the hatch and the numbers as icons relieves the players of the need to assign them semantic significance for the narrated world of the game – i.e., to perform an extensional operation, which would be the regular operation for an element of the diegetic environment. Instead, players perform an inferential operation, assigning only an extra-medial referential function. Switching from an expected operation to a different one qualifies as a form of deautomatized perception. In Shlovsky’s terms, this is “enstrangement” (1990: 1–14). Players engage with the formal aspects of the game rather than its semantic meaning or ludic mechanisms, deriving aesthetic pleasure from this experience. According to structuralist theory, the incorporated icons thus indicate the extent to which games can offer artistic value to their consumers.

For this process to take effect, it is necessary for players to realize the iconicity of the hatch and the numbers. Although these icons may be less recognizable today, they were highly significant at the time of *Wrath of the Lich King*’s release. The TV show *Lost* was at the peak of its global popularity, serving as a narrative icon of Western popular culture, albeit a temporary one. The hatch and the numbers represented the show in a *pars pro toto* capacity. It is reasonable to assume that a significant portion of *World of Warcraft* players were familiar with the show. For those unfamiliar with *Lost*, numerous fan-based online encyclopedias on *World of Warcraft* provide the necessary context to read these inclusions. These icons are discussed in detail on these websites, including their lack of ergodic or narrative function, which is a frequent topic on the discussion boards.<sup>5</sup> Exchanges like these highlight the community-building effect of these cultural icons for the pop-culture-savvy gaming community of that era.<sup>6</sup> The iconic status of the hatch

<sup>4</sup>A possible explanation for the deviation from the original could be the designers’ intent not to infringe the copyrights of the producers of *Lost*. Another possible reason to deviate might be a playful way of quoting, i.e., to change the original and yet clearly refer to it.

<sup>5</sup>For example, a contemporary discussion from the time of the release can be found at <https://www.wowhead.com/forums/topic/what-quest-goes-with-the-hatch-from-the-tv-show-lost-181736>, visited 07/04/2024. Due to the continuous development of the game, players who joined the community later discussed the hatch and the numbers even ten years after the release of *Wrath of the Lich King*, e.g., at [www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/96egro/forgot\\_about\\_this\\_reference\\_to\\_the\\_tv\\_show\\_lost/](http://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/96egro/forgot_about_this_reference_to_the_tv_show_lost/), 07/04/2024.

<sup>6</sup>The cultural phenomenon *Lost* has always been of high value to a specific community only, i.e., the aficionados of Western popular culture. Since the finale of the show, the iconicity of *Lost* has vanished almost completely even with them, yet it is implicitly perpetuated in the numerous humorous iconoclastic adaptations of the show, i.e., its parodies. Two examples are especially significant. In the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (S23 E18, “Beware My Cheating Bart”, 2012), Homer Simpson becomes temporarily addicted to watching the fictional TV-show *Stranded*, an obvious parody of *Lost*. Homer is obsessed with solving the riddles of the show, just as actual view-

and the numbers was recognized and reaffirmed by players familiar with the show. As part of the fan-driven information exchange integral to every successful MMORPG, players initially lacking relevant knowledge were either introduced to the iconic status of *Lost* by their fellow players or could find this information themselves. In subcultures within the online gaming community that value pop cultural literacy, recognizing pop cultural icons like the hatch and the numbers from *Lost* amounts to cultural capital. Participating in the “iconographic experience,” as Jeffrey C. Alexander explains, “illustrates how we feel part of our social and physical surroundings, and how we experience the reality of the ties that bind us to people we know and those we don’t” (2008: 7).

In semiotic terms, players either assigned no significant meaning to the hatch and the numbers, recognized the icons as part of an encyclopedia distinct from the one primarily relevant to their gaming experience, or acquired the necessary knowledge to identify the relevant encyclopedia appropriately. From the perspective of some narratologists, any of these options should have disrupted the narrative unity of the narrated world at hand, as coherence is supposed to be essential for the suspension of disbelief in fictional worlds, and thus for maintaining audience immersion.<sup>7</sup> The inconsistency of the iconic elements I have described above should theoretically fracture the unity of the fictional world. However, the hatch and the numbers do not shatter the audience’s “Secondary Belief” in the non-mimetic world, a concept J.R.R. Tolkien and many other following his argument considered vital for narrative immersion (2006: 132). In my opinion, this theoretical conundrum arises from a fundamental misconception of narrated worlds, which are less fragile than current theories suggest, and from a misunderstanding of the relationship between gaming worlds and their stories. A brief theoretical detour is necessary to illuminate these circumstances and their relevance to cultural icons in video games.

Other than in linear, non-ergodic media, the cohesion between the worlds in games and the narratives they host is much more limited. Kai Matuszkiewicz states that every game – and thus the world of the game – can support multiple narratives (2014: 8). It is important to complement this highly relevant finding with a few additional observations to fully comprehend the limits of this cohesion. Players of video games do not necessarily presuppose such a

ers of the original show were. *The Simpsons*, one of the most persistent and influential phenomena in modern Western pop culture, is well-known for adopting and transforming cultural icons. The TV-show *Wrecked* (2016 – 2018), on the other hand, is a direct parody of *Lost*. Six years after the notoriously unpopular ending of the original, the parody still ran for three seasons.

<sup>7</sup>Theorists such as Lubomír Doležel (1998), Mark J.P. Wolf (2012), and Jan-Noël Thon (2016) each make their case for the necessity of narrative consistency for narrated worlds in general, while Jesper Juul (2011) elaborates the need for consistency for gaming worlds in particular. Ruth Ronen is one of the very few theorists who argue for a more robust nature of narrated worlds when she says that the “coherence of fictional worlds does not collapse when a world of the fictional type contains inconsistencies or impossibilities” (1994: 93).

narrative cohesion. Gaming worlds can be without narratives altogether and be considered fully functional, for multiple reasons. For example, not all players necessarily experience all narratives within a given game. *World of Warcraft* offers different stories to players depending on which race and role they choose for their avatars. The player of a troll hunter will experience a fundamentally different story than the player of a human priestess. In other games, such as *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), the gender of the player's avatar allows access to certain storylines and prohibits access to others. As some locations within the gaming world host only single stories, players learn early on in their gaming careers that not every place in a game has to have a narrative meaning that they can decipher right away. If they do not make an active effort to explore all storylines, some location within the game will remain without story.

Furthermore, players can discover locations before the story progresses to that point. While they may hypothesize about the narrative function of these places later in the storyline, they cannot ascertain it at that moment. Players might also revisit a story location after the narrative has moved on. They may recall the previous experience of the conjunction of the location and its corresponding narrative, yet they cannot reexperience this event. Additionally, game designers may include certain locations in the game world from the start and introduce the story in a subsequent patch or expansion. Until then, the location does not serve a narrative purpose. Sometimes, these additional stories are never delivered due to creative decisions or economic reasons, leaving the location meaningless for the game's story. In non-interactive media, such uncontrolled disconnections of place and narrative are unheard of. However, players of video games experience these disconnections regularly. Consequently, while they are trained to scan for possible connections between place and story, they do not necessarily expect them.<sup>8</sup> Gamers do not presuppose that such a connection exists for every place in the game world. In games, the cohesion between game worlds and the narratives they support is optional and gradual.

This particularly limited cohesion results from the dual nature of video games. As Marie-Laure Ryan explains, narrativity is a matter of degree in all media (2002: 583). In video games, this degree is limited and fluctuates significantly, even within a single game. Scanning predominantly for shifting degrees of the narrative and the ludic function, gamers are ready to realize whatever function the game prompts. In the case of the hatch and the numbers, the game prompts neither narrative nor ludic functions. Yet, as I have shown above, the iconicity cues the poetic function of the reference. These icons do not prompt an extensional operation; they are not a semantic part of the diegetic

<sup>8</sup> This understanding of the players' active part in constructing the game world and its narratives is based on Karl Popper's Constructivist's stance of a "searchlight" theory of mind, as quoted and applied to film studies by David Bordwell (1985: 31) and to art by E.H. Gombrich (1979: 1).

environment. The hatch and the numbers are non-representative for the narrated world of *World of Warcraft*.

Such seemingly paradoxical elements are not at all difficult for players to process and are frequently included in games. Another example was introduced in *World of Warcraft* with its first expansion, *The Burning Crusade* (2006). By traveling through a magic portal, avatars enter a new world, the Outlands, and its central city, Shattrath. From here, players from both the Horde and the Alliance can access specific “battlegrounds,” i.e., time-limited skirmishes between player avatars. To enlist in such a skirmish, avatars must interact with certain non-player characters, known as “battlemasters,” to sign up for the next match. One of the Alliance’s battlemasters in Shattrath is named Adam Eternum. His outfit – loincloth, leather harness, and boots – and his name are references to He-Man, the protagonist of the *Masters of the Universe* franchise, and his alter ego, Prince Adam of Eternia. Next to Eternum stands a tiger, referencing He-Man’s ferocious feline steed Battle Cat, and the gnome Oric Coe, who references Orko, He-Man’s loyal sidekick. Once more, icons from popular culture have been incorporated into *World of Warcraft*. Unlike the hatch and the numbers, however, Adam Eternum is interactive, albeit to a very limited degree. Players can sign up for the next battleground with him, thus activating a game mechanism, and avatars can also engage in conversation with the NPC. However, Adam Eternum’s repertoire is limited to one line:

I came to Outland hoping to discover powerful artifacts to assist the League of Arathor against the Defilers in Arathi Basin... but all I’ve found is this smashing magical loincloth, a ridiculous gnome sidekick, and an egomaniacal undead stalker who insists I’ve stolen his grey skull, or some such. In any case, would you care to join the League in their fight while I continue my search?

The beginning of the first sentence and the entire second sentence narrativize the NPC’s ludic function as battlemaster. The ironic self-description, on the other hand, comments on the outfit, the companion, and the adversary of the original figure as well as those of the present NPC. The “egomaniacal undead stalker” Adam Eternum mentions is the Horde’s respective battlemaster named Keldor, who is a reference to none other than Skeletor, He-Man’s restless adversary. In the *Masters of the Universe* franchise, Skeletor’s original name was Keldor. His attire remarkably resembles Skeletor’s, just as Adam Eternum’s resembles He-Man’s. In a fashion similar to the Alliance’s battlemaster, players can sign up for a battleground with Keldor. They can also engage in a very limited conversation with him:

I have travelled far in my search of a way to ultimately defeat the League of Arathor in the Arathi Basin, but that lion-clothed lummo, Adam Eternum, hounds my every move! Still, if slayers like you would return to Azeroth, perhaps we could defeat the Alliance once and for all!

Once more, the narrativization of the game mechanism for joining a battleground is combined with a humorous reference to the original character's narrative.

The iconic status of the *Master of the Universe* franchise in current popular culture is undeniable. Adapting its protagonist and antagonist into the Outlands provides another Easter-egg for knowing players to find. Yet the process of their adaptation is more complex than the case of the elements incorporated from *Lost*. Other than the hatch and the numbers, Adam Eternum and Keldor have been assigned ludic functions and minimal narratives. From a structuralists point of view, these short background stories – the constellation of characters, their ongoing conflict, and the reason for it – are identical with the background stories of the original characters in the *Master of the Universe* franchise. Telling such parallel storylines in these two distinct franchises is possible because, again from a structuralist's point of view, both franchises are a perfect match. The never-ending battle of the forces of good and their champion, He-Man, against the forces of evil and their power-hungry leader, Skeletor, in the *Masters of the Universe* franchise has its semantic equivalent in *World of Warcraft*. In the video game, the noble Alliance and the fierce Horde are opposing political and military factions locked in a continuous armed conflict. The human race, to which Adam Eternum belongs, is part of the Alliance, while the undead, to which Keldor bears a striking resemblance, have joined forces with the Horde. The configurations of the respective opposing groups even share a number of semantic fields: light/darkness, civilization/savagery, peacefulness/aggression.<sup>9</sup> In both franchises, armed conflict and the struggle for world dominance is a central aspect of storytelling and game mechanics alike.<sup>10</sup>

The structural and semantic parallels between the two franchises could have diminished the iconicity of the imported characters if not for the iconoclastic parody in which Adam and Keldor are depicted. Their respective mocking descriptions – “lion-clothed lummoX” and “egomaniacal undead stalker” – and the misconceptions about their conflict, with each accusing the other of being its source, along with Adam Eternum's malapropism of the original Castle Grayskull's name, serve to caricature the heroic pathos of the *Masters of the Universe* franchise. This effect is only possible because He-Man and Skeletor are iconic figures. Without an icon, there can be no iconoclasm. In turn, the act of iconoclasm underscores the iconicity of the object. The humorous effect highlights the grafting process of the original icons more effectively than the

<sup>9</sup>A significant difference between the two franchises is the absence of the general dichotomy of good vs evil in *Warcraft*. The franchise allows players to choose avatars from the Alliance and the Horde, and while the respective opposing party might be considered to be “evil” from members of either faction, the overall narrative of the game does not support this categorization. In contrast, *Masters of the Universe* leaves no doubt that He-Man and his companions are heroes, while Skeletor and his henchmen are the villains.

<sup>10</sup>The action figures of *Masters of the Universe* are clearly meant to reenact battle. The vast majority all game mechanics in *World of Warcraft* focuses on armed conflict.



non-humorous import of *Lost*'s hatch, thereby emphasizing the poetic function of these icons even more. Once again, the relevant encyclopedias were easily identified by players who shared this information with their few less informed fellow gamers.<sup>11</sup>

It is noteworthy, however, that players cannot participate in these minor narratives. The ludic function assigned to Adam Eternum and Keldor is minimal: players can join a queue with them for an endless series of battles over control of an enclosed region and its resources. Once the battle concludes, the scenario resets and can be replayed. The structural parallels to the content of most episodes of the animated TV show *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983–84), which firmly established the franchise's popularity, are evident. However, these structures are also inherent to the heroic fantasy genre, to which both franchises belong. The icons do not provide any additional narrative material that could be transferred into the game's mechanics. Nevertheless, such an integration is possible.

The characteristics attributed to iconic figures, for example, can be translated into game mechanics. This mechanism is at work at Karazhan, a ghost tower in Azeroth. When introduced in *The Burning Crusade*, ten players had to enter the tower together to overcome its numerous undead occupants. The tower, once the residence of a long-deceased wizard, contains various facilities such as stables, a banquet hall, and also an opera house. In this music venue, ghosts perform one of three plays each week: "Red Riding Hood," "Romulo and Julianne," or "Wizard of Oz." The reference to the iconic originals is evident. These performances are challenges for the players. To overcome them, the avatars have to step onto the stage and face the actors in combat. The undead thespians have taken on the respective parts and adopted their characteristics. As a result, each group of players must overcome game mechanics depending on the play of the week. When "Red Riding Hood" is performed, the single enemy is a gigantic werewolf. During the fight, the wolf magically transforms one of the avatars into a female gnome wearing a red riding hood. The avatar-turned-red-riding-hood has to run away from the wolf as the transformation has left him or her especially vulnerable. Once the spell wears off, the fight continues normally until the next avatar is transformed. This ludic configuration mirrors Red Riding Hoods physical inferiority to the wolf in the traditional fairy tale. "Romulo and Julianne" offers two opponents, iterations of Shakespeare's most famous characters, who first have to be faced consecutively before they engage the players' avatars together. In this finale round, the encounter offers a specific game mechanic. If either Romulo or Julianne is defeated more than ten seconds before the other, they will rise again and rejoin the fight. The lovers have to die together, mimicking the finale of the famous tragedy. In contrast, "Wizard of Oz" offers multiple opponents: Dorothee, her dog Tito, Tinhead, Strawman, the

<sup>11</sup> For example, at <https://www.wowhead.com/tbc/npc=20273/adam-eternum#comments>, visited 07/23/24.

lion Roar, and finally the evil Crone. For each opponent, there are game mechanics at play that need to be considered in order for players to win this encounter. The lion needs to be frightened, Strawman is vulnerable to fire, and Tinhead rusts eventually and slows down. The dog Tito must not be defeated before Dorothee. Otherwise, Dorothee will enrage and increase her magical powers, which will almost certainly lead to the defeat of the players. The Crone can summon a cyclone that knocks avatars up in the air. When she is defeated, she yells: "How could you? What a cruel, cruel world!" The references to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (L. Frank Baum, 1900) and its famous film adaptation *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) couldn't be clearer. Dorothy and her dog Toto, Scarecrow, Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion are as recognizable as the Wicked Witch of the West. Dorothy's love for her dog, the Scarecrow's fear of fire, Tin Man's vulnerability to rust and the Cowardly Lion's eponymous lack of courage have been turned into game mechanics. And although the Wicked Witch of the West originally did not summon the tornado that carried Dorothy from Kansas to Oz, the postmodern amalgamation is easily recognizable.

Players who can identify the relevant encyclopedias cannot only deduce the required counter-strategies for each encounter, but also enjoy the humorous narrative effects embedded into the gaming mechanics. The resistance to dying separately in the encounter with Romulo and Julianne, for example, mocks the tragic death of Romeo and Juliet moments apart from each other in Shakespeare's play. Yet how did the plays and stories from the actual world of the players find their way into Azeroth? There is no explanation in the game. Once more, there is also no narrative need for any explanation. Again, the iconicity of the incorporated elements and its poetic function substitutes any narrative justification. In *World of Warcraft*, these stories have been ascribed a transdiegetic significance. Executing the right strategy with a group of ten players is far more pressing than hypothesizing how the writings of Shakespeare, the Brothers Grimm, and L. Frank Baum came to be performed in the heroic fantasy world. The non-representativity of the plays does not challenge the unity of the narrated world.

A sheer endless number of cultural icons is hidden in *World of Warcraft*. A.A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh can be found in Azeroth, as well as Don Quixote, the shark from Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), Dr. Seuss's Grinch, and many more. Their iconicity allows for a non-representative incorporation into the gaming world, cueing players to perceive the poetic function within the ludonarrative experience of the game. *World of Warcraft* leverages the iconicity of these elements, allowing players to engage with them on a meta-referential level rather than strictly within the diegetic environment of the game. This process, achieved without disrupting the player's immersion, highlights the medium's distinct capacity for integrating semantically incongruous material. The dual nature of games, where narrative and interactivity coexist, permits a form of player engagement that is multifaceted and requires further

observation. This phenomenon underscores the artistic potential of video games. As gaming continues to evolve, the interplay between narrative and gameplay mechanics will likely become even more sophisticated, offering new ways for players to engage with.

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SECTION III

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Science and Humanities

# Dolly: An Icon on the Threshold Between Science and Culture

*Nikolai Münch and Paula Wojcik*

*Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity,  
and I am not sure about the former.  
Albert Einstein*

What we see above is a common example of how science becomes popular: a well-known and widely-applicable quotation, divorced from the scientist and the scientific context, disseminated into everyday culture. Why and how did these words become ‘winged’? This obviously did not happen because they express something unique or outstandingly funny. The quotation finds itself on t-shirts, coffee cups, or postcards because its originator is Einstein—a cultural icon in-and-of himself. In a similar way scientific concepts (e.g. butterfly effect, theory of evolution), images (e.g. double helix), portraits or names of scientists (e.g. Stephen Hawking, Nils Bohr) are used in everyday and mass culture where they ‘lose’ their initial impact and meaning while at the same time they obtain cultural and affective value (or according to Bourdieu: cultural capital, see the discussion in the introduction to this volume).

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Moreover, Dolly's example contributes to the shift from a pictorial understanding of the cultural icon to the conceptual as it is introduced in this volume. Dolly had a severe handicap regarding her publicity: she was not an individually-recognizable sheep. Maybe most people would note a difference between a Scottish Blackface and a Finn-Dorset (that is, between Dolly and the mother which gave birth to her) but most are surely unable to identify Dolly as an individual sheep—a rather poor prerequisite for an icon. While Dolly became iconic through her pictures she did so primarily because of the semantic surplus created beyond her sheer images. The semantic surplus described had to be recalled by the context and framing of Dolly's images—be it pictorial by replication and iteration or textual.

This chapter examines the entanglement of cultural dissemination, intermedia appropriation and semantic modification of science using Dolly, the cloned sheep as a paradigmatic example. We focus on the question how cultural icons accumulate—sometimes divergent—meanings, emotions, and last but not least their cultural and economic value. We argue that the semantic surplus has roots in several cultural traditions (see section “The Semantic Surplus and Its Origins”) and results in a potential to politically polarize groups (discussed in the section on groupism). The interaction between the semantic and the affective area generates a symbolic value that can feed back into the original field of science (discussed in the section on the value of icons).

