W.J.T. Mitchell’s Image Theory

W.J.T. Mitchell – one of the founders of visual studies – has been at the forefront of many disciplines such as iconology, art history and media studies. His concept of the pictorial turn is known worldwide for having set new philosophical paradigms in dealing with our vernacular visual world. This book will help both students and seasoned scholars to understand key terms in visual studies – pictorial turn, metapictures, literary iconology, image/text, biopictures or living pictures, among many others – while systematically presenting the work of Tom Mitchell as one of the discipline’s founders and most prominent figures. As a special feature, the book includes three comprehensive, authoritative and theoretically relevant interviews with Mitchell that focus on different stages of development of visual studies and critical iconology.

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Living Pictures

Edited by Krešimir Purgar
Dedicated to my dear colleague, Žarko Paić
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Among all the people to whom I should be grateful for the appearance of this book, some of them obviously I cannot thank enough. Tom Mitchell is not just the subject of this book, and he is not only the major topic of all the articles in this volume; he was, and still is, the *spiritus movens* of my whole intellectual enterprise and scholarly career. When we first met in person, at the Visual Culture Now conference at New York University in 2012, my main task there was to “clear the ground” for him to come to the Visual Studies as Academic Discipline conference, which I was co-organizing in Zagreb in the fall of 2013. We met again several times between these two occasions, as well as a few times after he had come to Croatia. Although I had been following his books and articles long before we met, it was only after I knew him personally that the idea for this book came forth. On any other occasion I would always try to keep strictly separate my professional interests from personal preferences, but in this case that pattern changed radically. When I met Tom, not only did it occur to me that he deserved a book like this, but I realized that I wanted to be the one to put this book together. Aside from everything else that usually comes to mind, I thank Tom primarily for that. It is an honor for me to have had the opportunity to work on this volume.

Fourteen people to whom I am also extremely grateful are, of course, the authors and contributors to this book, without whose commitment none of this would have been possible. I thank them not only for having contributed to our mutual endeavor, but also for showing me that there are always so many things to be discovered anew, that so many new readings of topics that have seemingly been exhausted are always possible, and for reassuring me that we are on the right path. I also thank my publisher, Routledge, as well as my editors, Felisa Salvago-Keyes and Christina Kowalski, for having accepted my proposal and for making the publishing process run as smoothly as possible. Three anonymous referees gave very positive assessments of the initial concept of the book, and I am grateful to them for having given the green light.
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Time-consuming and challenging projects like this, where so many people are involved on so many sides, always come down eventually to people who probably provide the most important help but whose names are not supposed to appear on the pages of the book in any other way but this. The role of these caring persons is much more than just giving moral support in everyday routines or dispelling the doubts that every author sooner or later has to face. One such person for me is my wife, Mirela, to whom I am immensely grateful for being my primary purpose in life.

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K.P.
Introduction

Krešimir Purgar

If anyone is hardcore visual studies, it’s me.

W.J.T. Mitchell

At the very end of his most recent book – Image Science – W.J.T. Mitchell poses a question in a somewhat rhetorical vein asking what, in the end, image science is, and whether something like that can exist after all – that is, after all the books, articles, lectures and graduate students to which he dedicated himself over the forty years of his career. He readily confesses that, if the answer could make any sense, then it would have to do with something of a decidedly hybrid nature, between “hard” and “soft” sciences, nature and culture. Drawing comparisons with boxing and a wrench, he describes image science not only as a tool for understanding or analyzing images (the “wrench” metaphor), but also as a way of interfering with them, making contact with them and ultimately fighting them (the “boxing” metaphor). According to Mitchell, images are always already responsible for two basic types of relation that exist in the world and are practically unavoidable in two crucial ways: intersubjective and interobjective. In the first case, images serve to instigate communicative action in order to tighten relations between sender and receiver, leading eventually to emotionally charged responses, as in iconoclastic gestures, pornography or other kinds of “undesirable” pictures. In the second case, images serve to establish a representational bond among objects, between images themselves and the objects they represent. Seen in this way, the science of images does not have to deal only with the objects of its enquiry proper but is always itself put under scrutiny by the very objects with which it is striving to come to terms.

The objective of the present volume is to show how this paradoxical intertwining of images and their science came into being – not only how it developed in time through many of Mitchell’s writings, but also how it influenced major shifts in contemporary theorizing on images and their impact on culture, politics and media. As with every influential author, these two aspects – personal achievements and general disciplinary
advances – will prove inseparable. However, it should be mentioned that when disciplinary questions of image science are concerned, it is not normal to receive the credit for one and the other at the same time. The reason for this can be sought in precisely what Mitchell sees as fundamental to image science: the way in which contemporary visual disciplines, like visual studies or Bildwissenschaft, “attack” both images and their beholders, as in a boxing match, while at the same time trying to “make peace” with both images and beholders in a kind of mutually acceptable disciplinary discourse. The main problem with visual studies – the discipline with which Thomas Mitchell is mainly associated – is, according to its most prominent antagonists, twofold: the lack of disciplinary rigour in analyzing (art) images, on the one hand, and excessive inclusivity that renders the difference between art and nonart objects invisible or even obsolete, on the other. I will discuss this a little later.

The first aim of this book is to show that these “problems with visual studies” are exactly what Mitchell considers its principal accomplishments: the creation of turbulences on the borders of various established disciplines and its efforts to address the issue of their purported self-sufficiency. The second aim is to show that image science cannot base itself on a set of premises, no matter how reliable or trustworthy, in the expectation that it will remain intact over the course of time. It is not that Mitchell’s various interventions in the humanities and social sciences ever implied shortcomings in semiotics, psychoanalytical theory or gender studies per se, or that when these disciplines were applied to different objects he ever found them unworthy of enquiry; it is just that Mitchell never believed any of them could stringently define what images are, what they do, let alone “what they want”. The third aim of the book is, therefore, to show how such a precarious discipline – as visual studies may probably be called – is in fact the least ideologically biased way that we have today to engage with images and with their multifaceted incarnations. But none of these aims would be possible had there been no Tom Mitchell and his intellectually provoking ideas, clearly presented in his twenty-three books (to date) and innumerable articles and translations (to all of which the “Resources” section at the end of this volume makes due reference).

