Imaging Identity
Text, Mediality and Contemporary Visual Culture
Edited by Johannes Riquet · Martin Heusser
Imaging Identity
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CHAPTER 1

Identity and Modern Visual Culture: Textual Perspectives

Johannes Riquet and Martin Heusser

As the title of W. J. T. Mitchell’s influential book *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005) suggests, images have demands on us. Conversely, we want things from images, and both sets of demands evolve within shifting image cultures. The close “relationship between the visual object and […] modernity” (Saltzman and Rosenberg 2006, ix) has become a critical commonplace. If we live indeed, in the words of James Elkins, “in an especially visual culture” where we “see more images in our lifetimes than any other culture has” and “may be able to assimilate more images per minute than any other culture” (2011, 2), it bears asking how the rapidly changing economies of vision that shape our everyday lives relate to the constitution of contemporary identities.

The recent graphic novel *Zahra’s Paradise* (Amir and Khalil 2011), set in Tehran in the aftermath of the protests following the disputed re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of the Islamic Republic...
of Iran in June 2009, offers a wealth of material for reflecting on the demands of and on images in contemporary globalised culture. In doing so, it rehearses the promises contemporary image culture offers for the active construction and negotiation of (personal, cultural, political) identity while also cautioning against the pressures exerted by images themselves. *Zahra’s Paradise* revolves around a young man (Mehdi) who disappears in the protests, and the story follows the efforts of his mother and brother (Hassan) to find him. In an important scene, the brother orders 1000 copies of an image of his brother at a copy shop (a recurrent location in the graphic novel), with the words “Missing” and his phone number printed above and below the image. As the machine churns out the flyers, they pile up to form the outline of the missing brother: a figure made entirely of images and words, thereby taking shape as an image itself—a three-dimensional image rendered in the two dimensions of the comic page and evoking a hologram in its striped, semi-transparent appearance (Fig. 1.1). “The whole world is still,” we read in the captions, “as if
everything hinges on my brother’s rebirth out of the machine’s wondrous womb” (2011, 70). Indeed, the brother never returns in flesh and blood: as of now, he only exists as an image. Mehdi’s “rebirth” is thus a medial event and predicated on the dissemination of images. In this medial rebirth, an image of individual identity carries the hope for a renewal of political identity.1 This is accentuated by the image itself: throughout the graphic novel, the brother’s face in the flyer remains blank, which makes him emblematic of an entire generation, a generation of young and politically committed Iranians fighting for political change.

_Zahra’s Paradise_ is thus invested in the power of images to bring about change and reshape identities. These images, furthermore, are distinctly associated with new technologies. This is already announced in the cover image of the book, which shows an arm holding up a mobile phone on whose display we see an image of people holding up banners on Azadi (Freedom) Square, the main site of the 2009 protests. While the identity of the person holding up the phone is not revealed—the face is cut off—we see the same image that is shown on the display behind her head (several details suggest that it is a woman). The simultaneity of event and image that recurs in _Zahra’s Paradise_—and the presence and dissemination of images as an event in itself, suggested by the visual parallel of holding up banners as well as phones—make this graphic novel a unique reflection on the politics of contemporary image culture.

This image culture, furthermore, is shown to interweave different medialities that originated in different times, exemplifying Henry Jenkins’s thesis about the convergence of old and new media, the “circulation of media content across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders” and the central role of “consumers’ active participation” (2006, 3) within these processes. While Jenkins’s book is not about visual culture per se, it acknowledges the central importance of images within the global convergence of media cultures that interests him: like _Zahra’s Paradise_, _Convergence Culture_ prominently displays a small digital screen (an iPod) on its cover; the image on this screen (which shows a tropical beach) is surrounded by countless other images on a wall made up of what looks like TV screens. In _Zahra’s Paradise_, images are produced and disseminated by a variety of technologies and media platforms including copy machines, mobile phones and the online blog written by Mehdi’s brother Hassan, also named Zahra’s Paradise. The copy machine’s serial production of printed images to be distributed on the streets, connected to the pamphlet culture enabled by the invention of the
printing press (the chapter is significantly entitled “The People’s Press”), thereby exists side by side with the immaterial distribution of images in the digital world. Indeed, the production of the graphic novel itself exemplifies this convergence: initially published serially as a webcomic in seven languages simultaneously, and later as a hardcover book, *Zahra’s Paradise* emphatically belongs to a global media culture where images cross “national borders” as well as “different media systems” (Jenkins *2006*, 3). This is exemplified by the self-reflexive last panel of the copy shop chapter: in the bottom right-hand corner of the panel, which shows a street in Tehran, we see one of the flyers with Mehdi’s image. It is partly inside and partly outside the panel, whose frame is interrupted while a curved line indicates the flyer’s movements in the wind: a true ‘flyer,’ the image, as it were, leaves the confines of the comic page to enter other medial spheres.

