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Paul Ricoeur, visual hermeneutics and political science: an 'incompatible relation'?

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Paul Ricoeur, visual hermeneutics and political science: an 'incompatible relation'?

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Abstract: *As a response to calls for political research to do more than refer to visuals and for visual research to focus on the political, this paper discusses a Ricoeurian narrative-communicative action approach to the construction of political space applied to images, even though, until today, very little attention has been given to Ricoeur's conception of the relationship between hermeneutics and visual theory. An updated reworking of Paul Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics offers a better basis for reconstructing visual (political) studies by sharpening the focus on the ideas of embodied imaginary and iconic augmentation. Ricoeur offers an explicit connection to visual political studies in the direction of pointing out the ways in which images, scenes, and narratives attempt to convey ideology, balancing a hermeneutics of suspicion with a hermeneutics of faith, illustrating the aporias, the opening and closing of possibilities from iconic image to ideograph and identity.*

Keywords: Ricoeur, visual political science, hermeneutics, narrativity, imagination

Introduction

What can images say? As one examines Paul Gauguin's painting *D'où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous* (1897)¹, the question that make up the artwork's title – 'Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?' – invite the viewer to contemplate the meaning of life with regard to the symbols Gauguin has left for us. In other words, the answer to the question 'where do we want to go?' presupposes the question 'where are we going to?', which is based, in its turn, on a certain answer to the question 'where are we from?'. On an epistemological level, a much more promising approach is that which focuses first of the questions of 'what' is remembered and only thereafter turns to the question 'who'. The question of 'what' we remember is directly associated to that of 'how' we remember. To remember can be to 'have' memories or to look for memories (Bottici 2012). On 'looking' at pictures we are engaged in an imaginative narrative construction contemplating a famous Ricoeur phrase: "Reading introduces me to imaginative variations of the ego. The metamorphosis of the world in play is also the playful metamorphosis of the ego." (Ricoeur 1991a, p. 301).²

Connecting Paul Gauguin's visual narrative to Ricoeurian ideas of 'embodied imaginary' (Ricoeur 1991a, 1992, 2000 among others) means iconic consciousness occurs when an aesthetically shaped materiality signifies social value. To politologize the visual through the 'rhetorics of the

image' as a cultural, politically-inspired concept of visual hermeneutics, our research strategy – far from a 'quantitative' content analysis – aims at analyzing how its generic codes, positioning of viewers, dominant images, discourses and its formal-aesthetic elements all embody certain political and ideological positions and have political effects. We may say pictures are not empty signifiers and may be containers carrying whole sets of 'transcriptions' about the ultimate social, political, economic, or legal impact that these images have at various historical junctures. Political pictures, either as 'icons' or as 'key images', reflect social knowledge and dominant ideologies; they shape understanding of specific events and periods; they influence potential action by modeling relationships between civic actors; they provide figural resources for subsequent communicative action and they provide resources for thought and feeling necessary to constitute people as citizens and motivate their identification with, and participation in, specific forms of collective life.

By giving a narrative texture in the first part, I situate Ricoeur's theory of iconicity a better basis for reconstructing *visual (political) studies*. Next I will focus on the issues of imagination, ideology, memory and narrative identity, which I believe radicalize his political thought and permits us to integrate it in the context of 'visual political analysis'. Finally, I proceed to a last comment (instead of a conclusion remark), discussing briefly his contribution to a *visual political science* project.³

1. Why Paul Ricoeur?

This paper underlines the importance of political imagery and the symbolic level of politics for the perception of political identities. Political communication obviously draws from the repository of political memory, political myths and the history of political ideas as well as from popular culture and associations with everyday life in order to load images with meaning. In other words, political pictures never come without political imagination. An updated reworking on Paul Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics offers a better basis for reconstructing cultural (political) theory, by sharpening rather than abandoning the focus on interplays between meaning and materiality, instead of substituting the former with the latter. His political philosophy is to provide a framework for the interpretation, analysis and criticism of social action and institutions. This framework will be capable to identifying ideological formations and distorted communication that prevent us from living well together in just society by highlighting the moral and political character of our decisions, actions and institutions in the name of democracy, justice and community. His political philosophy is designed to steer a delicate path between legitimate and illegitimate power and authority (Kaplan 2003, p. 2).