### THE ICON'S REPRESENTING FUNCTION: DOLLY AND “DOLLY”

Dolly was born on July 5th 1996 in the Roslin Institute near Edinburgh, but her sudden rise as a worldwide icon occurred some months later (22nd February 1997) when the public was informed about her existence. The scientists at Roslin had kept the news quiet while they waited for their scientific paper to be published in *Nature*, but the story was leaked a few days before their article appeared (Wilmut et al. 1997, 2000, 243–245). Though at Roslin they were prepared for some media interest, “nobody could have anticipated what actually happened” (Wilmut et al. 2000, 243). It was the beginning of “Dollymania”, the start of Dolly's career as “one of the most celebrated animals ever created” (Franklin 2007, 4–5). Although she never left her place of birth, she lived the life of an international celebrity and was present in the media all over the world during her life and afterlife. Her ‘public birth’ appeared in “nearly every major newspaper in the world”, which all “carried headlines about Dolly the sheep” (Mathew 2020); there was extensive media coverage about her health status (e.g. Young 2002) and her giving birth (e.g. Cohen 1998). “She posed for magazines, including *People*; became the subject of books, journal articles, and editorials; had an opera written about her; starred in commercials; and served as a metaphor in an electoral campaign” (Mathew 2020). The Roslin Institute made Dolly a trademark so they could prevent her pictures being used in advertisements that were considered inappropriate (Watson-Smyth 1998). However, because Dolly and her creators were depicted

as taboo-breaking, this action made the Roslin scientists look absolutely irresponsible. The “attempt to patent Dolly, and lay commercial claim to animals produced by cloning”—still called the “Dolly method” (e.g. Maron 2018)—led to a “saga” of court proceedings (Servick 2014) that outlasted Dolly’s life by more than a decade. Media all over the world covered her early death in February 2003 (e.g. Briggs 2003), and continued to report Dolly news on several “memorial days”, like her 20th and 25 birthday or the 15th anniversary of her death (e.g. Weintraub 2016; Gabbatiss 2018).

What made Dolly an “iconic animal” (Franklin 2007, 5)? One aspect is the announcement of her being a major scientific breakthrough. Roslin’s scientists were not exactly humble in their communication to the public about “the most extraordinary creature ever born” (Wilmut et al. 2000, 15). But, the “hype” (Franklin 2007, 5) around Dolly referred to sets of connections and imaginations beyond the “hard” scientific facts. “The world reacted with intense emotion” Nussbaum and Sunstein (1999, 11) observed, and “the arrival of Dolly made it clear that human beings would soon have to face the possibility of human cloning—and it has been this idea, far more than the reality of animal cloning, that caused public anxiety”. This “today the sheep ... tomorrow the shepherd” motif (Woodward 1997), or the prospect of human cloning, dominated public—and seeped into scientific—discourse (Haran et al. 2008, 15; Petersen 2002). And although Ian Wilmut, probably the most prominent scientist involved in Dolly’s creation, was not at all reluctant to decorate his scientific merits with religious or metaphysical connotations, he told the *Washington Post*: “The social impact of this is actually out of proportion to the science” (Barbash 1997). So, what are the hard, scientific facts behind Dolly’s creation?

The word ‘clone’ was coined in 1903 in the context of plant breeding by the American plant physiologist Herbert J. Webber, “to apply to those plants that are propagated vegetatively by buds, grafts, cuttings, suckers, runners, slips, bulbs, tubers, etc. The plants grown from such vegetative parts are not individuals in the ordinary sense, but are simply transplanted parts of the same individual, and in heredity and in all biological and physiological senses such plants are the same individual” (Webber 1903, 502). A short time later, the term was picked up by laboratories researching cell lines, especially around questions of inheritance (Brandt 2010).

After plant, bacterial, and cell line clones, there were the first successfully cloned animals (mainly amphibians) in the 1960s (McKinell and Di Berardino 1999). These clones were created through the technology of somatic cell nuclear transfer, which was successfully applied for the first time in 1952, and later also used to clone Dolly (McKinell and Di Berardino 1999; Gouveia et al. 2020). In this process an egg cell is enucleated and a donor nucleus from a somatic cell is implanted in the egg cell to produce a viable embryo that is genetically identical to the somatic body cell. Before Dolly, there had been other cloned animals—including cloned mammals, and even cloned sheep (McKinell and Di Berardino 1999; Gouveia et al. 2020)—elsewhere, and at the



Roslin Institute (the immediate predecessors of Dolly were Megan and MoragWilmut, Ian) (Wilmut et al. 2000, 205–230). But, unlike Dolly, these animals had not been cloned by differentiated adult cells; donor nuclei from cells in earlier stages of development were used instead.

All these cloning experiments, including the one with Dolly, were “never intended as a procedure for the simple multiplication of animals” (McKinell and Di Berardino 1999, 875). Instead, cloning was foremost done to serve basic science by providing insights into embryonic development, nuclear differentiation, nuclear reprogramming, cellular aging, genomic imprinting, and epigenetics (McKinell and Di Berardino 1999; Gouveia et al. 2020). Showing that adult somatic cells that are already completely differentiated can be de-differentiated is the big impact that Dolly had on science, especially stem cell research. The Japanese cell biologist Shinya Yamanaka (who won the Nobel Prize for the development of human induced pluripotent stem cells from somatic cells) wrote that “Dolly the Sheep told me that nuclear reprogramming is possible even in mammalian cells and encouraged me to start my own project” (Weintraub 2016). Today in stem cell research mostly these induced pluripotent stem cells are used and are considered to be the most promising path for practical applications in regenerative medicine. Somatic cell nuclear transfer is still used in basic science but it is far less widespread than induced pluripotent stem cells. Practical applications of cloning are rare and limited to plants and small niches of animal cloning, such as racing or polo horses (Cohen 2015). So, the technique of somatic nuclear cell transfer and cloning, as important it was for the developments of cell biology, nowadays plays only a subordinated role in science and practical applications of biotechnology and faded out of public attention. But unlike the technique itself, Dolly did not go off the stage.—“Dolly the sheep is gone but not forgotten” as Nancy Touchette (2003) diagnoses. This is due to her semantic surplus.

### SEMANTIC SURPLUS AND ITS ORIGINS

Why did Dolly provoke this huge resonance in media and society beyond her scientific meaning? As we illustrate below, in intermedia circulation, the cloned sheep has been freely associated with different thinking traditions, topoi and motifs from literature and film. This accumulation created a semantical surplus that evoked different emotions with different cultural actors. On the one hand, it provides affirmation of scientific progress, but on the other it produces anxieties of different origin: concerns about the God-like power of scientists, the societal implications of cloning, the loss of individuality and a denaturalization of natural processes (such as reproduction). We elaborate on this by concentrating on three main semantic complexes: identity and individuality, metaphysics and religion, sexuality and naturality.

### *The Complex of Identity and Individuality*

The clone is the uncanny embodiment of everything opposed to the modern idea of human identity, as it neglects the individuality and uniqueness of a person. The word evokes images such as the Clone Troopers from the *Star Wars* franchise that are merely tools of evil power and a constant, yet unsuccessful, threat to the heroes of the sci-fi fairy tale. These clones are identical not only in the way they look but also in the way they behave; they lack a free will, an individual biography, social or family relations—in short, everything that defines us as human.

The uneasiness about the loss of individuality reaches further back to the motif of the doppelganger, particularly developed in romantic fiction. One of the most sophisticated novels representing the idea of the doppelganger is E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Die Elixiere des Teufels* (*The devil's elixir*, 1815/1816). In dialogue with Matthew Lewis' novel *The Monk* Hoffmann introduces the character of the monk Medardus, who is misled by sexual desire and later faces a doppelganger who commits rape and murder using his alias. Hoffmann's well-known interest in what Freud named, years later the unconscious is clearly recognizable in this motif; as Medardus has lost his moral compass before he met the doppelganger; the doppelganger can be understood as the externalization of the monk's dark side (fatefully predetermined by the family's incestuous history)—an interpretation of the motif that has had a long-lasting impact. The loss of uniqueness is connected to a loss of control over one's dark desires and lower urges; it can lead to both horror and laughter, but is never a permanently-desirable option. This is solidified in the imagination of the clone that fed back to Dolly-the-icon, e.g. when *Time Magazine* placed an ominous (if not alarmist) question over Dolly's cover image "Will there ever be another you?" (in analogy to the jazz standard *There will never be another you*) followed by "A clone might be eerily like you. Or perhaps eerily like someone else" (Wright 1997). The fear of a loss of individuality can also be transferred from the individual to a collective dimension, manifesting itself in dystopian world visions.

The connection between the semantic areas of "cloning" and "totalitarian regimes" that we observe in *Star Wars* has famous predecessors in the history of film and literature; popular landmarks include Ira Levin's *The Boys From Brazil* (1976, movie directed by Franklin J. Schaffner 1978) or Woody Allen's *The Sleeper* (1973) and *ante litteram* in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). The blending of clones and totalitarianism follows a causality: "because totalitarian regimes are a threat to individuality, cloning is the climax of totalitarian world visions." In the decades after World War II, this vision was closely connected to German National Socialism. In *The Boys From Brazil*, a secret organization of former Nazis and young neo-Nazis conspire to take over the world by cloning Adolf Hitler 94 times and raising him in foster families. In Woody Allen's *The Sleeper*, a dystopian totalitarian society plans to clone their deceased leader from a cell of his nose. Although both visions seem hilarious from today's point of view (and Woody Allen's film clearly intends this effect)

the imaginary blending of the semantic areas did not lose its power, as the debates and images around Dolly show.<sup>1</sup>

In 1997, the German weekly political journal *Der Spiegel* published an issue on Dolly, entitled *The Fall From Grace* (14/1997). This religious commentary employed three iconic figures, all of whom had been cloned and lined in a row of identical individuals: Adolf Hitler, Albert Einstein, and Claudia Schiffer. In each row, the figures march with their clones in perfect lockstep that remind us of military parades known from North Korea, Russia—or Nazi-Germany. The triad of outstanding evil, genius, and beauty is blended with ideas of totalitarianism and dictatorship; strengthened by a *mise-en-abyme* of Hitler being one of the pictured. The subtext therefore points to the eugenic practices during the Nazi era and blends it with the idea of superhumans in the context of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. The cover, however, transfers the semantic area of politics into the frame of identity and individuality. The represented properties—evil, genius, beauty—are meant as reductions of humanity to a feature that may be requested (or rejected) by a dystopian society, and therefore deemed worthy or unworthy of cloning. The title’s religious reference to a fall from grace enriches the discussion with a metaphysical dimension, well-articulated by Herbert et al. (1997): “Would a cloned person have its own soul?”

### *The Complex of Metaphysics and Religion*

From one of its earliest literary representations, the idea of human scientists artificially making other human beings is framed by religious questions. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) blends science and metaphysics in the tragic story of Victor Frankenstein and the monster he created. The hubris of playing God results in Frankenstein losing all whom he loves and in the existence of an unlucky creature that cannot find a place in the world. In the end, both protagonists are captured in a mutual chase in a non-world of eternal ice. The narrative trope of human hubris reaches back to the homunculus, the golem or the myth of Prometheus (Wulff 2001). The latter is explicitly adopted as a metaphor for the scientific striving in Frankenstein’s subtitle: *A modern Prometheus*.

An early example of religious framing within the cloning discourse is the book *In His Image: The Cloning of Man* by science journalist Michael Rorvik (1978). It caused a splash in the media for a variety of reasons. Using contemporary categories, the book is a mockumentary or “science unfiction” (Poon 2000, 167), in which Rorvik depicts the fictional story of a wealthy businessman, who successfully cloned himself.<sup>2</sup> This book is usually seen as an example for the increasing interference between science and fiction within the public

<sup>1</sup>i.e. <http://www.cbc-network.org/2010/11/dolly-the-cloned-sheep-cloned/>.

<sup>2</sup>The book was announced as a documentary that reflects on ethical issues of cloning. The contrafactual announcement entailed not only public attention but also lawsuits which forced Rorvik to finally declare the book was a work of fiction.

sphere (Marek 2012, 28). However, it also indicates to the latent presence of the metaphysical and religious connotations that become visible when Dolly enters the stage of popular culture.

Dolly has been introduced as the most famous sheep after the Lamb of God (Gould 1998, 44)—an analogy that usually occurs as a statement without further implication but contributes to the semantic enrichment of Dolly as an icon. Dolly's creators published a book titled *The Second Creation: The Age of Biological Control* (2000) that, like Lee Silvers' *Remaking Eden* (1997), plays with the idea of the scientist replacing God and creating a new mankind. The somehow lurid character of these both titles picks up metaphysical criticism, expressed in statements such as the already mentioned "Today the sheep ... tomorrow the shepherd?" (Woodward 1997) or "This is not the 'conquest of nature', it is the abolition of man" (Will 1997).

The fears to dissociate the metaphysical creator-creation-relation reach back to discussions about the first robots or automats (i.e. E.T.A. Hoffmann's Olimpia in *The Sandman*). They gained popular interest within the eighteenth and nineteenth century—fueled by Jacques de Vaucanson's experimental works and Julien Offray de la Mettrie's *L'homme-machine* (1748) and point to the discourse around biotechnological reproduction which originated at the beginning of the twentieth century.

### *The Complex of Sexuality and Naturality*

As Roman Marek (2012, 34) remarks, it is somewhat surprising that cloning as a reproductive technique (which involves no sexual acts) is semantically connected to sexuality on several levels. Firstly, he points to the pulp magazines that at the beginning of the twentieth century echoed scientific developments and framed them as horror-stories. A precursor to this lurid genre is the gothic novel of the nineteenth century, particularly when it comes to females as persecuted, sexually harassed, held captive, dying or (un)dead. Images that were coined by Horace Walpole, E.T.A. Hoffman, Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, or Bram Stoker develop an afterlife in popular pulp fiction, and later in so-called B-movies, when mad scientists hold beautiful and usually half-naked victims captive on behalf of their experiments—among them, cloning (Marek 2012, 20).

Biotechnical reproduction was more than cloning; in 1857 France developed technological methods for incubating babies in order to increase the survival chances for premature infants (Marek 2012, 19). Frederick Edwin Smith, the First Earl of Birkenhead, proposed ectogenesis as a beneficial reproductive technique in his illustrated book, *Life in Year 2030* (Turney 1998, 111–112), and the 1896 Berlin industrial show featured an incubator baby exhibit.<sup>3</sup> This exhibit was so popular that similar sideshows were developed in the United

<sup>3</sup><http://www.neonatology.org/pinups/berlin.html> (accessed 2021, June 24). Archived as <https://archive.fo/fhgZO>.

States (Marek 2012, 19). The media echo around these exhibits enriched the purely-technical dimension of the invention, with slogans such as “an artificial foster mother”, which directly refers to ideas of ectogenesis. The powerful impact of these 100-year-old images is illustrated by its exaggerated dystopian vision in movies such as *The Matrix* (Part one in 1999).

Although ectogenesis had been introduced as liberating for women (Turney 1998, 112) and cloning holds the potential to bring freedom from the “tyranny of reproduction”, feminist critique considered both to be an appropriation of the female body and a reflection of a patriarchal vision of society (Marek 2012, 35). Other voices complained about the opposite: “cloning would make men superfluous” (Wray, Sheler, and Watson 1997 cited after Poon 2000, 170). At the same time, the liberation from the tyranny of (heterosexual) reproduction can be seen as beneficial for queer and transgender persons, many of whom want to have children they are genetically related to (discussed by Eskridge, Jr and Stein 1998). This completes the emancipatory credo “mutual sex without reproduction” by “mutual reproduction without sex” (Eskridge, Jr. and Stein 1998, 97). Striking the same note, Jean Baudrillard welcomes cloning: “[f]irst, sex was liberated from reproduction; today it is reproduction that is liberated from sex, through asexual, biotechnological modes of reproduction such as artificial insemination or full body cloning” (Baudrillard 2000, 10). What strikes us as odd is that—in contrast to the pro-cloning attitude—the title of Baudrillard’s essay (*The final solution*) refers to the complex of totalitarianism.

This vision is humorously combined with the semantic complex of “totalitarianism” in Woody Allen’s *The Sleeper* (1973). As human sexuality is considered to be barbarian, its ‘benefits’ are being outsourced to so-called orgasm-machines, where the idea of a ‘clean’ non-sexual reproduction is connected to a futuristic authoritarian state. The possible consequences of cloning for human relationships have been a steady topic of fiction. A contemporary and complex example can be found in Allen Michael Winterbottom’s film *Code 46* (2003); a love story comes to a tragic end because one of the lovers turns out to be a clone of the other’s mother and their sexual interference is considered incestuous. Although these movies do not directly engage with eugenics—in contrast to i.e. *Gattaca* (1997)—the future world visions are dystopias. The shift away from natural reproduction creates a world without emotions (in *Code 46* the protagonist falls in love only because he uses emotion-producing pills).

There has been a notable effort to introduce Dolly not only as a sexual but also as a natural mammal. Of the many photographs of Dolly that were splashed across global media, there is little that reminds the viewer of her creation in the laboratory. Instead, Dolly is staged as a quite normal sheep in her barn or outside the green Scottish grassland (Marek 2012, 33), often as a proud mother, with her first born lamb Bonnie or later with her triplets Lucy, Darcy and Cotton (see Fig. 1). According to the former scientific director of Roslin, Harry Griffin, “she performed well for the camera, and everybody could see



**Fig. 1** Dolly and her triplets Lucy, Darcy and Cotton. <https://www.ed.ac.uk/roslin/about/dolly/media-links/images> (accessed 2021, June 11). Archived as <https://archive.fo/0paMo>

she was a perfectly normal animal” (Callaway 2016). This public relations strategy seems to counter the ambivalent connotations coming with the clone, its unnaturalness and ‘yuck-factor’. Indeed, renaming an embryo from a prosaic laboratory number to the personalized moniker ‘Dolly’ was intended, as Ian Wilmut admits, to “humanize a research project that might otherwise have seemed detached from everyday life” (Weintraub 2016). Depicting Dolly as a mother lamb helped this humanization—up to a point where the Roslin scientists themselves worried if Dolly became *too* human in the media (Callaway 2016). Dolly’s motherhood not only makes her look normal, natural, and as ‘human’ as a sheep can get, it also shows her normal biological functioning (including sexual functioning), thus weakening the debate about her diminished health as a side effect of the cloning technique. So, the scientist’s presentation of Dolly to the public was ambivalent. On the one hand, they were eager to personalize a scientific technique and did not hesitate to stress the importance of their achievements by using theologically or metaphysically laden notions, like Dolly as the “second creation” (Wilmut et al. 2000). In doing this they further fueled the semantic surplus Dolly created. On the other hand, overwhelmed by public reactions, they tried to form and sober up the public discourse around to Dolly. But Dolly in public discourse had become independent from interpretations of her creators.



## FROM SEMANTIC TO AFFECTUAL SURPLUS: GROUPISM AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

The semantic areas of individuality and identity, religion and metaphysics, and sexuality and naturality refer to ambivalent world visions that can be a source of anxieties and hopes, contempt and affection. The icon Dolly is not free of valuations, although it first and foremost represents the technique of cloning. However, the semantic surplus evoked by the rhizome-like network of meanings that we described above causes an affectual surplus that reflects norms and values of different groups. Dolly represents the ethical concerns against cloning, however she can be used as an icon by those who support this technique because of its inherent potential to positively change the world or simply because they believe in inevitable scientific progress. Others can use Dolly to express their skepticism or even rejection with different motivation that holds a potential for groupism: conservative Christians, feminists, believers in progress, or technic sceptics—although unstable, formations like this can emerge within the cloning discourse to appropriate Dolly as ‘their’ icon or commit iconoclasm by ‘destroying’ it metaphorically.

As presented above, skepticism is more common than affirmation when it comes to cloning. Still, a few examples testify to pro-cloning attitudes. One is the Canadian religious cult Cloneaid, based on Raëlianism, a religion that believes in the extraterrestrial origin of mankind (Poon 2000, 171). Founded in 1997—the year Dolly became widely known—the cult believes that cloning is a route to immortality. This attitude refers to the religious and metaphysical semantic area. In Cloneaid’s worldview, there is no interference between cloning and God’s will, which is seen very differently by some others, such as conservative Christians. Already the idea of ectogenesis can be seen as a violation of God’s natural order, observable in the debates on the reproductive *in vitro* technique that persistently splits social groups in many countries (e.g. Brazil, Hungary, Poland). Here the semantic complex of religion and metaphysics is blended with that of sexuality and naturality. In fact, no large organized religions approve of cloning, including Islam, Roman Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox Judaism (Güvercin and Munir 2017). The Vatican names Dolly as a caesura for cloning in a statement that leaves no doubt about the attitude towards this technique: “In the cloning process the basic relationships of the human person are perverted: filiation, consanguinity, kinship, parenthood. A woman can be the twin sister of her mother, lack a biological father and be the daughter of her grandfather” (de Dios Vial Correa 1997).

