

READING PICTURES: THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I chart the seismic shift that has occurred over the past three decades in attitudes towards the interpretation of visual images. My strategy implies the argument that the reading of visual images would appear to be an inevitability given the accelerating change of attitudes towards pictures as containers of determinate knowledge. French critical theorists (Foucault, Barthes, Derrida et. al.) dominated debate on interpretation of text and image in the 1980s, where my survey begins. Michel Foucault dismissed the image (in *Madness and Civilization* 1959/1988) as a fascinating site for the madness of dreams but one standing outside of reasoned interpretation because of an inherent excess of meaning and deeply hidden attributes and allusions. Generally, however, when images were discussed using identifiable interpretive strategies in the 1980s the framework was a variant of semiotic analysis (Marin, Eco and Barthes – who famously, diverges from this mode in *Camera Lucida*). I use W. J. T. Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* 1986 as a focal text from the 1980s and follow this with two of his publications on images, one from 1995 and another from 2005 to demonstrate the dramatic shift in the approach to pictures across almost three decades. Around these focal texts by Mitchell I reference other texts and trends that culminate in the more recent proliferation of texts related to visual studies and the re-emergence of aesthetics.

Keywords: image analysis and interpretation, pictures and theory,
visual studies, pictorial turn

Over the past few years within the theoretical discourse that engages the visual there has been a renewed interest in aesthetics by theorists from a range of disciplines (Halsall 2009) as there has been particular attention given to what was once considered a marginal curiosity,

visual literacy. This trend is indicative of the need for academics to come to terms with the fact that measures of competence in most university disciplines are text-based when real-world cultural, social and even political operations are primarily visual (Elkins ed. 2008, p. 3). In this paper I present a survey of the state of play in visual studies over the past three decades, drawing on the experience in Australian university art schools, and demonstrate an accelerating trend towards accepting the material image as a site for serious scholarly attention in its own right.

My paper is divided into three chronological sections: 1980s, the 1990s, and 2000–2009. Each section takes as its point of departure a text by the same author, W. J. T. Mitchell. The choice of these three texts by Tom Mitchell is not simply to establish a connecting thread through the mass of publications over that period, but one made because these particular texts supply a synoptic view of the dramatic shifts in attitudes towards the theorizing of images over the past three decades.

The 1980s

W. J. T. Mitchell's text *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) attempted to subvert the twentieth-century methodological meaning of the term "iconology" and is a perfect exemplar of the approach of that decade; a book on images so dependent on linguistic models, history and allusions that it needed no illustrations, apart from a few line diagrams. Admittedly, by the early 1980s even the most conservative art history departments would have favoured a soft hermeneutics or even softer semiotics based on iconography rather than a rigid methodology that could be described as "iconology." The use of iconological method had been cultivated by Erwin Panofsky from its roots in the pioneering attempts by Aby Warburg and Fritz Saxl early in the twentieth century to establish a "science" of art history through a systematic identification of iconographic sources, a developed understanding of symbols, allegories and related codes, to reveal the meaning of a work. Mitchell avoids this territory but nevertheless his approach to pictures is still backward looking since he engages instead with Ernst Gombrich and Nelson Goodman who had for more than two decades dominated the debate on how to read images, with each occupying different but not entirely incompatible positions in accepting that images were made up of symbolic sys-

tems and therefore their reading was essentially cognitive. It was in the realms of psychological functioning and expressional aesthetics that Gombrich's approach differed from Goodman.

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" (Mitchell, in Elkins ed. 2008, p. 14) 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' (p. 14) were nothing more than rumors" does not ring true considering every art student in progressive art schools in Australia, if not elsewhere, had read Rees and Borzello's *The New Art History* (1986) and Hal Foster's anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983) long before approaching Mitchell's *Iconology* in the library. The text that is most representative of the 1980s would undoubtedly be the Foster anthology in one of its various editions, or Norman Bryson's *Calligram* where the semiotic paradigm can be more clearly identified. It should also be noted that Mitchell's oversight in almost ignoring Panofsky was amplified by the fact that in the 1990s Donald Preziosi would frame Panofsky's iconology as a precursor to modern semiotics (Preziosi 1998, pp. 227–275).

