

## ESSENTIALISM, SUBJECTIVISM, VISUAL STUDIES

Concerning «non-Disciplinary» Ontology of Images

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### **Abstract**

Ontological questions concerning images seem to be more urgent than ever. If that is the case, then it may be so either because we are still unable to provide an answer to the question “what is an image” due to a metaphysical nature of the question, or because ontological reflection on images can only follow the changes that occur more rapidly and more substantially every day. How can we know what the image is if conditions of its production and consumption in our times follow completely different paths compared to various historical periods and their shifting image ontologies? However, there seems to exist a perennial trans-historical dispute over particular questions that pertain to people's ability to perceive and understand images. One of these questions is whether images are objects *per se* that should be approached using some of the existing universalist epistemologies, or is it more pertinent to come to terms with images in socially, economically and sexually biased ways offered by various poststructuralist politics of identity. In this paper I will argue that contemporary theorizing on images should take into consideration not only dramatic changes occurred in imaging technologies and by the proliferation of subjectivities, but that it should also account for dramatic changes brought about by the theory itself – visual studies and *Bildwissenschaft*.

**Keywords:** visual studies; *Bildwissenschaft*; essentialism; subjectivism; image ontology; non-discursivity; appearing

### **1. Essentialism and subjectivism: two ways of claiming an image**

All disputes about the ontological nature of images emerge from two basic, counterposed viewpoints: essentialist and subjectivist. Always when we want to talk about the issue what an image represents, in what way we do or do not understand it – regardless of our possible intention to philosophically assess the ontological questions of the images' constitution or, which is more common, only critically refer to particular concrete image examples from the vast area of visual culture – we always ask ourselves if the analyzed image object contains a value *in itself* or has it been provided *by us*. Of course, in everyday critical discussions about art images or popular films we do not feel the obligation to examine the image ontology of the particular work in question, but by pointing to the opposition between the essential and the personal (subjective) in our approach to images we always contribute to something new; not so much to the description

of what images are (because every approach has its own demands and methods), but, much more important, what they might become.

Humanistic disciplines like semiotics and iconology, and to the same extent also phenomenology and psychoanalytical theory are concerned with the essentialist approach to images in the assumption that visual representations should be analyzed in regard to the manner in which an object is represented *in the image* (semiotics and iconology) or in regard to their interest in which way the represented object generates visual effects *in the mind* (phenomenology and psychoanalysis). Irrespectively of the fact that these disciplines consider that visual experience and thus the fundamental constitution of the image takes place in entirely different places – as symbols on canvas or screen, as opposed to perception as bodily experience – they all suppose that there is a universal set of rules applicable either to the *reading* of the image (semiotics) or the *experience* of the image (phenomenology), whose implementation brings us closer to the essence and sense of all pictorial representations. The purpose of this dialectical confrontation is not to rule out all the interpretive nuances that exist in either of them nor to discourage further insights into their specificities. When it comes to the theory of images, the purpose of this discussion is to turn our focus to the possibilities of the pictorial *in-betweenness* and *contingency*, or disciplinary *becoming*, instead of *defining*. Apparently, this approach will first of all require shifting our focus from ideological to material concerns of images, for only then shall we be able to start comprehending them in a different light.

If at the very beginning I postulate that the answer to the question *what is an image?* is always indeterminable in advance, because it is constantly delineated by the boundaries of the essentialist and subjectivist understanding of images, this does not mean that I do not consider that question worthy of discussion, but propose that it may be addressed in a different way. In order to explain what kind of difference this is, it helps to remember Charles Sanders Peirce's icon-index-symbol image concept on the one hand and the phenomenological idea of Edmund Husserl's *pictorial consciousness* on the other. In Peirce the image is either in direct relation to the object (indexical sign) or it is explained through a relation of similarity with the represented object (iconic sign) or it is a result of certain conventions of representation (symbolic sign) (Peirce, 1960).<sup>1</sup> In each of these sign variants the source of the image is outside of the observer: in the represented object, in a picture as a physical object or within social codes that define meanings. Nevertheless, although he also shapes the experience of the image through the triadic principle of the cognition process, the moment of perception as the *effect* of visibility is essential

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<sup>1</sup> More on this and numerous other typologies of symbols that served for the foundation of semiotics as a scholarly discipline see: Peirce, 1960.

for Husserl. Thus, unlike Peirce or Nelson Goodman, for example, who consider the image more or less a material consequence of impulses coming from the extra-pictorial reality, Husserl thinks that the image object is not *substance* present in the image, but *appearance* that only prompts the *relation* with something absent. This is best seen in the difference established between the material carrier [Bildträger], i.e. the paper or canvas of the picture and the image object [Bildobjekt], i.e. the immaterial likeness made of shapes or paint (that which we really see in the picture). The pictorial consciousness emerges between the observer's visual perception, the material carrier on the one hand and the imaginative relation towards the pictorial object on the other; it is prompted by each individual's capability of imagination (Husserl, 1980).

