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Bridging the Gap: Image, Discourse, and Beyond – Towards a Critical Theory of Visual Representation

Abstract Pictures and images play a central role in contemporary society. Not only do they mediate meaning in a seemingly universal language (Fromm 1981), but their relevance for the construction of perception and beliefs cannot be underestimated. In global, political and religious discourses, controversies often revolve around images. The influence visuality has on the forming of ideas has already been discussed in the 1930s (Freud 1932). Today, even neurobiologists acknowledge the influential power of mental images (Hüther 2004).

But, despite the well acknowledged impact the Pictorial Turn has had up to date, discourse analyses are typically carried out solely on linguistic material. Nevertheless, even in the Foucauldian sense the term "discourse" relates to epistemes and power not only conveyed by language, but also by pictures and images, in "a mushy mixture of the articulable and the visible" (Deleuze 2006).

Nonetheless, the specific characteristics of pictures and images render analysis ever more difficult. Visual representations are a case *sui generis*. They cannot be transcribed into language completely. Research on visual artifacts can be put to work as a disclosure of how symbolic orders and the accordant identities are constructed. Something present, a picture or an image, is analyzed with regard to its ideological implications, as studies related to Cultural Studies usually do. Yet, beyond the visible picture, if representation is the making-present of something that's absent (Pitkin 1967), what respectively who is being made absent by the presence of the visible? The ambiguity of representation as "standing for" *versus* "depiction of" might at the same time enable a critical approach in the analysis of visual discourse.

In this article, I attempt to conceptualize a methodological approach for conducting discourse analyses on visual material. For this purpose, I will introduce a dialectical notion of representativeness as imagery that draws on Gayatri C. Spivak's critique and Hannah Fenichel Pitkin's Political Theory of representation, as well as on Siegfried Kracauer's deliberations on film. Finally, I am going to give an example for putting this approach into research practice.

Keywords Discourse Analysis; Critical Theory; Dialectics; Picture Theory; Picture Analysis; Visual Representation; Visual Politics; Pictorial Turn

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Introduction: Cultural Studies, Visual Politics, and Power

Regarding concepts and notions developed in the context of Cultural Studies, power can be considered a fundamental term. For Oliver Marchart, culture has political relevance because of its connection to power (2008). Their potential alliance to power is also, as I want to suggest, precisely the reason why debates about pictures and representativeness oscillate between two basic positions. Iconoclasm aims at the destruction of pictures because their power is conceived as dangerous. Due to the aniconism in the *Old Testament*, this perspective is deeply rooted in Western culture, whereas idolatry as the worship of false images is considered a cardinal sin. However, both positions, idolatric as well as iconophiliac, imply an acknowledgement of the power images hold, of their potential to structure perception and consciousness. Images are productive, and power in discourse is also existent as iconic power (Mitchell 1986). Conceptions of reality have been mediated by images in all cultures at all times. The function visuality has for the processing of perception into notions, for shaping ideas, has been discussed very early by Sigmund Freud (1932). Following the Pictorial Turn, this centrality of visual representation has been widely recognized in most scientific disciplines. The developments related to this turn usually refer to a certain epistemological stance that takes into account the ubiquity of pictures in contemporary society and their centrality for the construction of perception. Since W. J. T. Mitchell's proclamation in 1992, it has not only been at-

tempted to substitute this by a so-called "iconic" and a "visualistic" turn.[1] Beyond such academic claims, the process all of these terms describe has had effects on the humanities, as well as on the natural sciences. Apparently, the centrality of pictures represents a certain consensus in all kinds of scientific disciplines today. Even neurobiologists, like Gerald Hüther (2004), have started investigating how mental images shape the brain structure.[2] Yet, in spite of the widely recognized influence of the Pictorial Turn, discourse analyses are usually only conducted on linguistic artifacts. However, the term "discourse," as Michel Foucault established it, is linked to epistemes and power in ways mediated by both language and pictures/images, in "a mushy mixture of the articulable and the visible" (Deleuze 2006:33). In globalized discourse, controversies often revolve around images, like in the violent conflict about the caricatures published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. In his book *Idols of the market. Modern iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle* (2009); Sven Lütticken even refers to the violent conflicts of contemporary world politics as "image wars" (2009:11). Hence, visual representations should be methodically included in discourse analyses.

