

## Computable imagery

### Composition and positioning on and with social media

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The images produced, compiled, and shared on and with social media platforms are preceded by formal aesthetic acts of submission and enablement ([Social Media](#)), which – according to our thesis – can be reconstructed if platform and image analysis are brought together. For this purpose, we propose the concept of *positioning* as a meta-analysis category that complements compositional analysis. The meta-analysis makes it possible to take into account the social dimension, which goes beyond the compilation of individual images and is precisely where it becomes apparent. This is because the algorithmic selection of computable shapes and data – depending on the platform – specifically hides or displays certain representations.



Figure 1: Detail of Arena Chapel frescoes: *The Arrest of Christ*:  
[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cappella\\_degli\\_Scrovegni#/media/Datei:Giotto\\_-\\_Scrovegni\\_-\\_31\\_-\\_Kiss\\_of\\_Judas.jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cappella_degli_Scrovegni#/media/Datei:Giotto_-_Scrovegni_-_31_-_Kiss_of_Judas.jpg) [accessed 05.01.2024]

Pictures that were painted around 700 to 500 years ago were decisive for the art-historically-oriented development of methods. It is based on an idea of imagery that was developed from *one* single picture / *one* subject, the European panel painting (Panofsky, 1975, p. 38; cf. critique Pilarczyk & Mietzner, 2005; Müller, 2012). The frescoes by Giotto (see fig. 1) and the works of Michelangelo and Raphael, which inspired Imdahl (1980) and Panofsky (1975) to develop their methods, are originally part of an architectural and painterly *Gesamtkunstwerk*

and are narratively and formally related to the pictures arranged alongside, above, and below them. In the history of its reception and analysis, however, the individual image has prevailed

Suggested citation: Carnap, Anna & Flasche, Viktoria (2024): Computable imagery: Composition and positioning on and with social media. In: DFG Netzwerk Transformative Bildlichkeit (Ed.): *Abschlusspublikation*. <http://publikation.bild-netzwerk.de>

(e.g. The Creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel), which at most includes the composition *with* other images in the analysis retrospectively. At first glance, the frescoes are maximally contrasted with those from an influencer's Instagram profile (Fig. 2: Partial view of Kylie Jenner's Instagram profile). Although at second glance the visual language of the Renaissance

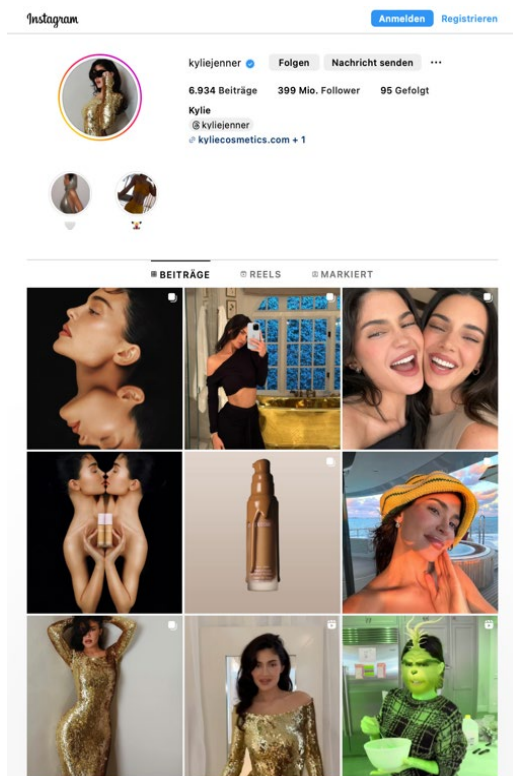


Figure 2: Screenshot of Kylie Jenner's Instagram profile: <https://www.instagram.com/kyliejenner/> [accessed 16.01.2024]

is reproduced here, the key moment for our argument is not the *individual* image, but the media framing that Instagram offers in this case. The images published on social media platforms always appear together with other images, in the aesthetic and algorithmic ordering logic of the respective platform.

### Challenges of computable imagery

If images that appear and are shared in the context of social media are the focus of research interest, the algorithmically arranged, framed, and personalized (i.e. user-specific) *synopsis* of the images by the platform requires further development of the image science analysis

categories. The following formal aspects are crucial in this regard:

*At the interface level*, the images are formally framed, i.e. the platform not only specifies the size ratio, but also separates the images from each other with windows or grids. In the currently dominant platform interfaces, feeds dominate the display, i.e. vertically ordered grids that are optimized for the practice of scrolling with smartphones held upright (vertically). This gesturally oriented optimization is accompanied by the fact that not the single image, but the arrangement of several images next to each other or below each other is the most common view.

Each image is also framed by attention-economic information about the image, which provides information about how often the image has been seen, liked, and reposted. Images that have gained a lot of attention so far are algorithmically preferred, i.e. displayed at the

top of followers' feeds. This means that at the level of the algorithmically personalized feed, the images of the followed social media users appear in a predetermined order. The individual image therefore always appears to be (pre)set in relation to other images.