If a wider scope is more important than any of these individual aims, then the foremost purpose of W.J.T. Mitchell’s Image Theory: Living Pictures is to situate Mitchell’s work in the relatively short history of visual studies while demonstrating how several of his key terms have helped not just to rearticulate our familiar notions of image analysis, but also to point to some of the directions that contemporary scholarship on images might or should take. A reading of the chapters in this book – many of which have been written by former students of Mitchell – should prove that it is not only the extremely wide scope of knowledge about different kinds of images and a jargon-free writing style that he has passed on...
to his students and readers, which should in some way be transferred to the pages of this volume. Much more important is the specific way that Mitchell has with pictures and their disciplinary or indisciplinary theories. In my opinion, his first well-known book, *Iconology* (1986), brings onto the intellectual market not just provocative insights about image/text relations but, more importantly, a sort of “disciplinary relaxation”, one that would soften disciplinary borders in the following decades and mitigate the strict divisions that existed between art history, literary theory, Marxism and gender studies.

One might say that this process of permissiveness of intellectual ideas was already under way, especially after Jean-François Lyotard proclaimed the end of “the great narratives” of the past in his *La Condition postmoderne* (1979) and after the publication of some influential books of the early 1980s, such as *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (1983), edited by Hal Foster. All this undoubtedly created a cultural climate in which it became much easier to perform any kind of interdisciplinary work, and not just in the humanities. It comes as no surprise that processes associated with “the postmodern turn” have been closely linked to culture, and particularly visual culture. The postmodern turn can be understood as a set of practices that existed and was performed during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and which was also concerned with the nascent methodology of visual studies which was gradually taking its (in)disciplinary shape during these three decades. In my opinion, the importance of yet another book from the 1980s in shaping the context of what would become known as visual studies should not be overlooked: *L’età neobarocca* written by the Italian semiotician Omar Calabrese in 1987.

There is one recurrent trope in Calabrese that reminds me irresistibly of the pictorial turn: the notion of excess. The neo-baroque paradigm might be compared to the pictorial turn inasmuch as the excess of which Calabrese is speaking is “transformed from a representation of excess into an excess of representation”. The pictorial turn is to an important extent a philosophical and theoretical coming-to-terms with the excess of images. Mitchell explains it in a very similar way to the Italian semiotician: as a sort of anxiety and unrest that predicts an imminent change in the cultural universe. Calabrese contends that the baroque spirit in any given era precedes the actual baroque representations in art and culture; only then does it take some kind of excessive form in order finally to become naturalized or normalized in terms of recurrent visual paradigms or styles. Similarly, Mitchell discerns the first symptoms of the pictorial turn neither in some clearly visible, excessive quantity of images nor in significant changes in their formal structure. He sees the first symptoms of it where there should be no images at all: in language and philosophy.

An important role in the constructive complicating of the visual theory of the time was therefore played by scholars of literary theory – of which Mitchell himself was one, along with Norman Bryson and Mieke
Bal, among others—who turned to visual topics. Although Bryson and Bal have authored some extremely influential texts that have opened up radically new paths for the so-called new or critical art history (the best example of which is their article “Semiotics and Art History”), this accomplishment had greater impact on the broadening of the theoretical-methodological scope of art history than on the establishment of some new, more general and more inclusive science of images. They introduced to the old discipline what was considered to be a new set of tools (semiotics, psychoanalysis, gender studies) in order to explain artworks of the past from a radically modern perspective, more adjusted to the needs of the contemporary audience and contemporary theory.\(^\text{5}\)

However, as Mitchell suggested, this new perspective was still not new enough compared to the essentially changed paradigm of the ways in which people make sense of the world: in other words, any radically new approach had to take into account the pictorial turn. His interventions in *Iconology* and *Picture Theory* were in direct opposition to what Bal and Bryson were doing at the time; that is, Mitchell forcefully rejected the attempt to “linguistify” art history because he thought that “the linguistic turn” and its methods based on language as a master-narrative for theory could no longer hold. As we will see later in this Introduction, as well throughout the whole book, “rather than colonize art history with methods derived from textual disciplines”, Mitchell wanted to “strike back at the empire of language”.\(^\text{6}\) Basically, this was his Weltanschauung, which served as a firm ground for him to bring into the discussion three important things: (1) a new theoretical apparatus as a sort of modulation of reality itself; (2) a rereading of existing literature in order to reconceptualize seemingly neutral notions such as image, text or media; and (3) bringing back images to the position that Charles Sanders Peirce called “the firstness” of the image in the production of meaning and emotion.

Another example that proves that changes within the discipline of art history alone could not have led to putting the question of pictures as such to the forefront of intellectual debate, and that divergent interests between art history and a general science of images were increasingly apparent, is the above-mentioned collection of essays, *The Anti-Aesthetic*. One of the contributors to Foster’s volume was a renowned theorist of modern and contemporary art, Rosalind Krauss, whose article was titled “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”. With this article she definitively joined the not so large community of scholars (to which Bal and Bryson also belonged) who had opened up a new and different kind of discourse. She showed, for instance, that the existing historical telos that linked – to follow her example – the classic equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius set in the middle of the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome with spatial interventions in Yucatán in 1969 by Robert Smithson had become highly improbable. What was earlier considered by art historians to be the natural state of a sculpture – its site, its home and its place – in the late nineteenth century
in Rodin’s *Balzac* and *Gates of Hell* already “crosses the threshold of the logic of the monument, entering the space of what could be called its negative condition—a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place.” According to Krauss, during the 1950s this “sitelessness” exhausted its epistemological ground and was eventually replaced by complex systems of intervention that reckoned with the sculpture in the expanded field of landscape/not-landscape and architecture/not-architecture. This practice was especially evident in works by Richard Serra, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Dennis Oppenheim and others.

The notion of expansion, however, which Krauss used in her essay, was referring to the expanded field of modernism, not of culture at large. The expansion that she envisioned for art was meant only in terms of new formal and spatial acquisitions in order for sculpture to appropriate an expanded field of artistic vision and not an expanded field of cultural reception. The telos of art history was therefore conveniently adapted in order to accommodate new sources of inspiration following two “analytical lines of modern art”—as had been masterfully presented by Filiberto Menna in the 1970s—and not in order to question any of the naturalized notions of the “artistic sublime”. I mention Krauss’s intervention in Foster’s volume not because I essentially disagree with her assessment of how the “expanded field of sculpture” had to be understood within the trajectory of contemporary art (since in part I do agree with her), but because I do not quite follow the belief that the kind of art and cultural theory presented in *The Anti-Aesthetic* may have led to anything similar to the contemporary science of images. Notwithstanding the great importance and invaluable merits of the book, which I bought and read during one of my summer trips as an undergraduate student of art history in Amsterdam in 1985, it is important to underscore that the type of inter- or nondisciplinary discourse that we today call “visual studies” is not primarily indebted to the tradition of scholarship that this book was promoting.

I mention *The Anti-Aesthetic* also because those who do not share the opinion I have just expressed may help us to better situate Mitchell’s role in establishing the discipline of visual studies. One of them is the Australian scholar Ross Woodrow, who a few years ago said:

the importance of Mitchell’s *Iconology* does not match his own recent assessment of it as the launching text for the study of “visual culture, visual literacy, image science and iconology” and certainly his claim that it was written in the mid-1980s at a time when “notions such as visual culture and a new art history were nothing more than rumors”.