Nevertheless, a systematic study and analysis of those pictures available to any member of society

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[1] For a brief overview regarding the content and implications of the proclaimed turns and related fields of study, see Schnettler (2007:195). Since this article focuses on visual representations that are widely distributed, usually by mass media, the above statement is limited to these as well.

[2] It is important to stress that Hüther does not state this process to work the other way around, as biologistic argumentations would.

is, apart from some exceptions such as Bernt Schnettler's notion of *Visual Knowledge* (2007), a relatively new phenomenon in the social sciences and thus, still rather scarce (Bohnsack 2009).[3] Notably in the context of Cultural Studies, respectively Media Studies, to some extent, established tradition of picture analysis from a perspective informed by social science has been developed (cf. e.g., Lacey 1998; Rose 2001; Hepp 2010).

Discourse analysis on visual data exceeds classical methods of picture analysis as established by art history, and methodological approaches that refer to the research instruments established by the latter (Müller 2003; Bohnsack 2009), primarily in its scope. But, these options concerning quantity affect the status of the pictures in question, too, and thus alter the modes of the approach, the research perspective, as well. This is why I want to argue that the focus on the relationship between power and culture so characteristic for Cultural Studies should be extended towards a Critical Theory of visual representation. "Critical" not only because it draws on approaches to representativeness that have been framed by the Frankfurt School, but also because such a theory and the related methodology might be able to correct those "surpluses" of Cultural Studies that overemphasize the audience's self-will, their agency.[4]

In the following, I want to argue that in order to convincingly grasp the influence pictures and images exert on ways of thinking – on discourse in the Foucauldian sense, that is – it is necessary to expand the focus and not only look at pictures themselves, but at their position in a certain discourse constellation, their function for that discourse and their relationship to other pictures, and especially their dialectic work of constituting absences while representing.

I am thus going to investigate possible ways to analyze visual artifacts that factor in the specific logic of pictures and images, while at the same time looking at the relation between pictures and their context. This relation between visual text and social context, and its connection to power, is what I refer to as Visual Politics. This term marks an understanding of cultural artifacts that includes not only the particular qualities of the material picture – as in art history – or the meaning people make of it – as in late Cultural Studies, but also the modes of production that constitute the artefact. Furthermore, I do assume that these modes of production at the same time constitute a particular need – or desire – for the cultural product in question.

What I am thus attempting is to combine discourse theory and discourse analysis with perspectives usually associated with the Frankfurt School. To stick with Foucauldian terms: I am trying to find a way to bridge the articulable and the visible in doing discourse analysis, and expand this framework to visual texts while concurrently using analytical instruments of Critical Theory to allow for connecting the findings to their political and economic circumstances.

For this purpose, I am going to briefly outline some basic theoretical assumptions and the thereby arising methodological consequences. I will then introduce a dialectical notion of representativeness that draws on Gayatri C. Spivak's postcolonial critique and Hannah Fenichels Pitkin's Political Theory of representation and offer a way to grasp the relationship between what is made visible – what is present – and what is made absent in the process of representation. In order to do so, I will use a theoretical, as well as methodological perspective that has been elaborated by Siegfried Kracauer. I am going to argue that in spite of the divide that exists between Critical Theory[5] and schools of thought labeled as "poststructuralist," his approach can be put to work in contemporary discourse analysis as well.