It is therefore essential in political iconography to draw the attention to connections between currently circulating images and antecedent imagery stored in an iconic memory. Furthermore, adopting ideas from hermeneutics would reframe cultural studies as an attempt to disclose the meanings of visual forms in order to interpret and explain their functions in human life-worlds (Hill and Helmers 2004, Heywood and Sandywell 2012). There is also another way of talking about the issues outlined below, the basic features of which are addressed *inter alia* in the assumption of *the visual construction of political reality*.⁴ Until recently, the strong programs in contemporary cultural sociology have followed Ricoeur's philosophical demonstration that meaningful actions can be considered as texts, exploring codes and narratives, metaphors, meta-themes, values, and rituals (Alexander, Giesen and Mast 2006). A good starting point for further discussion is in Jeffrey Alexander's model of 'iconic experience', where he conceptualizes the interaction of a visual object and recipient as an immersion into aesthetic forms, as a movement from the iconic surface to moral depth (Alexander, Giesen and Bartmanski 2012). Iconic power depends on the seamless intertwining of surface aesthetic and depth meaning, where an actor experiences sensuous surface and understands discursive meaning at the same time.

Ricoeur's approach is an important contribution to political theory as a narrative-hermeneutic approach to the construction of political space applied to images. Ricoeur's work is not only about semiological challenges and epistemology, but significantly points to something beyond the text. He calls this the "matter of the text" (Ricoeur 1981, p. 11). The ultimate horizon of his work is the horizon of being – a land that is promised but never occupied. The relation between text and being is constituted by the fact that the world of being is not merely represented by the text, but in fact disclosed by the text. To connect events and actions over time in a manner that reveals their significance in relation to each other, to their contexts, and to a valued endpoint, is to employ the transformational effect of plot.⁵

2. Paul Ricoeur and image representation

2.1 Paul Ricoeur on narrative and ideology

Ricoeur's philosophy is not so much a 'philosophy of language' as a 'philosophy through language' (Scott 2010). This will be shown as the discussion moves from a theory of meaning to a theory of action. Ricoeur calls this action 'symbolically mediated'. Human experience "in its profound temporal dimension, never ceases to be shaped by narrative" (Ricoeur 1992a, p. 7). Narrative in a sense arises from lived experience and affects what is taken to be lived experience. My narrative is a co-constructed interpretation. It is always a metaphor of the real, a representation, and it always

involves an imaginative process of configuration, "an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience" (Ricoeur 1992a, p. 162). Narrative identity is a constantly developing story, a representation that arises in part from distancing, and from a drawing on the pre-interpreted elements of social life that can be reconfigured into new symbolic forms (Khan, 2006).⁶

Alexis Itao questions in what sense is reflection critical or a critique? (Itao 2010). Ricoeur explains: "Reflection is a critique in the sense that the cogito can be recovered only by the detour of a decipherment of the documents of its life" (Ricoeur 1974, p. 105). By all accounts then, dispossession denotes a critical moment in reflection, "the critique of the false cogito, the deconstruction of the ego ideals which form a screen between the ego and myself" (Ibid. p. 244). This critical moment points to another: the critical moment of "the recovery of meaning" (Ibid. p. 270). For Ricoeur, self-understanding must involve distancing and the critique of ideology – this is necessary in order to form for self-understanding by the matter of the text and not, as Ricoeur puts it, by the prejudices of the reader.⁷

2.2 Ricoeur on memory and imagination

In the introduction to his magisterial work *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Ricoeur states that he continues "to be troubled by the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory – and of forgetting" (p. xv). This leaves us with the following questions regarding memory and imagination: firstly, the object which is represented no longer exists, but we possess a representation thereof in the present. Where and what is the original deictic form that is represented? Can the original image be recovered? Secondly, what relation exists between the *eikōn* and the original image/mark?

'Trace' is the concept used to refer to the relation between the *eikōn* and the (original) mark. Ricoeur sets out three major uses of this concept: traces that are written on a material support, traces as affection-impression in the soul, and traces as corporeal, cerebral and cortical imprints. He hereby emphasizes the temporal aspect of the phenomena of memory. Memory is not only related to people, places, and things, but it entails the notions of before and after, earlier and later. It is exactly the notion of temporality in Aristotle's thinking about memory that "assures the distinction in principle between memory and imagination" (Ricoeur 2004, p. 18). Aristotle distinguishes between terms *mnēmē* and *anamnēsis* in his study on the phenomenon of memory to illuminate the problematic of the entanglement of memory and imagination. *Mnēmē* refers to a memory that arises spontaneously (simple evocation), while *anamnēsis* is the active searching of

memory (the effort to recall). Ricoeur is of the opinion “that we have no other resource, concerning our reference to the past, except memory itself (...) we have nothing better than memory to signify that something has taken place, has occurred, has happened before we declare that we remember it” (Ibid. p. 21). The issue of the entanglement of memory and imagination can be summarized as follows: Is a memory a sort of image, and if so, what sort? And how could the interconnectedness between images and memories can be explained?