When in his *Imaginary Signifier* Christian Metz speaks of the immersive effect of film and the ability of the observer to experience film images as real, we could think that film is the best example of the phenomenological theory of the image. Nonetheless, semiotician Metz is closer to the film sign theory: the perception of film as fiction does not happen because the viewer is capable of activating his pictorial consciousness as a difference between the perception of the movie screen and the imagination of the film image (which would be the consequence of Husserl's theory), but only because the film signifier is in itself – that is, structurally – imaginary (Metz, 1977).

However, from the standpoint of a possible «general» ontology of the image the differences between these two approaches are smaller than they seem to be, although the gap, as we have seen, between semiotic concentration on pictorial *representation* and phenomenological insistence on the imaginative potential of the image *consciousness* seem to be the largest possible. In his *Aesthetics of Appearing*, Martin Seel argues that there is no clash between the phenomenological and semiotic theory of images, because both disciplines are in principle concerned with «surveyable surfaces that make something visible» (Seel, 2004, p. 176). Seel sees the ontology of the image as philosophically superimposed to different disciplinary approaches, because the latter ones offer us the possibility of discussing images only *after* we are sure that the phenomenon or the object we would like to discuss is actually an image. Therefore we can consider Seel's «Thirteen Statements on the Picture» from the mentioned book an introduction to the version of the image science constituted as a dialectic relation between the perceptual and the imaginative image – two basic directions in the contemporary theory of images.<sup>2</sup>

However, although Lambert Wiesing attempts to prove that these two directions need to be supplemented also by the anthropological one, based on the insights of Hans Jonas and Hans

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<sup>2</sup> This division has also been adopted by Lambert Wiesing in: Wiesing, 2009, pp. 8-23.

Belting, from the following theses it will become clear that in the ensuing argumentation I am rather inclined to view Belting's and Mitchell's «animist» version of anthropology and iconology outside of the context of subjectivist approaches. One of several arguments that I shall try to develop until the end of this text will lead towards a proposal of supplementing the pictorial dialectics by a new method equally inspired by Seel's hybrid philosophy of images, W.J.T. Mitchell's disciplinary «deconstruction» of the image, Hans Belting's pictorial anthropology, and the reference to the concept of mediality and logic of iconic structures by Dieter Mersch. Finally, I shall try to derive that which will be termed «non-disciplinary ontology» of the image.

Unlike the mentioned essentialist approaches, which treat the image as an object to which both the sense and the meaning are immanent (the so-called «metaphysics of pictorial presence»),<sup>3</sup> subjectivist approaches are based on the functions and interpretations of images in relation to (or by) the individual viewer or a group of viewers within different and often incomparable social contexts of visual culture. Certainly the best known among them are the disciplines that emerged from post-structuralism and cultural studies, which are today mostly encompassed by generic notions like «visual culture» and «politics of identity». Opposite to Jonathan Crary and his insistence on technologies of observation as most essential for the turn in ways of looking (Crary, 1992), Irit Rogoff maintains that

«in visual culture the history becomes that of the viewer or that of the authorizing discourse rather than that of the object. By necessity this shift in turn determines a change in the very subject of the discussion or analysis, a shift in which the necessity for having it in a particular mode and at a particular time becomes part of the very discussion» (Rogoff, 1998, p. 20).

Keith Moxey comments on the shift of the focus of scholarly interest from universal disciplinary insights towards the practical observer as follows:

«In contrast to poststructuralist theory, language is no longer regarded as the privileged medium through which we come to know both ourselves and the world. Rather than interposing itself between us and what we experience, language

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<sup>3</sup> In his text «Pictorial Turn» W.J.T. Mitchell derives the notion of metaphysics of pictorial presence from Derrida's deconstruction of the «metaphysics of presence»: if the text cannot be reduced to the meaning present in the language, then the image can also not be reduced to the meaning present in or deduced from any of its media incarnations. See: W.J.T. Mitchell, 1994.

is regarded as part of an experiential continuum. Instead of offering varying but commensurable approaches to the same world, language produces incommensurate accounts of different worlds. It is not a reflection of being so much as an agent in its constitution; that is, language has a performative status in the production of meaning» (Moxey, 2013, p. 56).