Importantly, however, images in *Zahra’s Paradise* not only circulate between different medial spheres, but they also interact with words, in ways that self-reflexively speak to the format of the graphic novel, in itself a combination of words and images. For one thing, Hassan’s blog, which provides the main narrative voice of the book and whose declared aim is to “make Mehdi’s absence official” so that “the world will take notice” (*2011*, 59), operates primarily in the realm of the verbal, complementing the image in articulating an identity for the lost brother and, by implication, the “lost generation” (*2011*, 14) for which he stands. Furthermore, the banners held up by protestors contain images, notably Ahmadinejad’s crossed-out face, as well as words, such as “Where is my vote?” The banners—present, as mentioned above, on the very title page—thereby self-reflexively evoke the speech bubbles and captions of the graphic novel. Throughout the text, digital screens flash both images and words; at the bottom of the copyright page, we see a small image of a mobile phone displaying the words “By art we live,” updating the Renaissance topos of survival through art for the digital age. We return to this idea at the end of the book in the grieving mother’s allusion to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18, the former’s “As long as I can breathe you will never die” (*1997*, 217) recalling the latter’s “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (*1997*, 13–14). Explicitly conjoining art and contemporary communications technology, the image on the copyright page thus comments on the graphic novel’s own status as not only a piece of art, but also a medial product. In their articulation of political identities, words give meaning to images and vice versa, and both are inflected by the technological apparatuses that produce and spread them.
However, these apparatuses not only help to disseminate art and political activism (and art as political activism), but also serve oppressive functions, and here we return to the question of what images want from us. For the images in *Zahra’s Paradise* not only enable the articulation of identities but also constrain it. This is most evident in the second chapter, when Hassan, who is taking pictures or filming the events in front of Evin Prison with his mobile phone (whose Apple logo is clearly visible), is warned by an elderly man: “You think you’re capturing their image, but it’s Siemens that’s capturing yours!” (2011, 47; boldface in original). This is followed by a panel which (partially) shows the faces of Hassan, his mother and the man through a circular lens on a black background (Fig. 1.2). On the one

Fig. 1.2  Who is capturing whose image? Digital surveillance in *Zahra’s Paradise*
hand, this seems to be a close-up of Hassan’s phone, which is visible in the preceding panels. On the other hand, the disproportionate size of the lens, the odd angle and a bizarre antenna-like structure on top of the lens, accompanied by the letters “WHIRRRR,” make it clear that this cannot be only Hassan’s phone. As such, the panel also suggests the faceless and global gaze of digital surveillance in which Hassan’s photographing or filming inevitably becomes entangled: “Your digital shroud: everything you see, say, or even think … is frozen in their diabolical bandwidths” (2011, 47). It remains unclear who “they” are: Iranian intelligence, global corporations and media conglomerates, or both. Rather, the scene suggests that the production and dissemination of images, as well as the identities emerging from them, are complex and ambivalent. These images of identity are caught in a global media web where, to return to Jenkins, “the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (2006, 2). In the process, it becomes unclear what can be regarded as an ‘Iranian’ image of identity: “Aren’t Iranians running Silicon Valley, eBay, Google, Yahoo?” (2011, 47), asks Hassan, further complicating the identities associated with the producers and disseminators of images.

With this comment on the asymmetrical distribution of seeing, *Zahra’s Paradise* addresses important issues related to Nicholas Mirzoeff’s notion of “the right to look,” which he treats in his eponymous book-length study of visuality. Visuality in this specific context is, as Mirzoeff explains, not a theoretical approach to “the totality of all visual images and devices” but an imaginary practice based on the gathering of “information, images and ideas” on an immense scale for the exercise of power and control vis-à-vis specific groups of people or entire populations. Crucially, “[t]his ability to assemble a visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer.” The right to look claims (and depends on) mutuality and exchange: “It means requiring the recognition of the other in order to have a place from which to claim rights and to determine what is right.” The right to look lays claim to seeing and looking back at those who look at you. And with this it is, as Mirzoeff reasons, “the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable” (2011, 2). Ironically, *Zahra’s Paradise* suggests, it is with the help of Western panoptic control, Western surveillance technology and former colonial tactics of counterinsurgency that the authorities in the world of the graphic novel are creating and maintaining visuality and regulating the access to what may be seen, what may be looked at—and reserving the supreme
right to look. This struggle over the right to look and visual authority is addressed in several chapters of *Imaging Identity: Text, Mediality and Contemporary Visual Culture*, notably those of Part III (“Contested Images of Identity”).