On Theoretical Assumptions and Methodological Consequences

In his essay *Critical Theory and Cultural Studies: The Missed Articulation* (1997), Douglas Kellner criticizes the turn Cultural Studies have made since the 1980s, a turn towards "postmodern forms of identity politics and less critical perspectives on media and consumer culture" (1997:20). This, as he calls it, "tendency to decentre, or even ignore completely, economics, history and politics" instead stresses the creative and productive use the audience makes of pop-

ular material.[6] On the other hand, approaches associated with the Frankfurt School have been accused of economic determinism or reductionism (Kellner 1997). Kellner dismisses this kind of totalizing labeling of different schools, which I find a viable way to pursue, particularly since the situation has received an additional spin lately by the implications of the pictorial turn.

I believe that the postmodern tendencies both Cultural Studies and Foucauldian thought represent on one side and the potential that approaches of the Frankfurt School hold for analysis of pictures and images on the other side do not necessarily have to be played off against each other. Instead, a combination of their specific advantages might offer a way out of the *cul de sac* either school of thought can turn out to be when it comes to analyzing visual artifacts, especially because both schools of thought have deemed ideology critique as essential for a critical research on culture. Kellner's proposal to bring together the concepts of an active audience and a manipulated one (1997:28) will be taken on here with regard to the Frankfurt School's economic analysis. Yet, the latter will be complemented by an approach that takes seriously the specific potential that pictorial representativeness holds.

The Gap to be Bridged: Critical Theory *versus* (Post)Structuralist Approaches

With respect to pictorial representativeness, Gertrud Koch has pointed out a fundamental contra-

diction regarding Theodor W. Adorno's Critical Theory, namely, the incoherence of his analysis of the commodity as fetish (*Warenfetischanalyse*) going back to aniconism, and his thoughts about the autonomy of the aesthetic (Koch 1992). Both strands of thought recur in popularized form as typical assumptions of Cultural Studies: the "autonomy of the aesthetic" (1992:26) as productivity of the artefact or as the resistant power of the recipients.[7] The valorization of the potential resistant power of cultural artifacts has become the division between both schools, though, since the Frankfurt School's notion of "the aesthetic" was limited to "high culture" (Kellner 1997:17). In turn, their picture critique resonates in image analyses of Cultural Studies relying on ideology critique – that must remain phenomenological, as I will try to show. Without expanding their scope towards a perspective that can encompass not only the audience's, but also the iconic power of the respective image in its context, such analyses will not be able to reach beyond a descriptive level.

Before discussing how the benefits of these approaches can be combined, I want to summarize briefly their respective shortcomings.[8] In short, postmodern or (post)structuralist approaches fail to acknowledge how texts – by which I include pictorial and all other kinds of visual texts – are produced by media industries, and

how the commodification of any cultural text ultimately determines its production. This is not to say it determines its reception in just the same way – although, that probably holds true in a mediated way, too. Yet, the pre-structuring of a cultural commodity alongside certain ideological biases that are in turn produced by the capitalist mode of production and the national organization of humankind today cannot be erased by stressing possible ways of resistance to these (Spivak 1988). In addition, I believe that the emphasis these approaches put on the content of the represented, on the material that is made present in the process of representation, renders impossible an understanding of the ways images work, especially with regard to those modes of subjectivization that are made accessible exactly by those cultural texts in question. On the other hand, picture analyses in the iconographical tradition, as well as that of art history, pursue a hermeneutical approach and focus, too, mainly on properties of the picture itself: that which is present in the representation. This stands in opposition to the (post) structuralist insight that meaning is produced in the process of perception, and that the production of meaning is always dependent on context. So, in spite of art history scholars claiming that the "classical" instruments their discipline offers form the gateway for any analysis of visual artifacts (Bredekamp 2006; Schnettler 2007), when it comes to what I have called Visual Politics, this approach is a too narrow one. It may become useful for detailed analyses, but it definitely needs completion to make it a useful instrument in social sciences' research.

