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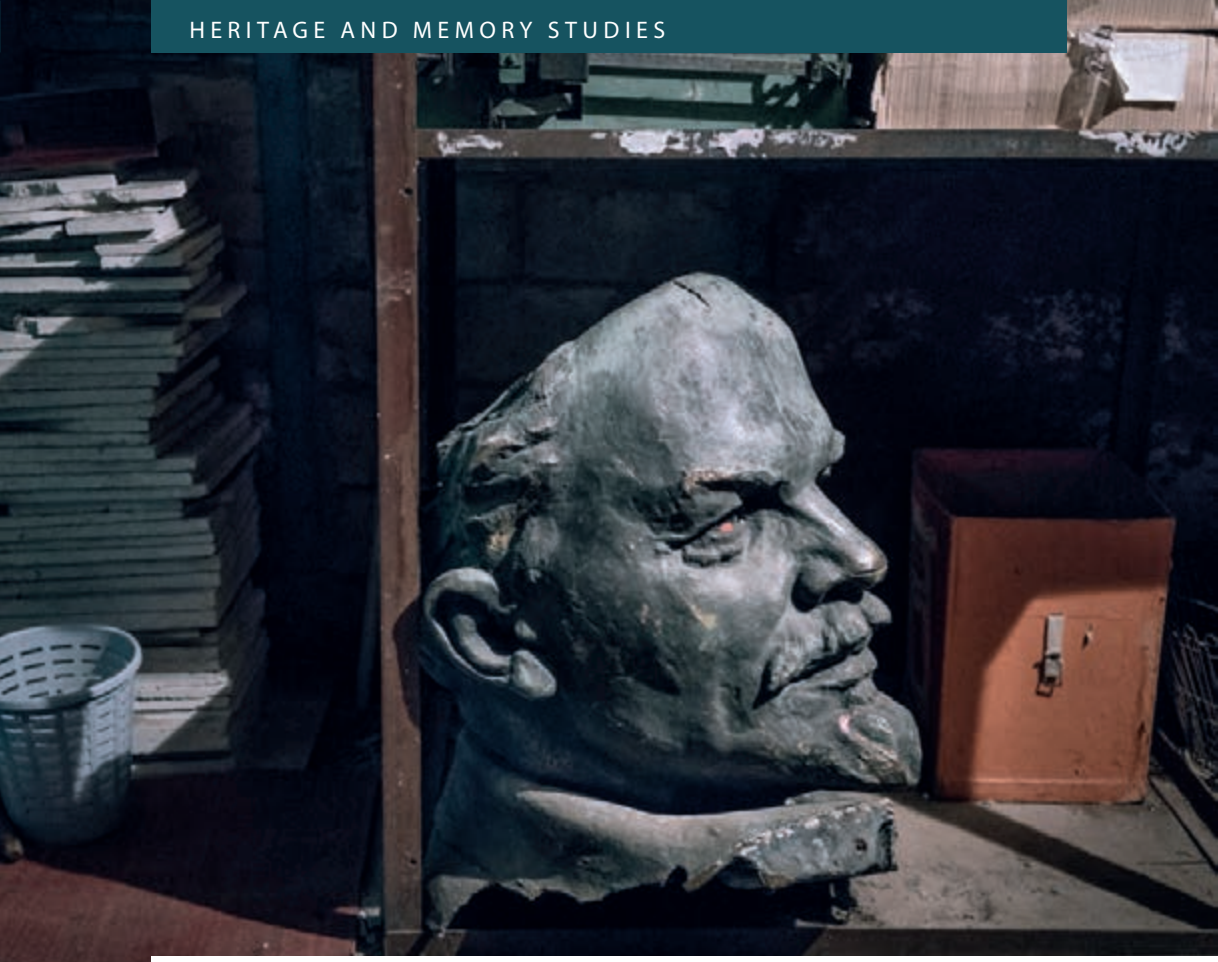

Edited by Erica van Boven and Marieke Winkler

The Construction and Dynamics of Cultural Icons

Amsterdam University Press

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of Cultural Icons

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Heritage and Memory Studies

This ground-breaking series examines the dynamics of heritage and memory from a transnational, interdisciplinary and integrated approach. Monographs or edited volumes critically interrogate the politics of heritage and dynamics of memory, as well as the theoretical implications of landscapes and mass violence, nationalism and ethnicity, heritage preservation and conservation, archaeology and (dark) tourism, diaspora and postcolonial memory, the power of aesthetics and the art of absence and forgetting, mourning and performative re-enactments in the present.

