



## **B. Business Impact**

# **Iconomy and the Dictature of Images**

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to better define the concept of ikonomy which amalgamates economy with the Greek etymology of image, “ikon”. As images have become channeled, data streams that coagulate here and there in changing formats, ikonomy is based on the fact that visibility has become the condition for the existence of human beings, things, opinions. Through their apparent immateriality, images apparently symbolize the false freedom that characterizes our societies, while facial recognition programs are constantly being developed without our knowledge, from the misappropriation of our photographs and millions of selfies. As if we were the main source of control of ourselves. As we will demonstrate, this complete instrumentalization of the image, constitutes the historical novelty of this smart dictatorship.

Keywords: images, iconicity, visible

## **Ikonomy and the Dictature of Images**

The fact that economics shapes our view of the world is not a new idea, as already stated by Marx. So much so that the categories of neoliberal economics imperturbably permeate the fabric of our existence. Think of concepts such as "health capital" or the famous "credits" that students must obtain. We have become, according to the philosopher and musicologist Peter Szendi, "very high debtors of images" (Szendi, 2020). Concretely, this means that we are constantly being fed images, but that also our eyes tend to incorporate the structure of indebtedness: in other words, each look we have of an image being 'in debt' is in the sense that it is always referring to the next one. This debt that we maintain with regard to images is a major characteristic of what we could call ikonomy, a notion that creates a link between economic and image theories. Ikonomy relates to the condition of images as it appears to us today through this stroboscopic vertigo which organizes our relationship to the world. How can we understand this alliance of image and economy and what does it say about ourselves beyond the mere questions of flow and storage? The industrial, commercial control of images is entirely centered on the idea that they must be totally co-extensible to the discourse that inhabits them because this is how one sells ideas, people and things. Herein comes the opposition between the medium which fixes the image and anchors it in reality, in physical space, and the notion of flow that it addresses. Ikonomy questions images, their structure, their circulation, their materiality, their fluidity and their value. It refers to the idea of a "supermarket of images" (Szendi, 2020) that structures our daily environment. Ikonomy deals with icons, that is to say a specific visual made up of a cultural clichés that tend to impose themselves on the viewer with a bundle of sensitive associations strongly tied together within the presence of a gestalt (Szendi, 2020). When a Christian sees a man crucified with a crown of thorns, he usually does not see two eyes, two thumbs or two knees but the Christ suffering martyrdom. The economy governing the supermarket of images tends to impose itself through the standardization of such cultural stereotypes, progressively imposed by media strategies being deployed on a planetary scale.

### **Are images still visible?**

Images are overwhelming us, flooding us. Knowing that more than 3 billion images circulate on social media every day, means that more than 3 million images will have been exchanged while you have read this paper... But where is the image? The different positions taken regarding images are well known: there are those who note the definitive loss of reality in favor of the infinite chain of simulacra; those who deplore the end of the image at a time when reality perpetually represents itself; those who claim the citizenship of the unrepresentable in the universe of images (Rancière, 2003). The image seems to be nowhere so that what threatens us today is not the image, but its disappearance, its very expulsion. "Some can travel the world and see nothing of it. To come to an understanding, it is necessary not to see too much, but to look closely at what you see" as Giorgio Morandi, one of the greatest Italian painters of the 20th century, once said. That is why it is crucial not to confuse the image with the visible. When an image stands in front of our eyes, it does not necessarily impose itself on the gaze. The visible conceals it, better still, the image has chosen the visible to conceal itself (Mondzain, 2004). The image always imposes a certain economy of absence. Finally, we cannot blame the image for the evils inflicted on us by the dictators of vision. Not everything that is brought to our eyes is, inevitably, an image. Far from it. "What we are given to see often deprives us of an image, I would even say, has no other purpose than to deprive us of it", claims Mondzain. And this is why "those in power, jealous of their power, have always been afraid of the image and it is despotically that they govern the visible to better reduce the free vitality of our imaging faculty." Image, Rancière

reminds us, is not exclusive to the visible, and it is not genetically linked to any specific medium. Just as words can produce images, so the visible can elude the image. Strictly speaking, an image is not a simple reality, it is an operation, a series of relationships between seeing and saying. And this operation lies under a regime of "*imageity*" (Rancière, 2003 and 2004).