Regarding Critical Theory, the accusation of economic reductionism cannot be held on to at a close look, as Kellner points out (1997). Yet, this perspective does, at first glance, not allow for the structuring power of discourse as Foucault has elaborated in *An Archeology of knowledge* (2007). Hence, this approach would benefit from an "update" as well.

Either way, there is no doubt that the analysis of "statements" on a visual level is even more difficult to standardize than it has been for linguistic statements. Pictures and images hold genuinely unique qualities that are translatable in language only partially, which renders questionable any scientific analysis of pictures that does not account for their context. This becomes obvious when it comes to analyzing in detail the microstructure of a "fragment of discourse" (Jäger 2009:193) or, on an even smaller scale, a statement, "the elementary unit of discourse" (Foucault 2007:90). That is why it is ever more important to stress that discourse analysis relying on Foucauldian terms is a relational method and statements, linguistic as well as pictorial, need to be analyzed in their relationship to others. Elements of discourse constitute each other mutually. According to Rainer Keller and others, any discourse analysis is an approach "… that identifies the different elements and dimensions of the thematic field as *constituting and stabilizing each other reciprocally*" (Keller et al. 2003:11 [translation A.S.]). Hence, discourse analysis aims at the ways texts and context are connected (Angermüller 2001). I believe that this perspective can be very useful for the analysis of pictures, too: assuming that meaning is produced in the process of perception, and that

structures of cultural artifacts are more or less open, and thus allow many or few alternative readings, the production of meaning is always dependent on context, and this holds true for pictures as well.

This emphasis on the overall structure, on the relationship between text and context is what I believe can be the key for putting to work an analysis of pictures and images that does not fall prey to the essentializing assumption that meaning is in some "magical" way incorporated by the artefact. Neither enables this perspective determinist views such as that meaning is forced upon a passive audience top-down by the culture industry.

Furthermore, using an approach built on discourse theory protects picture analysis from being mere interpretation dependent on the interpreter by narrowing down the arbitrariness of meaning. Pinning down the meaning of pictures – moreover, by means of language, which is still the preferred medium of scientific communication – is a much more precarious task than to do that with linguistic texts (Schnettler 2007). Hence, linking picture analysis to context – discourse, that is – might enable a viable way.

To summarize these presuppositions, the attempt to sketch aspects of a Critical Theory of Visual Representation will draw on (post)structuralist thought or Cultural Studies insofar as meaning is understood as being constituted in a relational way and that signs – pictures and images – receive meaning in the process of reception, that is, in the respective relation between sign and recipient. Therefore, this meaning is historically con-

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[7] See, for example, the three-part model elaborated by Stuart Hall. He distinguishes between a dominant, a negotiated and an oppositional reading (cf. *The summary by Marchart* 2008:131).

[8] Such a purpose necessarily implies a certain reductionism I want to apologize for. Amongst others, this summary is based on Gayatri C. Spivak's thoughts about power and representation (1988; 2008) and, regarding Cultural Studies' subjects, Douglas Kellner (1997).

tingent on one hand. On the other hand, it can be narrowed down for a historically specific time and place for the same reason. In the irreducible tension between the fundamental polysemy of cultural artifacts and those determinants that pre-structure their reception, there can be no ultimate meaning. Yet, since we as producers and participants of discourse access the same ways of articulation and the same artifacts at a certain, historically specific time, this article will not carry out the epistemological apologias of radical discourse theory. Instead, the insights of the latter regarding the relational constitution of meaning will be combined with a dialectical approach towards representativeness in the following.