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Erica van Boven and
Marieke Winkler

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Introduction

The Construction and Dynamics of Cultural Icons

Erica van Boven and Marieke Winkler

The omnipresence of the icon

Read any newspaper or online magazine, watch any video or television ad, and it is likely you will encounter the term 'iconic' being applied to a specific person, building, object or even fictional character. Cultural icons can take many forms, and they appear to be omnipresent in the public domain. As Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen stress in *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life* (2012), 'The concept of [the] icon has endured across vast stretches of time and space. It represented the sacred for medieval churchgoers a millennium ago and remains central to the technical discourse of computer users today.'[1] They continue, 'The icon has proven to be a powerful and resilient cultural structure, and a container for sacred meanings, long after Friedrich Nietzsche announced the death of god'.[2]

Despite the central place iconic representations take in contemporary culture, consensus on what the term 'icon' means is abundantly lacking. Overflowing with meaning, the concept itself almost seems to become meaningless. As the art historian Martin Kemp already signalled in *From Christ to Coke: How Image becomes Icon* (2011), 'the term iconic is now scattered around so liberally and applied to figures or things of passing and local celebrity that it has tended to become debased.'[3] Recently, Hariman and Lucaites even spoke of the 'hyperinflation' of the concept, stressing

1 Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen, p. 1.
2 Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen, p. 2.
3 Kemp, p. 3.

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that icons suggest 'a stable fixture, a familiar setting, an enduring connection to something beyond endless churn and change'.[4] They add that the problem is a devaluation of the term itself, 'leaving the public more adrift than before'.[5]

This volume sets out to limit the inflation of the term by offering, in this introduction, a comprehensive overview of the existing conceptualizations of the icon and by demonstrating, in the chapters that follow, how the concept can be fruitfully applied in research from diverse cultural disciplines, such as literary studies, media studies, art history, and cultural history. The book has been arranged according to the main perspectives of the contributions: iconic persons (I. People), iconic places (II. Places) and iconic objects (III. Objects). The contributions focus on the visual aspects of icons as well as on the cultural historical embedding of iconic representations – two aspects which are strongly intertwined and cannot easily be separated, if they can be separated at all. In the various contributions, questions are addressed about the *construction* of cultural icons. How are images turned into icons? What are the characteristics of iconic representations? What role do modern media and cultural institutions play in constructing icons? To what extent are cultural icons the product of an explicit promotional campaign, as opposed to the outcome of a diffuse cultural process? Several contributions also specifically discuss questions about the *dynamics* of cultural icons. How and why does the meaning and function of cultural icons change over time? How does the meaning of an icon depend on its viewing public and on the specific (inter)national context in which it circulates? What meanings of the icon are disregarded at certain times and places, by whom, and why?

In this introduction, we further elaborate on the field of cultural icon studies as a form of cultural history, strongly embedded in visual and cultural studies. Here we argue this approach can benefit from insights from cultural memory studies, thus expanding the focus of the field by looking at the interaction with the socio-historical contexts icons embody, as well as the way they remember and (re)shape the meanings of these contexts. The goal of this introduction is not to offer a strict, *a priori* definition of the icon, but rather to set the markers that define the study of cultural icons and to clarify existing ambiguities surrounding the concept.