Woodrow contends that Mitchell’s statement “does not ring true considering every art student in progressive art schools in Australia, if not elsewhere,
Krešimir Purgar

had read ... Hal Foster’s anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983) long before approaching Mitchell’s *Iconology in the library*. Acknowledging, somewhat ironically, Mitchell’s accomplishments in subverting the twentieth-century methodological meaning of iconology, Woodrow says that the book in question – *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* – depended so heavily on language, history and allusions that it practically needed no illustrations, apart from a few line diagrams. The Australian author says that during the 1980s two of the most significantly scrutinized essays in art schools were those by Louis Marin on Nicolas Poussin and by Michel Foucault on Velázquez’s painting *Las Meninas*, implying probably that certain other texts (and not Mitchell’s *Iconology*) should be credited with the primacy of influence in what was already under way under the term “new art history”.

If that is, more or less, what Woodrow ultimately thinks, then he and Rosalind Krauss on the one hand and Tom Mitchell on the other are not talking about the same thing. Although I agree that in Mitchell’s *Iconology* one did not necessarily have to grasp the contours of the nascent discipline of visual studies, the book was *not*, nevertheless, offered by its author as an advance in art history. Whether art historians felt particularly addressed by its spirit is completely another story, which has to do with the intellectual climate of the early 1980s in which art historians, among others, were “interpellated” by the radically changing disciplinary foundations of the contemporary world. The change was brought about by the tremendous proliferation of images produced outside of the consecrated realm of art, and the understanding of that process was in one way or another already present in authors like Michael Baxandall, Norman Bryson, Svetlana Alpers and Keith Moxey. Mitchell’s *Iconology*, and even more so his *Picture Theory* (1994), should therefore be credited with having encouraged a change of disciplinary formations in all disciplines within the humanities that felt that the primacy and exclusivity of “pure” or “high” art was giving way before the vernacular visuality of everyday culture. What ensued was a collision of political and ideological interests on a much larger scale, which has been succinctly formulated by Margaret Dikovitskaya:

The scholarship that rejects the primacy of art in relation to other discursive practices and yet focuses on the sensuous and semiotic peculiarity of the visual can no longer be called art history – it deserves the name of visual studies.

Ironic as it may sound, the visual studies that flourished in the Anglo-American world (as well as the *Bildwissenschaft* that was rooted in the German-speaking countries), found just as firm ground in the methodology of the most prominent European art historians as in the deconstructivist methods of poststructuralism; but in spite of that, visual studies was
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in the beginning largely seen as alien formation. Horst Bredekamp convincingly demonstrated how deeply German image science was indebted to art historians like Aby Warburg, Heinrich Wölfflin and Erwin Panofsky; this debt was obviously defined not so much in terms of interdisciplinary scope but primarily by their demonstration of a general interest in the functions of all images (Warburg), a very structured methodology (Wölfflin), and a sincere interest in the nascent technology of moving images (Panofsky). It seems that the fate of the seminal Bredekamp article “A Neglected Tradition? Art History as Bildwissenschaft” was two-fold: first, it succeeded in providing a different genealogy of modern art history in such a way that would present its progenitors as very serious in their efforts to make of art history a more inclusive “science” known today as Bildgeschichte or Bildwissenschaft; but second, and even more importantly, it proved less successful in backing up all the efforts of contemporary visual studies scholars, whose attempts to follow (in one way or the other) the paths of their illustrious predecessors were largely disregarded. Bredekamp sees this oversight as a tremendous failure, particularly because American art historians have introduced numerous different kinds of insight into the European scholarly context and vice versa. He regrets that

although in the English-speaking world there are of course many art historians like David Freedberg who represent art history as Bildwissenschaft, one has the impression that, for example, Barbara Stafford and James Elkins are perceived not as regular art historians any more, but as heretical “visual studyists” and that W.J.T. Mitchell is seen not as a builder, but as a burner of bridges. This kind of camp thinking is disastrous for both sides – and for art history on both sides of the Atlantic. The separation of visual studies from art history and the retreat of the more conservative members of this discipline onto precious little islands would put an end to art history as Bildgeschichte. The idea that art should not interfere with rapidly growing areas of visual-cultural (nonart) experiences became particularly obvious when the concurrent process of various “interfering” theories apparently went out of control after the “Questionnaire on Visual Culture” was published in issue 77 of the famous October journal in 1996. As stated in an interview with Hal Foster given to Marquard Smith in 2008, this questionnaire was “cooked up” by Rosalind Krauss and Foster himself and was meant as a provocation inspired, as the story goes, by the suspicion that Krauss and Foster had “about certain aspects of visual studies as it was framed at the time (1996)”. It is now generally known that the editors of October used the “questionnaire” in order to (dis)qualify the emerging discipline of visual studies as a threat to people’s ability to learn, to appreciate and to
understand art in the society of spectacle in which they are overwhelmed by the simplicity of choices that are offered to them indiscriminately every day. In the interview with Smith, held twelve years after the questionnaire, Hal Foster admits that much more than just an intellectual quarrel was at stake then, as it is today:

There is a dialectic of Art History and Visual Studies, too, in which the latter term opens up the former, while the former term keeps the latter rigorous. Isn’t that what interdisciplinary work does, that is, if it is truly “inter” and “disciplinary”? In any case I don’t see Art History and Visual Studies as quite as antagonistic as they were presented then; and even then I felt there were resources for Visual Studies within Art History and vice versa. The October issue was driven by two primary concerns. The first was the way in which Visual Studies was too taken by the visual, by a fixation on the image, a fixation long questioned in advanced art. (Maybe we drew the line too quickly from “the visual” to “the virtual”, but it seemed Visual Studies had done so for us.) The second had to do with the anthropological turn … and the atrophying of the mnemonic dimension of art as a potential result.  

Perhaps it is still too soon to grasp whether the misunderstandings between art history – as the “master-discipline” that was the first to deal systematically with visual artifacts, a status it has been claiming for a couple of centuries – on the one hand, and visual studies – a much newer “indiscipline” – on the other, were actually provoked by “turf policing” of the visual areas of culture, or whether these misunderstandings are predominantly ideological in nature. Should the former be the case, then Mieke Bal is probably right when she claims that visual studies may be accused of considering the contemporary culture as “primarily visual”, thus isolating its pictorial aspects and somehow denigrating all other ways in which culture is being created every day. Mieke Bal refers to this primacy of the pictoriality as “visual essentialism”, and remarks that visual studies paradoxically stumbled upon this kind of essentialism “in the paranoid corners of the art history” to which visual studies should have offered an alternative in the first place. If it were a question only of which particular discipline is responsible for overseeing the realm of the visual, then it would probably not be so important which discipline that might be, as Bal herself contends, because disciplinary boundaries or turf policing are today so dependent on individual understandings of terms such as discipline, art and the visual that the meaning of essentialism in this context becomes practically useless.

