

Epilogue

Images Talking Through Time and Space

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The communicative power of images is extraordinary and exceeds our expectations. This volume has illustrated a vast range of methods and fields of experience through which images can talk and be irreplaceable forms of expression. Every time we delve into the study of visual art, iconography, and writing, we keep discovering the deepest roots of our visual perception and graphic communication. Since the Upper Paleolithic, we have been drawing and coloring images, carving figures, and producing symbols, but for many years these prehistoric artifacts have been underestimated and treated as mere cultural manifestations. Nowadays, thanks to recent research in the field of cognitive studies, we have come to terms with how influential the mental impression of images is in our cognition and communication, after centuries of using of glottographic writing made of letters and logograms, which were thought to be substantially divorced from artistic forms and figurative depictions. Writing was first invented in Mesopotamia and Egypt toward the end of the 4th millennium BC and later in other world regions, and has been used to facilitate communication in highly interconnected and large societies. In our social awareness of today, writing has become the predominant asset in graphic communication relegating other visual forms to lesser importance. This volume has brought our attention to reevaluating the importance of images and the prominent role they play as multimodal vehicles of communication and true wire between writing, human beings, and their visual perception.

Images as Bodies

We often make the mistake of conceiving images as detached representations and products of the mind rather than as entities that are part of the human world. Pictures, drawings, and figurative artifacts are not just an extension of our mental projections. This volume has demonstrated how images are so intertwined with us that the physical body itself can be a figure. The practice of drawing tattoos or coloring the skin with

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the intention of embodying a meaningful image is a cross-cultural feature observed in many living hunter-gatherer societies. Massimo Leone introduced us to this often-ignored practice of using the body as vehicle to express personal identity and a form of writing through Māori facial tattoos. Having an indelible drawing on their skin allows the Māori, an indigenous group of Polynesia, to gain a distinctive but nonetheless mutable mark through which individuals can express themselves. The image attached onto the skin is a true signature that not only identifies the individual but enables the subjects to emerge from their group and their cultural environment. The image in this case is literally embodied and clearly visible inasmuch as it leaves a legible mark that everyone can readily acknowledge and recognize.

The body as a medium to express identities has also been explored by Adriana Iezzi, who examined it through the performance of the artist Zhang Huan. In this performance, the artist turns his face into a canvas for calligraphers to write on. This art, which is rooted in the ancient Chinese practice of physiognomy, involves interpreting personality and cultural or political connotations, and predicting the future based on facial traits. As the inscriptions accumulate, Zhang's face is completely covered in black ink, symbolically erasing his identity. As Iezzi highlights, the meaning of this performance is to draw attention to individual personalities overshadowed by their cultural heritage, which lays down unbearable layers of habituated customs. The case of Chinese physiognomy is another example of how embodied images touch on the key aspect of communal involvement of the self.

'Readable' marks and bodily experiences have also been noted in Paleolithic contexts. Although the interpretation of supposedly symbolic incisions is notably difficult and problematic, as highlighted by Enza Elena Spinapolice at the beginning of this book, image-making processes are surely significant at the individual and social level, especially if the body itself is involved and the evidence is archaeologically traceable, such as the use of colorant. Evidence of ochre in anthropogenic contexts appeared in Africa since the Paleolithic and, although body painting with ochre might have been used for more concrete purposes, such as insect repellent, sunscreen, or antiseptic, it can be equally seen as an expression of community and personal belief and identity. Therefore, colorants and their properties take on a value precisely in relation to their embedded significances and affordances. In this regard, Spinapolice invites us to review our terminology when analyzing ancient artefacts and their potential meanings, paying attention to prefixed concepts such as 'utilitarian' and 'non-functional'. Dichotomies such as these lead us away from a more appropriate understanding of image-making in prehistory. Rather than attempting to trace an evolutionary line of cultural development up to modern behavior through

the discussion of so-called symbolic objects, it is time to rethink our development from the Paleolithic in their archaeological context, looking at the manufacturing processes involved in the making of incised stones, seashell engravings, and the use of colorant, their potential individual influences, and social implications.

Face-to-face communication has been part of human methods of communication since deep history. Catching eyesight and interpreting facial expressions and body language have been essential characteristics of our species that have enabled synergistic actions and successful group cooperation. The visual reproduction of these body expressions, which increasingly appear as of the Neolithic period (ca. 9700–6000 BC) in south-west Asia, is promptly examined in the chapter by Marion Benz and Joachim Bauer. The extraordinary development of anthropomorphic images reflects the transformation of community consciousness regarding human power and control over natural forces. The emblematic example of domestication clearly indicates this pivotal development in human consciousness that is visible through images as bodies, the production of figurative objects that can reflect the changing human-environment relationship, and the potential effects of human agency toward nature. Neurobiological studies reported by Benz and Bauer have pointed out the key aspect that the variety of bodily expressions provides the range of emotional states that from early childhood we ought to learn, to recognize, and to reproduce in our communicative endeavors. The production of these images can therefore allow the group to strive, to grasp the natural forces at play, and to fully express human potential.