According to Moxey, Mitchell's concept of the pictorial turn is one of the most important proofs that image objects have developed the ability to withstand the meanings ascribed to them by entire generations of their interpreters (Moxey, 2013, p. 62). Therefore, visual studies not only undermines the idea of epistemological universality, but it explicitly excludes it in some of its theoretical options. For example, Mitchell's famous question «what do pictures want?» disables a (single)-disciplinary approach to images, because the assumption is that images themselves will impose *ad hoc* theoretical or practical positions from which they «want» to be viewed and that these must not necessarily be the positions intended for them within the framework of semiotics, traditional iconology, psychoanalysis, phenomenology or a sort of politics of identity. Belting's concept of «living medium» is close to Mitchell's concept of «living pictures», but it is also opposed to it. In order to explain one's role in the production of images, not as physical objects but as objects in the mind, Belting states that in the German language there is a difference between memory [Gedächtnis], which means image archive, and remembrance [Erinnerung], which is the activity of collecting images. He discovers that one simultaneously *owns* and *produces* images. This German theorist says that in both cases our body, our brain, serves as a «living medium» that enables us to perceive, send, and recall images in the memory, same as our body enables our imagination to reshape and censor them (Belting, 2005, p. 306).

As we can see, subjectivist approaches can be related to groups of subjectivities connected by common interests in the affirmation of political, gender, sexual, national or other values. Same as in a kind of «animistic turn», these approaches can be related to images themselves or the individual production of images in the mind through their enlivenment by means of mental operations only man can perform. The comment of English theorist Janet Wolff applies to all those approaches which still maintain that there exists something called «the magic of the image», impossible to be explained with the help of individual disciplines as discursive practices within a humanistic theory. She states that recently we have witnessed a series of attempts by the members of the humanistic scholarly community to prove that the ideological positions of cultural studies have become insufficient to encompass the new technological and

post-humanistic reality of images and visual representations. Instead of focusing the attention on social and historical conditioning of scopic regimes, today, says she, the deflection from long-surviving analytical methods is increasingly visible. It is reflected, for example, in the concepts of *presence* or *immediacy* of the image, like David Freedberg's «power of images», W.J.T. Mitchell's «living pictures», Georges Didi-Huberman's favoring of phenomenology in relation to semiotics, in the resistance of images to discursive interpretation or in the theory of affects, the aesthetic of reception and neuro-sciences applied in order to interpret artworks – all that which cultural theory has traditionally neglected. (Wolf, 2012, p. 9).<sup>4</sup>

In her *plaidoyer* for the detachment from the hermeneutics of the image based on the effect, presence, and sensory nature of pictorial experience, Janet Wolff proposes the return to the affirmation of social insights into the status of artworks and images in general, although she admits that «emotional and affective sides of private and social life have been fully neglected in critical theory, cultural theory, and aesthetics» (Wolf, 2012, p.10). What exactly is the English theorist's grudge against approaches of «new subjectivists» and is her proposal for overcoming of essentialist master-science in combination with the abandonment of the mysticism of the image really the right way towards the understanding of the ontology of the image in our time? If images have power, says she, then this is because people have yielded them that power in the circumstances in which images could not have activated and enlivened themselves: «We can recognize the power of the image, while understanding full well that that power is (socially, culturally, perhaps politically) given to it» (Wolf, 2012, p. 6).

If we build upon this last assertion and if we accept that it is possible to give power to images, then it is reasonable to assume that this power can be controlled and at a certain point even denied. However, some of the basic disputes in the Jewish-Christian image culture have been motivated by the conviction that it is *not* possible to control the power of images, so that in certain periods, or even lastingly, physical traces of their existence were erased. Unlike the radical iconoclasm of the Jewish or Moslem tradition, which did not allow the representation of God as a human likeness – therefore retorting to entirely different pictorial options – the difference between the Eastern and Western Christianity is primarily the difference in the *intensity* of the power of images. French theorist Marie-José Mondzain says that the Byzantine tradition saw full *assimilation* with the depicted likeness of Jesus in the icon and not *representation* of his imagined appearance. This is not about the fundamental clash of the Platonic iconoclastic version of the image as simulacrum and the Aristotelian iconophile concept of the image as mimesis, which

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<sup>4</sup> In this context it is interesting mentioning that Janet Wolff is one of the founders of visual studies. Her work on establishing the first visual studies program at the University of Rochester in 1992 is highly esteemed.

defined the historical schism between iconoclasts and iconophiles. Here we have a certain inner confrontation of two iconophile groups that represent different «politics of the image», that is, opposed interpretations of that which an image can represent. The Eastern model of the image, when we speak of depicting deities in icons, referred to «consubstantiality»<sup>5</sup> of the image and the actual model (the so-called natural image), while the Western model – adopted after the intervention of the patriarch Nikephoros at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 – established the image through «relational economy», inherent, as this was perceived, to all images (Mondzain, 2005, pp. 71-75).<sup>6</sup>