In *Zahra’s Paradise*, then, the status of the image remains fundamentally ambivalent. Politicised images, the graphic novel suggests, can both empower and frame you, serve power and undermine it. The panel with the mobile phone lens visually resembles the vignettes at the beginning of each chapter, where we see a detail from the chapter as a circular image inside a black square. We are cautioned against the power of the image: it remains unclear who ultimately benefits from the images in and of *Zahra’s Paradise*. Do they empower the protestors? Are they appropriated by the Iranian authorities? Or by global actors? In a context where representations of Iran and Iranians are easily appropriated by foreign governments to demonise a political enemy and thereby legitimate interventions and economic sanctions, *Zahra’s Paradise* asks pertinent questions about the complex lives of images. Combined with words, they help the young protestors create their own identities, but the medial networks that produce, disseminate and discursively reframe them can be equally liberating and constraining, contributing to the “digital shroud” that makes Mehdi, Hassan and their peers traceable and shapes their identities in partly invisible channels.

**Imaging Identity**

This initial example raises a number of questions about the nexus of image, word and identity that are addressed, with varying emphasis, by the contributors of this volume. Like a recent collection entitled *What Is an Image in Medieval and Early Modern England*, this book aims to “[explore] the status of the visual image in relation to another sign system and medium, namely words and texts” (Bevan Zlatar 2017, 12), in a specific historical period, in this case the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Unlike the former collection, it does not focus on “a particular location” (2017, 12); indeed, its global and transnational span is appropriate in view of the increasingly global production and circulation of images. This global approach is combined with a specific focus: all chapters examine the constitution of different identities at the intersection of the visual and the verbal.

Of course, images have long been used in combination with words and narrative to fashion, refashion and challenge identities in different genres
and media. A few eclectically selected examples will have to suffice here. The Renaissance invention of perspective painting (Panofsky 2002) went hand in hand with the exploration of the subject and its interiority in early modern plays like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Othello*. In the age of discovery, written and visual texts combined on world maps to negotiate identities of self and other; as Tom Conley argues in *The Self-Made Map*, the popular genre of the *isolario* or island book, which combined maps of real and imagined islands around the globe with written descriptions, both projected an autonomous self and fragmented subjectivity (Conley 1996; see Riquet in this book). The famous micrographic self-portrait by the twenty-nine-inch-tall German magician, musician and calligrapher Matthias Buchinger from 1724 (Fig. 1.3) offers a particularly striking example of self-fashioning via portraiture as it had developed since the fifteenth century (West 2004, 206). The caption describes the crafting of self in words and images: “This is the Effigies of Mr. Matthew Buchinger, being Drawn and Written by Himself. […] This little Man performs such Wonders as have never been done by any, but Himself.” The writing of the self thereby takes place not only in the caption but also in the drawing itself as Buchinger’s hair consists entirely of psalms and the Lord’s prayer written in tiny letters. The verbo-visual portrait itself is thus one of the “Wonders” described in the caption, and Buchinger’s identity as an artist is boldly asserted and performed in a process of self-authorship that bridges, rather contradictorily, bragging and religious piety. A similar (though much more earnest) form of self-authorship occurs on the title page of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which promises an account of the life of Robinson “Written by Himself.” The text and the frontispiece (Fig. 1.4), which shows Robinson proudly standing on his island, in the centre of the image, thus underscore the centrality of the (bourgeois) self as author of his own destiny (cf. Watt 2001).

Indeed, the German word *Bildungsroman* carries the image in its very name (see Frey Büchel, Chap. 6). A hundred years later, as Jessica A. Volz maintains, nineteenth-century women writers crafted strong selves for their female protagonists through literary images “in a society in which the reputation was image based” (2017, xi). Influenced by “portraiture, the looking glass, architecture and landscape painting,” so Volz’s argument, these authors were exploring their culture’s investment in external appearances and public images and “painted with words” through “the use of visual cues, analogues and references to the gaze” (2017, 3). Thus, “[v]isuality, which functions as a continuum linking visual and verbal modes of communication and understanding, empowered women novel-
ists at a time when self-expression was particularly constrained for their
sex, allowing them to control the gaze and speak through pictures” (2017,
xii). More generally, as Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przybyski

Fig. 1.3 Early modern self-fashioning: Matthias Buchinger, a phocomelic.
Engraving after M. Buchinger, 1724. Credit: Wellcome Collection. CC BY 4.0
contend, the emergence of a plethora of visual practices and technologies in the nineteenth century is at the roots of a development that led to “the seemingly endless saturation of the contemporary world by images” (2004, xi).