Images as a Source of Emotions and Vital Experiences

Fear, awe, exaltation, and other emotions are best represented with images like faces or naturalistic depictions, all the way to the use of emojis today. If it is true that long, highly detailed written descriptions can convey complex feelings, the immediacy of an image can reach the deepest realms of our perception, touching our emotions, which are ultimately the result of our cognitive attention. The Neolithic imagery from Upper Mesopotamia that Benz and Bauer relate can be framed with reference to mental affordances in which figurative artifacts are media devoted to the identification and embodiment of those emotions. Here, the learning process of what a community member can or cannot do and what is good/wrong, as well as their political involvement, are founded on those figurative expressions that are conveyors of vital matters in both prehistoric and modern societies. Images can be standardized so they can be manipulated and juxtaposed to different contexts. Benz and Bauer analyse a wide range of early Neolithic images of Northern Mesopotamia and reflect on the evidence of emerging

standardization, monumentality and ubiquity of figurative representations, arguing that the changing mediality is intended to prime emotional effects and create lasting collective and embodied memories, in order to strengthen group identities and a sense of belonging. Images, especially in illiterate communities, are not only the direct linking of ideas, they can be compressed to blend a multitude of concepts and, as Benz and Bauer suggest, to trigger memories influence perception, and vital social narratives.

The impact that images have on our social lives and culture is undeniable, and this influence is further revealed by the Chinese calligraphy, as illustrated by Adriana Iezzi. Chinese characters, originally icons of real entities can be artistically reproduced in varied forms that are recognized as calligraphy. This very ancient artistic production is not a simple expression of aesthetically appealing drawings but is a 'reflection of the flowing energy', an arcane belief in forces and agency influencing human essence. Not surprisingly, Chinese traditions of calligraphic practices have established conventional practices and canons to encapsulate and channel the flowing energy, which is something that writing with its linearity and rigid character fails to hold. As explained by Iezzi, calligraphy has also been involved in the social sphere and applied as an instrument for political reasons in recent times. Integrated with other forms of art, such as music and dance, the performance of calligraphy aims to influence community behavior, catching viewers' attention toward the essence of good, beauty, justice, and harmony that each community member should embrace, and to fight against those attitudes that aim to suppress the flowing energy and freedom. Images, hence, possess agency, rhythms, and forces capable of influencing the human dimension and are open to be used as tools to express inner emotions and to empower the self.

The perception of the energy flow transmitted by the images can also be recognized in the use of color coding, through letter shapes and time intervals of the figures. These aspects are outlined by Roma Chatteriji, who describes the image-making traditions in Indian comics. The narrative of Vikram Roy and his life journey as an Aghori, which Chatteriji presents, is revealed through a set of arranged visual rhetorical devices and drawing compositions in a way that effectively conveys the spiritual message and deep meaning that characterizes much of Indian popular culture. Variations in letter shape and size determine the pitch and emotion of the topics represented. The degree of emotional depth is also expressed by the colors along with the panel-to-panel transition, which sets the pace of the storyline. Finally, the omission of parts and the concealment of things from the visual frame is a further technique aimed at projecting the invisible into the readers' minds to a deeper and different meaning. It is through these compositional rules that readers can comprehend the vital matters at play and perceive them in their entirety.

Images at the Core of Writing

All primary scripts incorporate an iconographic substratum in their signs, and secondary adaptations of primary scripts preserve a residual iconicity. Their visual projections, arrangements, and distributions are reflected in the way ancient and modern societies approach graphic media, including writing. There is no doubt that images interact with writing and vice versa. However, assessing the reflexivity and shared influences of these vehicles of communication is rather complicated. Unraveling the intertwined relations between glottographic systems and images is what the authors in this volume have brought to the fore. The chapter by Kathryn Kelley on the invention of writing in Iran reinforces the often-neglected role that iconography plays in the inception of the first scripts in the Near East. For many years the origins of writing have been associated with administrative practices and urbanism in which scribes and rulers adopted arbitrary signs to sustain the management of the economy and state affairs. Within this sociocultural structure, theories of script formation were based on social activities and developments in which counting and bookkeeping (rather than iconicity and visual perception) were the major crucial points in the processes involved in the emergence of writing.

The contributions presented in [Part II](#) point in a different direction. Images and visual perception of real things assume a pivotal function in both the invention and development of scripts. Logograms and indexical marks develop from our visual perception of images, which is sometimes difficult to trace in the script, due to our limited knowledge of code-making and sign compression. This means that signs, indeed, are subject to phases of modification and stylization as a result of decades or centuries of use of those graphic symbols and other ancient cultural practices of which we are unaware. The case of proto-Elamite writing discussed by Kelley is illustrative, showing the extent to which highly schematic forms in that script may have underlying visual referents in real-world objects and also in the recreation of images from other traditions. The integration of iconographic shapes from other domains of visual culture into texts is an area of research that has yet to be thoroughly investigated. From this perspective, there is reason to believe that the adoption of graphic signs was not dictated solely by short-lived circumstances (such as the pressuring need for bureaucracy in the early urban centers), but rather by established traditions of image-making, including the imprinting of glyphic images through seals, as the core of the subsequent development of graphic media.