4 Hariman and Lucaites, p. 303.

5 Ibid.

The iconic turn in contemporary culture

The major role icons take in contemporary culture has stimulated the study of cultural icons significantly.[6] The increased interest for cultural icons in both the public and the scholarly domain is inherently linked to the growing role visuality plays in contemporary Western society. Cultural scholars were already pointing out the growing dominance of images in contemporary culture in the 1990s. The departing point for the essays collected in W.J.T. Mitchell's influential *Picture theory* (1994), for example, was the observation that 'we live in a culture dominated by pictures, visual simulations, stereotypes'.[7] In addition, for Mieke Bal, 'the stark visuality of present culture', as she called it in *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* (1999), formed an important incentive for overcoming disciplinary hang-ups and addressing both textual and visual dimensions within her project of cultural analysis.[8] Notably, in their volume *Cultural Icons* (2011), editors Keyan Tomaselli and David Scott refer to Bal when they state that '[i]n the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century world, language is tending to become supplemental to the visual image'.[9]

The 'stark visuality' of present culture that has prompted the rise of cultural icons is often linked to the increased mediatization of today's society. In particular, the rise of new media such as photography, film and cinema, broadcast television, video and the internet, including virtual reality and games, have contributed to a shift within modern culture from text to image.[10] While this broad cultural tendency towards visuality can be seen as a prerequisite for the icon to flourish[11], other, specific socio-cultural tendencies have contributed further to its popularity and omnipresence.

A first additional factor of importance is the far-reaching individualization of present-day society. As the commitment of both individuals and social groups to example figures is of all times and places, within a highly individualized society the need for (a personal relationship with) 'exemplary forms of life' and cultural models increases, as cultural historian Willem Frijhoff argues in *Saints, idols, icons* (1998): 'More and more our perception

6 Binder, p. 102.

7 Mitchell, 1994, p 2.

8 Bal, p. 9.

9 Tomaselli and Scott, p. 11.

10 See Lister, especially Chapter 2, 'New Media and Visual Culture'.

11 Hariman and Lucaites, p. 303: 'The reason for deeming virtually anything and everything iconic probably is a response to the incredible expansion, acceleration, and decontextualization endemic of contemporary media experience. When nothing is anchored, one needs anchors.'

of [social] processes, structures and conjunctures is organized around emblematic or exemplary historical figures'.[12] The life stories of 'holy', 'great', or 'famous' figures help us in shaping our own life story; they offer support in a world in which the ideal of a successful and happy life is primarily framed as the responsibility of the individual, not the community.[13]

At this point, the need for icons (NB by Frijhoff primarily understood as exemplary figures) connects to the growing pre-occupation with celebrities. Just as the phenomenon of the icon gains renewed attention and relevance within an individualized and visually mediatized culture, even more so the appearance of the celebrity is understood as a telling symptom of a meritocratic society. Notwithstanding that earlier beginnings of celebrity culture have been identified[14], overall the phenomenon is irrevocably interlinked with modern mass media and social media in particular. As Ellis Cashmore emphasizes in *Celebrity Culture* (2014): 'The conditions [for celebrity culture to come into being] include the proliferation of media in the 1980s and the loss in confidence in established forms of leadership and authority that happened around the same time."[15]

However, when trying to understand the obsession with cultural icons and related phenomena such as the celebrity, it is not only the individualization of present-day Western society (which is accompanied by the loss of confidence in established forms of authority, according to Cashmore) that proves to be a factor of importance that needs to be taken into account. A second additional factor lies in the profound entanglement of the economic and cultural domain. This intertwining is unmistakably clear in the case of the celebrity that is generally seen as 'a product of consumer culture'.[16] Yet, also in the case of cultural icons, the commercial or economic dimension is often not far away. As several contributions in this volume demonstrate, the construction and dynamics of cultural icons are not always only the product or effect of complex socio-historical interactions, they can also be the product of targeted branding or specific marketing strategies.

12 Frijhoff, p. 16 (trans. Van Boven and Winkler).

13 More critically, Frijhoff indicates that the need for icons underline the narcistic tendency in contemporary culture, see Frijhoff, p. 17.

14 Kemp, pp. 342-343: 'There have been a number of attempts to define the beginning of celebrity culture. The rise of mass popular entertainment in Britain in the later eighteenth century, the advent of photography on a mass scale, the rise of film and then television, and the internet have all been seen as marking special beginnings.'

