

THINKING THE IMAGE FROM THE INSIDE OF THE PICTURE

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When I read the exchange of letters between Gottfried Boehm and W. J. T. Mitchell published by Hans Belting in 2007, I was struck by the many points of contact and even agreement between two positions that started from two totally different positions.¹ In our program of interdisciplinary master studies now called “Aisthesis” (art history, archaeology, philosophy, and literary studies, coordinated among universities, museums, and research institutes in Augsburg, Eichstätt, Munich, and Regensburg), we have made students aware of the discrepancies between two traditions of thinking that were behind the “iconic” and the “pictorial” turn declared in 1994. Boehm insisted on the difference between what appears in an image and what we see, unmediated, through images; he labeled this the “iconic difference.” In 1994, you could still imagine remains of old aesthetics in Boehm’s texts: one of the arguments was that there is coherence in images, whether they are beautiful or ugly, boring, interesting, or scandalous. This coherence might be what remains of Kant’s “purposefulness” (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) of the beautiful image. However, more recently, Boehm has emphasized the idea of *deixis*, linking it to whatever one can do, or wants to do, in producing and using an image or by showing something in or through an image.² In Mitchell, instead, images tend to be what one does with them—and what they do to those who see them. They are placed in practice and ideology; they tend to reflect what they are, and how they make us see the world through them. The gap they build between fiction and reality, or the links they forge between those two terms, are reflected in themselves.

In Boehm’s “iconic turn,” the mental image, mediated through pictures, stood in the center, whereas in Mitchell’s “pictorial turn,” mental images are pushed into the background: we cannot share them except through other things, whether they are descriptions, ideology, or pictures. If we in Aisthesis perceived a common denominator in both “turns,” it was the discovery that we always already are in the image, the *Bild*, just as we are always already in language—but not *because* we are always already in language. Images, pictures (*Bilder*) are not a subcategory of signs. And they have their own impact; they are not merely something that goes along with words or notions, corresponding to them and adding a more or less clear idea to concepts. Words and images were transformed from the Kantian *Begriff* and *Anschauung* into two parallel universes.³

1. Gottfried Boehm, “Iconic Turn: Ein Brief”; W. J. T. Mitchell, “Pictorial Turn: Eine Antwort,” in *Bilderfragen: Die Bildwissenschaften im Aufbruch*, edited by Hans Belting (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007), 27–36 and 37–46 respectively.

2. Boehm, *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen: Die Macht des Zeigens* (Berlin: Berlin University Press 2007), 19–53.

3. I refer mostly to the classical texts: Gottfried Boehm, “Die Wiederkehr der Bilder,”

In 2007 Boehm and Mitchell, while underlining the differences, found many common interests in the nonverbal epistemic uses of the image, from psychology to mathematics. But between the lines, what struck me was the spirit of friendship in inaugurating a dialogue that was continued in 2008, thanks to James Elkins, who had already contributed so much towards enriching, but also complicating, our understanding of images far beyond their use in the still prevailing domains of the narrative or the artistic imagination.⁴ The spirit uniting faculty and fellows in the Stone Summer Theory Institute seemed to be that the theory of pictures and images is something that is highly precarious, but that we still have to work on. *Bildtheorie* (picture theory) is somehow like the famous boat that has constantly to be repaired, but without our being able to get it out of the water. When you change a piece, someone has to pour out the water that comes in through the place you're working on. You never have the boat wholly intact, but somehow you have to keep it going. The theory of and about images is not a text. Or before it is a text, it is in the images themselves. Art must not to end in order to become philosophy, as Hegel thought. Art itself can be philosophy.

As a student, I lived with an old woman who took care of an even older man. He had been very active, and still liked to stroll through the city, even though he didn't always find his way back right away. When you found him, he smiled and explained the situation with a saying that is idiomatic in German: "Ich bin nicht so ganz im Bilde" (I am not entirely in the image), meaning that he did not entirely know where he was. The sentence struck me again when I read the lucid discussions mostly about ontology and public and private. The elderly man had said "nicht so ganz" (not entirely), and he thus was "in the image," but not totally. By strolling around the houses he had known for so many times, and leaving over and over again, even though he knew the risk that he would not find the way back before becoming tired, he was still "in the image," but not entirely so. Hence we cannot walk and not be *im Bilde* somehow (even if not entirely), in one sense or another; we think about the images from within. The old man had known the houses and streets, the blocks and the subway stations. He had studied the city map and the public transportation maps, the architecture of his friend's houses, and so on. But it all became a bit fuzzy for him. The world "in the image" is thus at the same time like an ocean, like a cosmos for us, and like something limited and very concrete, a montage, sometimes a collage of a great many pictures (but not an endless quantity of them) that structure our knowledge of the city. There is no vantage point from which to see our world from the outside. We are always already in the picture, *im Bilde*. *Picture theory is done from within*.

in *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen*; and Boehm, *Was ist ein Bild?* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1994), 11–38. See also W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," *Artforum* (March 1992): 89–94.

4. Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca:

Cornell University Press, 1999); and *Six Stories from the End of Representation: Images in Painting, Photography, Astronomy, Microscopy, Particle Physics, and Quantum Mechanics, 1980–2000* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

However, we know that the old man's world is not ours, that sometimes he needs ours to find his way back. And we know that we teach ours to children (as in the German *Bildung*, meaning both education and picturing), showing them the city map and so many other pictures, and that other people, other cultures, other times have their montage or collage of pictures and images, and their intermedial world of pictures, texts, and metaphors. We thus have to think our being-in-the-image (that sounds Heideggerian, but I am thinking of the old man) as something at the same time universal for us and also very concrete—sometimes regretfully limited—for others. *It is thus from within that picture theory has to be done.*

In the discussions about the ontology of the image, the paradox of the universal and the concrete, the nonhistorical and the historical, in images and pictures is well explored. Anthropology, at least in a universalizing sense, is dismissed: it is not the human in a generalized form that explains this double status of being concrete (namely “human”) and universal (for us “humans”) at the same time. As Mitchell says, “It is our nature to change our nature.” Humanity is not beyond its own history, but within it. It is not beyond the pictures from Lascaux to Matthew Barney, but in their history. Even anthropology has to enter into the historical conceptions of what is or was considered to be irreducibly human at any given time, within any given discourse or visual *dispositif*.⁵ It is part of the paradox: so many ideas, conceptions, pictures of what is human in general, but no one of them suitable to be accepted as universal. Anthropology becomes its own history, destroying through its own approach what it is interested in: the transhistorical, the universally “human.”

So the question comes back to asking how can we do theory from within, without “super-duper theories” (to take up Mitchell's pun) such as Peirce's that do not know their limits, or even without ahistorical “supertheories” that do know their limits but are ahistorical? How can we at the same time be in the image (*im Bilde*) and out of it?

For the boat that has constantly to be repaired within the water, it would be futile to give answers to that question. But maybe there are links between phenomenology, analytic philosophy, and their “posts-” that are worth exploring. In the discussions about public and private images, I encountered an astonishing agreement. Jacqueline Lichtenstein rightly insisted that during the eighteenth century, roughly at the time of the invention of modern art criticism (as opposed to normative aesthetic theory), the private character of the encounter with images became an institutional practice. On the other hand, from the *Entretiens* about the salons to the emergence of public museums and exhibitions, privacy

5. I refer to the use Foucault made of the notion of the *dispositif*, but also to its transformation in cinema theory and to attempts at defining the *dispositif* as an operative notion by Deleuze and recently by Agamben. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), especially 101–73; Michael Maset, *Diskurs, Macht und Geschichte: Foucaults Analysetechniken und*

die historische Forschung (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2002); Jean-Louis Baudry, “Das Dispositiv: Metapsychologische Betrachtungen des Realitätseindrucks,” in *Kursbuch Medienkultur: Die maßgeblichen Theorien von Brecht bis Baudrillard*, edited by Claus Pias, Joseph Vogl, Lorenz Engell, Oliver Fahle, and Britta Neitzel (Stuttgart: DVA, 2004), 39; Giorgio Agamben, *Was ist ein Dispositiv?* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2008).

was projected into the public sphere, Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit*. Boehm introduced the figure of the invisible third to whom I address even what I imagine around private images. The faculty seem to have agreed that images are not primarily private, that the mental image, for example, is not primarily a result of private imagination that then is coded into a medium (translated into it in order to become a picture) in order to enter only then the public sphere. Instead, images seem to be always already public. Mitchell introduced Wittgenstein's argument against "private language" as read by Saul Kripke (some philosophers label this reconstructive reading "Kripkenstein"): there cannot be a private language because it would have no criteria.⁶ I could name my apple of today a pear tomorrow, and no one would say that this is not consistent. So: are there private images? The double answer tended to be No, because our imagination is always addressed to the "unknown third," and No, because our mental images are already "picturesque"—they are permeated by the rules and codes of pictures we see and that are in common use: city maps, photographs, movies . . . There is a public element in projection, as there is a public element in reception. There are cultural codes, media *dispositifs*, historical discourses in our dreams. Both aspects insist on the essentially (ontologically) communicative and thus public character of images. This is a statement about ontology, but it is also nonessentialist: it does not say what pictures are in themselves, but where we find them, where we should and where we should not situate them in order to know more about how they work.