Further evidence of images at the core of scripts is shown by the use of emblem glyphs in the Classic Maya tradition to delineate political affiliation. Mallory E. Matsumoto describes how diverse groups of the Maya lowlands associate their affiliation through integrating and consistently

arranging given icons in hieroglyphic writing. Manifesting public belonging through writing, which finds similar parallels in other regions of the world, allows community members to not only express their thoughts verbally but at the same time display their identity and cultural practices. The key aspect emerging here is that political identity is immediately conveyed through easily recognizable compositions where writing and images follow systematic models and are harmonically integrated. The evidence provided by Mallory confirms the special function that images assume within an already-formed writing system.

Images Beyond Language and the Fear of Uncertainty

The awareness that images can say something that cannot be explained in words or are not in need of verbal support is well-attested, and this can be observed through artistic outputs such as Chinese calligraphy and prehistoric iconography. However, the ability to overcome language has often been felt more as a danger than an opportunity. Many of the issues related to the image beyond language can be framed within the countless modes of communicative application in which images are placed. The case of the 'other writing' in the '*Ominous Hieroglyphics*' presented by Christopher Pinney recalls the long debate about the relationship between visual characters and writing in 19th-century Britain. At the dawn of the discovery of the Rosetta Stone and the explosion of interest in hieroglyphics and their enigmatic significance, *Raphael's Prophetic Messenger*, discussed by Pinney, offers a perfect example of how images and writing not only merge effectively but also delineate the historical context of the debate in Western thought on the role of images that has inevitably influenced the way we think today. The irreplaceable ability to express thoughts that transcend language is obtained by connecting diverse sources of knowledge through figures, letters, and objects and blending them into a multifunctional image. However, the puns, mystical figures, and obscure enigmatic prophecies that appear portrayed in the almanacs are perceived as 'false, barbarous'. The anxieties about ambiguity can be connected to the unconscious concern about the uncertainty that images can convey. It is the fear of the *pharmakon* and the multivalent semiotic contribution that images can convey, which is something that writing does not contemplate. This has led our consciousness to rely on the less ambiguous system of writing at the expense of figurative depictions as a vehicle for multimodal communication.

Viewed from this perspective, it seems that our visual communication has gradually moved away from using images as communication models due to concerns about uncertainty in message transmission, of being afraid that pictorial depictions can irreversibly compromise the vital meanings

and cultural traditions we meant to pass on. Drawing from the false belief that writing can always transmit exact information without equivocation, thinkers of the Enlightenment have relegated the functional aspects of images and most importantly classified image-writing as problematic or vague. This has influenced our point of view of image-making, inevitably dissecting and distancing graphic media from the visual backdrop and signification that images can feed into.

The passage of acquiring an unambiguous system of signification is picked up by Claudio Paolucci, who discusses the adoption of writing from a semiotic point of view. He draws our attention to the key shift from symbol to writing, the step from expressive to denotative sign that, through the words of Lambros Malafouris, can be conceived as a transition from enaction to representation. Paolucci emphasizes this phenomenon as a loss, a marked distance from the object and its material reference to turn into a translated sign reproduction in which the relationship between the entities (semiotic and material) is maintained but their engagement is eliminated. The meaning obtained through bodily expressions and active engagement with materials can be achieved feasibly through images. As soon as denotative signs emerge, the communicative relations are filtered through diagrammatic processes – namely, constructing forms of relations among heterogeneous elements – in which the iconographic substrate of the sign and its rich background of meanings beyond language are stifled.

Talking Images, Anytime and Anywhere

In conclusion, we can emphasize that images are indeed multimodal message-conveyors and useful instruments in human communication that are sometime not fully appreciated or undervalued. The authors of this book illustrate different aspects of image-making, each highlighting the direct connection between visual culture and the cognitive architecture to which images are hinged to. Images as multimodal vehicles of communication can be well-integrated into other systems of human sensory dimensions, including taste, smell, and conceptual domains, such as metaphorical bridging, as outlined in the case studies provided in this volume. At different levels of human realms, images can speak and immediately imprint meanings by overcoming the limits of time and space and transcending the cultural structures that seek to filter or constrain their communicative capacity.

Being so interconnected to our perceptual world, images are everywhere as visible forms that our eyes and imagination can foresee. We have played with images, we have created worlds and cultures through images. We have done so in the past, and we will continue to do so in the future. Images are ready, as ever, to be used as effective conveyors and a clear

reflection of ourselves and our cultural environment that is in constant evolution. Visual culture has played a crucial role in providing the backbone of our cognitive support for navigating increasing complex social relations. As a limited organ, the brain finds external images a reliable and inexhaustible aid not only in making sense of its surroundings but also in successfully navigating its way through the entanglements of human-things relationships that, as Ian Hodder would say, unquestionably bind us to the material world. Images are representations that enable us to develop our cognitive potential; they are solid multimodal communicative tools and, like writing, they greatly facilitate our everyday verbal expression and memory.