The clash between consubstantiality and the relational economy of the image did not, of course, have just consequences related to religion, nor did it just influence a different development of visual representations in art history of the West and the Byzantine Empire. It showed, first, that the difference in the intensity of the pictorial experience is probably a more complex problem than an ideological clash between the ones who approved of the depiction of God in the man's likeness and the ones who did not; and second, that transparency of the image can be and has been achieved centuries before Leon Battista Alberti had defined Renaissance paintings as «open windows». Mondzain suggests that the difference between the (Eastern-Christian) icon and the (Western-Christian) picture is that the former shows the *presence* of Jesus as a *permanent form of meaning*, while the latter shows its *absence* through a referential sign *detachable from meaning*. Although they can use comparable models of representation – color, form, compositional organization of the picture surface etc. – the icon cannot be the same as the picture because it *incarnates* presence, while a picture *imitates* it. However, the principle of immanence applies to both types: with the icon it is absolute and with the picture it is relative (Mondzain, 2005, p. 77). From the principle of absolute immanence follows also the mostly fixed depiction of Christ Pantocrator in Byzantine art history: because Christ is incarnated in the icon in accordance to his natural shape (natural image), there is no theologically justified need to change this form. In the West the representations of Jesus have been considered formally arbitrary since the first Romanesque reliefs, as visual and semiotic adaptations of the Biblical

<sup>5</sup> The term *consubstantiality* refers to the sameness in substance between the natural model (the deity) and the depiction (the icon), but with possible differences in aspect between the two.

<sup>6</sup> Mondzain states that Constantine V (741-75), the official representative of state iconoclasm, presented four basic reasons for the invective against the depiction of God in human shape: «1. If the icon is like the model, it must be of the same essence and nature as it. However the icon is material and the model is spiritual, therefore this is impossible. 2. If the icon claims to resemble only the physical and perceptible form of the model, it necessarily divides it by separating its perceptible form from its invisible essence. The icon is therefore impious because it divides the indivisible. 3. If the icon draws the figure of the divine, it encloses the infinite within its line, which is impossible; therefore it only encloses nothing or falsehood, which forces it to renounce all homonymy. 4. If the icon is only venerated in what it shows, it is therefore its matter that is venerated. It is therefore an idol, and the iconophiles are idolaters». Also see: Mondzain, 2010.

textual model, which in the following centuries would rather depend on changeable conventions of style than the corrections of the Christian dogma.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Towards a non-discursive concepts of the image

The dispute over the nature of images in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries can rightfully be considered the first systematic theoretical discussion on the nature of pictorial representation in history (Alloa, 2013), a kind of practical ontology that from the center of theological dilemmas of the medieval man repositioned the issue of the image to the theoretical line that had begun with the Platonic and Aristotelian complex of simulacrum and mimesis. It has been continued – but not finished – in the contemporary interpretations of media, virtuality and immersion. What the history of the theory of images suggests us is that the problem of incarnation in the picture and visuality in general cannot be resolved in metaphysical philosophy, although, as we have seen, it can be inspired by it. Gottfried Boehm even asserts that the contemporary ontology of images is not at all an essentialist question of the general status of the image, but that the current terminology can only refer to «*this* picture and *this* drawing», that is, the status of a concrete phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

Boehm's anti-metaphysical argumentation of sorts follows from his specific «logic of the image» characterized by hybrid «iconic logos». The understanding of the image as an entity with its own logic and sense is unambiguously essentialist motivated, but, unlike most disciplinary practices developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Boehm's approach does not strive towards a set of rules, signifier dogmas or perceptual and affective agencies of the image, although he often refers to them.<sup>9</sup> With his concept of *iconic difference*, and the attempt to answer the question *what does the logic of images mean?*, he primarily tries to equally detach himself from essentialist and subjectivist approaches and to come closer to the immanence of images of sorts, but not in the sense of the hermeneutics of the individual artwork by Hans Georg Gadamer, but by pointing at 1) the characteristic of the image surface that makes it detachable from the continuum of reality as a surface where not only something «happens», but where something is «shown» and 2) one's

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<sup>7</sup> One of the exceptions to such Hegelian interpretation of the development of art history was certainly the Nineteenth Ecumenic Council of the Catholic Church, which, supported by counter reformation tendencies in the south of Europe, was held from 1545 to 1563 in the Italian town of Trento (the so-called Trident Council). Decrees were issued to confirm the role of basic Christian dogmas, which, among other things, once again stressed the theological justification of pictorial representations.