Let me explain this a little more. Essentialism does not seem to be the problem when one essentially deals with images or with animals or with the human brain or with any other aspect of human
activity provided the concrete activity leads to a better understanding of any one of them. A “bad” kind of essentialism occurs when one’s approach is based on an unquestionable set of premises that always lead to results that could have been predicted even before the analysis started and not, as Mieke Bal has it, when one focuses on that “purity-assuming cut between what is visual and what is not”.

This “bad” kind of essentialism should be more appropriately called ideology, and I believe that visual studies might easily be credited with a deliberate lack of any political, disciplinary or identitarian preference. But visual studies is indeed essentially interested in the visual, although some new interventions disclose that this does not seem to be its most contested feature.

Nicholas Davey, for instance, has recently noted in visual studies a kind of reverse side of essentialism that he calls “the ontogenetic fallacy”. With that he refers to a set of founding principles of visual studies that lead this discipline to a neglect of a fundamental distinction that exists between the ontogenetic characteristics of the designed object and the artwork, which is a failure that “not only threatens the variety of study within visual culture but also disrupts the possibility of radical critique within aesthetic experience”. On the other hand, as he puts it, “hermeneutical aesthetics is of strategic importance for bringing to light what is at stake within the study of visual culture” because “hermeneutical aesthetics insists on making an important ontological distinction within visual discourse between a designed object and an artwork”. Davey thinks that visual studies as a discipline overrides this essential distinction, which eventually and regretfully leads to a dissolution of the very concept of art.

With this assertion Davey very succinctly encompasses and expresses once again all the previous “fears and fallacies” that existed around the study of visual culture to which Mitchell refers in his seminal article “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture”, which appeared in 2002. While in this article he was not directly polemicizing with October’s “Questionnaire on Visual Culture”, it is clear that Mitchell felt the need to bring art historians and other members of the concerned community face to face with their most latent and most paradoxical anxiety of all – the fear of images. Clearly, we are not talking here about the fear of pictures as works of art but about the fear of “the liquidation of art as we have known it”, once all images, artistic or not, are drowned in the swamp of the indiscriminate field of visual studies. It is interesting that all the myths and fallacies about the new image science that Mitchell enlists relate to the anxiety at breaking the boundaries between traditionally distinct areas of life and scholarly interest – such as those that separate high art from popular art, single medium from mixed media, history from anthropology – which brings to mind the discussion on essentialism and how deeply the radically antiessentialist and indisciplinary attitudes of visual studies have permeated the contemporary theory.
Does it come as a surprise, then, when in one of his subsequent articles Mitchell claims that “there are no visual media and that all media are mixed media”? It surely does not, as this assertion deserves to beanthologized as yet another of the many disciplinary extensions inherent to visual studies to which this book gives due tribute. In “There Are No Visual Media”, Mitchell asserts that, in the wake of postmodernism, any idea of a pure visual art, let alone a pure medium, should be abandoned. Mitchell was referring here to the high-modernist battle that Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, among others, fought, “insisting on the purity and specificity of media, rejecting hybrid forms, mixed media and anything that lies ‘between the arts’ as a form of ‘theater’ or rhetoric that is doomed to inauthenticity and second-rate aesthetic status”. If one wants to come to terms with theoretical claims that not so long ago ruled (neo-)avant-garde essentialism – which today seem utterly outdated – Mitchell proposes a solution: “for art historians today, the safest conclusion would be that the notion of a purely visual work of art was a temporary anomaly, a deviation from the much more durable tradition of mixed and hybrid media”.

But then a logical question ensues: what was this battle fought over; why would we need a pure medium, after all? Do we really need to “deconstruct” art theory or art history in order to unveil their meaning-generating processes and, more importantly, is visual studies the best candidate for the assignment? It is my understanding, and hopefully this book will prove it, that Mitchell has in fact never cared about disciplinariness, visuality or media, for that matter; what he cares about are objects, phenomena and events. To put it differently, Mitchell’s “image theory”, if we come to agree that there is one after all, consists of a much more complex system of individual cases that may help in structuring our helplessly unstructured picture of the contemporary world. Mitchell’s proposal for visual studies is exactly the opposite of the methodology used by all other branches of the humanities, insofar as he always starts his analysis from the concrete phenomenon to be unveiled, only after which does some kind of systematic structuring (or deliberate lack thereof) arise. For example, the famous “pictorial turn” that he announced in the article published in ArtForum in 1992 had been embedded in his critical assessment of two important books that appeared just at that time: one was the English translation Erwin Panofsky’s Perspective as Symbolic Form, published in 1991, and the other was Jonathan Crary’s Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century, published one year earlier.

At the very beginning of his article, Mitchell mentions that although various models of textuality and discourse that emerged during the twentieth century were already classified by Richard Rorty as a “linguistic turn”, “it does seem clear that another shift in what philosophers talk about is happening, and that once again a complexly related
transformation is occurring in other disciplines of the human sciences and in the sphere of public culture”, a shift that he wants to call the “pictorial turn”. But where exactly did he see the pictorial turn taking place, and is there any systematic interpretation of what it means, how it works, what its main characteristics are? If Mitchell had offered answers to all these questions (which a reader would normally have looked for), then visual studies probably would have become just another discipline with its theoretical apparatuses and ideological agenda – the kind of discipline that creates its object of study according to the discipline’s “rules of engagement” and not according to the object itself. More to the point, the particular symptom or object of the pictorial turn resided specifically in these two books, which Mitchell saw at the time as an allegory of the entire epoch – as a symbol of a renewed interest in visuality.

One could argue that the publication of these two books (one of which was an English translation from the German of a half-century-old essay) is everything but paradigmatic, and that no theory can be based on that fact alone. To such an opinion I counter the following thesis: the purpose of the pictorial turn as a conceptual matter was never to become a theory proper, to organize a body of knowledge or to represent somebody’s point of view. Instead, as theory, it should be regarded – together with Mitchell’s whole project of critical iconology – as a sort of “cultural symptomatology”, as I will propose later in the book. The purpose of the pictorial turn was “only” to mark a shift in people’s behavior by looking for both huge technological changes and imperceptible cultural symptoms, no matter which area of culture those happened to be found in. The “theory” and “discipline” came much later, but, again, not in the guise of textbook knowledge with a fixed set of references that can be applied following general instructions for use, and rather in the form of nondisciplinary tactics of explanatory seeing – which is basically what visual studies is now.