15 Cashmore, p. 6.

16 Andrews and Jackson cited in Cashmore, p. 6.

The omnipresence of the cultural icon thus can be connected to what we can call an iconic turn in contemporary Western culture.[17] In order to further understand the icon's functioning within contemporary culture, we need not only to consider the visual dimension of the icon or its reception by certain groups, but also the way the phenomenon of the icon ties in with questions of individualization/collectivity and of culturalization/commercialization.

Definitions of the icon

As indicated above, it is difficult – if even at all desirable – to provide a single definition of the concept of the icon. 'Icon' has become a buzzword used by the media for almost everything. Furthermore, a definition of the icon and indication of its characteristics appears to be highly dependent on one's starting point. Different perspectives generate different emphases. For example, in the case of Alexander et al., who in *Iconic Power* adopt a sociological standpoint, the concept can refer both to the traditional religious depiction of saints and to the little pictures by which we navigate through our computer. Frijhoff, as a cultural historian, proposes a distinction between 'saint', 'idol' and 'icon' and reserves all three terms to refer to exemplary figures/persons. In yet another way Tomaselli and Scott adopt a semiotic perspective and perceive the icon in the first place as a special sign that originates in the real but is transformed to a 'simulacrum'.[18] However diffuse the use of the term might be at first sight, when overlooking the field of cultural icon studies, it seems possible to distinguish three positions. For clarity: these three positions do not correspond with the design of this book in three parts. Throughout the entire book, in each part (People, Places, and Objects), elements of all three positions can be found.

A narrow conception of the icon recalls its original meaning of 'image'; the very word 'icon' stems from *eikon*, the Greek word for image and was used specifically for religious images in Greek and Russian Orthodox

17 Besides the aforementioned W.J.T. Mitchell, it was the German art historian Gottfried Boehm who introduced the term 'Iconic Turn' (*Ikonische Wende*) to indicate the cultural shift from word to image, a shift that also represented a major change in the way cultural sciences acquire and structure their knowledge.

18 Tomaselli and Scott, p. 16: 'The sign becomes a simulacrum that substitutes – mediatizes – the original person or object into something else that becomes progressively susceptible to commercial exploitation'.

Christianity.[19] Traditionally, art history was the discipline where to find this use of the concept of the icon. Though at present in art history, the term is also no longer restricted to depictions of religious figures, we do find the narrow conception of the icon still resound, for example in *From Christ to Coke* by Kemp, when he refers to the icon as 'a visual icon' and defines it as a special kind of image that has risen to extravagant levels of fame.[20] Kemp wonders what it is that makes iconic images so 'extraordinary'. In a way, for Kemp iconic images are surrounded with some secret, they seem actively to incite 'the need for legends'.[21] Not surprisingly, the main task of the scholar studying the icon from this perspective is to ask how iconic images have achieved this extraordinary status, and whether they have anything in common. Indeed, it seems possible to give some general characteristics of the cultural icon despite the aforementioned ubiquity of the icon concept.

The main factors all cultural icons have in common are fame and widespread recognizability.[22] An icon is always widely known and instantly recognized by a certain audience.[23] This is certainly the case for the iconic persons discussed in the chapters by Jan Oosterholt (Lord Byron), Maria Brock (Lenin), Ginette Vincendeau (Brigitte Bardot), Kirsten Kumpf Baele (Anne Frank) and Yvonne Delhey (Hitler), as well as for the depictions of episodes addressed in the contributions by Paul van den Akker (the Renaissance) and Pieter de Bruijn (The 'Blitz').

Where images are concerned, even apart from the issue of fame of their subject, not every image has the potential to reach an iconic status. Icons are strong and highly concentrated images. After all, only images which emanate an immediate strength can appeal to basic visual and conceptual senses in such a way that they become iconic. In addition, icons have to be easily repeatable and reproducible and that means they have to take a certain static shape. The image has to crystallize into what Kemp calls 'a memorable still'.[24] A certain degree of standardization is needed, a fixed shape, as many examples in this book reveal. Other characteristics can

19 See for example Binder, p. 101; Brink, p. 139; Mitchell, 1986, p. 31.

20 Kemp, pp. 2-3.

21 Kemp, p. 3.

22 Frijhoff, p. 52: 'The icon – more than the saint, the idol and celebrity – is based on affirmation and recognizability. It refers in other words not to the particular and concrete qualities of a specific (historical) person or event but to a set of qualities that are collectively perceived and appointed to the iconic representation' (trans. Van Boven and Winkler).