Two of the most significant, or significantly scrutinized, essays in 1980s Australian art schools and art history departments were Louis Marin's "Towards a Theory of Reading the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*" and Michel Foucault's "Las Meninas." Both essays appeared in the popular 1988 anthology *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, edited by Norman Bryson. Foucault's essay was the first chapter of his seminal *The Order of Things* (1966) so had been available in translation since 1970 and Marin's essay was first published in English in the 1980 anthology significantly titled *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, Leiman and Crossman (eds.). Both these essays involved intensive scrutiny of the works under analysis. Each author paid particular attention to the visual syntax of the image stressing its basis in renaissance perspectival construction of the space in which the drama depicted is enacted, by denial of the spectator's presence in the case of the Poussin and by direct engagement of eye contact as in the Velázquez, although only Marin made direct reference to Panofsky and art historical sources. It now seems a stretch of definition to describe the method used as semiotic when placed against later applications of the semiotics of Roland Barthes

or the semiology of Umberto Eco such as in Michael O'Toole's *The Language of Displayed Art* of 1994, for example. Not forgetting Foucault's association with the "death of the author," although both essays intended to reveal the mechanisms of the classical representational paradigm and imply its terminal point, both authors assume the internalized critique of representation is the intended specific reading or 'meaning' of the picture – a "message sent by Poussin" in the case of the *Shepherds* (Marin, in Bryson ed. 1988, p. 88).

However radical they appeared at the time, these essays were anchored to the established methodology of art history. This was the approach that Carlo Ginzburg identified as the evidential paradigm, built on the forensic unraveling of clues, iconographic or iconological reference, stylistic and autographic nuances (Ginzburg 1989, esp. p. 96 ff). An approach that favoured "puzzle pictures" as James Elkins would claim in his strident critique of the excess of writing on particular sorts of images. Velazquez's *Las Meninas* certainly qualified as one of Elkins' "monstrous pictures," a painting surrounded by a literature so vast as to be beyond the reading scope of the lifetime of one scholar (Elkins 1999a, p. 123). By the mid-1980s the field for art history and theory was expanding to such a degree that it was not just the canon that was called into question but also the special status of paintings and related objects. At the risk of brutal simplification it can be said that by the end of the 1980s, images were interpreted or analysed not as containers or carriers of complex determinate meaning that could be measured against established value systems but as one piece of a larger puzzle that made up visual culture in its totality of signifying activity (Corbett, in van Eck and Winters 2005, p. 18).

It is possible to show with simple graphs, as James Elkins has done, the dramatic collapse in citations of the leading lights of traditional art history such as Panofsky and Gombrich for the period 1980 to 2000 and the associated exponential rise of alternative theoretical approaches such as semiotics, feminism, psychoanalysis or more generally visual theory (see Elkins 2006, figs. 1, 2, pp. vii, ix). The postmodern fragmenting of methodological approaches and the shifting focus of attention on objects and images outside the field of high art changed the sort of writing about images from the old exegetical writing, where humanistic or aesthetic values could be extracted by working on the autonomous art object to unravel its meaning within an established history, to one where theories of cul-

tural production or psychoanalysis, for example, were applied to the image as with a lens to reveal the countless possible conditions behind it which led to its creation or formulation (Belting 1987, p. 28). Such an approach can be best illustrated with a quotation by John Tagg from one of the most significant anthologies of the 1980s on photographic practice.

The transparency of the photograph is its most powerful rhetorical device. But this rhetoric also has a history, and we must distance ourselves from it, question the naturalness of portraiture and probe the obviousness of each image. As we begin this, they must appear strange, often incompatible one with another. Comfortable notions of the history of photography and sentimentalities about the Family of Man must be left behind (Tagg 1988, p. 35).

In retrospect, the probing of obviousness did not often result in a making strange and a search for critical texts from the 1980s and 1990s that take a single “obvious” image as their locus of analysis will show how rarely writers stray from the familiar art image. It seems that the pattern of writing within the field of visual studies that emerged over that time favoured theoretical arguments held together by constellations of examples as opposed to close-reading of single images. Where concentrated attention was paid to particular images they were often paintings or photographs from the established canon.

Interestingly, in critical feminist writing of the 1980s and 1990s, this latter trend is only most obvious in the strand that comes from within the discipline of art history by key figures such as Carol Duncan, Lisa Tickner and Griselda Pollock. Feminists in the 1970s, notably Lucy Lippard and Judy Chicago, had developed the twofold strategy of dismantling the assumptions on which the canon was built while at the same time expounding alternative exemplars, her own work in the case of Chicago, and Laura Mulvey’s focus on cinema in that decade had expanded the field of feminist analysis into popular culture. Even so, the dominant critical strand of feminism that emerged in the 1980s, exemplified in the work and writing of Mary Kelly, might be characterized as anti-image. The cross-disciplinary scope of feminist theory and its integration with the more generalized field of critical theory tended to elide high-art images in favour of a socio-cultural analysis of popular art and entertainment. The writing of the most important of the French feminist theorists

