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Imagining the Public
Image policy and its aesthetic foundations in late medieval and early modern Italy

Since the Due- and Trecento, in Italian society images have become an integral part of public action and political discourse through a new power of visualization. They unfold a hitherto unknown presence in assembly halls, palaces and churches, squares and monuments, and develop their performative power in the context of gatherings, rituals or ceremonies. As a novel element of corporate and institutional symbolization, they play a key role in the negotiation of social cohesion and/or distinction goals. My project asks how these images lend imaginary visibility and vivid credibility to the institutional fiction of a politically, religiously or culturally constituted public and at the same time give it the appearance of the factual. Against the backdrop of today's debates on political opinion-making, on publicity control through visual media, on the virulence of fake news and fact-checking, etc., these questions are highly topical and can help to give our current situation a specific historical depth of focus. All the more so when we consider that the democratic commonwealth ideas in the USA and in Europe, especially since the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, have been repeatedly, and often in emphatically identificatory intentions, recurrent on the genesis of a "civic humanism" in the Italian Tre- and Quattrocento, and that, as a consequence, modern societies have often derived their own ideological self-understanding and their public self-legitimation from this historical construct. Here as well as there, in the era of the early capitalist Italian city-states and in our complex, politically and socially globalized, yet increasingly re-nationalist world, public image policy has a central significance that can hardly be overestimated, and that all the more has to be systematically *and* historically explored in its foundations and reasons.

Against this background, these are the focal points and central questions of my project:

1. The public in the pre-modern era:
What is meant by the term "public" in the pre-modern era, and what political, social, but also religious and cultural relevance comes to this question? The project refers here to the lively discussion that has been conducted in recent times with Jürgen Habermas and his influential theory about "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," which, however, was developed on the genesis of the bourgeoisie, emerging since the 18th century under the impression of the Enlightenment. Contrary to this theory, one must assume that in the pre-modern era, and especially in the Italian Tre- and Quattrocento, processes of social identity formation and self-interpretation take place above all in social corporations, religious communities or political institutions, that is to say, in such social configurations that, contrary to Habermas, one can envisage as internal or partial publics. The project wants to ask how

such "partial publics" were produced and negotiated in the main situationally and occasionally, and thus were constituted first and foremost in a communicative space, more precisely: as communicative networks, which are constituted by participation or demarcation, by consensus or distance from one another. The project thus focuses on the model of a differentiated coexistence of different public spheres, which are formed either as value communities or elites, as legislative or executive bodies, or as religiously determined bodies.

2. The aesthetic intrinsic value of images as media of visual communication:

Based on these considerations, the project asks about the function and meaning of images as effective media of nonverbal communication whose imaginative power contributes significantly to the reality-creating power of institutional fictions. Central to this is the question of how these images in certain contexts, be they social, religious or political, cultural, economic or epistemological, visualize certain ideological concepts, aspiration goals and representational intentions not only on the content-iconographic level, but also and precisely on the path of a form-aesthetic production of meaning, and how they thereby give them a validity and effectiveness, which eludes the logic of an exclusively discursive determination. The premise here is that pictorial production of meaning constitutes a basic aesthetic category which, on the one hand, designates the process of representing reality, but on the other hand also produces a genuine visual self-presence, which is not to be expected outside the images. This twofold determination of the image - as representation and presence - is fundamental to the question of political, social or religious communication in and with images, for only in the dialectical mediation of these two modalities can the central meaning and function of images be adequately analyzed and differentiated described.

3. The charisma of pictorial presence and its visual beauty:

Recurring to the more recent Middle Ages and Early Modern Studies, the project assumes that in the late Middle Ages a professional governmental competence, anchored in a rational, legal and bureaucratic administration, has developed and been institutionalized, which in the political context has become a secular counterpart, indeed has become a substitute for the previously divinely legitimated 'supernatural' rule and governance. In consequence, from this increasing functional differentiation of identity-forming ideals of unity and common good ideas from previous ecclesiastical-religious grounding contexts has emerged in a fundamental sense a charismatic vacuum. Against this background, the question arises as to how public images and image programs occupy and fill this new charismatic vacuum, and not only through novel iconographies, but also and especially through media-specific forms of artistic expression and visualization strategies, and seek to fill it, as if compensatory, with a kind of religious or quasi-religious authority of appealing, captivating, even beguiling visual beauty. One central thesis of the project is therefore that a fundamental as well as consequential process of social, political and juridical re-semantization takes place through the novel effect and validity of the aesthetic intrinsic value. In essence, it amounts to nothing less than an evocation of present-day reality as a state of happiness and peaceful, blessed well-being, which, through magnificent and delightful images of a well-shaped polity, manifests the dispositive, one that is evident to all citizens, of social harmony and political prosperity.

The project aims at a work-related and concrete analysis of the images and their aesthetic structures, i.e. the pictorial production of meaning and the aesthetic and historical specificity of this visualization. During the period under consideration (Due-, Tre-, and early Quattrocento), a constellation emerges that seems contradictory at first sight, but which reveals all the more the new political and social dimension of the aesthetic value in and with images. Because on the one hand it turns out that the politically, ideologically, legally and institutionally so diverse representation goals are all based on abstract, non-descriptive, unimaginative concepts of value, patterns of action and guiding principles, while on the other hand we face the profound historical fact that the painted picture in Italy since the time around 1300 increasingly established itself as a mimetic representation, as a vivid illustration and empirically based representation of reality. How do the pictures and picture programs unfold abstract political and governmental arguments under the aspect of mimetic figurations? How do they prove this with the impression of evidence in the sense of undoubted conciseness and vividness? One thesis of the project is that a topical inventory of pictorial patterns, iconographic codes, and image-text relations is transformed by a growing potential of fictionalization and poietic charging of said representation aims, thus creating a novel hermeneutics of pictorial representation, which meets an aesthetic and at the same time a reality-meaning claim. The main focus of the concrete work analysis will be on the Italian Due- and Trecento and continue into the Quattrocento. In addition to the prominent picture programs (Siena, Palazzo Pubblico, Pisa, Campo Santo, San Gimignano, Palazzo Comunale, Padua, Palazzo della Ragione, Florence, Spanish Chapel, etc.), also less well-known (Bergamo, Aula della Curia, Asciano, Palazzo Comunale, etc.) or fragmentarily preserved or only documented complexes (Florence, Palazzo del Podestà, Rome, picture programs of Cola di Rienzo, Venice, Doge's Palace, Sala Maggiore, etc.) should be analyzed in a comprehensive systematization.

The notion of charisma and its aesthetic twist seems particularly promising for the interest of the project, since - following Max Weber and the continuation of his theory through recent cultural-sociological perspectives - it is understood as a manifestation of extraordinary, unaccustomed and incomparable notions, as a kind of promise of redemption from everyday human life, from social conditions and from the associated practical uncertainties. Within the historical framework addressed here, the notion of charisma thus refers to the socio-structural dimension of the aesthetic, which has to be understood in its cultural meaning: the aesthetic as a medium and agent of a dynamics of symbolic attribution that conveys or reformulates religious – and at the same time ideological and political – values.