23 Hariman and Lucaites, p. 285: 'Yet even the most widely recognized icons are not known by all and often are identified incorrectly (…). Nor do all viewers agree on the meaning or value of the iconic image'.

24 Kemp, p. 4.

be related to this such as simplicity and symmetry. These features favour the capacity of icons to keep some of their core qualities in the processes of change they go through. Kemp refers to this as transgression: a cultural icon transcends the limits of its initial context of origin, function, context, and meaning.[25] In the course of time, it undergoes many transformations. It develops and changes in various historical periods, geographic and cultural contexts and media. It takes multiple forms; its representations can become schematic, and yet it is still recognizable in outline. This continuity is also a main quality of cultural icons. Although the above goes especially for visual icons, the idea of standardization and abstraction can be considered a component of an overall description of cultural icons.

A second position that can be distinguished within the rich body of icon studies does not see the icon primarily as an 'image' but understands it as a special kind of 'sign'. When approaching the icon in this way, the study of cultural icons takes inspiration from the tradition of semiotics, the theory of signs (visual, aural, or linguistic), and their interpretation, as developed initially by C.S. Peirce (1839-1914). To avoid confusion, it should be noted that the cultural icons we discuss in this volume are not necessarily 'Peircean icons'. These concepts are not to be mixed up, but there are relations.

According to Pierce a sign consists of three inter-related parts: the sign itself, the object it refers to and the effect (by Pierce referred to as the 'interpretant') that the sign/object relation has on its receiver.[26] In his early work Pierce describes the icon as a specific sign that constitutes a distinct relation between sign and object, namely a relation of *likenesses*. The icon, in other words, is a sign that is interpreted as resembling its object. Following the work of F. de Saussure (1857-1913) this relation is explained in slightly different terms. The icon is a sign and thus, according to De Saussure, consists of two sides: a form (the image, the word, the object: what we see or hear) called the *signifier* and a meaning (the concept or thing it refers to) called the *signified*. What makes the icon a *special* kind of sign is the inherent resemblance between signifier and signified. Whether one adopts a Piercian or De Saussurian terminology, researchers that make use of semiotics define cultural icons generally as signs that 'refer to the thing they represent'[27] or that 'resemble their objects'.[28] This indeed applies to

25 Kemp, p. 3.
26 Pierce, p. 478.
27 Frijhoff, p. 52.
28 Tomaselli and Scott, p. 18. See also Bijl, p. 28, footnote 22.

all icons discussed in this book. For example, the iconic book chest Hugo Grotius escaped in from prison in 1621, subject of the chapter 'Exploring the Iconic in History Museums' by De Bruijn, refers to an actual book chest. At the same time and in the course of history, this object has been charged with multiple meanings, making the *cultural* icon in the end much more than a sign which resembles its object. This is where the contemporary study of icons, rooted in semiotics, follows up on Pierce. As Tomaselli and Scott point out in their study *Cultural Icons*: 'Semiotics is not just about the "meaning of any image or corpus of images" but about the way images are constructed and work within systems; it is also about the way they are interpreted'.[29]

By emphasizing that the analysis of the icon not only requires the study of their form and their function but also involves investigating their *interpretation*, Tomaselli and Scott indirectly stress the importance of hermeneutics within the study of cultural icons. Cultural icons generally have a strong visual nature, yet a narrative is needed to reveal their significance, to interpret their levels of meaning and social functioning. Icons, in other words, contain a complex visual-textual relation. In this sense, it is telling that the task of the semiologist is framed as a decoding – or 'reading' – of the layered symbolic and affective meanings of the sign, in our case the icon[30], including as well the meaning-making process (or *semiosis*) on the part of the receiver. The task of decoding is explicitly addressed in the chapters by Lopes and Delhey.