This kind of programmatic de-disciplinarization is paradoxically visible in what turned out to be Mitchell’s most programmatic text: “The Pictorial Turn”. The most frequently quoted passage from that article states:

Whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naive mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial “presence”: it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of a picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality.

The concept of the “picture as a complex interplay” between very disparate fields of enquiry, artistic expressions, media platforms, ideologies and disciplines is both Mitchell’s “political” statement on the nature of his
own theoretical work and on the nature of a discipline that should be indulgent enough to accommodate whatever needs to be assessed from the specific viewpoint of pictorial analysis. Therefore, instead of applying a set of historically established and methodologically “approved” disciplinary rules, Mitchell’s method consists in thorough observation of various artistic, media, political and social phenomena and then in putting them under the scrutiny of a sort of methodology “on demand”. Through his consistent antidisciplinary procedures, and after numerous objects and cases have been analyzed in such a way, a “reversed” kind of theory ensues: one that is based on observations and assessments instead of a priori theoretical premises. The best reconstruction of such a method is offered by Mitchell himself in the article titled “Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science”, in which he sums up what he considers to be the most important terms frequently associated with his work and, as he puts it, “four basic ideas [that] have continually asserted themselves”. These terms are: the pictorial turn, image/picture, metapictures and biopictures. The reader will find numerous references to all of them in this book, as well as explanations of the different uses that Mitchell makes of them. However, for the sake of methodological concerns it is important to realize that these concepts are for Mitchell just indications of various processes of looking, reading and writing that have only eventually – after several years of practical use – deserved to be categorized as “fundamental concepts”. They were not based on a fully developed theoretical overview, but should be regarded as models of reconstruction of verified field evidence. In addition to these four, many more have appeared over the years and become available as appropriate tools of image analysis: for example, the concept of totemism/fetishism/idolatry, then image x text, or living pictures, not to mention Mitchell’s conspicuous insistence on calling his own practice “critical iconology”, which points directly toward a constitution of a new, general science of images.

To deal properly with what appears to be the ontological ground of image science, we must recall the already foundational indisciplinarity of visual studies that Tom Mitchell opted for in his text “Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture”, where he stated that we must make a distinction between “top-down” interdisciplinarity, a “comparative, structural formation that aims to know the overarching system or conceptual totality within which all the disciplines are related”, and the kind of “compulsory” interdisciplinarity characteristic of studies in gender, sexuality and ethnicity “improvised out of a new theoretical object and a political project with its attendant urgencies. They are knowledge projects, but they also have more or less explicit moral and political agendas”. In his more recent, reassessed ideas on this topic, he has stated that, no matter which of the above categories one falls into, “interdisciplinarity turns out to be as nonthreatening to the disciplines as it is to corporate capitalism. It
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just reinstalls the same old disciplinary values of rigorous normativity, productivity, originality, and explanatory power at a higher level”. The latter assertion betrays Mitchell’s general reluctance to take any very firm position in one or another disciplinary trench, which was already visible in his somewhat ambiguous statement in 2002, when he first clearly stated that “visual studies is the study of visual culture”, immediately continuing that

this avoids the ambiguity that plagues subjects like history, in which the field and the things covered by the field bear the same name. In practice, of course, we often confuse the two, and I prefer to let visual culture stand for both the field and its content, and to let the context clarify the meaning.  

I would propose, therefore, following Ian Verstegen’s insights in Chapter 7 of the current volume, that these statements be read as Mitchell’s “surprising disavowals” that characterize visual studies as a general (in)disciplinary enterprise.  

Notwithstanding the fair number of theoretical concepts with which he should be credited, as authors in this collection will show, Mitchell’s image science or iconology is based not on any number of preset key terms, but on the constantly shifting ontologies of the concept of image as such. It goes without saying that the lack of the founding ontological basis for the concept of image has widened enormously the scope of both individual research projects and theoretical overviews within visual studies. The paradoxical nature of the discipline is particularly visible in the twofold parallel process developed out of the attempts of visual studies scholars to demarcate the area of study, on the one hand, and to define the principal objects of study, on the other. It was argued during the Stone Summer Seminar, organized by James Elkins in Chicago in 2008, that, in order to resolve this parallelism, in which the discipline and its object may never come to terms with each other and may continue to deal with strictly separate sets of problems, it would be necessary – if not to answer the essential or essentialist questions about images – at least to create a sort of taxonomical grid in which different kinds of image would strive to find their ontological ground. The reason why visual studies will probably never be able to make its parallel tasks intersect is precisely its radically antiessentialist stance.  

During the Stone Summer Seminar, one of the interlocutors, Gottfried Boehm, asked a very direct question: “How much history is needed to understand our question – What is an image?”. The response that Mitchell gave somehow simultaneously unmasked the whole project of his iconology as a general image science and his personal, fundamental antiontological position: he said that if iconology were to answer questions on the ontology of images, then the best way to approach it would be
to *always historicize, always decontextualize and always anachronize.* These words clearly recall – at least in spirit, if not verbatim – the first *bildwissenschaftliche* attempts made by Aby Warburg in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*. My sense of them is that we cannot grasp the ultimate meaning of any visual artifact, be it a timeless work of art or a simple, seemingly worthless cutout from a magazine, unless we constantly negotiate with a “picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figuraiity”, as Mitchell programmatically stated almost a quarter of a century ago.

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In trying to approach both the enviable time span of Mitchell’s professional career and his disciplinary scope, but also in trying to determine an approach that would do justice to some of the most important of his accomplishments, I decided, with few exceptions, to commission for this volume original essays from both younger and experienced scholars who were in most cases already deeply involved with Mitchell’s work, either by having been his graduate students or by having translated his major works into their mother tongue. I am talking here about scholars who have spent many hours and days with Mitchell not just discussing his concepts in direct conversation but also probing them, disputing them and thus helping these concepts – once they were published – to be clearer and more theoretically relevant. Virtually all the contributors to this book have had an intellectual relationship with the American scholar and, as readers will see, not all of them always go along his line of argumentation.