Not all concerns around this debate are expressed without humor. Dolly has caused a great amount of caricatures and memes that refer to the semantic complexes. For instance, there are cartoons picturing God who welcomes Dolly in heaven.<sup>4</sup> Subtitled “The real clone wars”—referring to the *Star Wars*

<sup>4</sup>[https://de.toonpool.com/cartoons/RIP%20Dolly\\_107230](https://de.toonpool.com/cartoons/RIP%20Dolly_107230) (accessed 2021, June 11). Archived as <https://archive.fo/rBJVR>.

universe—one presents the clone troopers as sheep with the well-known helmets.<sup>5</sup> This may be considered as iconoclasm, as it brings the ethical debate Dolly stands for down to a joke. However, the iconoclasm proves commercially successful as some of the jokes or political cartoons are sold as merchandise. You can buy a pillow with a cartoon showing a scientist who asks “So who votes YES to the idea of allowing cloning?” and a row of identically looking men—his clones—raise their hands.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the intermedia representation of cloning and related topoi, it is unsurprising that groupism against cloning is more popular than groupism that supports procloning attitudes. In the public discourse there are merely a few individuals, such as Douglas Coupland (Poon 2000, 170–171) or Michel Houellebecq (Caduff 2004, 233) who embrace the idea of being reproduced without sex. Overall, the three complexes of deeply culturally-rooted topoi and motifs about ‘the clone’, and the semantic and affective surplus attached to them, are genuinely negative. Despite this negative connotation, these complexes helped Dolly the sheep to accumulate symbolic value to qualify her as a musealized national icon. Dolly’s preserved remains were donated by the Roslin institute to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh where she still is “a spectacle” (Mathew 2020) and a symbol of national significance, as Gordon Rintoul (director of the National Museums of Scotland) states: “Dolly is a striking reminder of Scotland’s record of scientific achievement, and her contribution can now be recognized for many centuries to come” (Pilcher 2003). Today, there is even a cartoon series for children with Dolly as the main protagonist.<sup>7</sup>

That Dolly is a sheep “is no coincidence” as Sarah Franklin (2005, 74) remarks. There has been a long-lasting and tight connection between sheep breeding, agriculture and industry in Britain, and especially in Scotland. Dolly stands in this tradition and “must be seen as a product of the same agricultural, industrial, and economic inheritance that has given Britain its constitution as a nation” (Franklin 2007, 115). The fact that Dolly was seen as embodying “the combination of medical, agricultural, and industrial values that gave rise to many other noteworthy Scottish inventions, including penicillin, the steam engine, [and] the cotton reel” (Franklin 2007, 74) made her a perfect national symbol—a unique innovation which nevertheless stands in line with the historically-grown Scottish self-understanding. But beyond symbolic capital, Dolly’s creation and afterlife was—as Scottish sheep have always been—also intertwined with economic and financial interests. Dolly merchandising (still available!) is only a small aspect of her economic impact; the creation of Dolly and her public dissemination is a telling example of how thoroughly political

<sup>5</sup><https://wirdou.com/2012/07/01/the-real-clone-wars/> (accessed 2021, June 11). Archived as <https://archive.fo/3aTNV>.

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/d/dolly\\_the\\_sheep.asp](https://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/d/dolly_the_sheep.asp) (accessed 2021, June 11). Archived as <https://archive.fo/XC6c0>.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMELL5pwLds> (accessed 2021, June 11). Archived as <https://archive.fo/1ch64>.



and scientific institutional settings and the related economic necessities shape scientific development and its public communication.

### THE VALUE OF SCIENTIFIC ICONS: FROM CULTURAL TO ECONOMIC

Thus far we described mainly the cultural and symbolic value Dolly the sheep accumulated as an icon. It is somehow striking that the literature considered in this article remains silent on or at least underexposes Dolly's economic value. It is true that the cultural and symbolic value of Dolly is essential. Nevertheless, that economic and cultural value often are closely associated should not fall out of view. In the case of Dolly economic necessities and expectations paved the way to her status as a scientific icon, and the cultural capital that Dolly gained helped to economically exploit the science behind her.

The birth of Dolly was one result of a long-term research project that started in 1984; both, British research funding and public-private research partnerships (García-Sancho et al. 2017) had a formative influence. The predecessor to Institute of Roslin, the Animal Breeding Research Organisation, was established shortly after World War II with the aim "to improve the commercial yield of livestock" (García-Sancho et al. 2017, 6). To improve this yield it designed, for instance, long-term breeding programs. For these programs it got relatively renowned and was sustainably funded by the British Government.

The funding situation became tricky in the 1970s, largely because Margaret Thatcher pushed tying funding to deliverables and fostered the (financial) involvement of private actors in state-supported research. There were financial cuts everywhere, but agricultural science was disproportionately affected because it was judged as "following purely academic interests and not addressing the need of the country" (Gracia-Sancho 2015, 289). So, the Animal Breeding Research Organisation reoriented itself to conduct fundable research, with a focus on biotechnology and turning to molecular science and genetic engineering, as "recombinant DNA techniques were seen as a model for industrial involvement in the application of basic science" (Gracia-Sancho 2015, 290). The "adaption to the hostile administrative and funding environment of the 1980s" (Gracia-Sancho 2015, 295) resulted in a program that aimed to create transgenic sheep whose milk would be enriched with human proteins for haemophilia and lung disease treatment. To capitalize on this innovative biotechnology, Pharmaceutical Proteins Limited (PPL) was founded, which was able to get funding from pharmaceutical multinationals "in exchange for future rights over the therapeutic proteins" (Gracia-Sancho 2015, 295). The birth of Dolly was part of this endeavour.

Although the Roslin Institute and PPL had some success with this "pharming project" (García-Sancho et al. 2017, 10) they were not able to develop processes suitable for industrial-scale production. So, the group within Roslin responsible for the nuclear transfer technology "became increasingly

independent from the pharming team” (García-Sancho et al. 2017, 10) and acquired independent funding. The fact that the nuclear transfer science was partly funded by a grant from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—which “was eager to distance itself from any genetic engineering work” (García-Sancho and Myelnikov 2019, 31) in a time where genetic modified food was hotly debated—led the Roslin scientists to present Dolly as an end in itself or in the name of basic science (which she initially was not) and not as a vehicle for genetic modification. “After making drugs in milk proved commercially nonviable, the institute decided to benefit from the cell culture technology used in Dolly’s cloning. A spin-off built around those patents, Roslin Biomed, was soon sold to the US-based Geron, which brought cloning together with stem cell research. The deal finally improved Roslin’s precarious financial situation” (Myelnikov 2016). Triggered by the shifting national science policy the Roslin Institute tentatively adopted its research focus to be able to ensure funding. This adaptation not only paved the path to the creation of Dolly but also the way she communicated to a wider public.

It was largely due to economic and funding necessities that led Roslin to Dolly, which in turn made the Institute into a financially consolidated “reference center in development biology and stem cell research” (García-Sancho et al. 2017, 11) and the involved scientists renowned experts in regenerative medicine rather than agricultural science. These tangible funding interests did more than direct the scientific path from agriculture to cloning for regenerative medicine; they were also formative for the public communication of Dolly as scientific achievement where cloning as an end for itself was overemphasized. The public debate that spread along the lines of cultural imagination—Dolly’s symbolic value—was unintentionally interlocked with Dolly’s economic value, the need to acquire funding and the economic possibilities of an emerging field in biotechnology.

## CONCLUSION

The newspaper and magazine headlines announcing Dolly’s death left no doubt about her cultural status: “A superstar exits the stage” (Touchette 2003). The lingering influence of Dolly is still observable in the spread of Dolly iconography across almost all cultural areas (even poetry: Ertel 2011). Although the research’s media echo has been beneficial to Dolly’s creators, they could predict neither the media paths Dolly circulated within nor the emotions she triggered. The circulating images, reports, and statements drew on an imaginative reservoir that can be traced back to mythical narratives or gothic novels, enriched over decades. The semantic ‘docking stations’ of identity and individuality, metaphysics and religion along with sexuality and naturality attach meanings to a biological animal that produce opposed emotions towards the threats, and promises of technology. In opposition to the fact that the majority of voices expressed concern about the cloning technique and proclaimed negative (if not apocalyptic) visions of a world filled with clones, Dolly accumulated

an immense amount of value in her symbolic, but also economic, meaning that fed back on the reputation of the scientists. Although we put our focus on the specific example of Dolly and traced her iconic status, the findings can be transferred to scientific icons in general. The detachment or loss of original meaning goes conjointly with an attachment of new ones. The new meanings attached open up different semantic frames which are, in turn, connected to affirmed or neglected world views. This, in turn, points to the potential of scientific icons to polarize societies. The accumulated semantic surplus provokes identification in a “pro” or “contra” manner. In contrary to the intuitive assumption that this form of becoming popular will be judged as “misuse” of science or even discredits the scientists and their work the example of Dolly showed that the appropriation within the popular discourse increases the reputation.

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# Deconstruction: Iconizing the Wor(l)d

*Nadja Gernalzick*

At the latest since Stephen Bannon, then White House chief strategist and Senior Adviser to the President, announced live on MSNBC News in February 2017 that the “deconstruction of the administrative state” was going to be a key item on the agenda of newly elected President Donald Trump, the word deconstruction has become iconic. Derived from “iconic persons” or “iconic individuals,” so-called “cultural icons” (Leypoldt 2010) or “global icons” (Ghosh 2011) are defined as human figures depicted in media such as painting, photography, film, or sculpture—George Washington, Martin Luther King Jr., Che Guevara, Chairman Mao, Queen Victoria, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, The Beatles, or Madonna as well as literary, phantasy, fairy-tale, or mythical figures such as Captain Ahab, Donald Duck, Count Dracula, Harry Potter, or Mulan. Iconicity, however, does not depend on the human or an imaginary anthropomorphized figure. A nonhuman entity, such as an architectural or natural site—the Colosseum, the Great Wall, Notre Dame, the Sydney Opera House, Mount Kilimanjaro, Ayers Rock, the Grand Canyon—or an object, image, machine, or event—the nuclear mushroom cloud, the compact disc, the Blue Marble photograph—may also become a “world icon” (Freeman 2018, 34). Moreover, like a brand name and logo, a word from scientific theory can also become iconic, intra-acting (Barad 2007) with human (re)cognition. Iconic words—corona, democracy, ubuntu, revolution, dialectic, deconstruction, or, with its iconicity in the making, *shanzhai*—carry semantic networks in a way similar to keywords (Bondi 2010, 3–5; Gernalzick

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2024) and comparable to the cultural iconicity of images of persons or sites. As the examples also indicate, cultural iconicity, in processes of iconization and de-iconization, comes and goes, ebbs and rises.

In the following, I argue that the word deconstruction affords worldwide cultural iconicity.<sup>1</sup> To demonstrate how the word deconstruction acts as a world icon, I outline Byung-Chul Han's deconstructionist explication of Chinese artworks as deriving cultural iconicity from emptiness (2017 [2011]) and show that processes of iconization engage and depend on materiality of media or artworks. This argument seems necessary since theories of cultural icons often presume a numinous 'presence' or a 'value' that is considered 'represented' by a cultural icon and to motivate its iconicity (Leypoldt 2010 and Freeman 2018, *passim*). I then briefly turn to anti-representationist actor-network theory (Latour) and postphenomenological material engagement theory (Ihde and Malafouris) as well as posthumanist and ecofeminist approaches—all frequently summarized as new materialisms—in order to provide a definition of iconicity that does not rely on 'representation' of 'value.' Such an approach permits the reading of the word deconstruction as a prominent item in discourse and semiosis, with its "notational iconicity" (Krämer and McChesney 2003) independent of images of persons or sites but still enactive of cultural iconicity. The investigation shows, moreover, that iconicity by its material engagement and intra-activity always acts as transnationalizer and 'worlder.'

### ICONICITY: ESSENCE OR EMPTINESS

Indebted to theories of the religious icon and the numinous, iconicity in studies of cultural icons is often explained as a "power" with which the icon is "charged" and the "source" of which it "embodies," so that it is saturated with and exudes "authority" (Leypoldt 2010, 12, 18, 14). The "pull" Günter Leypoldt claims to experience "in the presence of iconic individuals" (2010, 10)—"presence" per their "embodiment" (14) in a statue—is suggestive of the relation of the faithful to the image of the divine in catholic or orthodox Christianity. The "act of representing partakes in the transcendent presence it represents," Leypoldt holds, and the viewers "partake in the 'production of presence'" (12 after Gumbrecht 2004). According to such a reading, iconicity is an affectual force describable through "presence," "spirit," "essence," "transcendent values," "sublimity" (12, 7, 8, 13, 19), that is, an idealist vocabulary. The representationist understanding of the icon transfers the affective

<sup>1</sup>This chapter is based on a talk on the iconicity of the word deconstruction and Byung-Chul Han's *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, given at the conference "Cultural Icons" at Alfried Krupp Institute for Advanced Studies in Greifswald, Germany, in August 2019. I thank Hannes Höfer, Sophie Picard, and Paula Wojcik for their call for papers that drew my attention to reading words of academic terminology as culturally iconic. I am grateful to the Rector of the University of Vienna and to its Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies for support by a senior research fellowship.



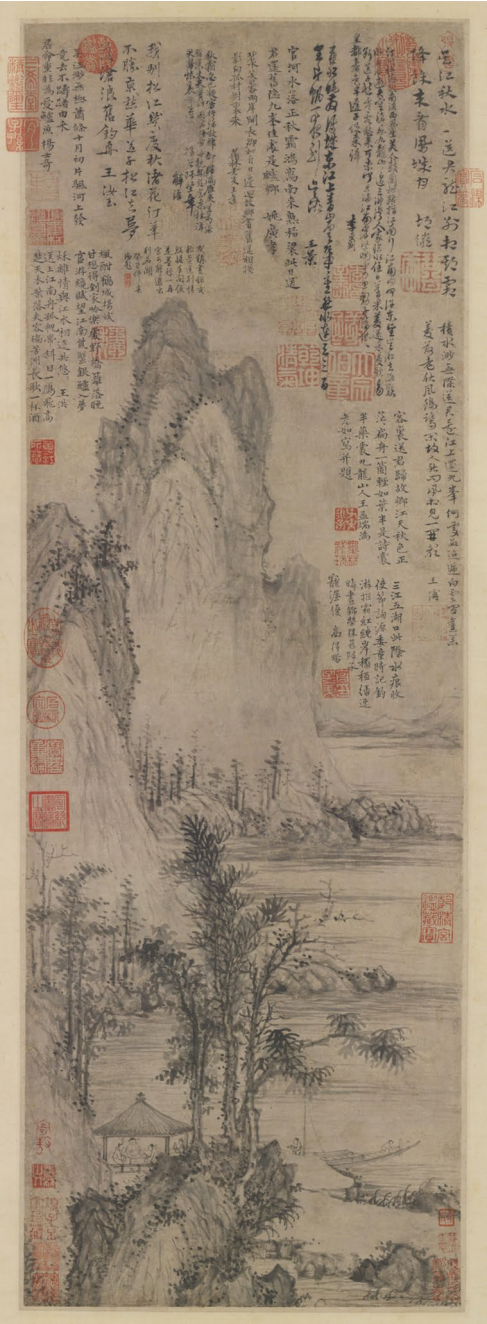
attribution into the sign as if the experience were contained in the sign or channeled through it, in a process similar to what, in psychoanalysis, is called cathexis.

Byung-Chul Han criticizes precisely such descriptors. Fame and recognition of a painting, he argues, derives from emptiness of the artwork and, in this sense, from an absence: The artwork is “in itself *empty*” (Han 2017 [2011], 15). In questioning positions of Theodor W. Adorno on artworks as “spiritual entities” (Adorno 1963 qtd. 15), Han refutes the explication of icons by animacy or the auratic. He demonstrates how emptiness of an artwork provides opportunities for reiterative and changing attribution of meaning by viewers, in a practice that “breaks radically with Being and essence” (8). Cultural iconicity, as follows from this position, is not the result of re-presentation nor does it result from power of a person or object depicted but, instead, from the occasioning of interaction.

Han’s example of an empty artwork is the painting called “Farewell Meeting at Feng-ch’eng” by Wang Fu (Fig. 1). The cultural iconicity of the painting in China, as Han explains, does not derive from its originality or attribution to the master artist, but from the tradition of appreciation that is marked by “connoisseurs or collectors who inscribe themselves into the picture not only through their seals but also through their commentaries” (2017 [2011], 14; Wallis 1973 [1969], 23–27). In this way, “art is a [...] practice that constantly changes even the artwork’s appearance,” and “viewers of the picture take part in its creation. The more famous a picture, the more its fame makes it subject to alterations” (Han 2017 [2011], 28). Iconicity here depends on the materiality of the object, not on an essence incorporated in the object. The “seal stamps [...] lend the picture no authorial, authoritative presence,” but “*open up* a communicative space,” so that the artwork “empties itself out” and becomes a continuously “sociable, communal act” of “transformation” (31, 15). In the process, “Being desubstantializes itself and becomes a path” (9), Han concludes, citing the philosophy of Tao. Han’s approach supports the position that cultural iconicity depends on shapes of signs and their vehicular media, whether these are figural or marked in other forms, and so is explicable by semiotic criteria. As semiotic units, icons are material entities and agents that participate in semiosis; they do not ‘represent’—nor are they generated by—an extra-semiotic source of meaning. The Sydney Opera House did not make its image; Abraham Lincoln did not make his statue; Derrida did not make the word deconstruction I am writing. Culturally iconic meaning, as any other, is materially dependent, conventional, and situationally contingent.

For Han, the “belief in substantive immutability and constancy determines [...] ideas of both moral subjectivity and normative objectivity” since “essence resists transformation,” whereas a different understanding derives from “Tao (literally, ‘the way’ or ‘the path’)” which provides “a counterfigure to Being or essence. It embraces change” and “empties out Being in the *process* or *way* that has neither beginning nor end” (2017 [2011], 8–9). In life as a “cyclical process that includes death and decay,” Han writes, “there is no longer anything

**Fig. 1** “Farewell Meeting at Feng-ch’eng” by Wang Fu (1362–1416) et al. In Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch*, Berlin: Merve, 2011, 47. By courtesy of Merve Verlag



unique, original, singular, or final” (45). In the same way, the meaning of the sign or medium after Derridean grammatology consists in the activity of writing, conversation, or material media practices, not in any permanent meaning as an essence. In any semiotic system, there are “the regularities of conventional norms, but at the same time [...] the awareness of continuous change. [...] ‘Under normal conditions we adhere to the rules of convention, but in times of change we use *quan*,’” or, adaptation to “relativity and situativity” (Zhu Xi qtd. 10).

When he applies a Derridean critique of Hegelian and Platonic idealist philosophical terminology to art and media from China and advances grammatology in a discussion of the meaning of change, Han contrasts two movements in art appreciation in the world: “[T]he idea of the original is closely linked to that of truth. Truth is a cultural technique that counteracts change using *exclusion* and *transcendence*,” yet there is also “a different technique that operates using *inclusion* and *immanence*” (2017 [2011], 25). So Han posits that “Chinese thinking is deconstructivist from the outset” (8). It compares, according to Han, to grammatology—as it does to material engagement theory—in that it “is *pragmatic* in a specific sense. It does not trace essence or origin, but rather the changeable constellations of things (*pragmata*). It is a question of recognizing the changeable course of things, correlating with it situationally, and deriving benefits from it. Chinese thought distrusts fixed, invariable essences or principles” (9).

### ANTI-REPRESENTATIONISM AND MATERIAL ENGAGEMENT THEORY

In his description of the artwork, Han employs motifs of structuralist and grammatological theories of signs. The semiotic item derives meaning from its relativity with regard to other semiotic items while itself remaining ‘empty’ in the sense of unmotivated. Han’s explication of the artwork is useful for consideration of the way cultural iconicity is made to pertain to matter, objects, commodities, media, or words. Writings on cultural icons, after all, treat media products—photographs, films, statues, paintings, printed books—and not, for example, persons themselves, whether dead or alive. Despite the affect generated in a group during the auratization of an object or the attribution of religious charisma—from the Greek for ‘gift’—to the cultural iconization (Leypoldt 2010, 12, 18), the iconized object is material, not spiritual, and as such meets with approaches from media studies and semiotics.

