

Chapter 11

Popular Culture and Iconology: Reading Today's Icons as Works of Art

Pınar Aslan

Bursa Technical University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This chapter intends to take a look at the concept of iconology with a focus on how it evolved into today's iconicity within the framework of cultural studies, media studies, and women's studies. The relation of icons to popularity and popular culture is paid special attention since icons are the best symbols of the zeitgeist of the era they belong to. The main theory of the literature study is taken from art history, that is Erwin Panofsky's study of iconology, and it is implemented into popular culture which can be summarized as a process of reading contemporary icons as works of art.

INTRODUCTION

Icons, a key term in art history, have been present in our lives since the early stages of history. Marshall McLuhan, one of the most important names in mass media studies, argues that the iconic age is upon us now (1964: 167). But why does McLuhan think that our age itself is iconic? Is it possible to say that icons, which we would only see in paintings and churches in medieval times, are everywhere now? That they are waiting to be noticed, perceived, and even acted upon? Ineed, it is clear that we are surrounded by meaningful images and icons and that we are to live and get along with them, which makes this current age a complicated period. As the iconic age is very present, all-over, and beyond us, this study aims to find out how we have come to this point within the framework of cultural studies and women's studies.

Within this age, there are so many sources of knowledge from various disciplines that extensive research most likely needs to be conducted in order to unify some of these theories under an umbrella-like study. An interdisciplinary approach could result in new and important theories since they are connected and many of the social sciences have a lot in common. Lynn Spigel explains how different branches of social sciences can become united in today's world:

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Varied disciplinary interests are beginning to form an interrelated project... Even if the fields still have different research protocols and different theoretical traditions, recent exchanges between disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have been extremely productive because the transfer of ideas has resulted in greater knowledge of how different industries and social institutions (such as media or housing) interact with one another and collectively affect people. (2001: 11)

In the quote above, recent changes in humanities and social sciences are emphasized as they have opened up new horizons and resulted in inspiring studies. As such, this is the crossroads where I would like to situate iconology. Originating from art history, iconology has become an essential concept to be able to explain a great deal in sociology as well. For example, cultural and social changes in communication and society have a lot to do with icons and iconology. Today, the word icon would make many people think about Madonna, the singer, although it is also directly related to the Virgin Mary since Madonna is also a representation of Mary. In fact, this is probably one of the main reasons why the singer whose original name is Madonna Louise Ciccone was given this stage name in the first place. The question to ask here is however, why do we not remember the artistic reference anymore and think about the cultural one directly? How has the word “icon” become more popular in culture than in art history, and how has it changed throughout the process?

The word “iconology” is a compound term made up of *icon* (image, representation in Greek) and *logos* (speech, reason). In other words, iconology is the language of images, it is the reasoning of representation. Despite the fact that this term has changed a great deal throughout history, there still remain some essential features. One of the primary meanings of the word icon still has to do with works of art that are generally carved out of wood or a similar material and painted in colourful styles. This is a tradition that derives from Greek and Russian Orthodox religions. However, the meaning of the term icon has also evolved a great deal. For example, Hans Belting explains the meaning of today’s iconology and gives a brief explanation of why the art theory side of the term is rather ignored today: “In a kind of visual practice of iconology, artists abolish the received distinction between image theory and art theory, the latter being a noble subcategory of the former. A critical iconology today is an urgent need, because our society is exposed to the power of the mass media in an unprecedented way” (2005: 303). The distinction is no longer taken into account because the term has become rather practical and widely used. However, a critical iconology could definitely help us understand icons, the endless messages they are sending, and the way we are receiving and processing these messages in this iconic age. Since the term has become widely used and has started to lose its foundation, there is an urgent need to go to the source and trace its roots.

This study intends to take a look at the concept of iconology with a focus on how it has evolved into today’s iconicity. The relation of icons to popularity and popular culture is paid special attention since icons are the best symbols of the *zeitgeist* of the era they belong to. The main theory of the literature study is taken from art history, that is Erwin Panofsky’s study of iconology (1939) and how it is implemented into popular culture which can be summarized as a process of reading contemporary icons as works of art. The main objective is to find out more about the process which started with religious iconicity and ended up as popular iconicity.

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