translated into English in the 1980s, particularly Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, was grounded in philosophy, psychoanalysis and literature rather than art history. Such theoretical texts generally needed no images or illustrations. Admittedly, only the dedicated art student during the 1980s read Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) or *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) but *The Kristeva Reader* (1986) edited by Toril Moi was on every art theory reading list as it was for many other disciplines well into the 1990s. Nevertheless, during the 1980s, feminist art historians continued the direct attack on canonical works, constantly demonstrating that a feminist critical analysis was more devastatingly immediate in its impact on the status quo if it was applied to Gauguin's *Nevermore* (Solomon-Godeau 1989), for example, rather than to an automotive poster. This might explain to some degree the persistence of canonical works, such as Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, forming the basis for critical pictorial analysis (e.g. Collins 1996). However, it does not explain the almost total lack of monographic studies of images outside of historical or contemporary art during this and the following decade. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* from the 1970s established a particular pattern of critique with direct attack on paintings from the canon and images from popular culture presented in generalized rather than individuated form.

The 1990s

Although Mitchell has presented his *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* 1994 as a sequel to *Iconography* from the previous decade it is a very different book. Pictures were shifted to centre stage as indeed they had been in popular culture and all aspects of contemporary experience. Mitchell identified this "pictorial turn" and the need to come to terms with it across a range of images (Mitchell 1994, pp. 11–34). He was not alone in triggering or identifying this new paradigm shift from the linguistic metaphor of "reading texts" to the pictorial models of spectatorship and visuality but this work by Mitchell "contributed powerfully to this trend" and an acceptance that the image was demanding its own unique mode of analysis (Jay 1996, p. 3). It should be acknowledged that an inescapable influence on this movement in academe towards an interest in the visual during the 1990s was the impact of the "ecology of

images” from the first Gulf War, better remembered as the first television war (Bryson et. al. 1994, p. 325).

In *Picture Theory*, Mitchell identified the image-picture distinction as an important issue in understanding the pictorial turn since the picture or material image such as a painting or photograph seems to operate in a different way to the image represented in that painting or photograph and can be evoked in memory or with a single word. The material or iconic image would be something Mitchell would more fully explore in the next decade. His identification of “metapictures,” that is a particular class of pictures that reflect on the nature of pictures, was a more secure classification. For example *Las Meninas* and the *Arcadian Shepherds* conform precisely to Mitchell’s definition of metapictures in that they each function as a “foundational metaphor or analogy for an entire discourse” (p. 19), in this case the representational system that required the canvas to simultaneously act as window to open space and a reflecting surface of the depicted scene.

To accommodate the interdisciplinary nature of the emerging field of visual studies the published texts during this decade often focused on “seeing,” “looking” or “vision” as a unifying theme. Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay’s *Vision in Context* is a good example but the James Elkins’ *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (1996) is surely the text of the decade in crossing disciplinary boundaries, not to mention academic and popular divisions, to foreground picture theory and become a minor best seller in the process. However with a selection of images that did not avoid the most abject examples, written in a colloquial style (for example: “Still, there is something creepy about the idea of objects staring back,” p. 73) and without direct citations to sources (further reading for each chapter was placed at the back) the text was never going to become a fixture on reading lists in any university discipline. The later publication by Elkins titled *How to Use Your Eyes* (2000) was an odd compendium of unrelated images and objects informed by text that drew from many sources. It was impossible to know what audience the book was aimed at although it was clearly not an academic readership, as can be demonstrated by comparison with a text on “looking” that was published soon after as a visual or cultural studies text. This was Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright’s *Practices of Looking* from 2001. In fact this latter book is but one of many pedagogical texts specifically aimed at the burgeoning development of