As Charles Reagan (2005, p. 310) explains, “the object of the representation no longer exists, but the representation is in the present”. In other words, the thing that we remember is long gone, what we have is the memory of it. The important point, however, is that the thing that we remember and our memory of it are not the same thing. The one is a representation of the other. Flowing from this problematic of the representation of an absent thing is the age-old entanglement of memory and imagination. Our memory, which is the representation of the absent thing, is portrayed in the form of an image. It is not the real thing, but the image that the mind creates. How do we distinguish memory from imagination then? Our imagination is nothing else than images created by the mind. We may argue that memory pertains to the ‘world of experience’ and imagination to the ‘world of fantasy’, but this does not solve the problem whatsoever. If an image/(re)presentation is all we have, the question is how we can discern whether this image is an image from the ‘world of experience’ or an image from the ‘world of fantasy’. When we recall a memory, we recall it in the form of an image, yet when we imagine a fantasy; our imagination is also in the form of an image. But what about pictorial narrativity?

2.3 Ricoeur on pictorial narrativity

Visual rhetoric is a very new area of study within this centuries-old discipline. Fisher's proposal of "narrative as a paradigm for the general communication" (1987, p. 59) was not prompted by an interest in visual communication. Not until 1970 was the first formal call made to include visual images in the study of rhetoric, which until then had been conceived exclusively as verbal discourse. Visual rhetoric constitutes a theoretical perspective that involves the analysis of the symbolic or aspects of visual rhetoric. Rhetorical perspective on visual imagery is a critical-analytical tool that highlights the communicative dimensions of images. The image must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating with the audience. To explicate function or to evaluate visual images requires an understanding of the substantive and stylistic nature of those images. Once an image is created, scholars who adopt a rhetorical perspective on imagery believe it stands independent of its creator's intention (Foss 2005, pp. 141-152).

Ranta (2013) argues that pictorial works can express or imply high-level narrative structures, including basic constituents of wider world views or world schemata, even in static pictures, in which an entire story is compressed into a single scene (sometimes called 'monophase pictures'). A pictorial narrativity (in monophase works) necessitates the representation of a significant, frozen moment that is part of a wider story structure. Visual narrative identity is a constantly developing story, a representation that arises from a drawing on the pre-interpreted elements of social life that can be reconfigured into new symbolic forms. This is the basic principle of visual narration according to Ricoeur, being firstly and mostly an action of re-creation and of re-inscribing the meaning. Visual texts do not reproduce reality; they invent and discover it, hence the term "productive reference". Visual imagery and imaging are celebrated for their generative capacity to distill and increase reality and this power comes from the synthesis of presentation and representation. These definitions include and delineate between perceived and mental images (images in the brain or mind) and exteriorized images.

As Ricoeur contends in his theory of imagination, all mental images are conceptual; they do not copy reality (Ricoeur 1991a). He calls the mechanisms of metaphor "language-like". In doing this, he removes metaphor from language and puts it in the realm of general mental processing, which includes visualization. Ricoeur's notion of iconic augmentation refers to the "power of the image to condense, spell out, and develop reality" (1991, p. 131). Images are not reductive but productive; they add to reality or create reality. Ricoeur sees a continuation of this process when an image is exteriorized or manifested in materials by an artist. To Ricoeur, exteriorization is a critical factor in creating meaning and is the exteriorization of thought in external marks which has encouraged the creation of images (Ibid. p. 131).

The visibility or materiality of an image also gives social function. Ricoeur implies that, just as mental images play a constructive role in shaping, distilling, and transforming thought in the individual mind, art images do the same in the social/cultural realm. He celebrates this in his compelling statement: "When the image is made, it is also able to remake the world" (Ibid. p. 129). Ricoeur's assertion is predicated on the belief that reality lies in how humans perceive it. For him, changing perceptions is changing reality and art or any images that present and catalyze new insights become powerful agents for shaping new realities on a grand scale. From Ricoeur's hermeneutic perspective, meaning emerges in the dialogue between the mind and the image; it is not in the image itself but in the active interpretation of the viewer. From this social, hermeneutical perspective, the artist creates the exteriorized image (through personal process of research) and the viewers continue the research (come to insights and understandings) by mining the images and

connecting them to their own experience. This is the crux of practice-based research: It is a social, participatory, conversational endeavor in learning based on synthetic productive conceptual images that creates new realities. As Ricoeur asserts, this can be transformative. Imaginative insight of the artist is shared and perceptions are changed.⁸