Much has been written about the nexus of modernity, technology and these new visual cultures. On the one hand, critics have emphasised that the visual technologies and media that emerged in the nineteenth century “were all too often focused on constructing a certain view of the ‘rest’ by the West” (Schwartz and Przyblyska 2004, xi). This strand of criticism sees visual culture as a tool for projecting imperialist identities against colonial otherness, as in Russell A. Potter’s discussion of the ways in which the Arctic and its inhabitants were turned into visual spectacles to be consumed by nineteenth-century British and American audiences (2007). Susan

Fig. 1.4 Frontispiece and title page of the first edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). British Library, C.30.f.6
Sontag’s discussion of photography as a sublimated form of violent control relies on this understanding of modern visual culture: “[Taking a picture] turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (1973, 14). Other accounts have focused on the reconfiguration of visual subjectivity through modernity’s internal developments such as the rise of the railways. Thus, Wolfgang Schivelbusch has argued that the experience of travelling by train in the nineteenth century led to the emergence of a new form of panoramic perception, a sense of detached contemplation of the landscape resulting from the visual overstimulation of the traveller at close range (1986, 52–69). So pervasive was the influence of the train that in 1878 Nietzsche used it as a metaphor for what he perceived as a new visual consciousness: “With the tremendous acceleration of life mind and eye have become accustomed to seeing and judging partially or inaccurately, and everyone is like the traveller who gets to know a land and its people from a railway carriage” (1996, 132). Two influential essays, Charles Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) and Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), explored how these fleeting perceptions shaped new forms of subjectivity in a different but related context, namely the hypervisual arena of the modern city (cf. Crary 1990, 23–24).

It was cinema that would come to embody this new visual consciousness, and theories exploring the subject positions created by the cinematic apparatus soon followed. While the figureheads of Soviet avant-garde cinema, notably Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, were interested in the revolutionary potential of cinematic images—their potential to mobilise spectators—post-Lacanian film theory tackled the flipside of this potential by arguing that classical Hollywood cinema produced a pleasurable illusion of a coherent world held together by the camera/viewer, a regression into imaginary completeness for the spectator (Baudry 1974–1975; Metz 1977). In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey explored one of the ideological dimensions of the scopophilic pleasure offered by Hollywood, arguing that classical cinema posits the male spectator as the subject of the gaze while reducing the female body to the status of a fetishised visual object. At the same time, Mulvey recognises cinema’s potential to challenge patriarchal ideology and create new, active subject positions for female spectators (1988). Cinema’s role in shaping modern visual consciousness can hardly be overestimated, but it has been supplemented with a flood of new technologies in recent decades. In the early twenty-first century, our lives have become more permeated by multi- and transmedial texts and images than ever before.
If it is true that “[m]odern life takes place onscreen” (1999, 1), as Mirzoeff would have it, the modern proliferation of images has gone hand in hand with a steady stream of image theories. In his introduction to What Is an Image?, Elkins presents the sheer mass of such theories as a both disorienting and liberating predicament: “There is, luckily, no way to summarize contemporary theories of the image” (2011, 1). Mitchell has described this “pictorial turn” (1994, 11–34) as a relatively recent phase in cultural theory in analogy to the earlier linguistic turn. However, he also suggests that its origins go back as far as the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce and the language philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1994, 11–13). Indeed, debates about the nature of images emerged in different contexts around the turn of the twentieth century. Other early image theorists include Sigmund Freud, whose investigations into the workings of the psyche frequently engage with visual drives and the signification of dream images, and Henri Bergson, whose critique in Matter and Memory (1896) of “the subject/object opposition” in philosophy entails “defining both consciousness and the material world as ‘images’” (Trifonova 2003, 80). Bergson thus “use[s] the image to bridge the gap between mind and matter” (2003, 80); for him, images are material and perceptual and is not essentially different from matter (2003, 80–81). They also include, as Chris Morash demonstrates in Chap. 8, debates about the theatrical image in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that revolve around the question whether the image should be considered in terms of an external appearance and representation or, conversely, a manifestation of consciousness in the minds of spectators.