studies in visual culture or visual studies in the Anglo-American academy. Margaret Dikovitskaya has comprehensively surveyed those texts and although there is no point repeating the process here, a number of observations can be made in relation to Mitchell's work since he is one of the seventeen theorists, including Martin Jay, Michael Ann Holly and Janet Wolf who were interviewed by Dikovitskaya for her survey. Reading Mitchell's interview is interesting as he seems to resist having his work subsumed into "visual studies" and he notes that visual culture studies are analogous to linguistics in that art plays the same role in the former as literature does in the latter when in fact visual imaging and picturing in no way operate in the same structured symbolic way as language. (Dikovitskaya 2006, pp. 55, 56 and 239) When Mitchell describes the content of a visual studies course he developed at the University of Chicago in 1995 it seems evident that his focus is on the techniques of "looking" at and "appreciation" of pictures rather than on the analysis of social contexts, ideological formations or representational practices. In contrast, Dikovitskaya makes her position very clear. "I argue that if we accept Mitchell's thesis that visual studies was born to the marriage of art history (a discipline organized around a theoretical object) and cultural studies (an academic movement echoing social movements), we should also recognize that it is the 'cultural turn' that made visual studies possible in the first place" (p. 47). On these grounds, Dikovitskaya rejects Mitchell's "pictorial turn" in favour of Martin Jay's "visual turn" as the best terminology to describe the dramatic emergence of vision and visibility as key issues in the humanities and social sciences in the 1990s (Martin Jay introduced the "visual turn" in his 2002 essay in the first issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture*). Mitchell seems to be seeking a theoretical formation that would put the image or picture at the centre of the discourse on the visual while Dikovitskaya was drawn to formations that revealed the processes of exchange between objects and audiences, with no particular status given to the art image. As she put it: "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" (p. 49).

2000–2009

Regardless of how creepy it seemed to acknowledge the disturbingly seditious power of images this is exactly the path that Mitchell took in his 2005 publication *What Do Pictures Want?* Inspired by a review of his 1994 text, the title had been first used in his contribution to *October* magazine in 1996. However, *What Do Pictures Want?* was truly a sequel to his *Picture Theory*, where Mitchell in identifying the “pictorial turn” had attempted to diagnose the widely accepted notion that visual images had replaced words as the dominant mode of expression. In particular, in *Picture Theory*, Mitchell questioned the possibility of any singular disciplinary approach to formulating ideas about “images replacing words” in this pictorial (“iconic” or “visual”) turn. As noted above in the summary of his response to Dikovitskaya, Mitchell remained skeptical of any theoretical approach that negated the centrality of the visual image and in retrospect he was able to see that *Picture Theory* in attempting to open a new initiative called visual culture – “the study of human visual experience and expression” – was also closely linked to the older enterprise of iconology that he had eschewed in his 1984 *Iconology*. Acknowledging a debt to the major studies by the art historians David Freedberg and Hans Belting, in *What do Pictures Want?* Mitchell began with the premise that the double consciousness of belief and disavowal or mix of magical and skeptical attitudes, in dealing with images in the so called ages of faith, is no different in the modern world. What is not explicitly acknowledged by Mitchell is that in creating this parallel between living organisms or species and pictures to capture the vitalistic status of images, his strategy clearly resonated with the approach of iconologists such as Rudolf Wittkower teaching at the Warburg Institute in London in the 1930s to 1950s where the migration of image species was used as a fundamental explicatory metaphor (*Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*).

Mitchell’s move towards a poetics of living pictures can be framed as an escape from the rhetorical study of discourse analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics or other approaches to images that had hardened into discrete disciplines by 2000 (see Rose 2001 for a comprehensive summary of the visual methodologies operational then as now). During the same period in which Mitchell was writing *What Do Pictures What?* in the US, Jean-Luc Nancy in France was

drawing similar conclusions that the image was “neither world or language” but a “real presence,” not the presence of the real but a sacred intimacy projected as wisdom (Nancy 2005, esp. pp. 9–13) Like Mitchell, Nancy’s “poetic image” does not refer to simply “a decoration provided by a play of analogy, comparison, allegory, metaphor, or symbol” or the “pleasant game of an encoded displacement.” Also in France, Jacques Ranci re extended Mitchell’s idea of the metapicture, at least in the field of painting or art images. Ranci re defined such an image as the “ostensive image” – that posits its presence as the peculiarity of art but also with the “powers of meaning that alter this presence: the discourses that present and comment on it, the institutions that display it, the forms of knowledge that historicize it” (Ranci re 2009, p. 23).

In 2008 Mitchell’s approach to images was literally foregrounded in Elkins’ *Visual Literacy* where Mitchell would summarize or synthesize the results of his work in *Picture Theory* and *What Do Pictures Want?* into four fundamental concepts of image science: the pictorial turn, the image-picture distinction, metapictures and bio-pictures (pp. 14–21).

What is more, by 2008 Mitchell’s treatment of the lives of images was widely enough accepted to have an entire anthology premised on images as “forms of life” (Costello and Willsdon 2008 – The acknowledgement of Mitchell’s influence is specific, p. 17). The “image wars” of post 9/11 and the second Gulf war were the central motivation for this particular collection for it was now obvious that no ostensive image, no poetic image could compete with the naked, abject power of the destruction of the Twin Towers or the images from Abu Ghraib prison. Importantly the subtitle for the anthology *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics* highlights the most recent and perhaps inevitable trend to a return to aesthetics as the field of enquiry most suited to the task of understanding images.