<sup>8</sup> See the transcript of the discussion between Gottfried Boehm and other participants held within the framework of a several years' seminar under the title *The Stone Art Theory Institutes in Chicago 2008*. Published in: Elkins, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> On Boehm's ontological construction of the image, explained as a paradigmatic deflection from *logos* to *icon*, see in: Boehm, 1994.

ability to see something in something else, that is, to see something “in the light of the other”. It is clear from these two basic postulates that the notion of iconic difference must necessarily be viewed from a hybrid, semiotic-phenomenological position. This becomes clearer insofar as Boehm’s iconic difference is related to the image as a different category that contains a «surplus of the imaginary» and provides a «context for visual differentiation» (Boehm, 2004).

In a clear reference to Boehm, Dieter Mersch states that already the definition which assumes that seeing an image primarily means seeing something like an image and then seeing something that it depicts requires from us the acceptance of the duplicity of pictorial ontology: namely a picture can be interpreted *as image*, but also as a mere *object* that makes something visible. Mersch considers the difference between the matter and the phenomenon, i.e. the pictoriality and making visible the key point of ontology of the image (Mersch, 2016). Mersch’s acceptance and then also the overcoming of the iconic difference can be recognized in his assertion that images speak less and communicate less to their viewer than they show him. *How* they show is not connected to either observation or understanding, but to some new ontology. Again we find here an inherent *logic of the image*. Along the lines of this argumentation we can infer that any visual difference must be recognizable as a distinctive visual symbol, but it does not necessarily need to be semiotically relevant; it can be mere evidence or a cognitive fact. Insight into these differences can be established through narrative or figurative image strategies, but also apart from them. We can recognize them through a multitude of referential effects of images, equally through their relation to nature and the relation to themselves. We can recognize them, for example, as ontology of *materiality* or ontology of *time*.

The pictorial turn as a terminological determination of the moment of transition from a linguistic to a pictorial paradigm did not happen, as it would be reasonable to think, at the moment of its proclamation in famous texts by W.J.T. Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm,<sup>10</sup> and also not after its somewhat later institutional acceptance by the academic community. The first significant theoretical contribution that attempted to relativize the discursive models of interpreting images was Mitchell’s *Iconology* published in 1986, which especially refers to the often mentioned chart of the «image family» from the very beginning of this book (Mitchell, 1986). It is interesting that a few years after *Iconology* Mitchell derived his *Pictorial Turn* from an entirely different position, as a kind of a new «image urgency» at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and not as a proposal for a non-discursive ontology of the image, which the mentioned chart and its

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<sup>10</sup> The texts in question are the mentioned «Pictorial Turn», the introductory chapter to Mitchell’s collection of essays titled *Picture Theory* (Chicago, 1994) and «Wiederkehr der Bilder», also an introductory chapter, this time to Boehm’s collection *Was ist ein Bild*, (München, 1994).

appertaining commentary already contained as indication. If we ask the question why after that Mitchell has not reverted to ontological questions related to the image, as one of the possible reasons we can offer general differences between visual studies and *Bildwissenschaft* – which topic was on different occasions addressed by Keith Moxey, Matthew Rampley and Jason Gaiger. They all referred to the gap existing between the primary social and ideological interest for the image in the Anglo-American school on the one hand and the interest for the nature and functioning of the image *as such* in the German school on the other (Moxey, 2013; Rampley, 2012; Gaiger, 2014). The gap in the understanding of the nature of images is very conspicuous between, for example, «late» Mitchell and Dieter Mersch or Klaus Sachs-Hombach, but the already mentioned grapheme of the «family of images» already contains some essential elements of non-disciplinary ontology that, as this became evident, would be more characteristic of the German school.<sup>11</sup> This school would finally be more inclined than the American to sacrifice both the essentialist approaches inherited from semiotics and phenomenology and the subjectivist politics of identity that emerged along the lines of post-structuralist intervention into social sciences.<sup>12</sup>

What could, therefore, be so revolutionary in the introductory chapter of Mitchell's *Iconology*? The links between the arts and other areas of visual culture (popular magazines, movies) have already been problematized by Aby Warburg and the German art history of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as this has been convincingly demonstrated by Horst Bredekamp (Bredekamp, 2003). We can witness the shift of the scholarly interest from stylistic and historical to cultural