These early debates are taken up in more recent theories of the image. Thus, Jacques Lacan returned to Freud in his concept of the mirror stage as a constitutive process of identification that grounds human identity in an illusory image (2006), and recent theorists have in turn drawn on Lacan to explore the imaginary investments offered by contemporary media culture. Peirce and Bergson are the main points of departure for Gilles Deleuze’s monumental “attempt at the classification of images and signs” (1986, xiv) in Cinema 1: The Movement-Image and Cinema 2: The Time-Image (first published in French in 1983 and 1985). Mitchell’s Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (1986), which discusses the signifying mechanisms of images in relation to words by outlining a “rhetoric of images” and exploring “what images say” (1986, 1–2), signals its indebtedness to another

Rancière’s philosophy of the image in the context of modern and postmodern aesthetics has become one of the most influential contributions to image theory in recent years. For Rancière, what is at stake in a discussion of the (artistic) image is not the relationship between image and reality. Because images interact with other images or with the environment in which they appear, their direct referential function (i.e., what the image ‘shows’) may move into the background. Images are rather “operations that couple and uncouple the visible and its signification or speech and its effect, which create and frustrate expectations” (2007, 4–5). Images are active operations, in other words, organised activities between the visible and the sayable (2007, 6). “Image” therefore refers to two things: on the one hand, to a more or less accurate resemblance or similarity, and on the other, to “operations that produce what we call art” (2007, 6). The latter introduce differences as a function of artistic expression. The image according to Rancière relates to and associates with the notion of regime because it is the manifestation of a relationship between the visible and the sayable. What he calls “imageness” therefore does not designate properties or qualities of the visual representations themselves but is rather “a regime of relations between elements and between functions” (2007, 4)—in practice, the way in which visual and verbal contents interact with each other. They mutually condition and contradict each other and out of this irresolvable tension arises ambivalence “in which the same procedures create and retract meaning” (2007, 5). The mutual incongruence and incommensurability of word and image thus becomes the motor of meaning-making in the interpretation of an image.

While based on an altogether different approach, John Berger, another pioneering theorist of the “pictorial turn,” also conceptualises meaning as the result of “functions” when talking about fundamental qualities of photographs: “[…] unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances—with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances—prised away from their meaning. Meaning is the result of understanding functions” (1980, 55). While Berger does not directly explain what he means by “functions,” he continues his argument by inserting a quote from Sontag’s *On Photography*: “And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which
narrates can make us understand” (Sontag 1973, 23). With this, Berger, like Rancière, addresses the need for some operative form of interaction between the visible and the sayable, arguing that images are basically mute except for their immediate referential function. Yet this also implies that they can be made to speak, and that they can be made to speak in different ways. As such, they can lead to active subject positions and stimulate political action, an insight that is also central for recent theories of civic spectatorship advanced by Ariella Azoulay (2008, 2012) as well as Robert Hariman and John L. Lucaites (2007, 2016; see Heusser, Chap. 9). In addition to shedding light on the signifying systems of images, then, recent theories have debated the different and sometimes contradictory ways in which images position their viewers by offering them models of identity—as well as allowing for the active (re-)construction of identities by audiences.

The contributors of Imaging Identity engage with both the image cultures and the image theories that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century and have proliferated in recent decades. While the “modern culture” referred to in the title of the introduction may be an irritatingly vague term, this collection zooms in on a phase of modernity that was inaugurated by a series of social, political and technological transformations and ruptures on the one hand and the emergence of modernist sensibilities on the other. While it acknowledges the continuities between recent image cultures and the visual regimes and practices of earlier phases of modernity, including the nineteenth century (Frey Büchel, Chap. 6) and even early modernity (Riquet, Chap. 12; Graziadei, Chap. 13), its contributors are guided by the conviction that the flood of emerging image cultures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries calls for a re-evaluation of the links between image and identity from textual and cultural perspectives.