The inherent connection between image and narrative and the emphasis on the act of 'reading' brings to light a significant difference between the semiotic approach and an approach that departs from the narrow conception of the icon sketched above. Instead of focusing on the question of icons' communalities (what do iconic representations have in common?), semiotic inquiries are much more concerned with differentiations (how do signifier and signified differ? How are icons 'read' in different cultural contexts? What meanings does the sign convey, and what meanings are oppressed?).[31]

These questions indicate that icons are not just representations – they do not merely *reflect* certain values, virtues or ideals. As signs that need to be decoded, they also play an important role in *shaping* both individual and

29 Tomaselli and Scott, p. 19.

30 As Alexander and Bartmanski write in their introduction to *Iconic Power*: 'Icons are aesthetic/material representations, yes, but they are also signifiers of the ideationally and affectively intuited signified'. Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen, p. 2.

31 Exemplary for this focus is the concept of 'iconic difference' coined by Gottfried Boehm to refer to the difference between the representation and its model in the real world.

collective values. Icons, in other words, can be 'actants', as Alexander and Bartmanski put it: 'They inspire and invite us to interact with them'.[32] It is this productive aspect of cultural icons that is further incorporated in the third position that proposes a broad definition of the concept of the icon.

Though it can be studied as such, the cultural icon is always more than an image or visual representation. Cultural icons reached their iconic status because, during the processes of transformation they undergo, they gather meanings which go beyond their original reference, beyond what they actually represent. In new historical periods, in new social and cultural contexts, they are connected with new meanings, new associations, new connotations that sometimes have little to do with their actual meaning. The aforementioned book chest of Hugo Grotius, for example, came to represent a crucial episode in Dutch history. Other contributions show how an image, namely the panorama of Florence, came to represent a complex of convictions, such as the birth of modern man, and in addition came to stand for a whole 'iconic' period, namely the Renaissance (in the chapter by Van den Akker) or how the icon of Lenin got detached from the historical figure Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov and became the site of numerous projections and instrumentalizations: a symbol for communism, an image for Russia's influence in the post-Soviet period or a reference to a lost utopia (in the chapter by Brock).

As these examples, as well as both definitions of the icon discussed above, make clear – and we can't stress this enough – the narrow conception of the icon is always intertwined with and touches upon a broader conception of the icon, a conception that emphasizes the process of iconization and *circulation* of the icon rather than that it concentrates on the iconic representation itself. In this regard, the third position we distinguish here can be perceived as the result of a shifting emphasis from the making and construction of the icon via the analysis of its multiple meanings, to the role of its audiences and its reception within these meaning-making processes, the latter, as we have seen, was an emphasis that was already present via the 'interpretant' in the semiotic approach. This shift in emphasis from studying the icon to investigating the iconic is for example visible in the volume *Iconic Power*, in which the title and subtitle, 'materiality and meaning in social life', already indicate the more social(historical) perspective on what an icon is and how it functions.

32 Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen, p. 4.

Functions of the icon

As all three positions discussed above indicate, an important function of the icon lies in its symbolic meaning. The profound symbolic function of the icon becomes apparent in the workings of the traditional religious icon (which is believed to function as a mediator between earthly life and the heavens), just as much as in the workings of modern, secular icons. From a semiotic perspective, the icon is related to the symbol. As explained above, the cultural icon refers to something that existed or happened in reality, but at the same time it embodies far more than what it represents. Apparently, the process of iconization turns images, individuals and even objects (as Meghen Jones shows in her contribution on Japanese tea bowls) into something less tangible. The link with the context of the origin of the sign is loosened and sometimes even appears to fade. In this sense, the cultural icon moves towards the symbol, that is, a sign with an arbitrary relationship to its reference. That is the reason why icon and symbol are often mixed up: it is not always easy to disentangle the two. A flag, for example, can be considered as a national symbol or as a national icon. It is also the reason the study of cultural icons easily activates related concepts such as the 'archetype' and the 'myth'. There is a similarity with the concept of the 'archetype' when icons represent deeply felt, idealized meanings, or when icons resound classical myths or mythical figures (as Oosterholt shows in his contribution on the adaptation of Lord Byron). Crucial here is the de-historicizing effect of the icon, an effect ascribed as well to the workings of contemporary 'myths' by Roland Barthes, as Delhey explicates in her contribution 'Hitler goes Pop'. Just as with Barthes' myths, a key feature of cultural icons is a pattern of accrued layers of meaning and a looser link with historical reality.