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<sup>11</sup> The fact that visual studies is gradually getting its disciplinary shape – although apparently in a «non-disciplinary» way – is proved by contributions of various scholars who not only try to demarcate the new field but, at the same time, try to answer the still enigmatic questions regarding ontology of images, social role of the artwork, the relationship between vernacular and learned styles of visual communication and the like. The literature on these topics has been growing steadily in the last two decades and it still is. Beside mentioned books and authors, let us here refer only to the seminal work by Klaus Sachs-Hombach *Das Bild als kommunikatives Medium. Elemente einer allgemeinen Bildwissenschaft* (Cologne, 2003), and more recent extraordinarily broad account of what visual studies might be offered by Whitney Davis in *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton, 2011), in addition to Sunil Manghani's valuable *Image Critique and the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (New York, 2012) in which he presents sort of a twofold agency of images: both as a theory and artefacts capable of exerting institutional critique.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth mentioning that Moxey has been accredited for having conveyed the first ever comparison between Anglo-american visual studies and German *Bildwissenschaft* in his article «Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn» published in *Journal for visual culture* (August 2008, vol. 7 no. 2, pp. 131-146). This already seminal piece was revised version of his presentation given at the international conference *Visual Construction of Culture*, 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 the one performed by Klaus Sachs-Hombach and the stream represented by authors like Gottfried Boehm and Gernot Böhme where the latter «comes to a strikingly similar conclusion to writers such as Nicholas Mirzoeff or Guy Debord», although «Böhme avoids taking up such socio-political threads» (op.cit., p. 125-126). Moreover, Jason Gaiger asks whether we need *at all* something like a universal science of images to which *Bildwissenschaft* apparently makes a claim (op. cit, p. 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» (227).

topics within the Western history of art already in Michael Baxandall's and Svetlana Alpers' «new art history», for example.<sup>13</sup> Mitchell's point of departure was that visual insights could exist in a very wide area delineated by images as objects on the one hand and images as pure perceptual phenomena on the other. The reality of each image is constituted in the ability of the viewer to be aware of the possibilities of pictorial evidence at any moment. Therefore, the decisive question for Mitchell is not the one of *discipline* that we might choose and apply to individual pictures. It is also not decisive what *kind* of images we focus on (artistic, scholarly or fashion-related); for him, already then, the crucial element was the shifting *modality of pictorial appearing* – that which was later in more detail developed by Martin Seel in the mentioned «Thirteen Statements on the Picture» or Dieter Mersch in his «Logic of Iconic Structures», which, as we have seen, is the fundamental preoccupation of the German image science.

Mitchell has spotted a conspicuous problem with the semiotic typology insofar as Peirce classified his sign system only in relation to the *physical* world in order to re-systematize it within signs as physical objects. According to this concept, physical images are signs whose connection to the denoted object can be established in various ways. However, images that dwell in the language as non-material signs, that is, the ones that create the imaginative potential in the mind of the reader demand a different approach. In order to also classify the kind of images that can be perceived outside the established semiotic systems, it is necessary to detach oneself from the division in only those categories or notions that point to *other* categories or notions with which the former ones are in more or less direct relation. Insisting on the image as a referent of some initial event always leads us to concepts like sign, simulacrum or replacement for the original experience. The semiotic discourse on the image is actually a discussion on the *possibilities* and *conditions* of a certain medium to show the physical world and not a discussion on that world itself. Mitchell attempted to approach images in an anti-semiotic fashion, by classifying them according to their way of appearance, unlike the semiotic division of images according to the manner of reproduction of actual events, objective reality and the like.

In his *Iconology* we find a division into five basic kinds of images: graphic, optic, perception-related, mental, and verbal (Mitchell, 1986: 9-14). It is interesting that each of these types, according to Mitchell's explanation, belongs to a different scholarly discipline: *graphic images* we consider pictures in the narrowest sense of the word. They encompass the entire art

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<sup>13</sup> See well-known studies by Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1972), and *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London, 1985); as well as Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983). Also instructive is the overview of new art history by Jonathan Harris, who focuses on its social-critical role, in: Harris, *The New Art History. A Critical Introduction* (London and New York, 2001).

production, all kinds of printed reproductions and traditional multiplying media. They are, of course, covered by the history of art. *Optic images* are characterized by the modality of visibility, immanent only to them, that is, they become observable only through the mediation of particular laws of physics or with the help of specific technology. For example all electronically screened images belong here, but also mirrored images or physical optic phenomena. These would belong to the realm of physics and electronics applied to the products of entertainment industry. Mitchell has placed *perceptual images* somewhere between the physically knowable world and sensations: these are «phantasms» and all kinds of sensory phenomena at the border between reality and imagination, between that which we have (maybe) once seen and the momentary impression – simulated or real – that we indeed see this. The best specialists for that area are psychologists and neurologists because they can show real, measured data that brain activity has actually «produced» an image, but they cannot confirm its objective status, content or appearance. *Mental* and *verbal* images belong to the realm of the «invisible» and therefore we should maybe not call them images at all: why should we call something image which we are unable to see or, better to say, of which we cannot prove that we have seen precisely that and not something else?