Economic Reductionism: Image and Ideology

The social and political character that the usage of images takes on in modern society becomes evident when it comes to visual representations of relational entities. These entities cannot exist in first order realities in concrete form inherently, since, being societal relations, they can only be comprehended as abstractions. With regard to Marx's concept of ideology, Mitchell has attempted to show the problematic implications of using pictorial concretizations for such entities. Mitchell, a pioneer in the field of picture theory, elaborates a close connex between representativeness as imagery, and ideology in his book *Iconology – Image, Text, Ideology* (1986). Particularly in his essay *The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm. Marxism, Ideology, and Fetishism*, he subjects the concept of ideology itself to an iconological analysis. According to him,

…the concept of ideology is grounded, as the word suggests, in the notion of mental entities or «ideas» that provide the materials of thought. Insofar as these ideas are understood as images – as pictorial, graphic signs imprinted or projected on the medium of consciousness – then ideology, the science of ideas, is really an iconology, a theory of imagery. (Mitchell 1986:164)

However, with Marx's conceptualization of ideology as "false consciousness," this science takes on an ironic turn and becomes in itself "a new form of idolatry – an ideolatry" (Mitchell 1986:167). In the following, Mitchell analyses the relationship between Marx's concepts of ideology and the commodity and the images that they are built upon, the *camera obscura* and the fetish. He investigates these images' productive work for processes of perception, their potential for generating knowledge. Mitchell's aim is to show how these images on the one hand facilitate Marxist analyses, yet, on the other hand, disable them at the same time by reifying these images and treating them as "separable abstractions instead of dialectical images" (1986:163). Instead, "ideology and fetishism have taken a sort of revenge on Marxist criticism, insofar as it has made a fetish out of the concept of fetishism, and treated «ideology» as an occasion for the elaboration of a new idealism" (Mitchell 1986:163)

Mitchell's analysis is relevant here insofar that, following Raymond Williams and Louis Althusser, he points out the consequences of reifying the two pictorial concepts by and for a "vulgar" Marxism (1986:170). He certifies all controversies about theory of ideology a "spell of…optical symbolism" (Mitchell 1986:170) and,

in opposition, advocates taking Marx's pictorial metaphors seriously by situating them historically. Thus, he very generally calls for including the particular historical constellation that empowers images in the analysis. This claim can also be understood as a postulation of a relational perspective to whose benefits I shall return below.

Remarkably, when discussing "dialectical images," Mitchell quotes precisely those antinomies between iconoclasm and idolatry that Gertrud Koch names: on the one hand, the contradiction between those aspects of Critical Theory that emphasize the enabling potential pictures hold, on the other hand the orthodox Marxist interpretations, which reify Marx's pictorial metaphors to such an extent that they become distorting mirrors (1986:204). In contrast, Mitchell stresses the polyvalence of dialectical images, their double existence as "mirror(s)" of history and at the same time "window(s) beyond it" (1986:205). With regard to the "hypericons" of the fetish and the *camera obscura*, he indeed reconstructs the particular historical life process that produced these images. Yet, aside from these, he does not offer a methodological approach that would point beyond these highly specific dialectical images. However, he gives a short, but significant indication when criticizing that Marx has neglected the "power of imagination." The reconstruction of "vision itself…as a mechanism subject to historical change" (Mitchell 1986:175) should thus include parameters he doesn't specify any further. Yet, for the time being, I want to conceive these as the conjunction of re-presentation as depiction (*Darstellung*) and perception or

imagination. At this point, I want to build upon Mitchell's analysis and dwell on the double role of pictures to synthesize conceptions of reality and at the same time offer the means to abolish the "illusions of ideology" (Mitchell 1986:178). The "paradox of ideology" to be not only erroneous, but a "coherent, logical, rule-governed system of errors" (Mitchell 1986:172) shall not, as Mitchell does, serve as a starting point for the analysis of dialectical images, but for generating a dialectical approach to the analysis of images and be extended by introducing the category of desire into the concept of representation.