3. Visual political science and new methodological insights

Our reference to the specific painting has not been random. It provides a fruitful chance for political scientists that wish to shed more light to the issue of political power from the point of view of the political dimension of the social imaginary. From this point of view, *visual political science* as a critical “reading” of imagery, on one hand, takes on the role of symbolic mediator and in this ways brings to the forefront the question of the identity of the *social* entities in question. On the other hand, not only ‘as theory of action or as a theory of experience’ but also ‘as a theory of meaning’, *Visual Political Science* shapes the contours of the action and contributes to modeling the identity of the narrative’s different protagonists. I am interested in analyzing visual aspect on individual images as symbolically mediated, politically motivated and culturally situated (Roberge 2011).

Political iconography implies a critical ‘reading’ of imagery and aims at studying the identification, description, and interpretation of the content of images. This point of departure takes an iterative step from spectacle (the power of looking) to narrative (the power of telling). Here is our bridge between a hermeneutics of writing and a hermeneutics of photographing and visualization the political and the social. The ‘said’ of speaking is, Ricoeur contends, the intentional exteriorization of discourse thanks to which the saying, *sage*, wants to become the enunciation, *aus-sage*. For writing, this means the written text. For documentary photographing, this means the visualized narrative. This is the basic principle of narration according to Ricoeur, being firstly and mostly an action of re-creation and of re-inscribing the meaning.⁹

Iconic effect is mediated by ‘hermeneutical power’, the understandings and evaluations offered by independent interpretation. The image becomes a puzzle and ambiguous object, quite similar to ambiguity of the symbol highlighted by Ricoeur in his interpretation of Freud. The puzzling aspects of those icons call for narratives that explain them, and their symbolic over-determination creates a multitude of competing and coexisting interpretations. Images provide multiple meanings and surprising synthesis: a pre-iconographic (paradigmatic level) description of the visual surface and a syntagmatic closure as a picture poses several puzzles, various connotations. Whereas the syntagmatic openness is characterized by structural under-determination or ambiguity, the

paradigmatic openness leads to symbolic over-determination or polysemy (Hill and Helmers 2004, pp. 106-107).

Interpretively, look at the image, as screen, window, and veil, etc., we are trying to see through the surface image to find out what lies behind – to explore, to clarify, to fill in gaps in self-understanding. A second look or closer examination may reveal something beyond the surface, what does not seem readily apparent – appears to take more shape, the ‘lost’ parts become defined, and new elements emerge and cohere, as understandings form and selves are constructed. The act of ‘looking’ may also give a glimpse of secrets, lifting an ‘apparent reality’ to reveal what seemed ‘hidden’ – adding what is missing to complete a picture, seeing through what is opaque, etc. to find ‘new’ personal meanings. Pictures can, in short, stimulate a ‘memorizing’ of people, events and objects and associated emotional and sensual experiences which are placed within contemporary thoughts, feelings and circumstance. As concerns those collective fields – culture and history –, Ricoeur’s analysis focuses on social imagination, which is constantly performing creative works, shaped into two main imaginative endeavours: *ideology* and *utopia*.

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Biography

Nikos Kaplantzis is a Greek political scientist (Ph.D). Whilst working as researcher at the Laboratory of Political Communications, University of Athens, he completed his thesis focused on the construction of political identities through political photography. His recent academic interests seeks to make a focus on the way political images can be understood, methodologically and epistemologically, in political science. He is a member of the Hellenic Political Science Association, International Visual Sociology Association and Ricoeurian Studies. He is also author of 'Photography and Politics' (Ed. Nissos, Athens 2012).

¹ The artwork is hosted on the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/where-do-we-come-from-what-are-we-where-are-we-going-32558>

² Alternative visual paradigms feed into the theoretical schemes of 'cultural pragmatics' (Alexander 2006), 'Habitus' (Bourdieu 1991), 'Discourse practices' (Foucault 1966) and 'Radical Constructionism' (Edelman 1988). Additionally, a visual narrative is re-translated as *symbolic drama, ratification of authority, bio-power, self-fulfilling prophecy*.

