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Images of the Human Being

Imaginary and Performative Basics of Culture

Human beings create images of themselves in all cultures and historical periods. They need these images to communicate about themselves and to understand themselves. Images of the human being are designs and projections of the human being. They are formed in order to visualize representations of the human being or individual aspects of a person. These representations are simplifications of human diversity and complexity. Images of the human being are irreducible. They arise because we communicate about ourselves and must develop similarities and feelings of belonging with other people. They are the result of complex anthropological processes in which social and cultural power structures play an important role. Owing to their iconic character, they reduce the complexity of the person and his or her being-in-the-world to select features and do not create a complete view of the person.

Images of the Human being: The Visualisation of the Invisible

Images of the human being. The visualisation of the invisible. What does this title mean? The title describes a process of imagining and thinking which results in images of the human being. Human beings create images of themselves in all cultures and historical periods. They need these images to communicate about themselves and to understand themselves. Images of the human being are designs and projections of the human being. They are formed in order to visualise representations of the human being or individual aspects of a human being. These representations are simplifications of human diversity and complexity in illustrations. A “productive moment” is portrayed here in these representations, as the discussion about the Laocoon statue shows. Historical developments and interpretative variants are not displayed in such iconic “productive moments”. The special nature of an image lies in its concentration on one moment and in the suggested evidence – but the limits of iconic representation are also revealed therein. Images of human beings are always simplifications which, despite their simplifying character, are extremely effective. The power structures of a society which are often difficult to see are incorporated in the construction of images of human beings. They are the result of differentiated processes of inclusion and exclusion. Desires, norms and values are conveyed in images of human beings. Images of human beings are aimed at the normalisation of humans. Social and cultural institutions, as well as religions, uto-

pias and world views, use images of human beings to portray their conceptions of humans and to embed their ideas in the imaginary and in the actions of humans.

Such images of human beings are clearly expressed, for example, in the sculptures of Ancient Greece, in which the ideal of the good and beautiful, the *Kolokagathia*, the unit of physical beauty and spiritual quality, is expressed. Also in the Christian Middle Ages, there are images of human beings in which the devout, godly person is represented. The *biblia pauperum* in the churches of the Middle Ages show this clearly. We find representations of godly people subdivided according to status into monks, nobles and peasants, reflecting the hierarchical structures of contemporary society.

Nationalism in the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century highlighted numerous idealising images of, for example, the “Germans” and the “French” which became role models for education and an honourable life.

Socialism in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe also tried to embed a certain image of the human being in the imagination of the young generation.

Today, the European Union endeavours to achieve an image of the human being as a free, independent democratic citizen and as a model of human development and education in Europe.

The Image of a Sustainable Human Being

After the period for the realisation of the millennium objectives set for the developing countries expired in 2015 and succeeded in reducing poverty and illiteracy in many parts of the world, the community of nations is currently working intensively on developing sustainability goals. In this process, there are philosophical and anthropological analyses of the ethical questions associated with sustainability, the development and discussion of the feasibility of the sustainability goals, the clarification of the concepts and the consistency of argumentation and the methodical and argumentative approach. Development is sustainable when it “secures the quality of life of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to shape their life” (Deutsche UNESCO Kommission 2014). The goals for sustainable development arising from this definition are interrelated with a culture of peace and human rights, cultural diversity and democratic participation and the rule of law. A culture of sustainable development is necessary for the transformation of economy and society. Future-oriented models, ideas, norms and forms of knowledge are required to evolve this culture. They should be supplemented by the development of values of sustainability and corresponding attitudes and ways of life. Education on sustainable development also plays an important role here. Without it, the initiation of independent action is not possible. The international community of states is looking for an image of the human being on which representatives from all societies and cultures can agree and which, as a role model, is able to span cultural differences. It is unclear currently whether such an image of the human being is possible and would destroy the cultural diversity between the

different parts of the world. There is also reasonable doubt as to whether and to what extent such images can be used to level cultural differences between the geographical regions of the world without cultivating tension between them.