## **The dictatorship of visibility**

Why does such a flow of images threaten images? The most recent forms of visibility give the impression of an unprecedented inflation of the iconic flow. Believing that the image is a modern reality which puts us in the presence of an unprecedented phenomenon is a step quickly taken in full naivety. Paradoxically, the iconic streams have never been so threatening to the image. And this is the reason why there have never been so few images. The overflow of visibilities poses a real threat to the fate of the image. The image is a precious good inseparable from what builds humanity, because it is united with speech and thought. What characterizes images today is that they are mostly digital and have become, Szendi tells us, "channeled data streams that coagulate here and there in changing formats". If one remembers the Priest in Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* who states "This will kill that", sadly observing the towers of his cathedral, understanding that with the advent of the printing press, the book will dethrone the cathedral and the alphabet will kill off the pictures, in that the book will distract people from their most important values by promoting the free interpretation of the Scriptures. Based around this Hugo quote, Annie Le Brun and Juri Armanda (2021) decipher and analyze the contemporary cult of the image as well as the mechanism of the algorithms which select content for us according to one principle: we love what looks like us. The "dictatorship of visibility" evokes this state of the human condition characterized by the fact that visibility has become the condition of existence of human beings, things and opinions. As if the value of a person only depends on the number of its subscribers, "views", "followers" and "likes". Hence the idea that "image/money equivalence has become commonplace". The paradox is that it is precisely the immateriality of images that allows us to design such tyrannical significance. Tyrannical, because beyond the apparent freedom that everyone has to produce images, eye tracking and spy pixel technologies are developing, as if the images we circulate allow others to follow and control us. From this denial comes the false freedom that characterizes our societies, while at the same time facial recognition programs are constantly being developed without our knowledge, misappropriating our photographs and millions of selfies that freely circulate. We are responsible for feeding the control of ourselves. This total instrumentalization of the image constitutes the historical innovation of this "smart" dictatorship. The problem of the image is no longer that of reproducibility but that of distribution. What matters now is no longer the image represented but its ability to be disseminated, quantified by viewings. Thus, the surge of images paradoxically refers to a contempt for the image. It seems it doesn't matter what it shows as long it shows itself. Wouldn't it be true to state that this is the reason why all selfies look the same? As if there was a detachment of the image from its content. Within this visibility regime, everyone becomes both the producer and the consumer of the images exchanged. The novelty of this phenomenon seems to be the total instrumentalization of the image by technique and capital combined, that is to say its definitive reduction to numbers, generating an image without imagination as Le Brun and Armanda (2021) argue. The image is no longer shown, it instead shows itself. This enhancement of visibility enslaves us by seducing us with ever more technology. Hence the proclaimed gratuitousness that we pay at a high price for our voluntary surveillance. The gaze of billions of Internet users is governed more and more by the statistical measure of our most thoughtless, gregarious desires, in order to lock us in a world governed by the one principle which appears to be similarity. The *raison d'être* of the image now seems to be beyond itself since what ultimately matters is the number of times it will be viewed. Any image is doomed to be distributed in order to become a source of profit at the same time

as a means of control. It is in this sense that visibility is the equivalent of a currency. This degradation of the image in commercial space is nothing but a murder of the imagination. The violence done to our imagination by the mess of visibilities is produced by images which deprive the viewer of his critical sense, of his ability to put them into perspective for reasoned reflection.

## **Conclusion: Semiotic urgency**

This potential murder of imagination requires our vigilance as consumers of images but also as educators. If the image is what we see together, it can only be constructed in the signs shared by those who see, and these signs are those of speech, signs of language. We can only universalize the act of seeing an image together if we talk about it. So, the image is what is built through a common visible, constructed speech.

This is the reason why the study of meaning is an absolute necessity for all of us since we are all confronted with images. This is why semiotics, which focusses on the construction of meaning should be a mandatory discipline for all students. As a generic skill that every human being needs to develop to overcome the visible and reach the true image. This is a cultural necessity in our life to extract shared meanings from images. Education appears to be a way to achieve this semiotic shift; semiotics remains within the domain of history and other social sciences, forming human beings as citizens.

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