³ Although during the 1990s visual political communication became an issue of greater importance in political science, other disciplines, like art history (Bonfait 2003, Warnke and Ziegler 2011), visual history (Merback 2013, Tinkler 2013), visual sociology (Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, Nathansohn and Zuev 2013), visual anthropology (Belting 2011, Baert and Lehmann 2012) or visual studies (Sandywell and Heywood 2012, Rampley and Lenain 2012), still seem to have more competence when it comes to analyzing the power of pictures in public (political) discourse. Of course, *visual political science* is "not a finished method", and it is not a "metascience" (Sachs-Hombach 2006, Hebel 2011, Barnhurst 2012). *Visual political science* describes a transdisciplinary research field by the meaning of 'Politikwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft' ['Political Science as Cultural Science', Hofmann 2004]. A substantial body of work has grown around the visual in political communication scholarship (Cheles and Sponza 2001, Delporte 2006, Drechsel and Leggewie 2010, Paul 2010, Hebel and Wagner, 2011, Diendorfer and Uhl 2014) and an analogous body of literature has emerged around the political in visual communication studies as well (Becker and Ekecrantz 2000, Muller and Knieper 2004/2005, Machin 2013, Matar 2013).

⁴ "The presence in which the representation of the past seems to consist does indeed appear to be that of an image, (...), an image that can be either quasi visual or auditory" (Ricoeur 2004, p. 5).

⁵ Ricoeur sees signification work through a dialectics of event and meaning, where event is the act of signifying, and meaning is its result. He also proposes a dialectical understanding of narrative identity, talking of the interplay between 'idem'-identity or permanent sameness and a processual 'ipse' -identity or selfhood that is always in a dialectical relation to otherness, both to the other outside the self and to the otherness that is 'constitutive of selfhood' as such. Third, concern relates to contexts, including both spatial settings and social worlds of institutions and power structures that frame cultural practices (Fornäs 2012).

⁶ Without going into Ricoeur's complex position and his view of mimesis, it is worth noting that he does not see narrative forms of expression as capable of full ontological mimesis, but rather speaks of the interplay between the experience of living and narrative (Ricoeur 1984). For Ricoeur, it is impossible to completely 'close' the 'gap' between the temporal dimension of lived experience and narrative configuration. Ricoeur seeks to mediate between the two, not 'reduce' the former to the latter (Lewis 2013).

⁷ What ideology interprets and justifies? "A system of authority", Ricoeur said (Ricoeur 1981). Ideology, we may presume, arises precisely in the breach between the request of legitimacy emanating from a system of authority and our response in terms of belief. Ricoeur treats ideology and utopia as derived from a common origin – the symbolic order or "social and cultural imagination" – and both ideological and utopian symbolizations, he says, are "constitutive of social reality". (Ricoeur 1991a, pp. 308-324). As established in *Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology* (1981), both the Gadamerian hermeneutics of pre-understanding and the Habermasian critique of ideology "cross on a common ground: the hermeneutics of finitude, which secures a priori the correlation between the concept of prejudice and that of ideology" (MacKenzie 2012, p. 104).

⁸ According to Brown (2011, pp. 199-224), Ricoeur's analysis on images gives us a fresh understanding of the way in which documentary photographing can be critically understood to operate and how it does so. The reflexive participation of the observer is recognizable in the locutionary manner by which the observation is described and visualised in photographs. Ricoeur calls this the *reference*, a literal description, and in his nomenclature, *mimesis*. He calls the intentional sense of the inscription, *illocutionary*. A message and discourse that reveals aspects, qualities and values of a reality that he categorizes as *mimesis*. He calls the *perlocutionary* the indirect reference, re-describing a reality inaccessible to direct description and categorizes *mimesis*. These different aspects become apparent through the skill (phronesis) with which we photograph and the manner in which the primary and lateral messages that are descriptive, explanatory, affective, sensory. These messages are revealing values that stimulate the imagination and, in their total, make the world one that can be inhabited.

⁹ First, ideology as a meaning-interpretation-text triptych is what reveals and hides reality – through the permanence of symbolism, but also through the constant possibility of manipulation and distortion. Secondly, it is the task of a theory of action – centered on, among other things, the concept of performance – to examine the diverse ways by which the mechanisms of social inclusion-exclusion construct themselves. Thirdly, ideology as an interpretation of the world is involved in the self-understanding of a subject nevertheless capable of keeping a distance from itself and thus somewhat criticizing its illusions.

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