Development and Power of Images of the Human Being

Why are images of human beings so effective? Why do they have such an influence on the human being? I believe three reasons are of particular importance here:

1) While the behaviour of non-human primates is largely controlled by instincts, this is not the case for humans due to the “premature birth” or the “extrauterine year”. The young human being is characterised by a large plasticity of the body and the senses. Its relationship to the world is not determined by instincts; it is open-minded and able to learn. Children need to learn and are capable of learning. They are literally designed for cultural learning. Cultural learning takes place using mimetic processes, i.e. processes of creative imitation (Gebauer/Wulf 1998a, 1998b). Images play an important role here. This includes images of other human beings, images of the living environment and images of human beings occurring gradually in synthetic processes. Images of human beings give orientation and meaning. They are shared with other humans and create feelings of belonging and togetherness. This is the origin of the durability of their effect. Images are not easily adopted but lived and internalised with other human beings and their interpretations. They occur in action and language games. In contrast to the instincts of animals, they are historically and culturally determined and can be changed.

2) Images of human beings have profound effects because they occur at least partly in childhood and create a sense of being part of a community. They occupy the conceptual world and become part of the imagination. They influence our perception of the world, culture and other human beings and our own self-perception. Images of human beings become part of the individual and his or her imagination and have an influence on emotions. They are repeated and consolidated by the rhythms and rites of daily life. Like plants with extended roots, particular and universal images of human beings are fixed in the imagination and gain effect from the connection with already existing ideas and images.

3) As images of the imagination, images of human beings become part of the body. They are inherent and therefore may be difficult to change. Often they consist not only of individual images but of picture sequences, even of picture networks with which heterogeneous, sometimes even paradoxical images are “captured”. As a result, existing images of human beings are repeatedly confirmed and their importance is reinforced.

The World Turns into an Image

A characteristic of modernity is the fact that the world is opposite to man and is perceived as an object and as an image. In ancient times, human beings, animals and the environment were part of living nature, the *physis*. They were generally perceived as similar to each other. They were stimulated by the power, the *dynamis* of nature, the *physis*. This relationship between human beings and the world was retained in the Middle Ages. Animals, human beings and the world are created by God and have a common creatureliness. In the modern era, this relationship between the (Western) human being and the world, other human beings and themselves changes. Nature is no longer experienced as animated. It becomes an object. The human beings are no longer part of nature or the world created by God but are opposite to it; they measure it and register it as “object”. In this process, the world turns into an image. This trend increases with the development of the new media. Not only the world and other human beings are perceived as images, we ourselves are also increasingly perceiving ourselves in the mode of images. The widespread use of digital photography in everyday life, and especially selfies, are proof of this. Using electronic photos or films, we create all important events and ultimately create an image of ourselves (Wulf 2013a, 2013b, 2014).

Images of human beings show the central role images, and with them imagination and the imaginary world, play for the constitution of the human being and his or her education. They also make clear how strongly images are defined by their respective historical and cultural character and how important their research is within the framework of anthropology and educational anthropology. Images of human beings are images the human being creates of him- or herself. It is important to understand their significance for the human perception of the world, for memories and future projections. They are generated by social and cultural practices of everyday life and by the arts. Images of human beings become part of the collective and individual social and cultural imaginary world and thus play a part in shaping human activities. The creation of images is a feature we share as human beings. Its forms, however, are very different in history and in different cultures. As images and the imaginary world visualise something which would otherwise remain invisible, their research is an important area of educational anthropology.