Hanna Fenichel Pitkin and Gayatri C. Spivak: The Multidimensionality of Representation

In her book *The Concept of Representation* (1967), Hannah Fenichel Pitkin investigates the different aspects of representation and differentiates between descriptive, symbolic and substantial representation. Yet, every representation, be it linguistic, political or pictorial, is "the making-present of something that's absent" (Pitkin 1967:8), all of them share the quoted structure. Hence, a painting can comply with this structural definition just as well as somebody holding a political mandate. It is precisely because of its multiple dimensions why representation shall be understood as an interface between aesthetics and politics here. On the one hand, its practical-political aspects as in substantial representation or "speaking for" (*Stellvertretung*) and its subject-related aspect as in re-presentation in art or philosophy (*Darstellung*), are irreducible. Yet, they cannot be separated completely, either,

as Gayatri C. Spivak (1988) has pointed out in her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

On the basis of the according section in Marx's *Eighteenth Bruma*ire (1946) about the small peasant proprietors' representation in 19th century France, Spivak (1988) highlights the connection between political representation and economical representation:

> [t]he relationship between global capitalism (exploitation in economics) and nation-state alliances (domination) is so macrological that it cannot account for the micrological texture of power. To move toward such an accounting one must move toward theories of ideology – of subject formations that micrologically and often erratically operate the interests that congeal the macrologies. Such theories cannot afford to overlook the category of representation in its two senses. They must note how the staging of the world in representation – its scene of writing, its *Darstellung* – dissimulates the choice of and need for «heroes,» paternal proxies, agents of power – *Vertretung*. (p. 279)

This interrelation between *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* becomes obvious in the light of the different principles underlying them. Whereas representation as *Vertretung* or "acting for" emanates from (objective) interest, from "acting in the interest of" (Pitkin 1967:209), a theory of subjectivization that relies solely on the notion of interest fails to explain why, as in the case of the French peasants, the desire for "paternal proxies, agents of power" (Spivak 1988:279) becomes more powerful politically than class interest does. To give a more drastic example: a theory relying only on interest cannot explain why the Germans chose a "leader" and the

according National Socialist regime, which could not possibly conform to their "objective interest." In order to grasp such ultimately irrational political actions and attitudes, it becomes necessary to introduce the concept of desire.

Re-presentation as symbolic-descriptive depiction, as *Darstellung* – structurally also a "making present of something that's absent" – is not based on an "acting in the interest of," but on a symbolic quality (Pitkin 1967) – an image that desire can be projected on. This lacking coherence of interest and desire that, as Spivak points out, Marx has already stressed, and their interaction in representation might be the key for an adequate notion of iconic power. To enable a comprehensive approach towards the possibility of identification – of the audience with the represented, of the nation with its leader, of the peasants with Napoleon – in the process of representation, I want to bring in the category of desire for a theory of visual representation that does not abandon ideology critique altogether either. For this purpose, I will return to Hannah Fenichel Pitkin's definition of representation. Her determination of representation as a process of "making something present that's absent" serves as a starting point for my following conclusions since it implies two contradictory moves that can be called the "dialectics of representation."

The "something" that is made present in the process of representation is at the same time constituted as being exactly that which is represented and not anything – so there is at the same time an absence created by the presence, a "that which

this is not." This fundamental quality of representation becomes further problematic when it is humans or social collectives of any kind that are represented. For now, the descriptive quality of the picture, the "depiction of," gets corrupted by traces of "standing for" or even "acting for." This certainly depends on the respective context. For example, a picture of a group of Japanese-looking people in an exhibition about World War II will very likely have the effect of those depicted being taken as examples of a hostile, then victimized people. The people depicted will become representatives of "their kind." On the other hand, those that are not in the picture are not part of the scheme being made by those perceiving the depiction. They are being made absent. The same group of people depicted in a TV show about U.S. campus life will probably come to "stand for" people belonging to the same social group: they will be an example for the social self.

The example shows that in analyzing pictures, it is not only important to look at text-context-relationship. It is also crucial to ask what, respectively who is being made absent by the presence of the visible? The methodological problem here is evident: how can this be answered? Of course, defining the other of that which is represented would be an infinite operation. However, it is exactly the socio-political context that allows for a narrowing down of that theoretically infinite number of "something absent," because what is made absent is never arbitrary, but determined by current power relations and ideology.