The material and interactive “field of dialogue” (Han 2017 [2011], 29) between the iconized object and art viewers evokes postphenomenological and anti-representationist material engagement theory with its methodological recommendation that meaning making is described not by essence but through “intra-activity of becoming,” in Karen Barad’s phrase (2007, *passim* after Rouse 2002), with ‘intra’ in the sense of immanent, not transcendent. Like

“sym-poiesis,” or, “making-with” according to Donna Haraway (2016, 58), such materialist process ontologies demand clarification of the relation of matter and signification. Sharing Joseph Rouse’s view of “science practice as ongoing patterns of situated activity” (Rouse 1996 after Barad 2007, 410 n. 16) and addressing his concerns about methodological obstructions due to representationism, Bruno Latour proposes a solution to the conventional distinction of “representation” and matter so that “unhuman entities”—including objects or artworks—“are allowed to enter” (1996, 375) as actors into scientific description. After structural semantics of Algirdas Greimas, all entities are actors in Latourian network theory that “does not limit itself to human, individual actors but extends the word actor—or actant—to *non-human, non-individual entities*” (370, 369), in a theoretical development similar to Barad’s description of “entanglement of matter and meaning” (2007) and to a postphenomenological “*relational ontology* in which people and things are inseparably linked” (Ihde and Malafouris 2019, 197). According to a “semiotics of things,” Latour claims, “[w]hat is lost is the absolute distinction between representation and things,” and “one does not have to specify if it is language or objects one is analyzing” (1996, 375). Language is not privileged among the entities that are actants in the Latourian network. Latour insists that, methodologically, “the new hybrid status gives to *all entities* both the action, variety and circulating existence recognized in the study of textual characters *and* the reality, solidity, externality that was recognized in things ‘out of’ our representations” (375). In these mobile relations, the material, physical item, whether statue, building, rock formation, or printed and spoken word, is one of many “meaning productions” that are “opaque,” and “the task [is] no longer to make them more transparent, but to recognize and relish their thick, rich, layered and complex matter” (373). Since meaning derives from material engagement and happens in relations and actions, including between human and nonhuman life forms, it is, for Lambros Malafouris, fully performative (2013, 149). Andrea Seier integrates actor-network theory with media studies by proposing “intermateriality” (2017) for this intra-active quality of semiotic or media processes.

With Han and the critics, I take exception, therefore, to representationism, and, for similar reasons, find misleading the widely used approach to cultural iconicity through ‘value’—“social value” in Cristina Garduño Freeman’s discussion (2018), “cultural value” in many more studies of cultural icons. Following Birmingham School cultural studies, scholars treat cultural icons as determined by economic exchange and economic principles in an “iconomy” (Smith qtd. in Freeman 2018, 44, 49 after Vardoulakis), with ‘value’ in these approaches a predominant methodological term. Representationist argument is taken on from Stuart Hall’s work, but, explicitly by Freeman, for example, separated from any consideration of semiotics (2018, 56 n. 56, 91 n. 3). In *Kredit und Kultur* (2000), from the perspective of Derridean grammatology and semiotics, I discuss the use of such economic semantics in cultural criticism. I do not want to take issue here with the correlation of cultures and economies overall, but the methodological point to consider is

which economics among the various economic theories deriving from different schools and economists' works are applied by cultural critics to read cultures as economics. This is the point I make in *Kredit und Kultur* and comparatively elaborate with reference to the history of theories of value. Purposely and with good reason, therefore, and *pace* Freeman or theories of "iconomy", I avoid argument by means of the terms 'value' and 'representation.' The term value is notoriously associated with the sense that some kind of substance or content determined the meaning of signs, as in centuries of metallist theories of money and labor theories of value. In the excursions into value theory in *Kredit und Kultur* (2000, 29–34, 43–46, 111–117, 144–151, 158–169) and the discussion of grammatology in relation to theories of economy, I show how comparisons of language—as one sign system among many—with the monetary economy develop, in the twentieth century and in semiotic terms, from value theory to price theory. The term value has become defunct in economic price theory in the twentieth century and is incompatible with grammatology after Jacques Derrida and his rereading of the 'linguistic value' found in Saussurean linguistics and its reception.

As with the sketch of material-semiotic propositions, Han's analysis of the artwork also agrees with relational aesthetics: "Artistic activity is a game," Nicolas Bourriaud asserts; "it is not an immutable essence," and "[t]ransitivity [...] is a tangible property of the artwork" by which it "introduces [...] that formal disorder which is inherent to dialogue" (2002 [1998], 11, 26). Like the artwork, the statue or photograph that is considered culturally iconic is an actant, and its meaning is intra-active, intermaterial, and temporary, and so is its cultural iconicity. In such an interdisciplinary methodological scenario, agency, mediality, and transitivity are characteristic of all matter, living or 'dead.' Leypoldt's argument on social construction of cultural iconicity briefly touches on interactions between persons and cultural icons or artworks (Leypoldt 2010, 12). Intra-activity is strongly foregrounded, by contrast, in Han's explication of the cultural iconicity of artworks.

### FROM CULTURAL ICONS TO SEMIOTIC PROMINENCE

Iconicity, then, means prominence of a semiotic item in material engagement, in the sense of the item affording frequent occasion for iteration of recognizably similar, complex semantic units that are actants and organizers in larger networks of narrative as well as academic theory and research shared as encoded text. Scientific terminology is prominently recognizable and selectable, for example, in the index of an academic book. Not all words appear in the index, but those are listed that are prominent in the book through their summarizing or marking a particular theory, for example. While semiotic prominence—like keyness (Bondi 2010)—is a criterion as yet hard to measure, and the term seems vague, the terms social value or cultural value regularly applied in research on cultural iconicity are not any more precise. Semiotic prominence, in terms of its dependence on the materiality of icons in the text- or

imagescape, I argue, is directly countable and measurable and will be more so with more generally available digital tools for analysis and for the counting of frequency of words or images in media, such as tools of corpus linguistics. There is a quantifiable and comparable prominence of items in terms of frequency.

Iconicity, in this sense of semiotic prominence, is more than the similarity, or likeness, of qualities of sign vehicle and object stipulated in the Peircean definition of iconicity. Likeness is irrelevant for the recognition of prominence of an iconic sign within the sign system. Iconicity as semiotic prominence, then, always subsumes the different meanings of “iconic:” “pertaining to an icon, image, or figure,” in the Peircean semiotic sense, and “designating a person or thing [...] important or influential in a particular context” (*OED* 2021), in the ‘cultural’ sense proposed by Umberto Eco (1976, 204–205). Neither representativeness, in a cultural, nor representation, in a semiotic sense, are necessary for semiotic prominence and the experience of iconicity of statues, photographs, landmarks, or words. The “charismatic hero” (Leypoldt 2010), if there is one at all, is made through the interaction with the icon, not vice versa, and depends on the desire of the onlooker or the codes of a community: The “similarity between a sign and its object is not a self-evident fact; it is a [...] judgement which depends upon a sort of implicit understanding [...] about images appearing ‘realistic.’ [...] From this perspective, we can speak of referential illusion, and no longer of iconicity. The impression of iconicity is nothing but an effect of reality, i.e. the result of some semiotic operations” (Calabrese 2003, 3224–3225, after Greimas).

The affective ‘power’ intra-actively accruing to the icon depends on the frequency of its inter- or transmedial iteration. Iconicity is gradual as well as ubiquitous (Morris qtd. in Nöth 1995 [1990], 124), and degrees of lower or higher semiotic prominence come by repetition of items and patterns in “feedback loops” (Haustein 2008, 30). Iconicity does not consist in the perpetual exudation of some spiritual power, but derives from semiotic activity, pragmatic application, and frequency of repetition; it has quantity and quality, or, frequency and complexity from the intra-activity in which the iconized item participates. Its repetition makes it open to adaptation as well as discontinuation. Sooner or later, it might be possible to measure iconization and de-iconization processes through corpus linguistics or digital image searches. Cultural or media studies can use data on the occurrence and frequency of images or words on the internet and in electronic media, including ebooks. Whereas research on imaginal icons can draw on image banks (Kirschenmann and Wagner 2006, part 3), the problem remaining is that access to data and retrieval technology for words, or, scriptural icons, as in search machines for marketing purposes or for the generation of artificial intelligence is not generally available to publicly funded research.



## DECONSTRUCTION: ICONIZING AND DE-ICONIZING THE WORD

An example for a concatenation of letters that makes plain the materiality and visibility as well as emptiness of a scriptural icon is AEIOU in stained glass or as writing in ink on paper and in other media, examples of which have been collected in Austria (Fig. 2). Read as a brand name, signature, word in a secret code, or debated as an acronym for various phrases (A.E.I.O.U. 2024; Langmaier 2022), AEIOU has performed in meaning making across centuries and is considered a cultural icon (Rauscher 2006, 22). AEIOU exemplifies that the “icon, like a word, belongs to everyone who uses it” (Schier and Schleif 2009, 106), or, makes sense of it.

The word deconstruction, as well, is iconic in the sense of semiotically prominent by the visual recurrence across media of the letters in the order of the word deconstruction and also in their audible iterations. With other human sensory organs than the eyes enabling the experience of iconicity, it need not be pursued solely “from a visibility-based viewpoint” (2010, 6), as Leypoldt notes and Winfried Nöth underlines (1995 [1990], 124). Indeed, the aurality of words in speech and hearing is as pertinent to their iconicity as is their visibility in reading. For the purposes of the study of semiotic prominence, the acoustic has to be considered, with its material actants sound waves and ears. However, leaving the aural aside here, in keeping with grammatological orientation from speech to writing, the iconicity of writing concerns a regulated, visual concatenation of graphic elements like letters or logograms. In media studies, the iconicity of words is approached in works on the materiality of writing and notational systems (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer 1988; Krämer and McChesney 2003; Linz 2016). Currently, however, studies in visibility and

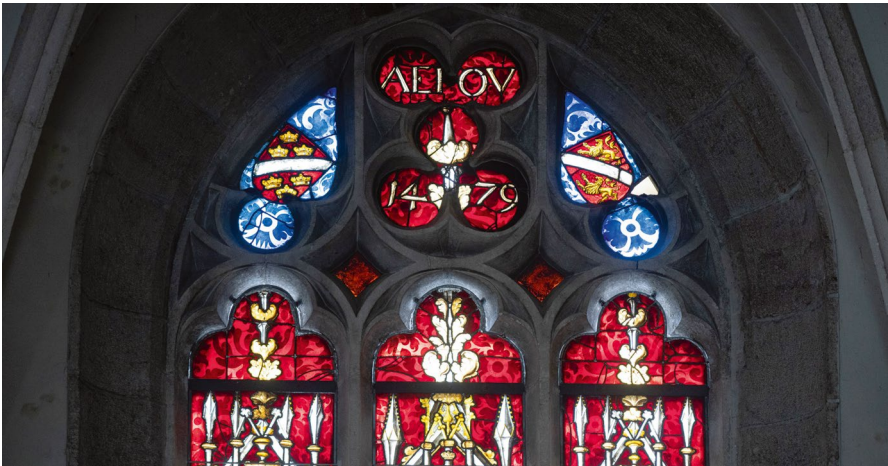


Fig. 2 Stained-glass window of 1479 with AEIOU, St. George's Cathedral, Wiener Neustadt, Austria. Photograph by courtesy of Theresian Military Academy

materiality of writing, to my knowledge, do not relate to words in what is considered ‘cultural’ and ‘global’ iconization.

Like any other word, deconstruction is empty, at best a principle in practice, and receives its meaning in its uses. Consisting in the parts de-con-struction, both destruction and construction almost but not quite simultaneously, the word performs becoming, change, and continuous making, whether the making of signs or any other intra-activity. In grammatological use subsequent to Derridean writing, the meaning associated with deconstruction has temporal, processual, and relational or differential—from the temporization-temporalization that is *différance* (Derrida 1972, 109 n. 31)—components. The Derridean use of the word deconstruction as a theoretical neologism derives from the term destruction in Martin Heidegger’s ontology of time, but this connection has become blurred in the course of iconization of deconstruction. Deconstruction is not a concept—it cannot be ‘grasped,’ *begriffen*, nor held on to—and not even a technical term with a limited use. In Derrida’s explication, deconstruction appears like material engagement itself: “Deconstruction is neither a theory nor a philosophy. It is neither a school nor a method. It is not even a discourse, nor an act, nor a practice. It is what happens, what is happening today in what they call society, politics, diplomacy, economics” (Derrida 1990, 85 qtd. in Attridge 2005, 43). Following the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce and its distinction of icon, index, and symbol that is frequently related to explanations of imaginal iconicity, the word deconstruction functions not only iconically—resembling its object—as well as indexically—connected to or pointing to its object—but also symbolically—in the Peircean sense of requiring deciphering—and all because it is part of the language which encodes grammatology and academic production of theory. Engaging the iconicity of deconstruction, therefore, means collapsing and levelling, in accordance with actor-network theory, categorical distinctions between object and method, medium and content, or sign and thing.

Notoriously, the word deconstruction has been iconized—supplied with prominence like a celebrity—since its introduction into the English language. The iconization first happened in academe and then in popular culture and media. In the about half a century since its introduction into literary theory in the United States by the translations of the works of Derrida, deconstruction has been widely disseminated in literary and cultural studies and also re-introduced to Europe. From the 1970s to 1990s, the rapid proliferation of deconstruction through the reception of Derrida’s works in anglophone literary and cultural theory brought on animosity among those who opposed the import of what was called ‘French Theory’ and usually equated with poststructuralism. Similar animosities, besides a general appreciation, developed in the germanophone reception.

In the course of the proliferation of the word, its meaning changed. Deconstruction came to mean either, simply, destruction, or, more complex but still reductive, analysis. The frequent use of the verb ‘to deconstruct’ with a first-person grammatical subject—\*I deconstruct—does not make sense by



deconstruction according to its Derridean explication. Deconstruction is not controllable by a writer or speaker like a terminological tool of literary studies. “Even before it is deconstructed, the philosophical text deconstructs itself,” Jean-Pierre Dupuy (1990, 111) asserts.

The early iconization of the word deconstruction was likely followed by a de-iconization, with the word then gaining renewed prominence through Bannon’s use. There were periods of greater or lesser intensity of the academic or popular use of the word deconstruction, also depending on the region of the world and language investigated. The use of deconstruction by Bannon in the service of the Trump administration has been brief but remarkable regarding the popular iconicity of the word. In a televised interview, Bannon spoke of “deconstruction of the administrative state” and said that “regulation” was “going to be deconstructed” (Bannon 2017). I leave the interpretation of Bannon’s use of deconstruction and ‘to deconstruct’ to the reader. The word deconstruction in the interview instantiates the auratic application of an icon for the purpose of claiming authority, as per the understanding of iconicity proposed by Leypoldt. The word was popular, and seemed strategically adaptable to populist purposes, so as to draw on the prominence deconstruction had gained in uses opposing elitism and to exploit this prominence for purposes of opposing democratically legitimized institutions.

In the reception of Bannon’s lines, however, any populist and anti-democratic purpose was quickly diffused by media theorists and philosophers, who also habitually applied the word deconstruction:

Leading key words of *French Theory* like “deconstruction” and “simulation” have suddenly been adapted to the political power strategies of right-wing populism. Cultural theorists who specialized in recognizing and affirming alterity and diversity [...] must, therefore, ask themselves with urgency how the achievements of poststructuralism in successfully questioning the nature of hegemonic truth claims can be defended in the face of this “hostile takeover.” (“Concerning Matters and Truths” 2018)

The academic riposte to the populist iconization of deconstruction takes on a popularizing dramatic posture itself, invoking the antagonism of two champions. Moreover, academic uses of deconstruction have frequently separated it from its context in critique of Hegelianism and Platonism—as employed by Han, after Derridean grammatology—and placed deconstruction in opposition to reconstruction, for example: “Postmodernists are interested in deconstruction *without* reconstruction, second modernity is about deconstruction *and* reconstruction” (Beck et al. 2003). Such a terminological opposition is nonsensical by measure of Derridean applications of the word deconstruction. The tautological opposition of deconstruction and reconstruction (DeGraff 2012), suggesting that a human actant were in control of deconstruction, is also found on the internet in popular advertising for psychological treatment from the United States. The “culinary trend” of “deconstructed food” (Klim 2019)

similarly presupposes disassembling and reassembling agents in control of the procedure (“Deconstructed Cuisine” 2024).<sup>2</sup> A paradoxical “self deconstruction” (Self Deconstruction 2016) is announced on the webpage of an eponymous music band from Japan.

### SHANZHAI, FAKE-ITY, AND METAICONICITY: ICONS MADE FROM ICONS

Han argues that “solely within this other cultural technique” that he describes as non-essentialist “is it possible to work freely and productively with copying and reproduction” (2017 [2011], 25). He concludes:

The Far East is not familiar with such pre-deconstructive factors as original, origin, or identity. Rather, Far Eastern thought *begins with* deconstruction. Being as a fundamental concept of Western thought is something that resembles only itself, and that tolerates no reproduction outside itself. [...] In every reproduction, this notion of Being sees something demonic that destroys original identity and purity. [...] A *lack of Being* [*Seinsmangel*] adheres to every image. By contrast, the basic figure of Chinese thought is not the monomorphic, unique *Being* but the multiform, multilayered *process*. (13)<sup>3</sup>

This means that the temporal logic of originality is abandoned: “[O]riginality assumes a beginning in the emphatic sense. Not creation with an absolute beginning, but continual process without beginning or end, without birth or death, defines Chinese thought” (9). The continual “practice of persisting creation [*Fortschöpfung*] (26), a practice of ‘creating along the way,’ is emphasized. Contrary to revolutionary histories, moreover, Han holds, “transformation takes place not as a series of events or eruptions, but discreetly, imperceptibly, and continually. Any kind of creation that occurred at one absolute, unique point would be inconceivable” (9). *Fortschöpfung* “is conceivable only in a culture that is not committed to revolutionary ruptures and discontinuities, but to continuities and quiet transformations, not to Being and essence, but to process and change” (26). Situated activity rather than an understanding of being as substantial or essential, copy rather than original, and fake-ity, as I call it, instead of identity are emphasized in the practice of *shanzhai* that Han describes.

*Shanzhai*, the “neologism for ‘fake’” (2017 [2011], 47; was coined around the turn of the millennium, Han suggests, and has become the slogan of an avant-garde and underground movement. The term is a literary reference indicating playfulness as well as subversion, in Han’s etymology (47, 49). *Shanzhai* always “fully exploits the situation’s potential” and is a humorous, “Dadaist game” (47, 48) involving labels of iconic commodity brands like Coca Cola or

<sup>2</sup> I thank Paula Wojcik for bringing deconstructed food to my attention.

<sup>3</sup> In very few instances, I have slightly modified the translation by Philippa Hurd.



Fig. 3 Cover image of *Harry Potter and the Porcelain Doll* by Zhang Bin, Beijing, 2002. In Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch*, Berlin: Merve, 2011, 82. By courtesy of Merve Verlag

iconic transmedia characters in popular culture like Harry Potter, for example in a sequel by Zhang Bin titled *Harry Potter and the Porcelain Doll* (Han 2017 [2011], 49; Fig. 3). Harry Potter is transposed to the setting of a subtropical forest with waterfall and rendered professorial, teacher-like, in a white laboratory coat and bow tie, and with hybridized features that may be European, may be Asian. The practice of *shanzhai* employs “intensive hybridization” (50) through intermedial and transcultural citations, such as in the example of the Obamao T-shirt made on the occasion of President Barack Obama’s visit with President Hu Jintao in China in 2009 (Fig. 4). The image of Obama cites an iconic portrait of Chairman Mao and the logograms, meaning “to serve the people,” are considered to quote Mao’s handwriting. The composition of the shirt is attributed to one Liu Mingjie, “a Beijing merchant” (Nelson 2009). The ironically playful copying by *shanzhai* is also a “technique of preservation” and memory, “allowing the circle of life to begin anew over and over again, maintaining life not *against* death but *through and beyond* death” (Han 2017 [2011], 44–45).

In the process, “stock components” and “modules” facilitate and guarantee “reproducibility” by “variations;” such “modulations” also suit “mass production” (Han 2017 [2011], 45). Reminiscent of posthumanist material semiotics by Haraway, Han’s deconstructionist aesthetics of *shanzhai* equates semiosis



Fig. 4 Obamao T-shirt, c2009. Photograph on the internet, last accessed 2019, no longer retrievable after 2021. Unknown photographer

with genesis: “It is not a question of depicting nature as realistically as possible but of operating exactly *like nature*. In nature, successive variations also produce something new, clearly without any kind of ‘genius’” (45). An example for the absurdity of the cult of the original and cult of identity, according to Han, is the Freiburg Minster:

[T]he Minster is continually being examined for damage and eroded stones are replaced. And in the Minster’s dedicated workshop, copies of the damaged sand-stone figures are constantly being produced. [...] But what would be original about the Minster if the last old stone were replaced by a new one?

The original is something imaginary. It is in principle possible to build an exact copy, a *fuzhipin* [“exact reproductions of the original” which “are of equal value to the original” and have “no negative connotations”] of the Freiburg Minster, in one of China’s many theme parks. Is this then a copy or an original? (44, 41)

Art as a means to ‘arrest’ becoming is declared unfeasible, and the logic of causation by original or identity makes way for processes of fake-ity. Like the artist who, according to Han, “is a signifier without identity, who is always being loaded with new significance” (15), the work as a medium is without identity or origin(ality). The potential for iconicity, it appears, is part of *shan-zhai* in that iconicity as semiotic prominence consists in reiteration as

quotation: Icons are made from icons. This metaiconicity of “iconizing” (Gernalzick 2010) performs the emptiness of cultural icons.