My strategy to highlight Mitchell’s texts as indicative of a pivotal evolution of the way visual images have been theorized over the past three decades does demonstrate the rise of the visual and the renewed primacy of the picture as a site of serious study. In the 1980s the term “reading pictures” was only a figure of speech to describe the semiotic and hermeneutic approaches of that decade and the idea of actually reading a picture in a determinate way was considered an impossible dream – the path to madness, as Foucault implied. We have come a considerable distance since then. After reading *What*

Do Pictures Want? it might even be imagined that the intractable abundance of meaning in any picture could be penetrated by a singular focus on its internal coherence and experiential impact. Nevertheless, the seemingly exponential development of “picture theory” in Mitchell’s model or “visual studies” more generally from 1995 to 2009 does not in any way imply that this process will continue and the “pictorial turn” or “visual turn” will no doubt ultimately be replaced by alternative theoretical paradigms in academe and outside it. The process could well be underway already.

It would be possible to trace an alternative trajectory through the last two or three decades with a singular focus on the status of aesthetics and its evolution from the margins of art or image analysis in the 1970s to its absolute rejection at the height of postmodernism in the 1980s (it is not for nothing that Foster’s seminal anthology of 1983 was titled *The Anti-Aesthetic*) followed by the “relational aesthetics” of Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s to more recent claims for “complicity aesthetics” (Drucker). Such a survey would no doubt also reveal that the linguistic turn was not extinguished by the rise of visual studies since, apart from Drucker, very few of the recent key texts could be said to engage directly with the visual image. In fact, if such a survey included the aesthetics of the philosopher Jacques Ranciere the visual primacy of the image would be called into question since Ranciere gives no special status to the material image over other forms including the images constructed in a novel, for example. Looking at recent publications would however demonstrate that at least art historians and aestheticians are beginning to talk to each other, as facilitating such an encounter is the rationale for the Art Seminar Series 2006 volume *Art History Versus Aesthetics* edited by James Elkins.

This brings me to the most recent publication of collected essays on aesthetics edited by Francis Halsall who works in a contemporary art theory department and Julia Jansen and Tony O’Connor, both teaching in philosophy. *Rediscovering Aesthetics* showcases a range of cross-disciplinary voices speaking very much from their disciplinary base in art history and philosophy, with the interesting addition of three art practitioners, Adrian Piper, Carolee Schneemann and Robert Morris, all trained in textually dense theory prior to the pictorial turn in the 1990s. The Morris essay charts a much longer survey than the last three decades as he speculates on the nature of aesthetics and art but he specifically locates himself as part of a

generation trained before the pictorial turn identified by Mitchell. He positions himself with those who could, like Foucault, relentlessly subject the surface of a painting to inch by inch analysis to unpick its multiple differences in the continuous flow of the image. Furthermore in the context of speculating if the innate aesthetic faculty could have shifted with the pictorial turn he asks the question: “Are we freer now that our aesthetic faculty is exercised on the discontinuities of the post-high art general spectacle?” (Morris, in Halsall et al., p. 235). The magical, poetic, living image is not to be found in the view of the contemporary visual world that Morris presents and he sees the reordering of aesthetic response to digital images as “scan reading” with the aesthetic faculty being honed to triage the incoming barrage of images for a rapid response (p. 235).

In an echo of Mitchell’s *Iconology* from over twenty years ago this book has no pictures, just a line drawing and images do not form a particular focus since television programs, images from the Hubble Space Telescope, theoretical writings and painting styles all become equal as forms of evidence for particular arguments. In Claire Bishop’s essay “The Social Turn” in which she surveys socially engaged art beyond the “relational” work discussed by Bourriaud, she calls on Rancière to argue that since the term *aesthetic* “denotes the very linguistic and theoretical domain in which thought about art takes place” it follows that “all claims to be anti-aesthetic or to reject art still function within the aesthetic regime of art” (Bishop in Halsall et al. 2009, p. 249). Even so, Bishop acknowledges the disengagement of much relational art from the aesthetics of the visual image: “Many social projects photograph very badly, and these images convey very little of the contextual information so crucial to understanding the work” (p. 247). All of which raises the possibility that this current reemergence of aesthetics could just as easily mark the end of the pictorial turn as it could suggest the elevation of visual studies or picture theory to another level in university-based education where visual practices or image competence have a foundation in the sensitive science of a new aesthetics or perhaps a Neo-aesthetics.

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