In a few cases the rule that articles must not have appeared in English prior to being published in this book was deliberately broken, but hopefully for good reason. In this category are two interviews with Mitchell: one was conducted by Andrew McNamara in 1996 (Chapter 5), and the other was given to Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes ten years later (Chapter 10). Both interviews prove that conversation is a completely different form of communication that lets a partner in the dialogue face his own previous assessments and perhaps deal with them more critically from a different angle altogether. A third interview was conducted by Krešimir Purgar on several occasions and during the lunch breaks of various conferences which Mitchell attended between 2013 and 2016. Apart from the above-mentioned scholarly arguments that justify the inclusion of these three interviews, they bring to this volume a particular flavor of intimacy and proximity that is uncharacteristic of scholarly books. Furthermore, they provide an invaluable opportunity for readers to assess the development of Mitchell’s thinking and argumentation as developed and (auto)criticized over time.
The only critical text in this book that has appeared in English prior to its publication here is Timothy Erwin’s chapter, “The Changing Patterns of Iconology: Seven Questions to Mitchell from the Twentieth Century” (Chapter 1 of this volume). As a matter of fact, the text originally appeared under a different title in 1988 in the journal *Works and Days.* The reason for including it here is that it is one of the first assessments to deal more seriously with what would eventually become known as Mitchell’s version of critical iconology, or visual studies, if you like. It occurred to me that Timothy Erwin was not just one of the first critical readers of Mitchell to have grasped the radical novelty of his thinking, which thirty years ago challenged existing disciplinary and interartistic studies. What I found particularly appropriate for this book are the seven questions that Erwin posed to Mitchell at the end of his text, thus having initiated a sort of parallel interlocutory dimension that is present throughout the current volume. Although Mitchell answered the questions in the same issue, posing them again today and reassessing them from the radically changed perspective that digital culture, biopolitics and globalization have brought about, will inevitably bring unexpected insights without the need for them to be answered directly this time.

*W.J.T. Mitchell’s Image Theory* is divided into three main parts, following the traces that the American scholar has left in: (1) developing critical iconology as a general science of images; (2) creating a sort of postdisciplinary or indisciplinary context that has developed as a corollary of the intertwining of visual, image and media studies; and (3) instigating theoretical discourses in fields and about topics contiguous to the purely visual. In Part I, four authors try to delineate the contours of Mitchell’s image theory, discussing it, confronting it and relating it to a much broader context than that claimed by “iconology proper”. For instance, at the very beginning of Chapter 2, Francesco Gori’s “What is an Image? W.J.T. Mitchell’s Picturing Theory”, Gori states that

> the general science of images is what Mitchell calls critical iconology. The adjective ‘critical’ is meant to distinguish it from ‘iconology’ in the strict sense – the philological study of the literary influences in painting and sculpture, and vice versa. Critical iconology, in fact, not only takes into account artistic images and literary *oeuvres*, but opens up the research to ... all kinds of images and discourses.

It does so in order to create a discipline that would go “beyond the sole relations between images and language, studying their migrations across all media”. Gori particularly takes into account Mitchell’s very concept of image – not so much its ontological but its relational ground – and eventually focuses on strategies that Mitchell uses to show how disciplinary questions are transformed, by way of theory, into the specific
kind of life and animism of pictures; or, the other way round, how Mitchell “pictures” his theory, instead of creating a theory of pictures.

In Chapters 3 and 4 György E. Szőnyi and Krešimir Purgar approach the formation of Mitchell’s critical iconology from different perspectives – genealogical in Szőnyi’s essay, cultural in Purgar’s. They give readers the opportunity to construct a trajectory from his first collection of essays “The Language of Images”, the title of which “still bore the ‘linguistic turn’ paradigm”, but whose content was already questioning this paradigm, all the way to iconology as “cultural representations” (Szőnyi) or “cultural symptomatology” (Purgar), in which very few of the key terms of the older discipline have survived. Szőnyi meticulously shows the development, and he points to particular instances in and through which the dissolution of the methodologies of the traditional disciplines was taking place, not just iconology but art history and semiotics, as well as in all other disciplines that insisted on maintaining the metaphysical divide between different sign systems and between art and nonart pictures. Purgar’s chapter concludes that Mitchell definitively overcomes this metaphysical divide by offering even “dinosaurs”, “sheep” and “the Golden Calf” as theoretical tools of a critical iconology. These tools are systematically employed in several of Mitchell’s books to represent one possible way in which iconology (or visual studies) as a flexible (in)discipline can be translated into a visual theory composed of different sets of working methodologies developed “on demand”.

In Part II, the authors consider disciplinary and institutional concerns in relation to visual studies. During the 1990s, the establishment of a new critical practice proved to be highly context-dependent, in terms of both its place within the general academic community and the specific methodologies that in the following years started to differentiate one “school” from the other. Mitchell’s role in these processes cannot be highlighted enough. Nonetheless, we can isolate three principal axes along which image science was gradually taking shape; or, to put it sharply, there are three main points of confrontation that marked the early years of a new visual theory that was named and treated in different ways depending not only on the continent but even the occasion. The first point is the disciplinary establishment of visual studies within the Anglo-American academic world; the second is its disciplinary relation to what was happening elsewhere, primarily in Europe within German Bildwissenschaft, which included Mitchell’s continued communication with Gottfried Boehm and Jacques Rancière; the third point deals with the long-lasting process through which Mitchell gained himself a specific position on both sides of the Atlantic, both affirmed and contested. All three aspects are given extremely informative contextualization in Chapter 6, by Michele Cometa. From his insights we learn not just that the three aforementioned processes are all to be traced as parallel events in the history of visual studies, but also that only if seen together can they reveal a fourth
important point: the open terminology of Mitchell’s image science that would gradually be composed over the course of years, from `imagetext to pictorial turn to biopictures` and onward. Cometa’s overview shows that visual studies is unique as a discipline in having gained prominence institutionally, in having developed methodologically and in having grown terminologically in mutually interdependent processes.

In Chapter 7 Ian Verstegen gives a sort of “archeology” of visual studies, noting that traces of the discipline could already be detected during the 1980s in various activities at the University of Chicago. He states that

although no formal Chicago school existed for visual studies, a more informal arrangement existed for a time in the so-called Laocoön group, and then the Chicago School of Media Theory (CSMT), which was centered on Mitchell’s seminar on media theory and included, among others, [Joel] Snyder, [James] Elkins and Hans Belting (then teaching in Chicago), not to mention the dynamics of the Critical Inquiry editorial board.

This alone would be more than enough to sense that as early as the 1970s one was witnessing a peculiar friction among many different individuals, even if it is impossible to find commonalities among such a diverse group of people. Verstegen develops the argument that, in the academic context of the University of Chicago, Mitchell became famous for his consistent “antifoundationalism” and strong “relativism”, which he carefully nurtured in all phases of his career. However, in order to find out what images really want, Verstegen contends, we need a more direct approach than the one in which “all images are created equal”. In his view, one has to choose whether to go for a theory that does not presuppose any possible meaning of its object of enquiry – and to follow Mitchell – or to accept a less pluralist and more confined sense of image – the road not taken by Mitchell.