Accordingly, the chapters of this volume all explore the constitution of personal, national and cultural identities at the intersection of the verbal and the visual, focusing on the multiple relations between identities, words and images across a range of media. Their authors come from various disciplines including literary studies, media studies, sociology, art history and semiotics, but they share an interest in textuality and narrative. They are attentive to the ways in which the medialities and (im)materialities of modern image culture inflect our conceptions of and articulations of identity, examining and interrogating the cultural and political force of selfies (Kavka, Chap. 2), digital algorithms (Pötzsch, Chap. 3; Schneider, Chap. 4), social media (Sobral, Chap. 10), computer-generated images
(Schneider, Chap. 4), photojournalism (Heusser, Chap. 9), painting (Myers, Chap. 7) and branding (Graziadei, Chap. 13; Baldacchino, Chap. 14), to mention just a few. They also reflect on the image theories that emerged in the same time span—from early theorists such as Peirce (Schneider, Chap. 4) and Yeats (Morash, Chap. 8) to influential twentieth-century models like those proposed by Roland Barthes (Kavka, Chap. 2) and Jacques Derrida (Reifenstein, Chap. 5), as well as more recent theories by thinkers such as Hariman and Lucaites (Heusser, Chap. 9) and Jill Walker Rettberg (Pötzsch, Chap. 3).

THE IDENTITY OF IMAGES

Before we discuss some of the specificities of the new image cultures in more detail, however, let us briefly engage with the identity of images themselves, an issue whose philosophical implications are explored in different chapters of this book through the work of Jacques Derrida (Reifenstein, Chap. 5), the semeiotics of Charles S. Peirce (Schneider, Chap. 4) as well as theories of the digital archive (Pötzsch, Chap. 3). As many scholars agree, a unified definition of ‘image’ seems to be as impossible as an exhaustive overview of different conceptions of the image. The former of these impossibilities is addressed by Mitchell when he states that “the word image is notoriously ambiguous” (2005, 2; emphasis in original) and can refer, among other things, to

- a physical object (a painting or sculpture) and a mental, imaginary entity, a psychological *imago*, the visual content of dreams, memories, and perception. It plays a role in both the visual and verbal arts, as the name of the represented content of a picture or its overall formal gestalt [...] ; or it can designate a verbal motif, a named thing or quality, a metaphor or other “figure” [...] . It can even pass over the boundary between vision and hearing in the notion of an “acoustic image.” And as a name for likeness, similitude, resemblance, and analogy it has a quasilogical status as one of the three great orders of sign formation, the “icon.” (2005, 2)

Etymology is a useful starting point if we wish to sort through this conceptual disarray, but it raises as many questions as it answers. As Raymond Williams points out, two tensions have characterised the various meanings of the word and their evolution since the thirteenth century. Firstly, the word has oscillated between material and mental references; between the image as “a physical figure or likeness” on the one hand and a “mental
conception” on the other (1983, 158). Secondly, and relatedly, it has served to designate both representations and copies (an understanding of ‘image’ that is implicit in the function of Jane Eyre as a model for the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine, discussed by Nicole Frey Büchel in Chap. 6) and creative processes (this understanding of the image is crucial for Chris Morash’s discussion of W. B. Yeats’s conception of the image as both generative of and resulting from a collective mental being with revolutionary potential in Chap. 8). Thus, ‘image’ is connected both to ‘imitation’—a word with which it has a “probable root relation”—and its cognate ‘imagination’ (Williams 1983, 158).

Williams goes on to discuss two important specific meanings of the term that embody this tension, and both are particularly relevant for the present collection. The first of these is the literary image; the image as trope, poetic figure or, more broadly, textual concept. The literary image has both material and mental components: it exists as much on the page, in the form of words (or, in the case of, say, visual metaphors in painting or film, in the form of ‘images’), as in the minds of readers as they are asked to link one concept to another for which it provides an image. The contributors of this collection discuss the crafting of identities through such literary images in various contexts, ranging from the highly figurative language of rap (Sobral, Chap. 10) to the postmodern pastoral imagery of John Banville’s fiction (Myers, Chap. 7), self-fashioning of diasporic identity through literary models (Frey Büchel, Chap. 6) and the figurative appeal of islands in providing metaphors for either unified or relational identities (Riquet, Chap. 12; Graziadei, Chap. 13).

The second meaning of the word, which according to Williams seems to have become particularly prominent, is “‘perceived reputation’, as in the commercial brand image or a politician’s concern with his image,” a use of the term whose “relevance has been increased by the growing importance of visual media such as television” (158; boldface in original). If Williams was thinking of television in 1976, recent decades and years have seen the rise of ever new visual forms of expression in multiple media and channels that allow both public figures and ordinary citizens to fashion and curate their own public image and that of others—as well as the image of geographical, political and cultural entities. Several chapters address this shaping and transmission of public images through different channels, including selfies circulated via social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Kavka), music videos and online news platforms (Sobral), video messages circulated on the internet (Frank), photojournal-