But still Jacqueline Lichtenstein is right in insisting on the intense presence the image has just for me, for an imagination that in considering an image is, so to speak, intensely present for the one who "has" it, and through that feels compelled into talking about it to the one beside himself, preferably so in front of an image. In his *La voix et le phénomène*, Derrida tried a certain reading of Husserl in order to understand, reconstruct, and deconstruct the extraordinary presence of his voice to the one who speaks.⁷ What we speak about is, so to speak, co-present with our speech; it has the temporality of an ongoing presence. That temporality is of course opposed to writing, to what is marked and put into the series of iterative readings and rereadings. The image seems to have more of voice and speech, the picture more of writing and rereading and revisioning. However, just as Derrida accords primacy to writing, which grants some sort of fixity in relation to any possible speech, so we have to accord some sort of primary status to the picture, through which images enter the communicative sphere, that sphere we all share.

Before coming back to picture theory, we might have to enter into a reflection linking "Kripkenstein" to Derrida. Rereading Wittgenstein with Kripke, we should ask whether the private language argument is not in a hidden sense a writing argument. What makes language public, if not its capacity to be reused,

6. Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 55–113.

7. Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967).

to be used tomorrow not the same way as today but in a way that somehow presupposes the way it had functioned before? And is it the group of speech users that guarantees that today's usages can be linked to yesterday's? Cannot all the users of a language forget about what they meant yesterday? So we might grant to writing, to *écriture* in the broadest sense, an important status in this argument. The meaning of yesterday's word does not necessarily have to have been written, but it has to be part of a code that has already been somehow fixed, that is thus used as something potentially written, or pinned down onto some medium.⁸

Derrida's definition of *écriture* does not systematically divide writing and drawing. There has to be some surface that serves as a medium. It can be a *tabula rasa* that is used as a playing field, as a field to calculate or as a field for graphic demonstration (icon in the broadest sense), or for a more or less coded writing. It is largely James Elkins who has explored the boundaries between these practices—boundaries that are at first floating and only gradually more defined, and that vary in different cultures. It seems to me important to reread not only Derrida's *Grammatology* again in that context, but also his early comment about the sixth treatise of Husserl's crisis book about geometry.⁹ Husserl had commented about the origin of geometry within a vital practice, measuring land, for example after flooding for irrigation. Rules that were first linked to that practice were abstracted, step by step, and coded into an ever more autonomous field of knowledge, known as geometry. Through that process of abstraction, geometrical knowledge could be transposed to virtually any field. Husserl's argument would be that by forgetting its epistemological place within the *Lebenswelt*, geometry loses its ground in practice and starts to govern through abstract mechanisms, a motion that is the root of any future form of estrangement. Derrida, however, is interested mostly in the common ground of geometry, arithmetic, and writing in the *gramma*, and how that ground is projected onto what we may conceive as a *tabula rasa*: first the irrigated land flattened out through the floods, then the surface the geometer used to establish his laws.

A deviation from private language to private writing can shed some light on our reflections on private images and pictures. There is presence in a picture, especially if it enters a process of beholding or of "realization" by Gottfried Boehm's "unknown third," or if it enters into some sort of community, or even if it is situated in a public sphere so that it unites people otherwise unknown to each other. But that presence is linked to a preexisting picture, to a whole process of production and description commonly described as a *dispositif* (as that term is developed in Foucault, Deleuze, and Agamben). In order to acquire its intense presence as an image for me, it has to be part of a common sphere; and

8. See also Mitchell's recent discussion of Luhmann in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

9. Edmund Husserl, *L'origine de la géométrie*, translated with an introduction by Jacques

Derrida, second edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974). I used the German translation of Derrida's lengthy introduction: *Husserl's Weg in die Geschichte am Leitfaden der Geometrie* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1987).

in order to enter that common sphere, it has to be produced by some individuals who are part of an institutionalized sphere of the production and reception of images. And, as in writing, any new reading is a rereading, an iteration (Derrida) and a renaissance (Warburg) that also changes its sense, sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes even subverting it through ironic appropriations, through second readings within new metaphorological frameworks and so forth. As for the relationship of text and image, metaphorology plays a role, as Anselm Haverkamp has argued. But we should not confuse the metaphor with talking in images.¹⁰ It is not the metaphor that links language to images, but language itself that is always already imaginative, before being metaphorological. The metaphor links texts images to cultures of *seeing as*. We are always already in texts, and we are always already (more or less) *im Bilde*.