### ICONIZING THE WOR(L)D: BEYOND ICONS OF “CULTURAL IDENTITY”

On the same grounds, as Han’s “deconstruction in Chinese” demonstrates and material semiotics seconds, iconizing and metaiconicity always push beyond borders and towards transnationality. Iconicity as iteration and reproduction transnationalizes and is incompatible with national containment, contrary to theories of ‘national’ or ‘cultural’ icons. There may be degrees from national to international or to world prominence of an icon, but these are degrees of lesser or greater iconicity and not different in principle. As soon as a ‘national icon’ circulates by citational border crossing beyond a nationalized mediascape or language, it is no longer ‘national,’ just as it is, differentially and paradoxically, not recognizable as ‘national’ unless there is a border and its beyond.

Leypoldt explains iconicity as quasi-religious auraticization of objects by groups wishing for exclusivity in a performance of their affective appropriation (Haustein 2008, 51) of the object. According to theories of national or cultural icons, iconicity as socially constructed auratic presence serves “*group-specific purposes*” of “competing groups” (Leypoldt 2010, 10, 9) on an affective level. Such affectual and auratic powers attributed to iconicity may be demagogically abused. When affect is employed to substantiate, essentialize, and authorize ‘cultural’ iconicity, it is usually in the service of politics or religion. The application of the iconicity of the word deconstruction by Stephen Bannon in the service of the Trump administration constitutes such a case of appeal through affect. Among many others, Leypoldt’s position echoes views that iconicity be necessarily transported in categories that are not only group- but also culture-bound, within borders that are frequently nationally defined (“Icons by Selected Countries” 2021). I like to contest the position that iconicity is group-dependent, and the word deconstruction is a case in point.

Deconstruction is Chinese as well as of the world, certainly so in English as the lingua franca. The title *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* relates deconstruction to the Chinese language while it implies, at the same time, that the phrase ‘Chinese deconstruction’ is oxymoronic. The word can move between languages but cannot be appropriated to a nationally or linguistically closed system. The title—in the germanophone edition involving logograms by contrast to the anglophone edition (Fig. 5a and b)—and the publication history—translation from German into English with both versions including Chinese logograms—multilingually involve three languages besides French, the language of Derrida’s writing. The chapters of Han’s book are titled “*quan*,” “*zhen ji*,” “*xian zhan*,” “*fuzhi*,” and “*shanzhai*.” In addition to the transcription of the logograms into Latin alphabet, the editions of the book in German or English render the Chinese logograms in large font and so typographically foreground the hybridized notation system used in the writing (Fig. 6). The text actively and multilingually propels the entry of logograms associated with China into



**Fig. 5a and b** (a) Cover image of *Shanzhai: Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch* by Byung-Chul Han, Berlin: Merve, 2011. By courtesy of Merve Verlag. (b) Cover image of *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* by Byung-Chul Han, translated by Philippa Hurd, Boston: The MIT Press, 2017. © 2017 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of The MIT Press

# Shanzhai: Fake



**Fig. 6** Logogram for *shanzhai* from *Shanzhai: Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch* by Byung-Chul Han, Berlin: Merve, 2011, 75. By courtesy of Merve Verlag



English or German. Further investigation of how the franco-anglo-germano-phone, or, in short, Latinate word deconstruction entered the Chinese language is desirable.

The transformative process of iconicity is uncontainable, so that the group that associates with the icon can neither sustain their exclusivity nor control imagined limits and borders. Iconicity—as reproduction or iteration—always drives meaning across borders, and the transport and media distribution of the iconic signs, objects, images, or sounds cannot be restrained within a closed circuit, whether lingually, medially, culturally, nationally, or sociologically defined. The image of Obama is part of media practices in China (Fig. 4), and so are images of Mao Zedong or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the United States, or of Muhammad in France. The auratization of a statue by the presumed “presence” of an “iconic person”—George Washington or Abraham Lincoln—which guarantees to the viewer a “place within the social hierarchies of the US” (Leyboldt 2010, 11) and within so-called United States civil religion and its specific national interests, is a culture-bound illusion in attempts to resist or ignore change. Consequently, the geographic extent of ‘culture’ in the phrase “cultural icons” (Leyboldt 2010; Scott and Tomaselli 2009) requires discussion. By contrast, the artistic technique of *shanzhai* demonstrates how internet users, media artists, and visual designers practice openness and transitivity. Icons are in transit from national to transnational and planetary spaces in a globalized world.

While insisting on aura and embodiment as features of icons, Bishnupriya Ghosh also investigates iconicity in transnational “media ecologies” (2011, 161 after Fuller) and as “volatile” (Chap. 6). The representationism and theory of mimesis in her account of the global icon notwithstanding, she underlines that the “icon always opens to an elsewhere” (9). The making of “global icons” through media and worldwide “scopic regimes (image or word),” on the one hand, “engineers consensus for existing hegemonies” (9); however, on the other hand, the “volatile icon” brings with it that “significations [...] will not stabilize,” and it “signals [...] fluctuations and variabilities” (215).

The boundary-crossing and -dissolving potential of iconicity is confirmed in Ghosh’s treatment of the global icon, but her discussion of the global circulation of icons does not further elaborate how iconicity is “actualized to forge a popular mobilization” (2011, 9) at the level of a highly generalized “macro-scalar change” (12) of constituencies and institutions. To understand populist uses of the potential of iconization on a ‘macro’ or global level, however, its investigation has to be supplemented by address to the micro level of situated intermateriality in the sense of Seier’s micropolitics of media that “cannot be ‘discovered’” but “has to be fabricated and made conceivable” (2019, 25, translated by the author) by the researcher as one among many actants.

The same holds for the investigation of the worldwide iconicity of deconstruction. Foreshadowing the semantics of the COVID-19 pandemic, a passage by Derek Attridge illustrates the degree of globality that the iconicity of the word deconstruction has—or had—reached. He asks: “What would a map of deconstruction today look like? If deconstruction is, as both its enemies and

its friends have claimed, a kind of virus, and we were able to produce—on the model of the mappings you might see in a treatise on global diseases—a large chart of the intellectual world with its presence marked in red, how would the result appear?” (2005, 42). Attridge concludes that the exercise “would result in our map being coloured almost entirely red” (43).

The investigation of iconicity by means of material engagement theory calls for overcoming of methodological nationalism. The use of icons for purposes of consolidating national cultures or “cultural identity” (Haustein 2008; Hall and Grove 2006; Rauscher 2006; Schwimmer 1986; Herzfeld 1986) not only delimits the view onto the world in the sense of a planetarity that is home to all humans (Morin and Kern 1993); it also distorts the view onto the semiotic and media characteristics of iconicity. Icons lend themselves to mobility across borders and to hybridization and copying in manifold intra-activities anywhere on the globe where people, signs, objects, and technologies connect as actants. The gift of the icon today—its *charisma*, if there is one—is its affordance of transitions and planetarization, as exemplified by the ionic word deconstruction.

### CRITICAL OUTLOOK: METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM, METHODOLOGICAL ANIMISM

In this regard, the question arises how the culturalist claim that change by increments rather than revolution were particularly sinomorph, as Han pronounces, coheres with the Cultural Revolution and the massive and violent discontinuity it brought for many people. Is there a suggestion that revolution was an un-Chinese import of European-spirited specters to China by way of Marxism and socialism? Han’s criticism of European “Asianisms” (2017 [2011], 55 n. 1) is much appreciable, as is his suggestion that the book *Shanzhai* was inspired by the arrogance about originality on the part of organizers of an exhibition in Hamburg who complained about copies of the third-century BCE Qin dynasty terra-cotta warriors (41). Whichever way, there are instances of methodological nationalism (Beck and Grande 2010) in Han’s propositions. In describing *shanzhai* as the “genuinely Chinese spirit” (2017 [2011], 50), Han seems to strategically draw on idealist, pre-Derridean, Hegelian motifs to assert the separateness, exclusivity, and exceptionality—essence? substance?—of a national group while this assertion, at the same time, is subverted by his very own explication of deconstruction as much as by *shanzhai*. Can *shanzhai* support and export a claim to Chineseness? Is methodological nationalism part of the deconstruction of Han’s text? It requires attention, furthermore, that the author’s enthusiasm that “Chinese *shanzhai* communism may *mutate* into a political form that one could very well call *shanzhai democracy*, especially since the *shanzhai* movement releases anti-authoritarian, subversive energies” (50) has become impossible to maintain.

Another desideratum for research is indicated by the animism transported in theories of cultural icons and by the association of iconicity and semiotics with



magic (Nöth 1995, 188–191; Ghosh 2011, 9). Transcendent “hermeneutic energies” of the “cultural iconicity” (Leypoldt 2010, 10, 9) of images of humans allegedly anchor in the “authority” of a “higher power” (14, 11) and are held to supply an aura or charisma to a statue of Washington (6, 12), for example. This position, indeed, returns research to nineteenth-century idealist or transcendentalist American civil religion and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “representative men” (6), rather than acknowledges immanent semiotic processes that call on participants’ shared responsibility. Accompanied by lack of empirical measure, such descriptions of iconicity resonate with renewed interest in animism or vitalism in recent theories of material culture, human and nonhuman agencies, and posthumanism (Vetlesen 2019; Astor-Aguilera and Harvey 2018; Kember and Zylinska 2012). Both Leypoldt, prominently, and Han, less so, evoke either auratic or vital ‘powers’ and forces of iconicity that are not further questioned: “As the age of a picture grows, so does the power of the social relations made manifest in it” (Unverzagt qtd. in Han 2017 [2011], 54 n. 1).

The study of iconicity through material semiotics and engagement theory would seem to offer new pathways for research into populism, propaganda, and demagoguery, focusing the affectual, mental, and physical responsi/ability of people rather than defusing it by recourse to transcendence or theology. Semiosis happens between humans and nonhuman, even inanimate actors like sculptures, and iconicity is describable as nodes of high activity in networks of material engagement, including agential factors like the Lincoln Memorial on the Mall in Washington, for example, having been placed by people as communication and remaining where it is by gravity, its mass, and according to complex state and city regulations, their executors, and the political will of the people. “Powers” and “energies” of iconicity as last argumentative resort require pragmatic ethical and legal standards and their discussion, as exemplified by the Rhodes Must Fall movement. The practice of *shanzhai* as reproduction of iconized objects or artworks that Han outlines approximates a semiotic and media-studies explication of iconicity and contradicts animis, or, contradicts the spiritualist sense of the object containing a soul. The artwork Han describes “is without soul;” “desubstantializing emptiness opens it up for [...] transcriptions,” “modifications,” “repetitions and reproductions,” and it “is not the inwardness of the essence but the outwardness of the tradition or the situation” (2017 [2011], 15, 47, 45) that brings about its ever-changing becoming, underlining that iconicity is intra-active and intermaterial.

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# Script as a Cultural Icon: Glagolitic

*Katharina Tyran*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, readers of the popular Croatian daily newspaper *Jutarnji list* (The Morning Paper) have received a certain “gift to the readers” every mid-February: a poster of *Glagoljica*, the Glagolitic script, created in the ninth century during Slavic missionary work. Households all over the country hold such a poster depicting this specific writing system and including a transliteration into the Latin alphabet. The poster is regularly announced a few days before it is released. For example, in 2021, it was previewed with the slogan “Don’t miss out on Wednesday, 19 February, with *Jutarnji list* as a gift to our readers: Glagolitic => the oldest Croatian alphabet” [“*Ne propustite u srijedu, 19. veljače, uz Jutarnji list dar čitateljima: Glagoljica => najstarije hrvatsko pismo*”]. A year earlier, the same poster was introduced with the information that the angular Glagolitic script was developed only in Croatian-speaking territories, highlighting its national exclusiveness. The occasion for this newspaper supplement is the recently introduced Day of Croatian Glagolitic Script and Culture (*Dan hrvatske glagoljice i glagoljaštva*), for which 22 February is the official day for commemorating the Glagolitic tradition in Croatia. Although the script historically never gained the status of a persistently and widely used system for reading and writing in Croatia—and today, apart from a small academic circle, hardly anyone can actually read and write it—it is celebrated as a particular visual sign of national culture. In this way, the traditional scholarly view of script as being simply a representation of spoken language breaks down. Croatian society uses Glagolitic not for representing the spoken or written word itself, but rather for expressing and marking a specific cultural and ethnic

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sense of belonging. Therefore, I consider it to be a cultural icon and a visual reminiscence of Croatian identity, which as such has certainly had a widespread impact on many areas of everyday culture.

In this chapter, I will address the popularization and iconization of this archaic writing system in the Croatian-speaking area. After a brief overview of the Glagolitic's history, I will discuss its recent use in popular and everyday culture through examples from fashion. I will then elaborate on the above-mentioned introduction of a "Glagolitic Commemoration day" in Croatia. These examples will underline my argument that the Glagolitic script is important not so much as a writing system, but as a cultural and national icon of Croatians. Glagolitic, I argue, has recently undergone a reinterpretation of its semiotic basis. Despite the lack of a current referential function as a system for reading and writing, Glagolitic has been conventionalized as an autochthonous national heritage, a specific sign of Croatian cultural, and thus also national, identity (Tyran 2019). I contextualize the script's history and tradition to make arguments about the construction and demarcation of cultural spaces and identities. Furthermore, I ask how and by whom writing is positioned and situated in a society to (re)negotiate affiliations, to build writing systems into a national corporate identity, and what cultural practices emerge from this. This results in questions regarding the new, yet inherent, functions of, and ways of looking at, writing systems. Thus, I assert that writing transcends the referential function of language notation defined in structural linguistics and, despite its connotative connection to individual languages, can serve more than just the reproduction of the spoken word. Moreover, I consider writing as a social practice, as it is used as an instrument for legitimizing affiliations, as well as for political demarcation based on strong ideologization. This is especially salient in the Croatian case as Croatian institutions have sought to distinguish Croatian from Serbo-Croatian and Serbian since Croatia became an independent state in 1991.

As much as nations are imagined communities which refer to respective invented traditions—to draw on both Benedict Anderson's (2006) and Eric Hobsbawm's (1984) seminal concepts—icons and iconic notions need to be understood through their constructedness. Importantly, I am following Umberto Eco's notion of the "icon", questioning similarity as the main feature of icons, as described by semiotics, and arguing for a stronger contextualization in a cultural and historical framework (Eco 2002, 197–230). Therefore, the leading questions for my contribution are tracing how the Glagolitic script became iconic in a Croatian context and what usage of the script has occurred thereupon.

## NOTIONS OF SCRIPT AND ITS VISIBILITY

Writing and script generally can be examined with different approaches of different disciplines, whether it is to understand writing and its use as a source, as historians do, or to examine its form and aesthetics, as art history does, or to



deal with cognitive processes around script use, coming from psychology, to name just a few examples (Günther and Ludwig 1994, V). Linguistic approaches, however, have been characterized by strong references to writing and script as secondary systems to speech, as media that led to a neglect of memory, being only a projection of the word itself without the abilities to respond. This framework was important up to modern linguistics with the spoken word as the central focus of interest. Among the most prominent advocates of this position was Ferdinand de Saussure, who even speaks of “*la tyrannie de la letter*”, a tyranny of letters as an authoritarian system (de Saussure 2001, 28, 37). Prominent critique of “logocentrism” was articulated by the French philosopher and deconstructivist Jacques Derrida (1967). His criticism of logocentrism was picked up by the sociolinguist Florian Coulmas (1981), who importantly states that writing is not only a secondary system, but also a symbol of culture, a medium of identification by which one speech community is distinguished from another as much as by language itself (Coulmas 1981, 9–20). Such considerations have accounted for the autonomy hypothesis, that is, examining writing as its own object of research, to be investigated theoretically and methodologically independent of spoken language, even in linguistics (Dürscheid 2016, 38–47). Christa Dürscheid’s handbook on the study of writing systems, with its first edition appearing in 2002, introduced new research fields on script, with newer editions (Dürscheid 2016) also considering the more visual aspects of writing systems. Such a focus was most directly addressed in Jürgen Spitzmüller’s seminal study on graphic variation as a social practice, presenting a sociolinguistic theory of scriptural visibility (Spitzmüller 2013). This approach found a complement in art history with Birgit Mersmann’s concept of the iconicity of writing as a transdisciplinary field. She aims to understand script and writing as an iconic medium of perception (Mersmann 2015, 13–20) and strives for the better integration of cultural contexts (Mersmann 2015, 95–98).

In my contribution, I am drawing on both Spitzmüller’s considerations on visual representation in its variations as having communicative functions (Spitzmüller 2013, 9–27), as well as on Mersmann’s notion of the iconicity of writing as strongly integrating visual perceptions of script. I consequently focus on the visibility of Glagolitic in communicating cultural and national belonging, thus grasping it as a social phenomenon. Regarding this question of the social attachments of scripts and script traditions in linguistic communities, Jan Assmann’s notion of *Cultural Memory* as outlined in respect to Early Civilizations (2007) is also a useful concept. It describes three interacting elements that are clearly recognizable in the region of interest, Croatia, and in the context of script use and its narrativization. These elements are, first, memory or an orientation towards the past; second, a politically imagined collective identity; and third, cultural constitution or tradition formation (Assmann 2007). For Glagolitic, such a function in constructing cultural identity can be demonstrated precisely by a sense of inscribing a common “we”, both argued with references to history and a discursive continuity. As such, Glagolitic offers



strong points of references to the concept of cultural icons, as proposed in this collection, as it approaches a script system in itself and as a whole as a visible presence of condensed social, cultural, and national imagination. Glagolitic is grasped as a cultural phenomenon that has been created, produced, shaped, and distributed in various and manifold contexts. As a widespread and easily recognizable distinctive sign with an emphasized identification status, I propose that the Glagolitic script in Croatia, depending on the context, can be understood as a cultural icon both for expressing belonging and for demarcation. The relationship between the signifiers and the signified differs from linguistic positions: it is not necessary to link characters as a sequence of sounds in order to carry a meaning; even individual letters or linear combinations of such that elude the orthographic set of rules can suggest meaning through their visual expressiveness.

### GLAGOLITIC'S HISTORY

The emergence of a Slavic writing culture in the ninth century is strongly tied to Slavic Christianization generally and more specifically to the “Apostles to the Slavs”, Cyril and Methodius. They were two brothers native to Thessaloniki, which was at their time the capital of the Macedonian part of the Byzantine Empire. Both took part in religious and diplomatic missions. Most notably, Cyril and Methodius were chosen to serve as Slavic Christian teachers for missionary work for the Moravian ruler Rastislav in 862. They translated a variety of liturgical texts, prayers and gospels into Old Church Slavonic, the first literary Slavic language which can be classified as a constructed supra-regional Slavic language, based on a South Slavic local idiom (Damjanović 2002, 9–24). In 863, Cyril supposedly created the Glagolitic script for these texts’ notations (Eckhardt 1989, 32). He did not create the graphemes arbitrarily but rather with a strong creativity and symbolism for the individual letters (Eckhardt 1967, 460; 1989, 31–49; Damjanović 2002, 52–61). The first grapheme (for the phoneme /a/) resembles a cross and supports the argument of Christian symbolism, which further on identifies three main Christian symbols in the graphemes—the cross, circle, and triangle. Following the deaths of Cyril and Methodius, their scholars and followers spread out from Moravia and Pannonia, with some returning to the Balkan peninsula. From the tenth century, this led to an expansion of the Old Church Slavonic language and writing culture in the southern Slavonic area (Damjanović 2002, 9–24). The original form of Glagolitic is only a reconstruction, as the earliest preserved written monuments are dated back to the end of the tenth century. Such reconstructions assume thirty-six to thirty-eight hanging and round letters. With regards to linguistic functionality, the Glagolitic script represents the concept of one grapheme for one phoneme, but it had the disadvantage of being too unwieldy in terms of reading and writing, which was not conducive to further dissemination. Originally, the script was known under different names: for instance, the bishop of Novgorod called it *kurilovica* in a document of 1047. The term *glagoljica* is

of more recent use and derives from the verb *glagoljati* [to speak]. Similarly, priests using this writing and liturgy in the (Old) Church Slavonic tradition and language are called *glagoljaši*, with the respective traditional culture being *glagoljaštvo* (Damjanović 2002, 47–50).