What we describe as an “image” is different, meaning that the spectrum of the term is broad and requires a range of further clarifications. Sometimes we mean the result of visual perception processes. Under the influence of neuroscience and its visualisation strategies, even the results of perception with other senses are often described as “images”. We then speak about mental or “inner” images, bringing to mind something not actually present. These include, for example, souvenir pictures, swaying in their perception due to their vagueness. The same applies to sketches or drafts of future situations, to dreams, hallucinations or visions. Many aesthetic products also take the form of images. They are products of a process aimed at the very creation of an image. As metaphors, they ultimately are constitutive elements of language. Creating images, recognising images as such, dealing

with images using one's imagination etc. is a universal capability of humans. However, it varies depending on historical period and culture. Which images we see and how we see images is determined by complex historical and cultural processes. How we perceive images and deal with them is also influenced by the unique nature of our life history and subjectivity.

Like all images, images of human beings are the result of energetic processes. They transform the world of objects, actions and other human beings into images. Using imagination, they are imagined and become part of the collective and individual imaginary world. Many of these processes are mimetic and result in an assimilation to other humans, environments, ideas and images. In mimetic processes the outer world becomes the "inner world", which is a world of images (Gebauer/Wulf 1995, 1998a, 1998b). This world of imaginary images plays a part in shaping the outer world. As these images are performative, they contribute to the emergence of actions and to the production and performance of our relationship towards other human beings and our surrounding world. The imaginary world is a place of images as such, the destination of the imaginative process generating images. At the same time, it is the starting point of the mimetic and performative energies of images.

Image and Imagination

No less than language, imagination is a *conditio humana*, a human condition with its foundations in the constitution of the human body (Belting 2001; Hüppauf/Wulf 2009; Wulf 2010). Performativity, i.e. the orchestrated character of human action, is a consequence of the principal openness and role which imagination plays in the form of this openness. With its help past, present and future are interwoven. Imagination creates the world of the human being, the social and cultural, the symbolic and the imaginary world. It creates images of human beings. It makes possible history and culture and thus historic and cultural diversity. It creates the world of images and the imaginary and is involved in the creation of bodily practices. It is not just an awareness of these practices required for their production and performance. In reality, they must be incorporated and be part of a practical, body-based, implicit knowledge whose dynamic character makes possible social and cultural changes and designs. Here, mimetic processes based on imagination are of central importance. Cultural learning takes place in these processes and creates a social and cultural identity that is a central prerequisite for well-being and happiness.

Imagination plays a central role for all forms of social and cultural action and its concentration in images of human beings and the world. Using images, diagrams, models, etc., it controls human behaviour and action. Images are defining moments of action and their significance is constantly increasing. This leads to the question of what makes an image and what types of images can be distinguished. For example, mental images can be distinguished from manually and technically generated images, as well as moving and non-moving images.

Imagination is of fundamental importance not only in European art. It plays an important role in the genesis of *Homo sapiens sapiens* and its cultures. References to the aesthetic design of bone scrapers can be traced back several hundred thousand years (Wulf 2014). A human being's access to the world and the world's access to the "inner" human being takes place using imagination in the form of images.

A distinction can be made between magical images, representative images and simulated images. Magical images have no reference; they *are* what they portray. The statue of the "Golden Calf" is the holy thing; with a relic, the body part is the holy thing. The situation is different for representative images which are often based on mimetic processes. They refer to something which they portray themselves or something they are not. Photos are included here showing situations which are passed and not present.

Simulated images are images which have become possible with the new processes of electronic media and are playing an increasing role in the lives of human beings.

The difference between perceived and mental images is important. Each presentation is an expression of the fact that an object is missing. This is obvious for souvenir pictures and future projections. The perceived images based on existing objects have an influence on both. Pathological images, visions and dreams also differ from perceived and souvenir pictures. In all cases, imagination is involved in the creation of these images. With the help of imagination, mental or "inner" worlds of images emerge in which emotions are crystallised. The dynamics of imagination combine human beings and create a sense of community. Its ludic character creates connections between images and new images can emerge.

