

# Intro-question

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DO WE STILL  
BELIEVE  
IN THE POWER  
OF IMAGES?

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A thirty years ago, two authors, W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) and Gottfried Boehm (1994) pointedly drew attention to the fact that contemporary society is significantly characterized by visual communication and that a culture dominated by language has increasingly given way to a new paradigm centered on visual media. Mitchell called this radical change in the way of knowing the world the *Pictorial Turn*, and Boehm the *ikonische Wende*. However, what was still not entirely clear in the first half of the nineties of the last century was whether the turn towards the image was part of an irreversible process that fundamentally changes the human paradigm of communication, or whether it was (just another) episode in an unbroken, multi-millennium development line of technically supported visualizations. This dilemma was not only of a rhetorical nature, as it was also emphasized by the insights of the two authors: Mitchell asserted that the pictorial turn is not a peculiarity of our time, but that a kind of turn towards the image happened every time in history when some technical invention or cultural change led to a change in the ways we create, interpret or reproduce images. To that extent, the discussions, for example, between iconoclasts and iconophiles during the eighth and ninth centuries can rightly be considered a pictorial turn, because the medieval disputes on the ontological status of pictorial representation put the question of what we really *see* when we *look* at religious icons at the center of interest in the visual culture of that time.

The general history of images recorded that two main currents of thought clashed at the time: the first, which saw in the pictures the intensity of the presence of the depicted deity, and the second, which saw in the pictures a representation, that is, a symbolic reminiscence of the depicted character. The problem posed in this way led the contemporary philosopher Emmanuel Alloa to call the debate between iconoclasts and iconophiles in Byzantium “visual studies”, and the insights presented after the Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Christian church, held for the second time in Nicaea in 787, were for him like “A Pictorial Turn *avant la lettre*” (Alloa 2013). Conceptually, contemporary people have a similar dilemma in the encounter with virtual visualizations: if at the beginning of the 21st century we are completely used to not identifying an image with a real event, but know that there is always an ontological gap between intra-pictorial and extra-pictorial reality, then new, increasingly sophisticated virtual experiences bring us back in a paradoxical way to

the medieval problem of the intensity of presence. The only difference is that the level of presence of what we see *in* or *on* the picture today is no longer determined by a dogmatic-theological instructions, but by the degree of technologically produced mirage that places the observer in the space *between* presence and absence, or by what some authors call “immersion” (Grau 2003), “unframing” (Conte 2020), “atmosphere” or “atmospheric spaces” (Böhme 2013; Griffero 2017; Bruno 2022) or “environmental images” (Pinotti 2021).

If we draw another parallel with medieval debates about images, we can therefore note that even in our time there was a debate about the fact that images no longer have to be limited to their traditional, flat media/carriers, but that they can occupy a three-dimensional, real space, creating a special atmosphere as a phenomenon of multidimensional space that allowed for the simultaneous presence of the observer and the observed. The concept of an image is no longer associated with something separable (Nancy 2002), symbolic (Goodman 1976) or fictional (Walton 1993), but the concept of an image now follows a new path of technical possibilities for its transformation into a visual phenomenon of the continuity of space and time (Schmiz 2009).

The second stream of image studies after the “turn” of the nineties, which Gottfried Boehm called the “iconic” turn, can be connected to a much lesser extent with the technical nature of pictorial representations. Although, just like with Mitchell, the term itself remained open and under-theorized even after many years, the directions of research offered by Boehm’s proposal clearly pointed to the linguistic nature of the pictorial experience on the one hand and to the traditional art-historical material on the other. An American author also drew attention to the role of the linguistic component in the knowledge of the visual, but for him it was about the amalgamation of the visual and the textual, about the inextricable unity of both components. Boehm, on the other hand, insisted on two things that would later prove to be crucial for contemporary *Bildwissenschaft* as a whole: first, he insisted on the existence of a visible cut between image and reality (“ikonische differenz”). He interpreted this cut not only as a physical frame of the picture as a border between inside and outside, i.e. picture and non-picture, but also as a stylistic figure of metaphor which necessarily consists of something that can only be *conceived* and something that can (also) be *seen*. For this author, it is not possible to understand the ontological status of

the image without awareness of the border between what is imagined and what is actually seen. Another element that clearly separated Boehm from the American concept of visual studies was his foundation of the *iconic turn* both in the tradition of metaphysical philosophy and in the specific properties of the pictorial surface; both the philosophy and the materiality of the work of art equally contributed to the dialectic of Boehm's concept of "iconic logos". While Mitchell claims that a new iconology would certainly notice that the image today resists the logos – he says: "If traditional iconology suppressed the image, postmodern iconology suppresses language" (Mitchell 1994, 28) – Boehm's theory seeks to establish a *tertium datur*, by connecting the theoretical aspect of "linguistic image as metaphor" with the art-historical concept of "image as fine art" (Boehm 1995, 31)

