

PERSPECTIVES ON VISUAL LEARNING, VOL. 4

How Images Behave

Petra Aczél / András Benedek / Kristóf Nyíri
(eds.)

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Hungarian Academy of Sciences
Budapest University of Technology and Economics

How Images Behave

Perspectives on Visual Learning

Edited by Petra Aczél, András Benedek and Kristóf Nyíri

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Vicky Karaïskou
Open University of Cyprus

**“Same, same but different”:
BABELproject
and the Multifold Meanings of a Single Image**

The origins of the phrase “Same, same but different” are vague and its meaning holds a variety of explanations. However, the Thai self-referential catchphrase states a fundamental reality applicable at many levels in daily life. When we look, we subconsciously consent to accept what is confirmed to us as such because we only perceive what we think is. That context of “familiar” engages our existing mental “stepping-stones”.

With an aim to display the diverse interpretations and connotations people attribute to words and images, as well as the deriving subjective affect, BABEL started as a student’s project in 2018. It put neuroscience into practice and reframed Panofsky’s theory. BABELproject expanded the already collected material and created a global digital community and material pool on Facebook in April 2020 (@BABELprojectOUC).

Students of the Master’s programme “Cultural Policy and Development” of the Open University of Cyprus were given eight abstract concepts and were asked to take their smart-phones or cameras and attribute a spontaneous image to each one of them. The visuals submitted were impressively diverse.

According to neuroscientists and psychologists, people have different reactions and interpretations to identical verbal and visual stimuli. Reason is that the human brain automatically makes sense of incoming information depending on both the cultural and the individual context of pre-existing memories, experiences, and the resulting making-sense process. Although members of the same cultural groups interpret in rather similar manner concepts and images, especially those repeated in the public sphere, there is still much space for variation and diversity. Affect holds a major role in this process as it is the salient factor that determines the intensity and quality of the memory imprints.

The students' second task was to visit the page; choose four pictures from unknown contributors among the eight aforementioned concepts / albums; imagine the story behind them (what would the person's profile, feelings, thoughts or experiences be); and put these subjective interpretations in a short text. This second task revealed that students chose and explained images according to their own emotional narratives, and mind-frames. There were clear associations with their own, initial visual interpretations of the eight concepts.

BABELproject reaffirms two important facts: how individual meaning varies; and how our interpretations of reality regulate our choices. Common denominator here is that different interpretations generate different emotions, dispositions, mind-sets, and reactions. Our choices constitute by far a subconscious process regulated by and regulating anew – in an endless circle – projections that channel us to certain prospects.

Our “reading” of images reassures our familiar “territories”. We project our memories and interpretations of the past to what surrounds us in our daily life. Due to this affect load, as well as the resulting stereotypes we recognize in them, images shape our attitudes in the present, and, at the same time, they train us on how to act in the future. Images constitute our broad vocabulary, far more legible and comprehensible than words.

BABELproject unveils our perceptions, beliefs and the resulting expectations. It challenges the illusion of sameness and notions of

a common shared reality. Although we all exist at the intersection of our individual and collective memories and identities, still what we say matters; what we do matters; and how we think, certainly, matters.¹

¹ Some earlier, selected literature on the topic: Robert B. Zajonc, “Feeling and Thinking: Preferences Need No Inferences”, *American Psychologist*, vol. 35, no. 2 (1980), pp. 151–175; Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Putnam Publishing, 1994; Marvin M. Chun and Yuhong Jiang, “Contextual Cueing: Implicit Learning and Memory of Visual Context Guides Spatial Attention”, *Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 36, issue 1 (1998), pp. 28–71; Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies”, *History and Theory*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2002), pp. 179–197; Daniel G. Dillon, Maureen Ritchey, Brian D. Johnson, Kevin S. LaBar, “Dissociable Effects of Conscious Emotion Regulation Strategies on Explicit and Implicit Memory”, *Emotion*, vol. 7, issue 2 (2007), pp. 354–365; Arni Kristjánsson and Gianluca Campana, “Where Perception Meets Memory: A Review of Repetition Priming in Visual Search Tasks”, *Attention, Perception & Psychophysics*, vol. 72, no. 1 (2010), pp. 5–18.