In Croatia, the Glagolitic script gained traction early on and was followed by further independent developments. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the originally round script developed into an angular form, probably also under the influence of the fact that it was used widely in epigraphic monuments and thus chiseled, with curves being more difficult to incorporate. Thus, its typeface also became more legible. Importantly, in the Croatian context, it is always this specific angular graphemic system that is being referred to. One of the oldest—and today most famous—Croatian medieval written historical monuments, the so-called *Bašćanska ploča* [Baška Tablet], dated to the eleventh century, shows a transitional type between the round and the angular Glagolitic script. With the Cyrillic script emerging in Bulgaria and expanding in lands under Byzantine influence, it forced Glagolitic further to the west, mainly to what is now part of modern Croatia, most notably its coastal regions. Already in the High Middle Ages, and then especially in the Late Middle Ages, the spatial and functional application of the Glagolitic script was therefore narrowed and reduced: spatially mainly to the Croatian coast, to the area of Istria and the Kvarner Bay as well as Dalmatia. The script was only marginally used in inland regions, for example in Lika, as well as outside of the area of modern-day Croatia in Bosnia. Still, it was in the coastal regions that the script gained an early foothold and, in the course of time, took its own path. From the end of the fourteenth century, forms of cursive writing also appeared, such as book cursive and chancery cursive. While Glagolitic was mostly evident in liturgical writing, there are also examples of it in documents, legal texts and matricula. However, in the latter cases the Latin script soon predominated, so that the Glagolitic—and this is the narrowing of the functional aspect—remained mainly in liturgical use. The oldest printed book in Glagolitic is a Croatian missal from 1438, and the script was, albeit with increasing rarity, used all the way up until the beginning of the twentieth century. Over time, however, Glagolitic was replaced by the Latin script in almost all writing contexts (Eckhardt 1989, 39–49; Nazor 2004).

### THE ICONIZATION AND NATIONALIZATION OF SCRIPT

In a Croatian context, Glagolitic became part of what Orvar Löfgren (1989) calls a “thesaurus” of identity markers. These are general ideas making up the cultural ingredients needed to construct a nation—such as notions of national heritage, symbolic estate and, of course, language. Glagolitic accordingly responds to such concepts, but takes it as a visible cultural phenomenon in various contexts used to express national belonging even further, exactly by its iconization, in becoming an icon for the Croatian culture, language, and nation. It combines a linguistic component—as one of the oldest scripts of written texts in various forms of Croatian—with Christian symbols and an

arguably continuous history of almost one thousand years (Hercigonja 1994, 27–32; Damjanović 2002, 9–24), therefore alluding to heritage. Although an academic attendance and research on Glagolitic was prevalent already before the breakup of Yugoslavia and the establishment of an independent Croatian state, the script has only since the early 1990s become not just an icon for Croatian national heritage but also one of its core symbols by an intense academic attention. By ascribing the script and its use a specific value for society, it is established as a specific icon. In recent decades, there has been an intensified consciousness and recollection of Glagolitic in this very context (for instance Lipovčan 2000, 2004; Nazor 2008). This reflects the three interacting themes defined by Assmann: a remembrance of or orientation towards the past, an identity or political imagination, and the cultural continuation or creation of tradition. Concerning the orientation towards the past, the history of the Glagolitic script is used for a cultural legitimization even of the pre-modern times—as its “storyline” starts in the ninth century. It remains a politicized national symbol, a marker of an identity and a common political imagination in Croatia. As this process needs at least the appearance of a continuity reaching far back into history, Glagolitic is prescribed a somehow predestined role.

The Croatian scholarly community is paying much attention to this script phenomenon, most notably the Old Church Slavonic Institute [*Staroslavenski institut*]. This institute is declared to be the central academic institution for research on the Glagolitic script and tradition, and it therefore deals mostly with the heritage of Glagolitic in Croatia as well as that of Old Church Slavonic, which is of course interconnected with the Glagolitic writing tradition. A major percentage of the institute’s publications deal with the Glagolitic script itself and its different texts (Staroslavenski institut 2021a). Academics of the institute regularly emphasize in academic as well as semi-academic and public discourses the importance of Glagolitic as an autochthonous Croatian writing system, characteristic and culture. Such a standpoint was most directly expressed by a leading researcher of Glagolitic from the Old Church Slavonic Institute, Anica Nazor, in an interview: “The Glagolitic script is a distinctive sign of Croatian cultural, and therefore also national, identity” (Ćurić 2009, 34–35). Moreover, several associations and institutions foster the Glagolitic heritage in Croatia through publications (Salamurović and Nomachi 2020) or lectures, summer schools and other events (Tyran 2019, 292–293) dedicated to the topic. The meaning of Glagolitic has clearly transferred from a notation system in ancient times into a widely and in various contexts disseminated cultural phenomenon. Such processes are underlying the iconization of Glagolitic, making it an imagined symbol of an imagined community.

### SCRIPT AS A LIFESTYLE STATEMENT

The Glagolitic script can be found in diverse settings and usage in everyday culture: these include references on banknotes and coins, phone cards, stamps, dishes, cravats, ties, belts, and wine labels, in the logos of soccer clubs, and in

the marketing by touristic organizations (photo material in Nazor 2004, 232–237; Ćurić 2009, 34–35; Tyran 2019). Such usage includes illustration of written documents in Glagolitic—most notably the above-mentioned Bašćanska ploča, as the Croatian gemstone, as Slobodan Prosperov Novak (1996, 101) dubbed it in his literary history overview—the whole Glagolitic grapheme system, or single letters. Also, the Glagolitic script has in recent times become one of the most prominent tattoo motifs in Croatia (Meyer 2015). The intended message of Glagolitic in these popular cultural contexts can be characterized as an expression of national consciousness or affiliation, either as a reinforcement of national identity within Croatian society, or as a presentation of it to the outside. As such, Glagolitic is also strongly used in touristic marketing and souvenirs (Oštarić 2018; Tyran 2019, 288–290).

Glagolitic is also present in fashion, most prominently in the creations of a boutique in Zagreb located on the central boulevard in the city center, Ilica. The *Etno butik Mara* [Mara Ethno-Boutique] specializes in fashion pieces that include traditional patterns and “proudly worn motifs of important cultural monuments”, as stated on its website (Etno butik Mara 2021a). One such motif is Glagolitic, which is used by two of the boutique’s designers as they combine “contemporary urban fashion with tradition” (Etno butik Mara 2021b). Their creations are adjudged a high recognition value due to their “autochthonicity”, which refers to Glagolitic being positioned as an icon of autochthonous Croatians. Therefore, the creators also seek to have Glagolitic becoming recognizable outside Croatia, which makes them understand themselves as “ambassadors” of Croatian fashion and the “guardians” of elapsed traditions (Etno butik Mara 2021b). As such representatives, they visited Vienna in the summer of 2019 and presented their products at an exhibition. This event demonstrates an overlapping in terms of a representation of Croatian identity, first presenting in-group-identity for Croatia itself, and then being used to promote a national consciousness among the Croatian diaspora in Austria’s capital. Co-organized by an association for the “preservation of national heritage” [*Udruga Škrinja—udruga za očuvanje hrvatske narodne baštine*] based in Zagreb and the association of Croatian entrepreneurs in Vienna [*Udruga hrvatskih poduzetnika u Beču*], the exhibition’s slogan stated that “Croatian heritage is ‘in’” [*Hrvatska baština je ‘in’*]. At the opening fashion show, models wore dresses with designs that incorporated this heritage, which included Glagolitic. Exhibition tables presented accessories such as bags, cravats and brooches with embroidered Glagolitic graphemes. The messages depicted on various items also referred to identity politics and national consciousness. Most prominently, there was the Glagolitic-written slogan “*Budi svoj*”, which could be translated as “be your own” and might be also explained as a phrase emphasizing a pride in ethnic and national belonging. This expression was printed in bold angular Glagolitic letters and different color sets, either red, golden or silver, on either black or silver cloth. It was not only this catchphrase that was noteworthy at the fashion show. One dress illustrated the surname “Gundulić” in golden letters on the waistline, which refers to Ivan

Gundulić. He was a Croatian Baroque writer from Dubrovnik whose epic poem “Osman” is regarded as the most important literary piece of the Baroque period in Croatian literary history (Jelčić 2004, 89), telling of the struggle of the Poles and Cossacks against the Ottomans. Together with the rest of his oeuvre, which mostly consists of Catholic spiritual and mythological pastoral plays, Gundulić’s legacy is a “rebirth out of the dark” [*Od Gundulićeve “poroda od tmine”*]—as the title of a literary history volume (Prosperov Novak 1999) proposes—and “Osman” is characterized as a work “realized as synthesis of (...) poetic and national thought.” (Jelčić 2004, 90). At the fashion show in Vienna, Etno butik Mara also presented bags with excerpts of *Hrvoje’s Missal* [*Hrvojev misal*], a medieval Glagolitic manuscript written in 1403/1404 by several calligraphers for Duke Hrvoje Vukčić Hrvatinić (Prosperov Novak 1996, 43). This missal most probably originated in Dalmatia, and it ranks among the most spectacularly illustrated handwritten documents from those times (Nazor 2008, 36). In all of the above examples, it is important to note the combination of the specific script—the angular Glagolitic—as a visual symbol of Croatian history together with a message mediated through the chosen content. However, in the messages printed on cloth, graphemes, words and text excerpts were signifiers of an iconic meaning, drawing on writers, written documents and messages alluding to and invoking what is meant to be national heritage and national consciousness.

### CROATIAN GLAGOLITIC SCRIPT AND CULTURE DAY

In 2018, the then Croatian president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, was pictured in *Jutarnji list* wearing a coat made by Etno butik Mara—with Glagolitic letters on the cuffs that spelled out “*hrabrost*” [courage]. The photo accompanied the announcement of the newly introduced Croatian Glagolitic Script and Culture Day, which takes place annually on 22 February. The introduction of this commemorative day for the Glagolitic script and tradition was a recent initiative that was pioneered in 2018 by the Institute of Croatian Language and Linguistics [IHJJ, *Institut za hrvatski jezik i jezikoslovlje*], together with other cultural and academic institutions, such as the already mentioned Old Church Slavonic Institute. The bill for establishing the commemorative day was passed by the Croatian parliament in 2019, with the official introduction of Croatian Glagolitic Script and Culture Day taking place on 22 February. The declared goal of this initiative was to bestow Glagolitic a specific status in Croatian society, even if it is no longer used as a script in the proper sense. The chairperson of the IHJJ, Željko Jozić, stated that the purpose of the commemorative day was to popularize “one of the most distinguishable features of Croatian written tradition and culture” (IHJJ 2018a). This must be understood in the broader context of discursively positioning the Glagolitic script as an autochthonous heritage and national cultural symbol in Croatia (IHJJ 2018b). On the occasion of Croatian Glagolitic Script and Culture Day in 2019, after its acknowledgment by the Croatian parliament, whose launch was widely covered by the

media, products such as notebooks, umbrellas and pens with motifs of Glagolitic letters were launched. Such products have also been promoted by high-ranking government officials. Then minister of science and education, Blaženka Divjak, posed with such an umbrella in her office, and President Grabar-Kitarović also used it at official appearances on rainy days. As the force behind the initiative, the IHJJ used pictures of these politicians and objects on social media platforms to promote Croatian Glagolitic Script and Culture Day and to demonstrate the recognition for the day among Croatia's leading politicians.

The argument for choosing 22 February as Croatian Glagolitic Script and Culture Day was based on the first Croatian incunabulum and the first print in Glagolitic, the *Missale Romanum Glagolitice* [*Misal po zakonu rimskog dvora*] from 1483. The colophon of this reveals not only the year of print, but also an exact day—22 February. The missal was discursively positioned in an overarching dispositive of the autochthonicity of Glagolitic in Croatia, and as a special feature in Croatian history, not only as the first printed book in the Glagolitic script and the Croatian language, but the first missal in Europe that was not printed in the Latin language and script (IHJJ 2018b). Already in the mid-1990s, 22 February had been popularized as a cultural anniversary: the Zagreb-based Association of the Friends of the Glagolitic Script [*Društvo prijatelja glagoljice*], one of the multitude associations active in the education and distribution of Glagolitic, was established on 22 February 1993—on the 510th anniversary of the appearance of the first Croatian incunabulum. The association organizes various classes and lectures on Glagolitic in schools, libraries and museums and also edits magazines about the script; it even features a choir that promotes the Glagolitic mass tradition (Croatian History 2021).

Importantly, this specific day for celebrating Glagolitic is also part of a commemorative month dedicated to the Croatian language, Croatian Language Month [*Mjesec hrvatskoga jezika*], which was introduced in 2014 (IHJJ 2014). The commemorative month starts on 21 February—International Mother Language Day (United Nations 2021)—followed by Croatian Glagolitic Script and Culture Day, and it finishes on 17 March. On that last date, in 1967, Croatian linguists, philologists and academics published the Declaration on the Name and Status of the Croatian Literary Language [*Deklaracija o nazivu i položaju hrvatskog književnog jezika*], in which they asserted their support for an autonomous Croatian language separate from Serbo-Croatian and Serbian. It is this specific context in which Glagolitic and its use also need to be understood. After the linguistic convergence of Serbian and Croatian in the first decades of post-war Yugoslavia, the common language project eventually failed. The declaration of 1967 started the divergence of both varieties (Neweklowsky 2010, 187; Cvetković-Sander 2011, 207–215), which finally broke up as Serbo-Croatian, together with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, in the early 1990s. Ever since, the legitimization and planning of new national languages out of Serbo-Croatian, of which there are now four—Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian—have been discussed and disputed (Okey 2005; Neweklowsky 2010, 188–206). In this context, national academic

institutions work intensely to distinguish their national language from the other varieties. With regards to Croatian, this also involves references to Glagolitic and its respective writing tradition. The visibility of the script is also beneficial in this regard: Glagolitic must be understood as a cultural phenomenon and icon, which as such does not have a fixed meaning, but is a variable dependent on a context and incorporated into a prevailing discourse and ideology. Glagolitic is no longer purposefully used for the concrete notation of language, but only for the visual representation of belonging. Such stances are strongly supported by academic narratives, as for instance Anica Nazor's aforementioned statement that there simply should be no question that the Glagolitic script is an essential and fundamental marker of Croatian cultural identity (Nazor 2004, 237).

### CONCLUSION

Especially since the beginning of the 1990s, when Croatia became independent from Yugoslavia, the emphasis on autonomous national identity markers has been prevalent in the cultural definition of the newly established state. Glagolitic became such an idiosyncratic symbol of nationhood and independence, which was supported by discourses of an almost thousand-year-old tradition of this script in the Croatian lands (Staroslavenski institut 2021b), which was moreover also strongly connected with the Catholic Church. Only in small parts of present-day Croatia did Glagolitic survive after the tenth century, and in those cases it was mostly maintained by the Catholic clergy. The narrative connotations of the writing system, both in scholarly and journalistic discourses, thus give rise to a dispositive of Croatian writing culture. This has led to a shift in meaning, from writing as a system of notation, to writing as a symbol of identification with a high popularity in everyday culture, even being celebrated on a specific date. Therefore, I view the Glagolitic writing system as a cultural icon, which as such has no fixed meaning, but depends on a context and incorporation into prevailing ideologies. This case study also clearly shows the "invention" underlying such icons, that can never be explained in itself but always need to be analyzed in a specific framework and historical, social, and cultural conditions enabling the practical use of cultural phenomena as icons. The Glagolitic script has a high level of recognition, its graphemes being clearly distinctive from Latin or Cyrillic. Glagolitic in its angular form is furthermore marketed as a cultural peculiarity, and in the context of building up national consciousness in Croatia following its independence, Glagolitic experienced a revival as well as ideologization and iconization as such a denotation of autonomy. This specific writing system transcends the linguistic function of script and introduces an alternative purpose, thereby strongly supporting Spitzmüller's critique on the linguistic dispositive of monofunctionality and his claim for polyfunctional approaches to writing (2013, 91–92).



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# Production of Icons: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence* and Hermeneutics

Hannes Höfer

Icons appear in all disciplines of sciences and humanities. Scholars like Judith Butler or Albert Einstein became icons because of their ideas and theories. Institutes like the MIT or the Frankfurt School became iconic places of renowned research. Theories and models can become iconic, too, like Deconstructivism or the double helix structure of the human genome—which we can find in nearly every visualization of science in magazines, TV shows, blogs, or the webpages of institutes and universities. Besides these popular representations of science and humanities for the lay public, icons can be part of the daily work of scholars. They use icons when they write articles, chapters, and talks; beyond the simple, superficial references, more intricate iconizing can be a style of academic writing.

In this chapter I focus on an area where iconizing commonly takes place: the discussion of methods and theories in academic texts. I argue that icons emerge when scholars—like myself—take a stand within a theoretical or methodological framework or distinguish their work from other theories or schools of thought. Taking a stand is like marking ourselves with a badge to show everyone what or whom we like or dislike. These badges become icons when we use them to distinguish our theories from others. I discuss these strategies of marking and iconizing in the first part of my chapter.

Next, I explain a few important iconizing writing strategies in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence* (2004a). In this book, Gumbrecht criticizes the common, meaning-focused attitude towards works of art and culture that neglects their material and tactile features; he proposes a focus on the

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*presence* effects, instead of the *meaning* effects. As the theory of Cultural Icons concentrates on the increase of meaning and significance in intermedial processes, Gumbrecht's rejection of meaning effects might seem, at first glance, unhelpful in better understanding icons. However, Gumbrecht's book provides substantial material for my argument on iconizing as a style of academic writing. In other words, I focus not on *what* Gumbrecht says about presence, but on *how* he says it.

Gumbrecht does not only contrast meaning and presence effects. He also iconizes the opposite side of presence effects; Gumbrecht designs hermeneutics as the iconic theory and practice of attributing meaning. In doing so, he positions himself and his theory as an iconoclasm against the common-sense attitude towards works of art and culture. His method of iconizing consists of four main writing strategies: increasing of significance, contrasting pair of theories, creating a community of supporters of a theory, and addressing a specific audience. As a conclusion, I discuss how analyzing the method of iconizing can change our understanding of discussion and debate in academia.

### MARKING AND ICONIZING IN THE HUMANITIES

As scholars we use our academic writings to express our belonging—or at least our relation to a specific field of research and the related community. We do so implicitly, when we cite works of a specific school of thought, or directly when we say: "I will use a structuralist / deconstructionist / postcolonial / ecocritical approach." Such statements work like social markings, or a badge pinned on one's shirt. They are a shortcut for (self-)positioning in theoretical debates. Usually, scholars combine different approaches that fit their research interests. We might argue: "In my study I will mainly follow the poststructuralist approach of XY but I will combine it with the postcolonial theory of YZ." As we can see, marking is flexible. We use it to define our individual standpoint within a framework of academic research and discussion. This helps our colleagues to comprehend our thoughts and pigeonhole our research (or even us).

Marking our own position distinguishes us from schools of thought or theories we do not use in our own research. We might argue, for instance: "For my specific research interest I will not use a postcolonial approach because it is too narrow." However, our distinction might serve as an argument for our rejection: "I will not follow the thoughts of XY, because they use a postcolonial approach." This type of marking is not flexible anymore. It defines our distinguishing position with a fixed term. Such markings may be judged if they are related to academically-outdated or -problematic positions or standpoints. 'Postcolonial' is not such a term but others—for instance, 'neoliberal', 'positivistic', or 'metaphysical'—are. Here is where iconizing starts, because the term we use no longer simply refers to a theory, but also to something value-laden we should implicitly affirm or reject.

When we use a strategy of iconizing to define our own position within theoretical debates, we might emphatically say: "I am a discourse analyst!" We often

combine such claims with a name: "I am a true Foucaultian!"; or, maybe: "I believe in Foucault!" When it comes to affirmative name-dropping, it makes a difference if the name is iconic itself or not. "I believe in Foucault" is a strategy of iconizing by using an icon, "I believe in Höfer" is a strategy of iconizing by using just a name. This difference is relevant when we use a name in a hybridized position-taking. "I combine Höfer's approach with Wojcik's and Picard's" is no iconizing; "I combine Foucault with Butler" is also no iconizing in the sense of a writing strategy but it uses two icons which might change our perception of the one who says this. In the first case, we might think: "Okay, he or she combines three approaches." In the second case, we think: "Okay, he or she seems to be smart", as the use of the icons valorizes the user. When we iconize our own theoretical position, we not only use a specific theory but communicate that we believe that this theory is unquestionably right. As this requires a lot of confidence in our own cognitive faculties (or maybe a lack of modesty), we more often iconize to say that our opponents are unquestionably wrong.

This is exactly what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht does in *Production of Presence*. Gumbrecht develops his theory of presence in contrast to theories of meaning. His main enemy is hermeneutics, which Gumbrecht designs as the iconic theory of attributing or creating meaning. To establish the icon hermeneutics, Gumbrecht uses four relevant writing strategies, elaborated below.

### INCREASING OF SIGNIFICANCE

A theory icon always refers to more than just a theory. We cannot define this 'more' in general because it depends on the specific icon. However, we can analyze how an individual author generates the iconic 'more' in a specific text.