Siegfried Kracauer's Dialectical Approach

To grasp the specific absence created by a visual representation, an appropriate methodology is necessary. I believe that the approach Siegfried Kracauer has laid out in his essay *The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies* (1995), holds the key for this operation. Its first paragraph reads:

> [f]ilms are the mirror of the prevailing society. They are financed by corporations, which must pinpoint the tastes of the audience at all costs in order to make a profit. Since this audience is composed largely of workers and ordinary people who gripe about the conditions in the upper circles, business considerations require the producer to satisfy the need for social critique among the consumers. A producer, however, will never allow himself to be driven to present material that in any way attacks the foundations of society, for to do so would destroy his own existence as a capitalist entrepreneur. (Kracauer 1995:291)

Initially, this approach can be regarded as typical for the Frankfurt School because of its emphasis on economic interest. It might even be read as an example of the determinist reductionism cited above, since it relates all variables, including the content of cultural artifacts, solely to material sources and interest, especially since Kracauer concludes: "[s]ociety is much too powerful for it to tolerate any movies except those with which it is comfortable. Film must reflect society whether it wants to or not" (1995:292).

But, his formulation does not have to be read as a totalizing account of the way society functions, particularly because the term "must reflect

society" already implies the notion of an active audience. Actually, put under a close reading, in his conception of the relation between capitalist mode of production and cultural content, Kracauer already includes that activity, which Cultural Studies have later marked as a supposedly resistant practice. The assimilating forces of the culture industry are out in the open, transforming the "taste of the audience" and its "need for social critique" into new, highly successful products, as contemporary TV shows such as "The L-word" about a lesbian community in Los Angeles document. Yet, this is not the place for defending the Frankfurt School's approach against false reductions. The point I want to state is that however insufficient this account of culture industry might be, Kracauer's analytical model is not yet completed. He only starts by arguing that "films are the mirror of society" (Kracauer 1995:291). He further writes:

> …in the majority of films, things are pretty un-realistic. … But, the films do not therefore cease to reflect society. On the contrary: *the more incorrectly they present the surface of things, the more correct they become and the more clearly they mirror the secret mechanism of society*. (Kracauer 1995:291)

Referring to a "secret mechanism of society" might sound problematic, a little vague, like there was some device running society that was not accessible to analysis. But, in continuing, Kracauer states the exact opposite. His dialectical approach is enclosed in his phrase: "the more incorrectly they present…, the more correct they become." The fundamental analytical move lies in this following statement: "[s]tupid and unreal film fantasies are the *daydreams of society* in which its actual real-

ity comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take on form" (Kracauer 1995:292).

What is Kracauer doing when he calls filmic representations "the daydreams of society?" I believe that he is reading the absent from the text that is present. According to Kracauer, that which is shown represents a daydream, namely, a wish, a desire.

This perspective on representation provides a powerful insight concerning the interrelation between interest and desire, and regarding the relationship between a re-presentation as depiction (*Darstellung*) and those that are being represented by it (*Stellvertretung*). To apply it as an analytical tool, we have to ask: which society, which discourse constellation, which social and political situation, has produced this particular wish? To stick with this psychoanalytical metaphor: Who is dreaming this, what is her situation – as a society? Therefore, Kracauer offers a way to get a grasp on what might be called the ideological implications of a text – without being in danger of reading anything into a text. To wit, the potential absences of a text are narrowed down very distinctly by this analytical move. All we have to do for setting to work a truly qualitative inquiry is to ask who or what has produced this desire? Which specific absence is the origin of this presence?