As much as the turn towards the image by these two authors can be considered in the terminological sense as two parts of a unique paradigm, in the conceptual sense, as it turned out later, it is actually a question of two fundamentally different principles of approach to images that took into account different genealogical lines and therefore open up different research paths. In one of the first articles to outline the contours of visual studies or the Anglo-American paradigm on the one hand, and *Bildwissenschaft* as a continental-German paradigm on the other, Keith Moxey clearly separates two lines of development in the Image Science after the pictorial turn: the first, which rests on the tradition of cultural studies and the latter, which builds on the early "version" of Art History in such a way that it takes over from it the interest in the expanded field of images, not only those of art (Moxey 2008). Horst Bredekamp helped him in such a binary division with his seminal text "A Neglected Tradition. Art History as *Bildwissenschaft*?" in which the German author draws attention to key points, primarily coming out of German tradition, which reveal to us that the early Art History predicted a far more inclusive concept of the study of pictorial representations than could be inferred from today's preferences of that discipline (Bredekamp 2003).

It is very often mentioned in the humanities that the pictorial turn of the nineties followed the linguistic turn (Rorty 1967) that took place during the sixties and seventies of the last century, and that this only sanctioned the obvious fact that contemporary societies have mostly turned to technological possibilities, immediacy and the speed

offered by visual media. Even Art History showed a belated interest in post-structuralist (linguistic) methods and thus briefly opened a new direction with a new inclination for disciplinary constructions of meaning. However, what Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson talked about in their programmatic text “Semiotics and Art History” (Bal and Bryson 1991) was not on the trail of Bredekamp’s Art History as a science that, in addition to art in the strict sense, deals with images in general, but with these two authors it was an attempt to disciplinary expansion of the interpretation of art with the help of already existent disciplinary practices. Meanwhile, other disciplines born in the aegis of post-structuralism, such as psychoanalytic and post-colonial theory, Marxist, feminist and queer studies, began to claim the right to describe works of art in accordance with their own disciplinary interests (Bersani 1986; Silverman 1996; T. J. Clark 1999).

What the contributions in this issue of *New Theories* would like to point out is that the contemporary reality of images is much more complex than the tripartite disciplinary parallelism of visual culture/visual studies, *Bildwissenschaft* and post-structuralist Art History can convey to us. Each of these currents of thought was created as a kind of separate research platform, which was formed and re-adjusted depending on the specific goals of the research – ideological, political, artistic, identity, cultural, media, etc. The articles presented here want to show that the contemporary study of images may be regarded as a completely open area in a thematic sense on the one hand and disciplinarily individualized on the other; that old knowledge can be replaced by new one more easily and with more acumen than ever before. However, what distinguishes a more strict way to do that from other more or less radically inclusive practices of inter- and multidisciplinary (Walker and Chaplin 1997; Sachs-Hombach 2005) is questioning the possibility of the so-called non-universal or decentralized approach to images, which would not reflect the self-sufficiency of any of them, but rather point to the fact that the only essential feature we can attribute to images is their quintessence *precisely* and *only* as pictorial phenomena, and not as a method of interpretation or universal ontological foundations. The study of images today is atomized and de-essentialized to a much greater extent (for the opposite view, see Bal 2003 and Davey 2013), so that through the cultural and academic dominance established in this century by Visual Culture Studies and *Bildwissenschaft*, with Art History

having taken that position much earlier, can no longer be explained the intertwining of social and media-technological forces, regardless of the increasing porosity of traditional disciplinary boundaries and the thematic diversity of individual choices.

Thirty years after the pictorial/iconic turn, it becomes increasingly clear that the study of images as paradoxically visible and invisible, material and non-material phenomena of reality, can no longer be based on the construction of ideological, technological, identity or artistic concepts, regardless of how much such concepts participate in the subjective experience of images or how much they are objectively determined by them. Here, of course, we are not referring to the philosophical aporia of “subject and object”, but to a new sort of relationships that are being established in contemporary culture: those that approach the interaction of human and machine in an epochal new way on the one hand, and the still unexplained relationship between the image-as-difference and image-as-immersions on the other. The goal of future research should be to establish how the diverse and often conflicting approaches to images within the humanities can be related and instrumentalized in a very flexible way for the purpose of studying images as a phenomena that, beyond their optical, aesthetic and communicative components, may reveal new dimensions of their meaning; in other words, to reveal to us new reasons why we have worshiped or hated them, bowed before them or destroyed them, believed in their power or detested them for millennia.

In this volume, we want to examine whether we can approach images as specific phenomena with diverse and often unexpected effects, but such that do not depend on the personal preferences of the observer, but possess a kind of mobile and changing “nomadic essence” that results from their inextricable historical, philosophical and technological adventures. In order to be able to do this, it is necessary to accept and encompass the widest possible appearances of images – the experiences, effects and consequences they create – and at the same time deconstruct and reconceptualize existing disciplinary models that approach images as if they possess an always-pre-existing essence. Therefore, our goal is not to prove the inadequacy or inappropriateness of any research model, but to expand research models by proposing a type of image-specific realignment of existing methods. But, first of all, is our introductory question even asked in the right way or, as Žarko Paić draws our attention, “can we lose faith in something we never believed in?”

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