In *Production of Presence*, Gumbrecht maintains a highly-flexible standpoint: "There is no single academic 'school' or 'school of thought' to which the content of this book belongs" (Gumbrecht 2004a, XV). Although he marks fellow-scholars who have inspired his thoughts with either affirmation or disagreement, he avoids simple pigeonholing of his own theory of presence. This enables him to flexibly react to criticism (as we will see below). Furthermore, Gumbrecht suggests that he wants to talk about something new that has been neglected so long that "it was necessary to find a specific place [...] in an intellectual space with strangely blurred contours" (Gumbrecht 2004a, XVI).

While Gumbrecht retains a flexible standpoint, he creates a clear opponent. He defines his own concept of presence in contrast to concepts of attributing or establishing meaning, and explains these concepts with a series of ambiguous terms. First of all, he strongly rejects 'hermeneutics'. This is more obvious in the German translation of his book (Gumbrecht 2004b), because the rejection is part of the title: *Diesseits der Hermeneutik* (On This Side of Hermeneutics). I will return to this point in more detail later, when I describe the strategy of addressing different audiences. Gumbrecht explicitly makes Wilhelm Dilthey—the most important German representative of hermeneutics in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century—the ‘scapegoat’ of his project: “‘Hermeneutics’, the philosophical reflection on the conditions of interpretation that Dilthey had wanted to foster, became synonymous for us with ‘interpretation’” (Gumbrecht 2004a, 11)—which means, to him, “the identification and/or attribution of meaning” (Gumbrecht 2004a, 1). Moreover, for Gumbrecht ‘meaning’ is closely linked to ‘metaphysics’:

‘Metaphysics’ refers to an attitude, both an everyday attitude and an academic perspective, that gives a higher value to the meaning of phenomena than to their material presence [...]. [T]he word ‘metaphysics’ plays the role of a scapegoat in the little conceptual drama of this book. ‘Metaphysics’ shares this scapegoat position with other concepts and names, such as ‘hermeneutics,’ ‘Cartesian world-view,’ ‘subject/ object paradigm’ and, above all, ‘interpretation’ (Gumbrecht 2004a, XIV).

In sum, Gumbrecht exposes a whole family of scapegoats that he uses for iconizing hermeneutics. To create this hermeneutics icon, Gumbrecht does not define ‘hermeneutics’ or ‘metaphysics’ appropriately. It also does not matter to him how hermeneutic theory has developed since Dilthey. What matters here is that Gumbrecht describes the term ‘hermeneutics’ as a contrast to his theory of presence, by imprecisely defining the term with a series of other terms—like ‘interpretation’ or ‘metaphysics’—that, similarly, need to be defined. Following Gumbrecht, ‘hermeneutics’ becomes not just an umbrella term for all practices of interpretation, but also the icon of all academic and daily meaning attribution and production. A feature of cultural icons is to have a surplus of significance. When Gumbrecht suggests that ‘hermeneutics’ is the head of a scapegoat family, he fosters this surplus of significance. This increasing of significance is a first step towards his iconization of hermeneutics; in a next step, he designs the icon by contrast.

### THE CONTRASTING PAIR OF PRESENCE AND MEANING

Gumbrecht increases the iconic status of hermeneutics by making presence and meaning antagonistic. When it comes to the perception of objects, Gumbrecht distinguishes presence effects—the material and sensory qualities of an object—and meaning effects—its meaning. Meaning effects belong to hermeneutics. Gumbrecht emphasizes that this is a systematic antagonism that describes the perception of objects as a mixture of presence and meaning effects. At the same time, he explains the difference between presence and meaning *effects* with a historical antagonism between presence and meaning *cultures*. Although he emphasizes there is neither a pure presence nor a pure meaning culture, he considers the European Middle Ages as a presence culture and the European early-modern and modern times as a meaning culture. By doing so, his historical illustration of systematic aspects turns out to be the construction of a presence and a meaning culture that Gumbrecht uses for further iconizing of

hermeneutics on at least two levels. First, Gumbrecht describes the focus on meaning effects in Western cultures as an insufficient perception of objects. Second, he describes presence effects choosing a religious language, which leads to a textual sacralization of presence cultures.

Gumbrecht suggests that the division of subject and world in the aftermath of Cartesian philosophy defines our epistemological stance towards objects. We live in a world in which the hermeneutic attribution of meaning is the “broadly institutionalized tradition” (Gumbrecht 2004a, 1) of interaction with our world. Although I am not sure I agree, the crucial (and, by no means, self-evident) point in Gumbrecht’s argument is that he defines this modern epistemology as a loss. Meaning effects are deficient because they lack an awareness of the material and sensory quality of objects; Gumbrecht wants to correct this deficiency by highlighting presence effects. As he claims hermeneutics as the predominant and commonly-accepted mindset, his commitment to presence turns to rebellion. Gumbrecht becomes an iconoclast against orthodoxy in the humanities. Again, it does not matter whether hermeneutics is the predominant mindset or not; the point is that Gumbrecht claims this predominance in order to rebel against it. This becomes even more obvious when we consider that Gumbrecht planned on calling his book *The Non-Hermeneutic* (Gumbrecht 2004b, 9). I will return to this discarded title later.

Using terms like ‘iconoclasm’ or ‘orthodoxy’ here is not far-fetched. It is Gumbrecht himself who speaks a religious language to create the antagonism between presence and meaning. However, in the case of secular hermeneutics, heretical Gumbrecht is a religious apologist as he sacralizes presence effects. He explains his understanding of presence in terms like “epiphany” or “redemption” (Gumbrecht 2004a, 91, 133). His antagonistic distinction between cultures of presence and cultures of meaning can be found in these cultures’ typical practices. He illustrates a culture of presence with the catholic Eucharist and, in contrast, a culture of meaning with a parliamentary debate. Some scholars controversially discuss if Gumbrecht’s thoughts are, in fact, religious (Lauster 2012) or anti-religious (Tamen 2007). When focusing on the strategies of iconizing—as I do here—things are less controversial. Gumbrecht uses a religious language in mainly two ways that have nothing to do with religion. First, religion serves as an example for effects of presence that can help us to understand Gumbrecht’s ideas. Second, religion serves as a provocation; Gumbrecht accuses the humanities of neglecting the material qualities of objects while focusing only on intellectual thoughts. He posits a counter example with the Eucharist, contrasting the unholy cult of meaning with the solemn salvation of presence. This antagonism, however, does not serve for the iconizing of presence, but for the iconoclasm of hermeneutics. The religious language is not part of Gumbrecht’s worldview, but of his writing strategy. However, he uses this vocabulary to create a surplus of significance that is typical for cultural and religious icons. In a further analogy to religion, Gumbrecht also creates a community. In *Production of Presence*, the rejection of hermeneutics is the collective experience of a whole generation of scholars.

## CREATING A COMMUNITY

Gumbrecht does not claim that hermeneutics is synonymous with interpretation. He says that “‘Hermeneutics’ [...] became synonymous for us with ‘interpretation’,” which he calls “a certain generational view” (Gumbrecht 2004a, 11). In the first chapter of *Production of Presence*, he details the development of his theory of presence over the last decades. He highlights the importance of the 1980s colloquia in Dubrovnik, where he experienced the team spirit of a younger generation of scholars trying to find new ways of analysis beyond hermeneutics and interpretation (Gumbrecht 2004a, 5). As a feature of cultural icons is that they serve as a sign of recognition or identification for a specific group, we can also find iconizing in Gumbrecht’s description of his generation.

How cultural icons are part of identification processes or the formation of groups of devotees is obvious when we consider, for example, the endless pop-culture discussion of ‘Beatles vs. Stones’. Die-hard Beatles fans know that the Beatles are the best band in the world and that the Rolling Stones are definitively overestimated. Die-hard Stones fans know that the opposite is true. Although being a Beatles fan and rejecting the Stones is not the same as being a scholar and rejecting hermeneutics, it is a helpful analogy. Gumbrecht emphasizes this analogy when he describes rejecting hermeneutics as a rebellious and collective experience of a younger generation. Regarding the generational aspect, the analogy ‘Beatles vs. Chris Barber’ might be better (which remains only an analogy; to be honest, I do not know whether the Beatles rejected Barber or hermeneutics). The devotees of Barber—to keep the analogy going—do not appear in *Production of Presence*; relevant German theorists of literary hermeneutics—like Lutz Danneberg or Gerhard Kurz—are nearly the same age as Gumbrecht, but he does not consider them as part of his ‘generation’. In *Production of Presence*, ‘generation’ means ‘like-minded people’ and therefore it describes a community of people who share their rejection of hermeneutics. In his book, Gumbrecht creates a community of iconoclasts of hermeneutics.

## ADDRESSING AN AUDIENCE

Gumbrecht had his readership in mind when he was writing his book. This becomes clear when we look at the different titles in the original edition and the German translation. The US edition is entitled *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Gumbrecht 2004a), which perfectly conveys Gumbrecht’s thoughts and intention. The German edition, instead, highlights the iconoclasm: *On This Side of Hermeneutics: The Production of Presence* (*Diesseits der Hermeneutik: Die Produktion von Präsenz*) (Gumbrecht 2004b). Here, the main intention disappears—i.e. we miss an important dimension of objects if we only focus on the (semantic) meaning. Instead, the distance to the opponent is emphasized, as Gumbrecht stands ‘on this side’ of hermeneutics. It makes sense that Gumbrecht highlights this distance in a country that has a



strong hermeneutical tradition in the humanities. However, Gumbrecht did not search for a provocative German title after finishing his book (Gumbrecht 2004b, 9–10). At the beginning of the German edition, he explains that he had planned on the English title being *The Non-Hermeneutic*. After talking with an American colleague, he realized that this title would not spark interest in the US, where hermeneutics is less provocative and more yawn-inducing. This shows that, on one hand, Gumbrecht actually wrote a book in English about theoretical problems that are more common in German literary studies, and on the other hand, that by changing the title, Gumbrecht knew how to appeal the different audiences in Germany and the USA. There is no difference between the US-American and the German version of the book except the title and the first two pages where Gumbrecht explains the German title choice. This means that in the English version of his book, Gumbrecht creates a hermeneutics icon that he joyfully attacks. An iconoclasm, however, only has an impact if it is directed against the devotees of the icon (e.g. the discussion between devotees of the Beatles and the Stones is highly irrelevant for devotees of Nina Simone). The same is true for hermeneutics. Gumbrecht can only attack the iconicity of hermeneutics when this iconicity is recognized. This holds true for Germany, but not for the US. The critical reactions on his book in the US and Germany demonstrate that Gumbrecht's iconoclasm was only discussed by German scholars.

Carsten Strathausen carefully discusses *Production of Presence* in broader theoretical contexts and explicitly points to Gumbrecht's attack against hermeneutics; the review is entitled *Rebel Against Hermeneutics* (Strathausen 2006). However, Strathausen—professor of German literature in the US—is not offended by Gumbrecht's iconoclasm or, more likely, he does not notice the iconicity of hermeneutics. Possibly due to the journal's focus on political theory, or the greater demand for social relevance of humanities in the United States, Strathausen criticizes that Gumbrecht attacks hermeneutics while remaining firmly situated within Western culture and political and cultural conservatism. The review criticizes Gumbrecht's rebelliousness as naïve. This political focus on *Production of Presence* is hardly found in German reviews; there is only one review (in the rather-leftist newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau*) that makes a similar argument to Strathausen (Werber 2004). Most German reviews focus on Gumbrecht's attack against hermeneutics in more detail. These reviews contain four major objections against *Production of Presence*; I focus on Claude Haas's review (2007), as it points to all four of these.

Immediately, we notice the slightly-aggressive tone that implies critics like Haas feel offended by Gumbrecht's iconoclasm. First, Haas accuses Gumbrecht of ignoring recent research and therefore providing no surprising (or even convincing) results (see also Fromm 2004). Second, Haas argues that Gumbrecht's thoughts never actually left the field of hermeneutics—which is the most common reaction to Gumbrecht in German critiques (see also Christians 2006; Fromm 2004; Kaube 2004). However, debunking Gumbrecht as a hermeneutic theorist, seems not to satisfy Haas. Because, in a third step, he accuses

Gumbrecht of deadly sins in good academic practice; he feels Gumbrecht's argument is contradictory, elitist, and totalitarian. Haas's criticism reveals a spiteful feeling of superiority that cannot hide the pleasure of accusing great thinkers of great mistakes. This pleasure in picking apart Gumbrecht's thoughts can also be found in other reviews (Knipp 2004; Dorschel 2005). Besides the moralistic (and, by the way, unfounded) accusations of being elitist or totalitarian, Haas does something in a fourth step that I call 're-iconizing'. He reacts to Gumbrecht's iconoclasm of hermeneutics by saying that Gumbrecht "turns out to be a sad constructivist" ("entpuppt sich als unglücklicher Konstruktivist"; Haas 2007). Haas only secondarily understands constructivism as a theory of literature; primarily, 'constructivism' represents everything evil Gumbrecht has done. Haas uses 'constructivism' as an icon to match Gumbrecht's iconoclasm against hermeneutics. In a similar way, critic Jürgen Kaube uses an iconoclastic pun of Gumbrecht's German title and calls Gumbrecht's book "on this side of humanities" ("diesseits der Wissenschaft"; Kaube 2004 [the translation literally reads "on this side of science" because there is no distinction between science and humanities in German]). These indignant reactions show that Gumbrecht's targeting works very well in Germany. The devotees of hermeneutics do not only feel offended—they also fight back. Furthermore, we can see that iconizing is part of the writing style of more than internationally-renowned scholars; in the case of Haas and Kaube it appears also in reviews and the daily press.

The reactions to *Production of Presence* in academic contributions are more decent. We can, again, see the impact of the iconoclasm of hermeneutics in the different reactions in the USA and Germany. Gumbrecht's thoughts on presence have been well received in many different disciplines. Philosophers, theologians, (art) historians, classicists, and scholars of literary studies adapt or rethink the concept of presence in their respective fields in both US-American and German anthologies. These essays are more benevolent than the reviews—especially the American anthology, which does not discuss a theory so much as enthusiastically honor a colleague. The authors of the American anthology *Producing Presences: Branching Out From Gumbrecht's Work* portray Gumbrecht's intellectual path to his theory of presence. From their perspective, this path has little to do with a rejection of hermeneutics and more to do with another theory that has been prevailing in the humanities; former Stanford professor René Girard (2007) reads *Production of Presence* as the story of Gumbrecht's final success after a life-long struggle with deconstruction. However, in the UK, Cambridge professor Pierpaolo Antonello (2007) reads the book as a de-facto hermeneutic project. He allies with the authors of the German anthology *Präsenz Interdisziplinär: Kritik und Entfaltung einer Intuition* who—more often than their American colleagues—discuss Gumbrecht's attack against hermeneutics. They either try to find reasons why Gumbrecht's theory of presence perfectly complements a hermeneutic theory of meaning (Beinhauer-Köhler 2012; Kreyer 2012) or understand Gumbrecht's iconoclasm as a rhetorical ornament obscuring remarkable considerations (Lauster 2012). This demonstrates, again, that only people who know about

the iconic status of a phenomenon can be aware of an iconoclasm. The different reactions on both sides of the Atlantic prove the impact of the intended iconoclasm.

### INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: RE-REACTIONS

Gumbrecht wrote an afterword in the American, and a foreword in the German, anthology. In both texts, he reacts to the various reactions his book caused. In these re-reactions, he argues carefully and does not intensify the strategy of iconoclasm. As I said before, we usually iconize our opponents in order to debunk them afterwards. Gumbrecht, however, reacts to his critics without being confrontational. In fact, he re-reacts as he had already done in *Production of Presence*. The last chapter of the book includes comments on the objections of colleagues who have read the manuscript or listened to talks on the topic. Here, we have a rare case of a first-edition book where the author reacts to criticism of the book *within* the book itself. Gumbrecht addresses the concerns that his thoughts are too harmonizing, fetishistic, or religious. He clarifies his thoughts about presence without repeating any antagonisms or attacking hermeneutics. What holds true for the last chapter of *Production of Presence* also holds true for the two anthologies; there is no further iconoclasm, or, at least, no further explicit iconoclasm. However, it is not only because of modesty that Gumbrecht refrains from commenting on the criticism of his iconoclasm. Gumbrecht actually implicitly makes fun of the followers of hermeneutics who cannot stop to search for meaning. He composedly emphasizes that he does not want to comment on any of the interpretations of his work. He argues that he does not like people who pretend to understand things better than the author and give them friendly advice (Gumbrecht 2007). This aligns with his arguments against hermeneutic understanding. Additionally, by avoiding any further confrontation Gumbrecht demonstrates his own demand for redemption and calmness. This is the calmness of a scholar who knows exactly how to attack with iconoclasm and how to react to those who feel attacked. The last chapter of *Production of Presence* announces that Gumbrecht will punish defenders of hermeneutics with silence. He does the same in his re-reactions in the two anthologies.

In sum (and as a kind of conclusion, admittedly), thanks to Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence* we have a general idea of what iconizing means in the humanities. Gumbrecht explains his own project of a theory of presence by antagonistic distinctions between presence and meaning—the latter connected to hermeneutics. He iconizes hermeneutics by (1) declaring that hermeneutics is the predominant theory of our time; (2) increasing the significance of hermeneutics with other ambiguous terms like 'interpretation', 'meaning', or 'metaphysics'; (3) claiming that the rejection of hermeneutics is a collective generational experience; and (4) adapting his iconoclasm to different audiences in Germany and the USA. *Production of Presence* is not only a relevant study in the theory of presence but it is also a relevant textbook in the practice of

iconizing. As the book openly displays its strategies of iconizing, we do not even need any subtle hermeneutic method to recognize them.

So, how should we deal with iconizing in academic texts? The answer should be clear: these texts are multi-channel messages that consist of a subject level and an amplification level. Here, the subject is a theory of presence that contrasts with common theories of how meaning is established. This theory of presence is amplified to an iconoclasm against a ubiquitous opponent—‘hermeneutics’. The iconizing writing strategies extend the meaning of the term ‘hermeneutics’ to a maximum. We, then, call everything related to meaning ‘hermeneutical’. Such an extension undermines disciplinary distinctions—between, for example, hermeneutical theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century or neo-hermeneutical approaches—in order to maintain a singular monolithic theory of hermeneutics. It is crucial, however, that these strategies of iconizing are, by no means, deemed un-academic. Given they appear in academic texts, it is actually the other way around: academic texts usually consist of more than just a subject level, they have an amplification level, too.

So again, how should we deal with iconizing in academic texts? That depends. If we share the authors viewpoint, we can sit back and applaud. If we do not share it, things get interesting because we have to consider both channels of the text; otherwise, our objections will fall short. We can illustrate this with another analogy to pop music. If we want to talk about the Beatles solely on subject level, we can say correct sentences like: “Ringo Starr is not the best drummer in the world.” However, then we might have to face the objection that we do not even have the slightest notion of the Beatles, because if you talk about the Beatles, you are not allowed to criticize musical abilities. The same holds true if we accuse Gumbrecht of using the term ‘hermeneutics’ in the wrong way. We are then ignoring the amplification level of Gumbrecht’s text, and might have to face the criticism that we are small-minded or petty. If we, however, only react on the amplification level, we might have to accept the criticism that we are enraged or at least unobjective. It would be important to react to both channels simultaneously if we want to criticize Gumbrecht’s suggestions appropriately. As this requires some rhetorical skills, less-rhetorically-versed scholars might at least try to describe the multi-channel writing style of iconization as accurately as possible.

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# A Kind of Paradise: The Library as a Cultural Icon

*Stefan Alker-Windbichler*

## A UBIQUITOUS QUOTATION: BORGES' PARADISE

Jorge Luis Borges' phrase—"I had always imagined Paradise as a kind of library" (Borges 1984, 110)—along with the one misattributed to Albert Einstein about their non-relative importance—"The only thing that you absolutely have to know, is the location of the library"—have probably become the best known and most widespread library quotes of our time. The following examples of Borges' quote's wide dissemination show that affective references to the library, i.e. the use of an idealized image, reach far beyond the world of academia and library institutions.

In the area of academic publications, the Borges quote is popular. It serves as a motto (e.g. Brophy 2001) and sometimes even as a title (e.g. Hohmann and ten Hoevel 2014) for numerous works dealing with libraries, book lovers, or reading. It introduces several chapters on library research in textbooks (e.g. Scherer and Finkle 2001, 58) and embellishes quite a few PowerPoint presentations.

This optimistic phrase is not only appreciated in individual books, but also in libraries: on façades (e.g. in several languages in front of the entrance to the National City Public Library in San Diego), on the wall of reading rooms, as food for thought on overhead signs, or at library exhibition stands. The

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University Library of Salzburg even had it printed on deck chairs for its particularly-paradisiacal setting.<sup>1</sup>

According to Hall and Hall (2006, XVIII), “[a]n Icon is usually successful in commerce”—and so the re-production of the library continues in the world of goods; the Borges quote decorates the merchandising products of libraries. The Library of Congress had it printed on bags; the New York Public Library on wallets, desk caddies, and magnets. The Denver Public Library promoted its “Winter of Reading Celebrations” with the quote on mugs and pint glasses (Bohlen 2019).