This concept is significantly opposed to Boehm's determination of the image brought to realization as iconic difference. Understanding Boehm's achievements – but also limitation – Dieter Mersch adopts the phenomenon of difference, but he adds the assertion that the concept of difference – or «framework» as he calls it – is necessarily defined by two characteristics: primarily by the ability of the image to detach itself from the rest of reality and then also by its characteristic to make something visible as a *depiction on itself* of something else (Mersch, 2016). It is interesting that Mitchell's early concept of image ontology does not approach that problem from the standpoint of the general definition what an image is, but approaches it as ontologically indeterminable, recognizing images through different modalities within which different kinds of pictorial experience can be grouped. He compares them to that which Foucault calls «figures of knowledge». In spite of that, Mitchell also thinks that there is something like the authentic concept of the image «as such», but this concept should rather be a subject of institutionalized discourses of philosophy and theology (Mitchell, 1986, p. 10). Is not the German *Bildwissenschaft* primarily (or at least among other things) a philosophy of image? Is *that* the philosophical foundation recognized by Mitchell as a path towards the ontology of the image? At any case, if on the basis of the earlier mentioned comparative insights by Moxey, Rampley, and Gaiger we assess the image science (especially the practice of its most important German representatives) as

the most relevant place of the contemporary image ontology, we can also say that ontological questions of pictorial appearing were present much earlier than the pictorial or iconic turn.

Dieter Mersch supports Mitchell's original idea that the essence of the existence of images can be established only through the application of different but in principle non-disciplinary theories when he says that all attempts to reduce visual strategies to the rhetorical and semiotic, to language allegories and figures like ekphrasis and metaphor, have proved unsuccessful. He insists that we start from the principle of irreducibility of the image to discursive practices, of the fundamental *incommensurability* which will define the relation of the image and the gaze as a special media format that requires different means than the ones adopted from the sign theory, literary or language science (Mersch, 2016). One of these targeted, universal principles of understanding images is for Mersch the phenomenon of *chiastic structure of the look*, i.e. the ability of the image to make something visible by constant provoking of the interchange of the observer's view between three ontological extremes: a) image and non-image; b) iconic difference and immersion; c) framing and de-framing. Here we see that for pictorial evidence or appearing the medial basis and the depicted (not necessarily represented) content are equally important. The medium allows for a certain «chiasm of the gaze» – or fracture in perspective – so that we can recognize something *like an image* on the one hand, while the image itself demands refraction in order that it can be recognized *as a medium*.<sup>14</sup> However, for such an operation it is necessary that we have a non-discursive concept of the image, because some of the textual models – like traditional iconology, semiotics or gender and Marxist theory – would always lead us only towards the image and its hermeneutics and we would not take mediality of image into consideration, i.e. that to which Mitchell and Mersch direct us and which we may call *modalities of pictorial appearing*.

When we compare, for example, graphic and optic images (a portrait and the image of the portrayed person in the mirror, for example), it will be much more difficult to determine the fracture in the point of view in one and the other image type than if we compare a graphic and a mental image. Between a photograph and a mirror image of a person the difference does not have to be large in hermeneutical sense (it can even be unrecognizable), while in the ontological sense this difference is decisive. It can, on the one hand, be so tiny that we are often not aware if something is representation or a mirror image, while on the other it opens a large area of non-

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<sup>14</sup> The German author asserts, first, that the image cannot exist without a medium, and second, that a medium cannot exist without the image, but they keep obliterating each other. This is a paradoxical strategy, because it shows that the image cannot show – apart from showing itself – also that which makes it visible. In other words, the image and the medium can *exist* parallelly, but one of them must become invisible so that the other may become visible. The image enables the withdrawing of its own mediality. It keeps it invisible. The *dialectics of the medial* corresponds to invisibility, which consists in the fact that the medium possesses its particularness in the fact that it is hidden in the appearance. (Mersch, 2006).

discursive sense that no semiotic or phenomenological analyses can resolve. Some art practices, like hyperrealism or closed-circuit video installations are focused precisely on this phenomenon. This tells us that image ontology based on discursiveness and narrativity – the classic, gender or psychoanalytical history of art, for example – always feels the need for symbolic marking of the difference, while the areas of the image between ontological extremes about which Mersch speaks will always remain empty because disciplinary theories of meaning have a different purpose and methods. On the other hand, Mitchell's non-disciplinary *family of images* may become one of the ways in which Mersch's *chiasm of gazes*, as the dialectics of the image and mediality, can be fully taken into account.