This is by all means one of the crucial dilemmas connecting visual studies to its “neighboring” phenomenon of Bildwissenschaft, which flourished in German-speaking countries or, with perhaps less apparent similarities, to Medienwissenschaft, as Jens Schröter discusses in Chapter 8. On the other hand, as Luca Vargiu explains in Chapter 9, the high-profile debate between the most prominent exponents of visual studies and image science – which Tom Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm definitely are – marks just the tip of an iceberg that included some very competent interlocutors in Italy, France and elsewhere who shared the same sensitivity to visual phenomena but who discerned the shifts in image scholarship not in contemporary media, nor in studies on the word/image relationship or vernacular images, but in places where these changes were not so likely to appear – medieval studies, for a start. It

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is extremely interesting throughout all of Part II to read how Mitchell’s variant of iconology has shaken up the complacency (to put it in Michael Ann Holly’s terms) in various disciplines that were not normally affected by his broad range of themes but nevertheless felt addressed by them.

Although Luca Vargiu makes a reference to the important role Hans Belting played in the shaping of Bildwissenschaft as a more object-oriented discipline – as opposed to visual studies, which was considered to be more aware of the ideological context of images – he admits that progress in medieval studies “has its stronger and more meaningful motivations within this discipline, beyond parallelisms, similarities, and any exchanges with other fields of knowledge”, that is to say, beyond what was happening in visual studies. Seen in this way, in spite of the tremendous influence that Hans Belting had in establishing an agenda for Bildwissenschaft, his anthropology of images should not be aligned with what Mitchell was doing on the other side of the Atlantic. Then, perhaps, we would be more ready to follow Schröter’s line of argumentation that Mitchell’s types of interdisciplinarity are not “clear-cut options existing side by side”, but are “aspects or phases of the performative process of the destabilization and restabilization of disciplinary regimes”, a phenomenon clearly visible in German Medienwissenschaft, which was taking shape at about the same time. Schröter confirms that the German version is “similar to visual culture, because its defining term, “media”, “names a problematic rather than a well-defined theoretical object” (as Mitchell puts it in “Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture”).

Part III provides four case studies from fields as diverse as theory of photography, cultural history, political science and queer studies, showing a sort of legacy of Mitchell’s methodology (a methodology that was not always “gentle” in relation to its objects of study) and thus revealing both processes of dissolution of the existing knowledge and clear pathways for new epistemic practices. Moreover, the contributions in Part III all testify to the particular sensitivity not just to specific themes covered by Mitchell himself, but to a much broader spectrum of cultural phenomena that a general science of images and its proponents have identified and analyzed over time. This is perhaps the most important aspect of this book: how to use knowledge to gather new insights and at the same time let methodology challenge its own knowledge-making procedures. This strategy is clearly visible in Chapter 11, by Thomas Stubblefield, when he explains how Mitchell’s reluctance to accept any kind of essentialism may lead to a sort of reversed essentialism, or antideterminism, which falls victim to its own sincere belief in the power of subjectivity. He says that for Mitchell, granting a distinct technical identity to the particular medium (photography, in this case), is like isolating the “being” of a given medium from the social world in which it operates, thus overemphasizing a single aspect of its technical determination. Stubblefield argues that sometimes – and especially when it comes to digital culture and digital
photography – the power of subjectivity is inevitably contingent upon the very same set of rules that it wishes to come to terms with: namely, the digital.

Based on a somewhat “iconoclastic” premise, yet with the same deep sense of understanding the essence of the finest nuances of Mitchell’s writing, is Chapter 12, in which Hannah Higgins discerns a sonic alternative to our overwhelming infatuation with pictures and the spectacle of visuality. Following Mitchell’s metaphor of sound, she proposes that, exactly because images in our societies can be neither avoided nor smashed, we should all become more sensitive to other levels of their communicative agency, not primarily the visual level. Thankfully, it is Mitchell himself who offers the reader an alternative that locates sound at the center of his notion of image, when he writes:

I propose, then, that we treat these … idols in the Nietzschean sense, as icons that can be sounded but not smashed with the hammer – or better, the tuning fork of critical reflection … In my view we must sound the images of the spectacle, not dream of smashing them.34

Higgins points out that this image of Nietzsche’s tuning fork is our alternative, if there is one after all, to the almighty power of images.

The book’s two final interpretations originate from one premise from which the branching of Mitchell’s image theory is clearly visible in different aspects of culture where images are not necessarily in the core interest. In Chapter 13, Maxime Boidy states that although Mitchell is not a political philosopher, there is political philosophy in his iconology. Tacking between insights by Ernesto Laclau, Gustave Le Bon and Jacques Rancière, Boidy draws an original contour of the political body in Mitchell’s image theory claiming, among other things, that Poussin’s painting The Adoration of the Golden Calf to some extent establishes a visual rendering of “populist democracy”. Because populism as a sin can be regarded as the perfect modern example of classical idolatry, which describes people’s veneration of a wrong image instead of the true (word of) God, Boidy endeavors to discover whether we can view the famous Mitchell metapicture as a positive description of the “populist” democratic impulse. John Paul Ricco’s contribution in Chapter 14 can be understood in the same metatheoretical manner: Mitchell is not a queer studies scholar but his image science is, in a way, queer. Ricco writes that Mitchell’s theory is essentially concerned with the nakedness of any image and is constantly pointing to the ways in which an image can function as “showing seeing” and “showing showing”. Image science, then, would be a “science of exhibitionism”. I certainly agree with Ricco that “it is precisely this ‘wildness’ and madness of images that Mitchell has called our attention to, again and again, over the past thirty years”.
Notes