Commercial vendors also produce goods of all kinds with the Borges phrase. In addition to bags in various sizes and shapes, there are clothes ranging from T-shirts to hoodies, home furnishings such as posters and wall tattoos, wall clocks and pillows, and accessories such as cell phone covers or key rings (see the ever-changing Etsy listings for examples). Across countries and languages, there are some classic memes with the Borges quote—for example the ‘Skeptical 3rd World Kid’ questioning the promise of paradise.<sup>2</sup>

What does the extensive use of the Borges phrase tell us about its content and, more crucially, what does it tell us about its users and about the library? First of all, it shows a distribution and circulation of a specific concept of the library in everyday culture. At the same time, it shows a reduction of complexity typical for the context—here a certain, idealized library, far away from everyday life, is imagined—with a concurrent excess of affection. The paradisiacal nature of the collective library concept leads to its undifferentiated adoration; this sentiment is shared by a range of actors or contributors—everyone from the library and its neighboring service providers to commercial vendors and low-threshold web contributions.

At the same time, numerous translations and paraphrases of the Borges passage show a special connectivity of the text. This results from Borges’ own genre-crossing—the passage can be found in a poem (Borges 1982) and a lecture (Borges 1984)—; Borges’ use of metaphors that can be programmatically transformed by all participants (Hanke-Schaefer 1999, 8), and are blind to the “strange irony of events” (Borges 1984, 110); and from the special aura and imagined attributions of the paradisiacal place: the library.

## LIBRARY IMAGES ON SOCIAL MEDIA: PEOPLE, ROOMS, MEMES

The Borges quote, with its verbal and idealistic reference to the library, is not the only, or even the predominant, media distribution of the library icon—so let us get to the core of the matter: the images. Images from the library appear

<sup>1</sup>“Welttag des Buches an der Universitätsbibliothek Salzburg”. Photo by H.-Chr. Gruber, 23 Apr. 2015. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/uni-salzburg/17123609118>. Accessed 16 Oct 2020.

<sup>2</sup>‘Skeptical 3rd World Kid’-meme with the text “Siempre imagine que el Paraíso sería algún tipo de biblioteca. literatura.”. <https://www.memegenerator.es/meme/28264037>. Accessed 16 Oct 2020.



in all kinds of media products, from popular television series to pop songs, computer games and mangas, to pornography. Here, the focus is on those images whose production and, especially, presentation, have been privatized in digital exchange, as Lydia Haustein (2008, 7) puts it—i.e., primarily representations on social media.

If one searches on Instagram for hashtags related to the term library,<sup>3</sup> one finds a colorful wealth of images that refer to the library in very different ways. Here is a small panorama of selected library references which illustrate how, and in which contexts, the hashtag #library is used:

The most obvious reference to the library, apart from photos of buildings and events, is in the pictures that show everyday situations in libraries. Scenes such as lending books are less popular than depicting one's own library workplace, often with work equipment and a stack of books to document diligence and workload. Photos of oneself in the library, whether as a #libraryselfie or taken by another person, are similarly anchored in the physical institution and are particularly popular for self-presentation. The #library is also frequently used for fashion photos (#libraryshoot), ranging from bookworm images and impressively-staged fashion photography all the way to underwear and bare legs. The hashtags relate to the setting in the library (#vintagelibrary) and often link them to the merits of activities derived from the library setting.

Many of these images are set in institutional, often monumental, library spaces. Yet, a substantial number of them use an explicitly private setting (e.g. #shelfie). Private home libraries play an important role as a motif on their own: how the stock on a bookshelf is growing (#booklovers) or the successful creation of a 'library'—that hardly ever meets professional library criteria concerning the quantity or organization of the holdings. Here a special and quite surprising relationship between decoration/storage and books becomes apparent, as well as recurring principles of order, such as arranging by color.

The world of library memes, like those on Instagram, opens a new domain. Besides the obligatory classics of the genre like Cat Content (felines asking politely for books on world domination) and Chuck Norris ("You visit your library weekly? Chuck Norris approves"), there are sophisticated self-descriptions as a media allusion ("Some girls wanted the prince from *Beauty and the Beast*—I wanted the library") and aphorisms ("Ordinary people have big TVs. Extraordinary people have big libraries") as a supposedly-bourgeois clarification of 'distinction' (to use a term from Bourdieu 2010).

Finally, the field of pop cultural references provides insights into the fertile meme worlds surrounding the popular fantasy classics of our time. *Game of Thrones* contributes "When you play the game of loans you return your books or you pay the fines" (adapting a quote from the show) and "Find someone who looks at you like Sam looks at that library" (as an adaptation of the

<sup>3</sup>Including, in addition to #library, related terms like #librarylife, #libraryselfie, #librarymeme, #librarymemes, #libraryshoot, #librarylovers, #oldlibrary, or #librariesofinstagram; as well as often-combined hashtags such as #bookshelf, #bookshelfie, #bookish, #bookstagram, or #bookporn.

common ‘Find someone’ meme). The library version of the ‘One Does Not Simply’ meme—“One does not simply return from the library without a book”—comes from the *Lord of the Rings* world. And, *Harry Potter* surprises with an overly-conventional approach: “Gets invisible cloak—goes to the library”.

This is where the special pop-cultural dissemination of the library image becomes apparent; library imagery of literary texts—shaped by real libraries and examples from literature—finds its visual and conceptual implementation in films and television, ending up as memes in social media and designs on T-shirts. There are also library variants of popular sayings (depending on preference and temperament: “Keep calm and ask a librarian” or “Make America read again”) and glorifications of the job description (from G-rated to explicit: “Librarian—like teacher but cooler” or “Wake up smarter—sleep with a librarian”).

The examples mentioned so far raise a number of questions: What does the pictorial reference to the library mean for stakeholders? What social functions does it fulfil and are there specific functions in current online use? And finally: What is actually depicted as a ‘library’ and what can be depicted in the age of the e-book? What constitutes the ‘librarian’ core of the images and their common concept?

### SELF-CULTIVATION AND SELF-EXPRESSION

The social function of presenting oneself in, or with, the library has two levels: one based on the specific situation, and one based on evaluative attributions. In the logic of everyday life, visiting a library is connected to a number of possible functions, ranging from traditional research and reading, social aspects such as communication or isolation, to concentration and relaxation. These precise aspects can also be found in the staging patterns of social media; as a context usually dominated by the world of consumption, social media specifically stages environments that distinguish relaxation from other experiences (Bieling 2018, 141). In his examination of the visibility of consumer products on social media, Simon Bieling refers to creating a place and setting in one’s life for both other social milieus and rarely-experienced affects (Bieling 2018, 143), and thus points to attributions of social milieus and group membership created through library imagery.

The iconic character of the library is a striking simplification that marks affiliation and can change the self-image of its viewers (Haustein 2008, 20). It enables an ambiguous process of attribution and identification with the library as the basis for identity-finding processes, precisely because of this simplification and its more emotional (rather than intellectual) impact (Haustein 2008, 28 and 25). This effect applies equally to libraries’ media production and visits to reading rooms.

For many readers, the experience of being part of something is essential (Zürn 2019, 127)—they want to be seen as a member of a certain community

and see others as such at the same time. The literary scholar Gerhard Lauer recently answered the question of the continuing success of physical library spaces with a reference to Humboldt: they serve as institutions of a ‘cultivation of the self’, connected to an aestheticization and bourgeois ideals of life. Like the selfie in front of da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, a visit to the library and its presentation are a form of self-cultivation (Lauer 2019, 177). This intellectual emphasis includes not only old, sacred, or opulent libraries, but is also expressed in pop-cultural allusions and home interiors.

The use of book imagery has traditionally been a strong social marker: “Books have long served as symbols of class—literacy and learning, power and wealth” (Pressman 2020, 56). The use of images of libraries in social media follows a long tradition of staging identity through books in everyday culture. Books were popular decorative items in lifestyle magazines; still lifes were arranged around books; book images on decorations and accessories (packaging, furniture, and clothing) indicate a lifestyle, and constitute a group identity as insignia (Rautenberg 2005, 23–24). Ascriptions of identity and groups through images of books and libraries are set in a complex context that evoke values such as education, knowledge, and tradition, while often simultaneously raising suspicions of enactment and presumption. As a display of books and reading, these images would then be mere cultural indicators (Schikowski 2013, 24) or signs of appropriated bourgeoisie (Rautenberg 2005, 23). What, for some, is a sign of a desired lifestyle and participation in the ‘République des Lettres’, is, for others, a suspicious expression of mere representation and functionless decoration. Such ‘merely rhetorical’ use of books has always existed; Schikowski highlights the ubiquity of a gun lobbyist in the foreground, and a bookcase in the background (2013, 23).

In any case, the depiction of people with bookcases has no fixed meaning—it depends on the setting and the people depicted, their characteristics, desires, and power relations. Christiane Frohmann’s *Pre-Raphaelite Girls Explain the Internet* has aptly pointed out that there are gender differences here, too, by setting the equations cis man + bookcase = intellectual and cis woman + bookcase = likes to read (2020, 184) and thus highlighted that the interpretation of images showing a person in front of a bookcase can depend on gender and emphasises different aspects, such as male scholarliness or female hobbies.

Posing in front of one’s books is by no means just a phenomenon of the past. This was recently demonstrated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought about a boom in home office video conferencing and thus provided insights not only into private spaces often lined with bookshelves, but also into the way people want to present themselves today—at the crossroads of professional and private life and especially in the context of current media applications. At the same time, the absence from the library was experienced as a deficiency which might also concern self-image and lifestyle, and was met with silent reading sessions (Iqbal 2020), virtual tours, and library soundscapes, in order retain the aura of the library even when isolated at home.

## CHANGE OF FUNCTION AND MEANING

As a culture of representation, book culture has, according to Rautenberg, a significant effect both in past high-culture contexts and currently, as a sunk cultural asset (2005, 29). Although the bourgeois appeal of the private library and higher education has always had great symbolic value, the current media presentation of the library is confronted with a change in its social role. A functional decay of the book collection or its primary use as a source of information and reading material has an impact on the symbolic and affective content of the library icon.

Icons are typically created at times when pictorial worlds are reorganized after the decline of traditional lifestyles, and they gain their significance through the loss of definitive meanings and values, Lydia Haustein explains (2008, 27). If, in an example of iconization by Hall and Hall, railroad trains no longer stand for new technology and modernity, but for nostalgia and the retreat from high-tech (2006, XVIII), the same applies to the library's organized and usable collection of books.

With the decline of primary functions, the degree of auratization and iconization increases, while the depiction of classical book collections emphasizes not only a nostalgic moment, but also (presumably) secondary, symbolic, functions of the library as a workspace and stylistic element. The increased representative function of books, independent of content, shifts the balance of the originally symbiotic relationship of collecting and showing in favor of showing (Rautenberg 2005, 18); the functions of the book collection lie therefore primarily in book connotations as forms of—in the sense of ‘improprietas’ of classical rhetoric—improper (not to say figurative) use of books (5).

The use of images in social media also follows these changing functions. “[N]ow that the use value of the book has so radically altered” (Pressman 2020, 2–3), the online presentation of books and book worlds means connection to, *and* rejection of, the digital at the same time, by placing analog counter-images into the online context again. These “bookish practices of self-construction” (35) thus take on a double function; on the one hand, they provide an “extension of our intimate living and personal spaces” (12), and on the other, they offer a counter-image to the digital world: “claiming a bookish identity can constitute an act of rebellion, self-construction, and hope *within* this sphere” (24). Bookishness and the wood-paneled library are also central to the collective practice of online collage of “dark adademia”, which—in a similar inherent opposition—counter the neoliberal university facades with fantasies of intellectual and aesthetic rapture (Davidson 2022).

## LIBRARY AS INTERIOR DESIGN

The pictorial effects of the aforementioned functional change (of the book collection as a source of information to an identity-creating decorative element) can be found in private spaces, the business sector, and academic libraries. Book

collections no longer serve primarily for information and reading, but rather as decoration of ‘library’ spaces. Many Instagram posts in private settings show small book collections, its absorption into decoration, and the lack of principles of order. Kathrin Passig (2019, 90–92) points to the changed function of bookshelves by comparing Ikea catalogues from the years 2008 and 2018. Whereas ceiling-high shelves full of books used to be most popular, aesthetic questions are now becoming more important, as people no longer have to focus on storing (as many) books as efficiently as possible. This trend can even lead to the turning of books (called ‘backward books’) to eliminate color mismatches while simultaneously reducing order and usability, but not the library atmosphere.

Passig also reports a similar occurrence in the business sector: the Factory Berlin (“Europe’s largest club for start-ups”) includes not only a cinema and a ball pool, but also a workroom called ‘Library’—furnished with leather sofas, copper-colored reading lamps, and bookshelves full of decorative and completely-unrelated books (Passig 2019, 88). The coworking space ‘betahaus’ in Berlin also combines the qualities of other places with the atmosphere of a library and ends up with something “between a Viennese coffee house, a library, a home office, and a social campus” (quoted in Bonte 2015, 98). The fact that these commercial facilities refer so strongly to characteristics of libraries in their description and promotion of their services begs the question “What is a library?” (Bonte 2015), especially in the context of professional librarianship and public library services. Irrespective of any services, it is notable that the availability of an actual library, or even just a large number of books, are not necessary to benefit from the properties attributed to the library. Just a few books seem enough to call a room—whether in a private social media post or as a business service—a ‘library’ and charge it with symbolic and atmospheric qualities. As described in the introduction of the present volume, the transfer of ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 2010, 168) is underway by claiming fragments of a cultural icon.

### BOOK WALLPAPERS AND IMAGES OF LIBRARIES IN AN ELECTRONIC WORLD

Libraries themselves are doubly affected by functional changes and the development of increasingly-functionless library images—both in their reading rooms and their self-presentation within the electronic world. The development of creating a library atmosphere through merely representative images, in which books become wallpaper, affects not only private individuals and companies but also public libraries. This became obvious when the Tianjin Binhai Library opened in 2017 with floor-to-ceiling ‘bookshelves’, largely covered with decorative foil. The impressive interior design, which would not even have allowed the appropriate use of real bookcases at all, shows how much the desired atmosphere depends on something whose original functions became obsolete on site.

What was literally implemented here inevitably happens in many academic and university libraries: reading room holdings lose their function as reference works and become ‘book wallpapers’. Libraries keep books in aesthetically-good condition, for photos and film shoots, but less for their content. And, of course, the atmosphere plays a role here too, as Dan Cohen recently noted: “we should keep an ample number of books in the library for their beneficial ambience”, and “If books are becoming wallpaper, they are rather nice wallpaper, surrounding students with deep learning and with some helpful sound-deadening characteristics to boot.” (Cohen 2019).

So, there is a great, pragmatic persistence of books on visible library shelves. Likewise, the visual world of the library remains dominated by books and book collections for equally pragmatic reasons; e-books, databases, and virtual libraries are challenging to depict. In light of the difficulty visualizing plain or only electronically-available texts, which is less noticeable when the book object naturally surrounds the text, Passig (2019, 100) points to “advantages of matter” with its visibility and depictability, tangibility and comprehensibility.

Strong (not to say iconic) book images occur in many areas, despite a cultural move away from the printed word. Even in the advanced fictional universes of science fiction, printed books are ever-present, indicating that tangible books are powerful and practical symbols. When Captain Picard ostentatiously browses through old books on the *Enterprise*, he is by no means an exception; in 70 percent of the science fiction TV shows with library references, you still see printed books (Engelkenmeier 2020, 79). The problem is all too familiar for libraries and scholars looking for illustrative images for their electronic services or digital humanities projects to enhance their informational materials. One solution to this iconographic issue is, appropriately, found in books and libraries: the cover of the textbook *Germanistik digital* (Börner et al. 2018)—an introduction to the digital humanities in linguistics and literary studies—shows a scholar, sitting in a conventionally-furnished library, in front of a laptop displaying a physical book (Fig. 1).

Passig argues (2019, 104) that the more explanation a textual project requires, the more useful the book becomes as a tool for clarification, thus referring to an essential element of books and book collections: they are simple and do not need to be explained because they are illustrative in the best sense. At the same time, library depictions always go beyond the represented material—towards the books as carriers of fiction (Bieling 2018, 143) and libraries as charismatic guarantors for the ‘readability’ of the world (Hagner 2019, 8).

## THE ESSENCE OF THE LIBRARY: MEANINGS AND ATMOSPHERE

The library images that are widespread in everyday and popular culture are thus still close to the initial meaning of the library as a well-ordered and usable collection of books or as a public space with a certain aura. They are therefore considered icons that retain their original, unchanged meaning in global communication spaces, “absorbing” other content in the transition from analog to





**Fig. 1** Cover of the textbook *Germanistik digital. Digital Humanities in der Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft* (German studies digital. Digital Humanities in Linguistics and Literary Studies), Vienna 2018

digital memory locations (Haustein 2008, 25, 16, and 18). This expansion of the concept of library in the digital world leads to an enhanced understanding of how library features—such as organization and usability—are transferred to other phenomena (from the software library to Facebook’s ‘Library’ category to the brands like ‘The Library of Fragrance’).

Additionally, this process questions how libraries see themselves today—in the tension between analog and digital memory; in representation, and comprehension, of analog features in digital services—and which of these characteristics actually ‘make’ a library. This demonstrates the potential competition between different groups and points of view concerning the symbolic content of this icon; “competing groups seek to rewrite the symbolic content of cultural icons to make them ‘fit’ their preferred self-image and suit their pragmatic purposes” (Leypoldt 2010, 9). Many narratives on the current development of libraries pit the supposedly outdated, limited local book collections against the infinite possibilities of digitization, while, conversely, the lack of selection, orientation, and information retrieval is countered by the curated, finely indexed, and coherent traditional collection, which thus stands between positive and negative attributions, obsolete and worthy of preservation qualities.

Besides the symbolic content, original meaning, and pragmatic aspects, there is always an aesthetic element to cultural icons, or “an affective-emotional force of attraction” (Leypoldt 2010, 18). This can explain seemingly-obscure phenomena such as the—for many modern purposes—dysfunctional but crowded reading rooms, the purchase of old reading room chairs at flea markets, or the presence of card catalogue cabinets in living rooms (which is also pop-culturally established by the influential multiplier *Big Bang Theory*). After all, it is not only about transferring and revitalizing library functionality and practices, but also about its aura and charisma.

## SUMMARY AND PERSPECTIVES

Borges’ quotation highlights that images, ideas, and concepts circulate around libraries. In turn, social media reveals the everyday use of library images, their potential for self-presentation and how little of a library or book collection needs to be present to establish a symbolic connection. Memes and merchandising products reveal the pop-cultural connectivity and commercial use of library images.

Self-presentation with books and libraries oscillates between the desire to participate in a highly-valued intellectual world and the presumption of symbolic capital. This applies to the private sphere, but is continued in commercial services that charge and promote rooms with a library atmosphere. At times, the library is less a functional tool than a plain showpiece, serving as a (social or work) space with certain associative qualities. Even actual library spaces have to deal with the fact that books and their use are becoming more and more separated from one another, and books are in danger of becoming a scenery or wallpaper.



The world of images—including images for electronic libraries, digital research projects, and educational content—remain strongly tied to physical books and book collections; after all, the book is comprehensible and illustrative in the best sense, while always referring to larger contexts (like the world of fiction or the readability of the world).

Modern libraries have to deal with a development away from physical books and need to find a way to represent and visualize techniques and contexts that are being transferred into the digital world. Or, as Aleida Assmann puts it, they need to learn to sustain the Biblosphere in the Infosphere (2017, 18). The visual quality of the library can not only illustrate what is difficult to represent, but also opens up a space of aura and attraction that has an effect far beyond actual library contexts.

Overall, despite the fast-paced social changes, widespread library imagery is rather conventional, and sometimes nostalgic. What can appear to be explained on a practical level—with Hermann Lübke's striking and hardly-translatable wording ("Bemühungen zur Kompensation eines änderungstempobedingten Vertrautheitsschwundes") "efforts to compensate for a loss of familiarity caused by the pace of change" (2004, 24)—also has much to do with the cultural, even sacral, charging of the cultural icon. Thus, there is a last 'Angstblüte' [blossoming of anxiety] before former library and church buildings are profaned by becoming cinemas or restaurants (Knoche 2018, 8). The library reveals itself as a backward-looking icon whose images are always already outdated, but whose meaning is only just beginning to unfold in the erosion and replacement of old practices and their translation into new contexts of interpretation.

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