### 3. Overcoming the binary division: do we need *Gesamtbildtheorie*?

If now we return to the dichotomy we began this text with, to the essentialist and subjectivist understanding of reality, that is, disciplinary theories and politics of identity, we can observe that the mentioned approaches by Mitchell and Mersch do not belong to either of them. The postulate I am putting forward here is that this is because visual studies and *Bildwissenschaft* are basically non-disciplinary practices, which, as we have seen, remain open for the questions of identity (especially the ones inspired by Nicholas Mirzoeff's *visual culture*), but they are not considered epistemologically relevant as an answer to the question what *images* want and not what *observers* want. The theoretical positions I call essentialism and subjectivism are not new and are reduced to the viewer's choice if he wants to ensure exclusive approach to the artwork as a theoretical object or as a legitimation of his or her specific, personal/minority worldview. In other words, this is about the question if, on the one hand, a theory can stay «pure» if it abandons the demand for full objectivity and also, on the other, if we can come closer to the essence of the artwork if we don't have that which Lessing called *bequemes Verhältnis* (convenient relation) to it.

The classic discussion by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing from 1766, titled *Laokoön oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*<sup>15</sup> in many of its elements anticipates some of the current most important points of discussion about the boundaries of media forms because it attempts to establish what makes some artistic genre specific, so that we would not «inconveniently» demand from it that which it is unable to give us. In the humanities we are well aware of Lessing's choice that openly ascribes to poetry a superior role in spiritual creation, while painting is for him a “media” or visual prosthesis that has a communicative function, but is unable to reach the

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<sup>15</sup> In this article I use as a reference the English translation published with the title *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, translated by Ellen Frothingham, (New York, 1969).

imaginative potential of poetry. Paradoxically, Lessing's theses prove to be vital also for the considerations of mutual interactions of contemporary media, because a large part of image studies today is based on the marking of the transition between idea, imagination, and intuition on the one side («poetry») and a series of artistic and media signifiers on the other («painting»). Lessing's essay is therefore not only a dispute on ontological differences between poetry and painting, but also a demand for the application of non-uniform, but in principle exclusive approaches adapted to any art form. I think that Lessing's essay on the delineation of artistic media anticipates the contemporary boundaries between essentialist and subjectivist approaches to the image.

In a brilliant study *Archeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* Gary Shapiro put forward the assertion that what in Lessing looks like a search for the «metaphysics of genre», i.e. the essence of different art types, actually masks the «politics of genre» i.e. the determination how a particular art genre needs to be understood in relation to its function and possibilities (Shapiro, 2003, p. 72). If we accept Shapiro's assertion, we can see that ideological questions have determined the boundaries of the interpretation of images, even if cloaked in the metaphysics of genre or, which is more common today, the metaphysics of presence. The historical avant-gardes have already shown that interpretations of artworks and the proliferation of images escape all kinds of essentialist-subjectivist demands: at the time of modernist hermeneutics that demand was put forward again, primarily in Clement Greenberg's text «Towards a Newer Laokoön» and Michael Fried's «Art and Objecthood».<sup>16</sup> Gary Shapiro thinks that the connecting line between «two Laokoöns» – Lessing's and the equally «puristic» Greenberg's – actually represents the universal fear of unlimited potential of art and the fact that its effect cannot be limited in any way, no matter if we refer to exclusive areas of poetry and painting in Lessing or to transparency and opaqueness of the image surface in Greenberg. In the former approach ekphrastic poetry could never be viewed as a mental image *sui generis* and in the latter the *immersive* experience of the image as an increasingly present characteristic of contemporary visual representations could never be included.

Gary Shapiro pointed to Friedrich Nietzsche as a «post-modern» author who already in his *Birth of the Tragedy* in several places pleads for an active interrelationship between poetry and painting, because only a blend of opposed principles of logic and intuition can lead to a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a spectacle of words, images, and sounds:

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<sup>16</sup> I have written at length about the importance of these two texts for the understanding of contemporary theory in: Purgar, 2015.

«We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics, once we perceive not merely by logical inference, but with the immediate certainty of intuitive vision [unmittelbaren Sicherheit der Anschauung], that the continuous development of art is bound up with *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* duality – just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations» (Shapiro, 2003, p. 73).

Shapiro adds that it was Nietzsche who pointed out that the theory of art demanded from us to understand both the *creation* and the *reception* of art as a wholesome work of human beings in their entirety. In this «post-modern» perspective, the theories of genre and media would be replaced by constant blending of art forms and theoretical approaches, which would open to us new areas of the visible in the images of our time and times gone by. For this reason, we must once again remind that Wagner's and Nietzsche's romantic *Gesamtkunstwerk* today needs its equally romantic *Gesamtbildtheorie* that will overcome the division into Apollonian and Dionysian principles or essentialist and subjectivist approaches, so that visual studies and *Bildwissenschaft*, as two «neo-Nietzschean» theories could adopt new *modalities of pictorial appearing*. These modalities are as needed as they are complex, so that they should be treated separately at a different occasion.

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