Imagination and the Imaginary

With the help of imagination, human beings, communities and cultures create the imaginary. This can be understood as a materialised world of images, sounds, touch, smell and taste. It is the precondition that human beings perceive the world in a historically and culturally influenced manner. Imagination remembers and creates, combines and projects images. It creates reality. At the same time, reality helps imagination to create images. The images of imagination have a dynamic character structuring perception, memory and future. The networking of the images follows the dialectic and rhythmical movements of imagination. Not only everyday life but also literature, art and performing arts obtain an inexhaustible memory of images. Some appear to be stable and hardly changeable. In contrast, others are subject to historic and cultural change. Imagination has a symbolising dynamic which continuously creates new meanings and uses images for this purpose. Interpretations of the world are developed using these images created by imagination (Hüppauf/Wulf 2006).

In contrast to the general use of the concept of the imaginary, Jacques Lacan primarily emphasises its delusional character. Desires, wishes and passions play a central role here in that human beings cannot escape from the imaginary. For them, there is no direct relationship to the real world. As a speaking entity, human beings can only develop a fractured relationship with the real world via the symbolic order and imagination. With its help, they can try to hold their own ground against the forces of the imaginary. "The socially effective imaginary is an internal world which has a strong tendency to shut itself off and develop to some extent an infinite immanence; in contrast, the human fantasy, imagination, is the only power capable of forcing open the enclosed spaces and can temporarily exceed it, because it is identical to the discontinuous phenomenon of time" (Kamper 1986, 32-33). This compulsive character of the imaginary creates the limits of human life and opportunities for development. This clarification of the compulsive character of the imaginary is important, it only makes up one part of the range of meanings and describes the diversity and ambivalence of cultural visual knowledge according to the opinion expressed here.

Imagination has a strong performative power which produces and performs social and cultural actions. Imagination helps to create the imaginary world which includes images stored in memory, images of the past and the future. Using mimetic movements, the iconic character of images can be captured. In the reproduction of its image character, images are incorporated in the imaginary. As part of the mental world they are references of the outer world. Which images, structures and models become part of the imaginary depends on many factors. In these images, the presence and the absence of the outer world are inextricably interwoven. Images emerging from the imaginary are transferred from imagination to new contexts. Image networks develop with which we transform the world and which determine our view of the world.

The performative character of imagination ensures that images of the social field make up a central part of the imaginary (Wulf/Zirfas 2007). The power structures of social relationships and social structures are represented therein. Many of these processes have their roots in a human being's childhood and take place to a large extent unconsciously. The perception of social constellations and arrangements is already learned during this time. These earlier visual experiences and the resulting images play an important, irreplaceable role in the visual understanding of the world. A comprehending viewing of social actions arises from the fact that biographically influenced historical and cultural diagrams and mental images play a part in every perception. We see social actions and relate to them through perception. As a result, these actions become more important for us. If the actions of other human beings are directed at us, the impulse to link a relationship originates from these; a response on our part is expected. In each case a relationship is formed for whose inception the images of our imagination form an important precondition. We enter an action and act according to the expectations in this social arrangement, be it that we respond to them, modify them or act contrary to them. Our action is mimetic to a lesser extent because of similarity but more because of the generated

correspondences. Embedded in an action, we perceive the actions of the other and act mimetically.

Outlook

Images of the human being are irreducible. They arise because we communicate about ourselves and must develop similarities and feelings of belonging with other human beings. They are the result of complex anthropological processes in which social and cultural power structures play an important role. Owing to their iconic character, they reduce the complexity of human beings and their being-in-the-world to select features and do not create a complete view of the human being. There are approximations to the *homo absconditus*, the human being who cannot fully understand him- or herself. In the *Ten Commandments*, there is therefore talk that humans should not create an image of God and by analogy – as today we would say – no image should be made from another human being. Images and imagination are important for our relationship with the world, with other humans and with ourselves. Image criticism is required in order to escape the power of images and in particular images of the human being. For pedagogical work, a critical relationship towards images we make of children and teenagers is essential. The same also applies to a critical view of the ideas and images created in the discourses on pedagogy (Wulf/Zirfas 2014). If we have recognised the importance of images and imagination for upbringing, education and socialisation, then a *release* from our relationship with children and teenagers, with the world and with ourselves is required.

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