3 Ibid., 62.
4 Another important characteristic of the neo-baroque that makes it somewhat similar to the concept of the pictorial turn is that it rejects normative discourses that try to normalize what may have once been regarded as abnormal or unacceptable and thus make of abnormality a new norm. Calabrese contends that “static epochs” revolve around their systemic center, while “dynamic epochs” favor periphery and boundary, but he is ready to admit that in the era of contemporary baroque these differences are not so sharply visible. On the contrary, as he says, neo-baroque “adopts a limit and yet makes it seem excessive by trespassing on a purely formal level; or, alternatively, [neo-baroque] produces excess and yet refers to it as a limit in order to render acceptable a revolution in terms of content; or, finally, it confuses or renders indistinguishable the two procedures” (ibid., 66). In my opinion, the concept of metapicture that Tom Mitchell proposed in his Picture Theory is paradigmatic of the neo-baroque dynamics between limit and excess. Following the terminology proposed by Omar Calabrese, metapictures might be considered artifacts that posses “unstable uses”. Calabrese argues that “the phenomenon of instability appears in ‘neo-baroque’ objects on at least three levels. One, that of the themes and figures represented. Two, that of the textual structures that contain the representations. Three, that of the relation between figures and texts, and the way in which these are received. The three levels can be more or less concurrent” (ibid., 105). It is precisely here that the neo-baroque and the metapictures of the pictorial turn meet: in the moment of reception and understanding of images.
6 Mitchell, “Media Aesthetics”; first appeared as the foreword to Liv Hauskend (ed.), Thinking Media Aesthetics (New York: Peter Lang, 2013). Quoted from Image Science, 118.
8 Ibid., 40.
9 This new space of expanded sculptural intervention is in fact what has been left free from landscape and architecture – not-landscape and not-architecture – as she calls it. She explains: “Another way of saying this is that even though sculpture may be reduced to … the not-landscape plus the not-architecture, there is no reason not to imagine an opposite term – one that would be both landscape and architecture – which within this schema is called the complex. But to think the complex is to admit into the realm of art two terms that had formerly been prohibited from it; landscape and architecture – terms that could function to define the sculptural (as they had begun to do in modernism) only in their negative or neuter condition” (ibid., 37–38). The reason why one might see Krauss’s notion of “expansion” as elitist and exclusivist is because from the explanation she gives one can basically understand the following: the artists in question were really only concerned with problems of form in relation to landscape because they were treating landscape as an inverse shape of their sculptures, and not as environment with all its geopolitical, ecological and historical implications. Therefore, although the expansion of sculpture into previously unoccupied territories is undeniable art-historical fact, an explanation of this
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fact resides outside of art proper: namely, in the ideological position (or lack thereof) of a single art historian.

10 Filiberto Menna defines the aniconic line as being focused on the pictoriality of the surface, while the iconic line is addressed to tableau and representation (Filiberto Menna, La linea analitica dell’arte moderna. Le figure e le icone, terza edizione (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1975), 10–13 and 64). Although it is neither illusionist nor mimetic, the iconic line in avant-garde art deals with the problem of visual phenomena that stem from outside the image but are within it reinterpreted and redefined, setting up the ontology of the artistic image through a dialectical relation with extra-image reality. We can put within the styles of the iconic line, accordingly, Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, and all those that have what Menna calls a fondamento mimetico. The aniconic line, on the other hand, covers the radical abstract styles that consciously relinquish complex syntactic structures so as to examine the conditions of the creation, reception and visibility of art objects in themselves. Menna, however, provocatively observes that even the best-known “anti-image” of the aniconic line of modern art, the Black Square on a White Background by Kazimir Malevich, is not a “symbolic form” but a “primary structure” that “has no intention of representing even itself” but only of prompting the mind of the viewer to engage in a debate about the nature of art (p. 67). For more about this concept, see also Krešimir Purgar, “Anti-Image or Absolute Image: The Painting by Julije Knifer in the Age of Digital Reproduction”, Art Magazin Kontura, No. 127, Zagreb, 2015, 90–95.


13 Ibid., 63.

14 To get an idea of how art history started to gradually modify its approach from object-centered discipline to the understanding of processes and mechanisms in a culture as a whole, see the very early study made by Michael Baxandall, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972); and Michael Baxandall, Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1985); as well as Svetlana Alpers, The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Very important accomplishments in this direction also include an early work by Keith Moxey, The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), and the reader compiled by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994). In order to understand processes within the discipline of art history, Jonathan Harris’s overview, which focuses on its social-critical role, is very instructive: Jonathan Harris, The New Art History: A Critical Introduction (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).


16 It is worth mentioning that Moxey has been credited with having conveyed the first ever comparison between Anglo-American visual studies and German Bildwissenschaft in Keith Moxey, “Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn”; Journal for Visual Culture, Vol. 7, No. 2 (August 2008): 131–146. This already seminal piece was a revised version of the presentation he gave at the international
Krešimir Purgar

Visual Construction of Culture conference, organized by the Center for Visual Studies in Zagreb, 2007. This and other related disciplinary questions raised by him on these occasions were eventually developed in different directions by Matthew Rampley and Jason Gaiger, for instance. Rampley states that there is a difference between Bildwissenschaft “proper”, like that practiced by Klaus Sachs-Hombach, and the stream represented by authors like Gottfried Boehm and Gernot Böhme, whereby the latter “comes to a conclusion strikingly similar to those of writers such as Nicholas Mirzoeff or Guy Debord”, although “Böhme avoids taking up such socio-political threads” (see Matthew Rampley, “Bildwissenschaft: Theories of the Image in German-Language Scholarship”, in Matthew Rampley, Thierry Lenain, Hubert Locher, Andrea Pinotti, Charlotte Schoell-Glass and Kitty Zijlmans (eds.), Art History and Visual Studies in Europe (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 125–126.

Moreover, Jason Gaiger asks whether we even need something like a universal science of images to which Bildwissenschaft apparently makes a claim (Jason Gaiger, “The Idea of a Universal Bildwissenschaft”, Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. LI/VII, No. 2/50, 2014, 208) and concludes somewhat ambiguously that “the permissive conception of universality that underpins the project of a universal Bildwissenschaft falls short of the more demanding, normative conception of universality required by philosophy, but it has the advantage of keeping the question open” (ibid., 227).

Horst Bredekamp, “A Neglected Tradition? Art History as Bildwissenschaft”, Critical Inquiry, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Spring 2003): 428. The list of the “outcast” art historians that Bredekamp mentions can be enlarged to those who still “count” as art historians but who nevertheless significantly changed the face of American art history: such as Keith Moxey, Michael Ann Holly, Norman Bryson, Whitney Davies and many others.


Ibid.


Ibid., 342–343.


Ibid., 260.

The article originally published in ArtForum was later republished as an opening chapter in W.J.T. Mitchell, Picture Theory (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11.

Ibid., 16.


33 The original title of the article was “Modern Iconology and Postmodern Iconologies” and it was conceived as an essay responding to W.J.T. Mitchell’s 2015 book *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. A reply by Mitchell was also included in the journal. See *Works and Days*, Vol. 6 (Spring/Fall 1988), 217–229. A later version was reprinted as chapter 16 of David Downing and Susan Bazargan (eds.), *Image and Ideology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 309–320.

W.J.T. Mitchell – one of the founders of visual studies – has been at the forefront of many disciplines such as iconology, art history and media studies. His concept of the pictorial turn is known worldwide for having set new philosophical paradigms in dealing with our vernacular visual world. This book will help both students and seasoned scholars to understand key terms in visual studies – pictorial turn, metapictures, literary iconology, image/text, biopictures or living pictures, among many others – while systematically presenting the work of Mitchell as one of the discipline’s founders and most prominent figures. As a special feature, the book includes three comprehensive, authoritative and theoretically relevant interviews with Mitchell that focus on different stages of development of visual studies and critical iconology.

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