In addition to the much-studied symbolic function of cultural icons, this volume focuses further on what we determine as another important, related function: the icon's modelling capacity. *The Construction and Dynamics of Cultural Icons* thus explicitly sets out to place the study of cultural icons within the present need for cultural models, as we think the ubiquity of the icon is not only striking but also telling.[33]

Iconic images, persons, or events, with their concentrated strength and concise meaning, have acquired an exemplary status and can therefore

33 This 'passion' for icons can also work the other way around: the power and presence of images have not only triggered their worshipping but also their destroying, see Latour, p. 16.

function as a model in shaping our image of the past, the present, and the future. This exemplary status is not just one of the icon's characteristics; it is in fact precisely what makes (the image of) a person, a place or an event a cultural icon, what defines its role in culture. Powerful iconic representations affect the senses, the emotions, and the imagination, and they therefore are becoming more and more a tool in modern culture.

It is not uncommon that in these modern uses of iconic persons or cult objects the religious origin of the icon still shines through. This is visible in the worshipping of Lenin, as Brock shows, manifested in a personality cult including body embalming and pilgrimages. But the religious origin also shines through in the 'fan culture' that surrounds a mass media celebrity like Brigitte Bardot, as Vincendeau demonstrates, in her contribution of the typical 'blonde'. These two examples also point towards the striking gender dimension of cultural icons. Whereas male icons embody power, leadership, heroism, or geniality, and thus are models of a whole range of masculine ideals and values, female icons are iconic for their beauty, sex appeal, sensuality (see Bardot), or typical female virtues, such as chastity and self-sacrifice (think of a figure like Mother Theresa).[34] The gender dimension especially shows how cultural icons are not only modelling our view of the past and contribute to the shaping of collective memory. They also draw attention towards the reproduction of stereotypes and fixed cultural meanings that circulate within society. To study cultural icons is in one way also asking the question of how these fixations can be opened up. In other words, with this book, we want to demonstrate that analysing cultural icons will provide more insight in the preoccupations of contemporary society.

Conclusion

By addressing both the *construction* and *dynamics* of cultural icons, this volume follows up on the vast body of research done within the field of visual and cultural studies. However, by shifting focus to the modelling function of cultural icons within the light of cultural memory studies, it also wishes to expand the dominant semiotic approach and to think along the lines of research that addresses the circulation, reception and appropriation of the icon. To proceed in this line of research requires that the phenomenon of the cultural icon is explicitly understood as a factor of importance – that

34 See Horrocks. See also Frijhoff, pp. 9-10.

is, a *productive* factor, an 'actant' – within the wider process of shaping and constructing (collective) cultural memory.

This expansion offers constructive analytical benefits. First, it permits us to distinguish between a *narrow* conception of the concept of the icon – namely, as a visual representation – and a *broader* conception of the icon that indirectly meets the current ubiquity of the term – namely, the icon as a complex of functions and meanings (also referred to earlier as the 'iconic').

Second, the framing of the study of cultural icons within the light of cultural memory studies makes it possible to demonstrate the rich and wide scope of the study of cultural icons while limiting the aforementioned 'deflation' of the concept. This limiting lies in the given definitions that restrict the field of the icon/the iconic and in focusing on the function of the icon as a model. Moreover, the volume calls attention to new and understudied dimensions of the icon, such as the role of humor (Delhey) or the didactic functioning of icons (Kumpf Baele and De Bruijn), alongside what remains of vital importance: the study of those meanings of cultural icons that stay invisible or neglected. '[A]n icon's lasting power lies precisely in the way it taps into invisible domains while condensing their complexity', Lopes writes in the chapter 'Iconic City Thrillers'; it is this apparent invisible complexity of icons that the scholar needs to address as well and where (s)he has to look for new meanings.

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