With Kracauer, the historical placing of a picture that Mitchell calls for means questioning the material picture with regard to its relation to societal context, the non-coherent "image behind the picture." This query would be impossible with the common methods of ideology critique in the tradition of Cultural Studies that are directed only towards a pic-

ture's presence. Only asking which specific absence has created that which is made present in the picture reunites the moments of desire and interest in a theory of visual representation and directs them towards the absence of a picture:

> [i]n order to investigate today's society, one must listen to the confessions of the products of its film industries. They are all blabbing a rude secret, without really wanting to. In the endless sequence of films, a limited number of typical themes recur again and again; they reveal how society wants to see itself. The quintessence of these film themes is at the same time the sum of the society's ideologies, whose spell is broken by means of the interpretation of the themes. (Kracauer 1995:293)

In addition to framing a dialectical approach to the analysis of cultural texts, Kracauer by this gives an accurate description of the interest that drives discourse analysis: "a limited number of typical themes" does not only refer to aesthetic motives like those art history might elaborate, it can also be read as the result of an account of the discourse in question. I do believe that without having witnessed the emergence of (post)structuralist thought, Kracauer has provided some very useful instruments for qualitative inquiry that actually bridge supposed gaps between the academic traditions in question. By linking the dimensions of re-presentation as *Darstellung*, towards which desire is directed, with conceptions of reality and representation as *Stellvertretung*, he offers a possibility to grasp how society's actual contradictions are synthesized in a picture. As opposed to a perspective that focuses only on the present content of a picture, in so doing, that which is made absent by that exact picture becomes available for analysis.

Conclusion and Implementation

I want to conclude by demonstrating the potential of such an approach with an example, an analysis of the front cover of Germany's probably most influential weekly magazine, *DER SPIEGEL*.

Figure 1. Front cover of *DER SPIEGEL*, „Die Gier des großen Geldes. Finanz-Investoren greifen nach deutschen Unternehmen" [Big Money's Greed: Financial Investors are Snatching German Companies]. No. 51, December 18, 2006.

The picture features a giant locust. Iconographically based upon films such as "Godzilla" or "King Kong," it is pulling apart a city with its legs, while from its back, skyscrapers are rising – a classic example for the pejorative splitting-off of the financial sphere and the sphere of production as in antisemitic projections. Yet, crucial for the picture's ideological work is its positioning by the caption *Big*

Money's Greed: Financial Investors are Snatching German Companies. Not only does it mark the in-group, the own collective – Germans – as a threatened victim, moreover, it places it in opposition to "greedy financial investors." The pictorial re-presentation (*Darstellung*) of locusts thus represents (*Vertretung*) a hostile outgroup, the "financial investors," "grabbing for/snatching (*greifen*) German companies," visually performed by the humongous insect in the picture.

Following Kracauer and questioning this picture how contemporary German society "wants to see itself," this representation implies a distinct, Manichean division into a menacing exterior on one side, operating in an unrestricted capitalist mode, and on the other side, carrying a positive connotation, the national interior marked as its opposite. Disclosing this partition with Kracauer as a desire, as a society's "dream," allows for naming those contradictions that are being made absent thereby – the capitalist constitution of one's own society.

Opposing an antagonistic exterior to the nation makes invisible the opposition of the classes[9] in favor of the visual presence of a hostile collective. Seemingly, the audience represented here includes "the man on the street," members of the working class, as well. Regarding the constitution of meaning of this picture, the possibility of a resistant productivity of the audience remains unlikely. The iconic power of this picture consists in its potency to include those who

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[9] Letting aside here the question of how appropriate the ideal typical description of classes fits reality.

benefit least from the dominating order, thus, in synthesizing actual clashes of interest in one image. The obstinacy of "the people" that Cultural Studies have stressed has been integrated in the picture already, so that the re-presentation as depiction implies a representation of interests that can be revealed here as being an ostensible representation.

An overemphasis on the openness of a picture – the contingency of the absent – would fail to comprehend how iconic power is generated relationally, just as hypostatizing the ideological closeness of pictures – the determining power of that made present – would. I hope to have shown that, when conducting discourse analyses on visual representations, in order to grasp dominating structures in the connex of pictorial representativeness, discourse and power, an approach that integrates insights from Critical Theory can be useful.

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