So far, we have been more in images, private and public, than in the image. Are these reflections picture theory, or merely historical? Why not say whatever an image was or is in a certain context is historical, and any attempt at generalizing is futile and thus boring? Or why not say any such attempt is either more or less tautological (that looking at an image is somehow like looking at something else) or speculative? There is that image of our world, that mixed up cocktail of images, gathered partly strategically and partly casually, which makes up my being *im Bilde*. For many of us, it is chaos, for some of us a mess, and for Proust it was saved within a novel as his personal “cathedral.” There also is the oeuvre of an artist, that totality of works that make up his or her accomplishments. It is maybe more that mess that makes up the “private” subject than the presence of the mental image . . . However that might be, in any image we indirectly encounter the *dispositif*, the practice producing it as a medium, and, with it, the potential of the worlds it might possibly contain. That encounter with the potential of the *dispositif* is, so to speak, silent; Mitchell rightly emphasizes that we do not see a medium, but something within it, as he convincingly said in *What Do Pictures Want?* “We not only think about media, we think in them, which is why they give us the headache endemic to recursive thinking. There is no privileged metalanguage of media in semiotics, linguistics, or discourse analysis. Our relation to media is one of mutual and reciprocal constitution: we create them, and they create us.”¹¹ However, in his insistence on meta-pictures, he opens space for a theory of the medium within the medium itself.

Any medium has two languages: it stops the stream of consciousness, of perception that always moves, and it fixes images—according to one rule or another—in such a way that we can speak about them, in such a way that they enter into communication. This is true even for cinema: according to Deleuze, the *time-image* is diachronic, but structured in time, a structure that is perceivable only, like that of a melody, by putting the sequence into some sort of simultaneity, a synchronic presence. At the same time, in any medium, in any *dispositif*,

10. Anselm Haverkamp, *Metapher: Die Ästhetik in der Rhetorik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007), 99–102.

11. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 215.

there is a movement towards self-reflection. In gradually exploring its possibilities, the medium is also about its own status, about the rules, the paradigms and axioms that makes it possible. Very often, a tendency towards filling itself with all sorts of images, details, and emotionally interesting features is counteracted by a tendency towards emptying itself out, reducing it to something that seems to be its status of pure potentiality, before it conveys or contains anything. Wilhelm Worringer called these tendencies *empathy* and *abstraction*. The tendency towards abstraction has been transformed into a program since the historical avant-gardes, in art that became philosophical, self-reflective, and critical of other industrially produced media surrounding itself.

From Manet to Mondrian and Agnes Martin, the drive towards emptying out the medium and at the same time filling it, worked in relation to the idea that the medium somehow preceded itself and was originally void in a primordial sense. That tendency towards the tabula rasa finally tended towards treating the empty surface as itself a medium, as a thing already precoded with all the rules characteristic of a fully defined *dispositif*. The process of abstraction towards something very simple, towards a form somehow containing all the other forms, can also happen in sculpture, for example in Brancusi. The strange end of that process is that it projects the very simple or empty medium as primordial, as preceding itself in a radical way. Before the medium contains anything, before it contributes building up worlds, it is already there, in a state of emptiness, but filled with all its potentialities. This was another sense of the primitivist ideology: the projection that you can find in earlier cultures in some cultural evolution. But even without primitivism, this seems to be an inevitable move within a medium, and beyond it: from within, the searches for its own transcendental status, for a historical a priori in Foucault's sense: the rules that make it possible.¹² And the result of that process of abstraction thus always seems to be projected into some sort of *arche*, some inaugural scenario. Some metapictures and some ambiguous pictures reflect that process in themselves. Within pictures, we arrive at the picture.

These are points I consider worth exploring, not in order to resolve the paradox of a way of thinking of picture theory that is at the same time historical and outside history. Boehm's and Mitchell's shared interest in the relation between the historical use of pictures on the one hand and what was named (maybe misnamed) an ontology of the image on the other hand is what keeps *Bildtheorie* going. But can the paradox be resolved, or is it constitutive of what we are doing, of what we feel we have to do? Perception is always on the move; we cannot stop seeing. However, we always arrest it in pictures. We are always already participating in the Heraclitian movement of seeing, as Georg Simmel called it.¹³ And

12. I use the term *transcendental* first in the Kantian sense of any condition that makes episteme possible. But the move towards transcendental *arche* from within episteme itself has to be rethought in discussing Derrida's reading of Husserl, and in situating it in the context of multiple medialities.

13. See the forthcoming PhD study of Georg Simmel's comments on Rodin, and other attempts at constructing models of modernity through readings of Rodin, by Dominik Brabant.

we are always already participating in the simultaneity of the image, of a world made up of images. That is one side of the paradox. Would the other not be something like this: we are always already in history, and in discourses and media *dispositifs* that have their own historical, social, and ideological conditions? These media tend towards thinking their own conditions, whether as specific images or as images in general. There is a transcendental move in images towards what they are, towards their specific constitution as this or that medium, and towards their being images in general (whether or not we call that ontology or essence). The problem is that all ontology is subject to rereading, revision . . .