With these formal-informational framework provisions of the platforms<sup>1</sup> in mind, three challenges for the interpretation of computable imagery can be determined in relation to the classic analysis grid:

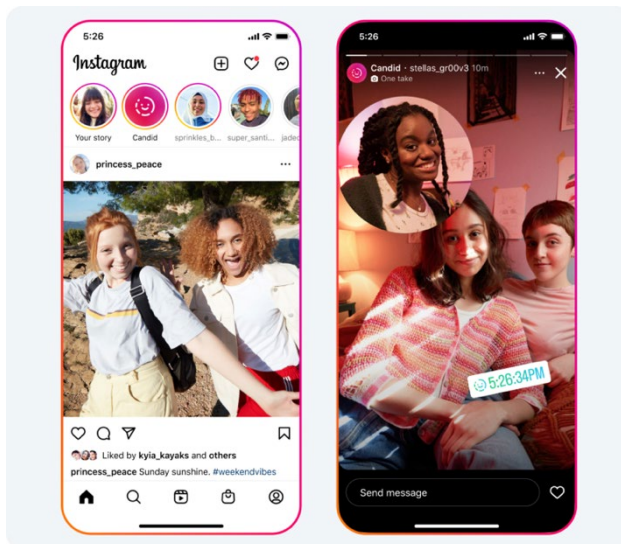


Figure 3: Image information in Instagram images:  
<https://about.fb.com/news/2022/12/sharing-features-on-instagram-notes-group-profiles-and-more/> [accessed 05.01.2024]

First, the analysis of planimetric composition in the context of social media is challenged by determining what the focused image is in the first place. Is the platform-specific framework or interface of the app included in the image analysis? Is the attention-economic information (e.g. number of likes) also interpreted? Are the pictures shown together framed as a collaged overall composition? The character of imagery is further complicated

by the fact that text-image compositions are often shared (such as memes) and pure text panels and videos are part of the respective image tableau (Przyborski, 2018; Langford, 2021).

Secondly, the perspective identification loses its meaningfulness or must be contextualized when taking into account the display options and additional information that are placed over the image like an additional layer. This is because in the collaged overall composition, the perspective of the image producers, who position the image recipients in a certain way in relation to what is shown via the visually conveyed horizon line, can no longer be clearly

<sup>1</sup> We are guided by the analytical steps of Imdahl (1980 with reference to Panofsky 1975): 1. Planimetric composition: Here the aim is to grasp the measurable relations – the dominant surfaces, colors, and lines (Schäffer 2009: 216) – between the pictorial elements. 2. Perspective projection: Here the local relations between the image and the points of view that arise when looking at it are examined. 3. Scenic choreography: Here, the directions of movement and thus the actional relations are examined. (The order of each analysis step may vary.)

determined. There is no longer a single point of view, no vanishing point, no central perspective; accordingly, the platform images appear flat in a two-dimensional sense. Nevertheless, it is possible to analyze a frequently adopted perspective, a perspective typical of an account (for example, in the case of "Neo" in Schreiber (2023), the close-up shot, the fragmented body).

Thirdly, the platform stages each image through framing and ranking, i.e. the platform has the primary framing power of the pictorial action (the scenic choreography). Via the platform-specific calls to action – *heart/like, repost, comment* – the platform choreographs the interaction of the image viewers; the algorithm promotes an affect-appellative, reaction-enhancing way of looking at the image: *look at me (exactly like this), be horrified, think I'm beautiful, rejoice with me, comment on me*, etc. (David, 2021; [Affect](#)). Thus, the scenic choreography of the individual image corresponds with (or diverges from) the scenic choreography of the platform and both correspond with (or diverge from) the situational, milieu-specific, difference-based relationship of the image viewers or app users, their pre-positioned *positioning possibilities* (Carnap et al., 2023). Within the interface tableau, the positioning is co-determined by the interaction between the individual image and the overall tableau, or by the scrolled image appearance, by the reactions of the viewer/user to the specific, equally produced photographic reality ([Photography](#)).

This means that the pictorially, photographically, aesthetically, and algorithmically organized relations of computable pictoriality culminate at the level of analysis of the scenic choreography. A compositional analysis of computable imagery can therefore start with the scenic choreography and – from here, so to speak, in a second reflection loop – (re)interpret the formal-informational framework conditions, with the aim of (somewhat better) understanding the positioning processes of the depicted scene. For example, TikTok videos of two twelve-year-old friends could be interpreted, among other things, as responses to the gendered demands of the adult world, which are addressed, imitated, and sometimes rejected in the videos (Carnap & Flasche, 2020); the mirror selfies of young people on Instagram who have experienced education-biographical rejection could be interpreted as a way to recognize and position each other as normal and belonging (Carnap et al., 2023). Such

a far-reaching sociogenetic classification of the analysis results is based on the combination of several types of data (transcripts, artifacts, platform structure).

**Conclusion: Transformative imagery = transformation of compositional analysis?**

The *transformative* aspect of computable imagery is shown here by the change and transgression of the formal compositional categories. The composed image, the tableau transformed by the algorithmically organized process of scrolling, is still an image made in a certain way, a produced image, the result of a process in which (different) visible aspects were placed in a relationship: (com/con (Latin) = together; ponere (Latin) = to put, to place). As a composed image, it can basically be reconstructed. The emphasis on the position in the reconstruction process starts (as usual) with the production process (what was *assembled*?) and expands it to include the specific settings that preceded the production process and emerge from it (new, different, the same).

An analytical model that accepts the challenges mentioned above and builds on the existing model can start with Panofsky's ideological expansion of image interpretation, according to which not only a clearly identifiable actor/author determines the composition of the image, but also the historical context of experience specifically shapes the image in each case.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the positioning on the assumption that the intrinsic logic of the pictorial is revealed in the formal composition ties in with Imdahl's focus on iconics. She goes beyond this in a power-critical way by taking into account technical and algorithmic as well as social prerequisites – the discursive conditions of having become. After all, every practically completed positioning is preceded by already having been positioned in society. Positioning can be used to reconstruct the constitutive conditions of appearance that are made on/off the platform. The positioning reveals the fact that the images have become, while the images themselves (can) respond to the fact that they have become.

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<sup>2</sup> Panofsky's achievement consists, among other things, in the fact that he did not relate his interpretation solely to panel paintings, but to cultural expressions *of all kinds*, as he illustrates with the example of hat tipping (Panofsky 1932/1992).

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