

Krešimir Purgar

Visual Studies and the Pictorial Turn: Twenty Years Later

Abstract

In this paper I will try to emphasize some key points in the discussion that have started two decades ago, after Thomas Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm had proclaimed the advent of the so called pictorial and/or iconic turn. At first sight, ever since this has been primarily a metatheoretical argument, that aimed at a disciplinary framing of the new intellectual endeavor. But over years it dissolved in a much more nuanced approaches to particular topics in art, film, and popular culture that found their natural “home” in the evolving area of visual studies. Nevertheless, the discussion still doesn't seem to be over and values and goals of visual studies still don't seem to be defined.

Keywords

visual studies, pictorial turn, W.J.T. Mitchell, image, Gottfried Boehm, visual essentialism, anthropology of images

As Italian scholar Michele Cometa once commented, those who were looking for the truth in images have faced a resounding failure, either because of the prejudices of western philosophy or because of its fundamentalist statements. The other way round, those who were resistant to acknowledging to images any meaning and power have condemned their selves to a life in a kind of “absolute reality” (Cometa, 2008: 49). To put this blatant dichotomy of belief in and fear of images on the level of visual theory, retaining both sides of the opposition, I could also refer to Keith Moxey who claimed that there were moments when art history was about to drown in a swamp of “contextual detail” that surrounded discourses of art, and there were times when all that mattered was “an internal history of the object that insisted on its freedom from cultural entanglement” (Moxey, 2008: 167). What should be of common and utmost concern, therefore, is an attempt to answer the following questions: are these times now over and are those who uncritically adore or despise images finally coming to terms with reality in its multifaceted, multimodal, let alone multimedia forms?

Cometa and Moxey imply that there is evidence of a highly disputable topic of the powers and weaknesses of images on the one hand and of their respective theories on the other. There is also a dispute over the role images should play in contemporary society and consequently over their values and purposes. Two decades after concepts of the *pictorial* or the *iconic* turn entered our vernacular theorizing on images, it has become clear that it wasn't only a newly discovered social, political or sexual construction of the visual field that brought turbulence into disciplinary knowledge, but that images themselves were discursive formations with powers exceeding those purely iconic or visually discernible. The turn towards images (Mitchell, 1994; Boehm, 1995) is a turn towards the acceptance of the proposition that images can *speak* and *tell* as much as they can *show* and *represent*. On the other hand, if we consider the pictorial turn to be only a reaction to the linguistic turn (Rorty, 1967) that is now giving way to the domination of images, we must refer to Jacques Rancière who challenged the whole idea of *turns*, which inevitably led the pictorial turn acquiring a controversial twofold nature: firstly, it represented “the challenge to the metaphysics that underpinned the linguistic turn” and, secondly, “it became the nihilist demonstration of the illusions of a world in which, since everything is an image, the denunciation of images is itself deprived of all effectiveness” (Rancière, 2009: 124).

What Rancière is really about to clarify asking “do pictures really want to live”, fifteen years after Mitchell's seminal text, is how to situate the philosophy of the pictorial turn within a much wider frame of dialectical reversal where there is not only the old dichotomy of the text-image relationship that matters, but now a whole new epistemology under way with “a machine that transforms images and life into coded language” (Rancière, 127). What is this machine? According to Rancière, it is a metaphorical device that produces all the artificial and digitally created life around us with the inevitable consequence that it also produces a new kind of image and a new kind of power altogether. This is a very clear reference to Mitchell's later books, *What do pictures want* and *The Last Dinosaur Book* (Mitchell, 2005 and 1998), where the consequences of the pictorial turn started to assume a much more dramatic aspect and in which the dialectical nature of images provoked a definition radically different from that of the “original” turn towards images. What is at stake here, after we have come to an understanding that images could speak and show on equal terms, is the new discourse of the power that images gained thanks to new technologies and

particularly thanks to the *abuse* of the new technologies. Following Rancière, this is what I would also subscribe to in regard to the pictorial turn twenty years later.

Starting from the famous exchange of letters between Thomas Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm, where the two fathers of the visual turn decided to enrich their already seminal thesis, eventually it became clear that questions of image were not so much issues of a purely philosophical nature but of a practical coming to terms with reality dominated by visual phenomena of all kinds. In one of his assessments in this letter, Gottfried Boehm proposed the idea of *the iconic turn* in a wider context of classical philosophy and the philosophy of language of Ludwig Wittgenstein, as well as a reference to how philosophy conceived of the term *logos*. In so doing he claimed that his concept of the iconic turn inevitably started to acquire a broader importance, tending towards a “meaning-generating process”. According to Boehm, the genealogy of the signification processes in images in the form of a “non-verbal, iconic *logos*” was to be found in comparable ways in meaning-creating processes in verbal communication as well (Boehm, 2009: 33). In addition to that, Boehm completely acknowledges that it is “the *history* of images that motivates the question 'what and when is an image'” allowing for the *paradigm* to be made out of the image in the first place (Boehm, 35). What, then, the *iconic turn* ultimately meant was an acknowledgement of and giving name to this on-going process inherent to both iconic and verbal texts which must not be confused, as Boehm puts it, with the identification of images with iconological references or with *ekphrasis* for they “do not illustrate the difference between the speakable and the visible” (Boehm, 37).

This is probably the reason why Boehm, in spite of initially calling this new understanding of how images work *the iconic turn*, doesn't see it as a turn in its own right but rather as a “vacillation between what Thomas Kuhn termed a 'paradigm shift' and the attitude of a 'rhetorical twist' that recalls last fall's fashions” (Boehm, 31). Not contesting the *meritum* of Boehm's theoretical position, Thomas Mitchell has pointed out that probably questions of style and fashion in regard to contemporary theory should be of equal importance, asking “are the emotions of iconoclasm and iconophilia confined only to the popular, mass-culture version of the pictorial turn, or do they also appear within philosophical discourse itself, from Plato's suspicion of the arts, to Wittgenstein's anxiety over the 'picture' that held us captive?” (Mitchell, 2009: 43). In other terms, shouldn't theory become impure in order to comply better with the impurity of artefacts themselves, as well as to cope more successfully with

contemporary discourses on art and images in general? If the answer to this question is *no*, as we shall see, then visual studies might easily find itself in the center of turbulence that will shake the disciplinary borders of all the traditional visual disciplines while the problems regarding the nature, function and philosophy of images will start to create massive responses all across the humanities. If the answer is *yes*, then a more structured disciplinary formation would probably be required from visual studies with a possibility of it developing into just another “knowledge project”, to which I will refer later.

Over the years, issues of disciplinary borders and, more precisely, of the particular *object* of visual studies became a salient issue in the process of the discipline's self-legitimization. Should visual studies engage with existing objects that have already gained prominence within the concept of Western culture – such as artworks, exemplary pieces of architecture and, sometimes, on very rare occasions, even pieces of industrial, graphic or fashion design – or should it *radically* broaden visual epistemology consecrating images of virtually all kinds? In my opinion, artistic and media practice resolved this dilemma long before practitioners of visual studies or new art history or critical iconology (however we want to name them), started to engage with it. The inclusion of non-artistic objects in the making of art, like that of Andy Warhol, and the adoption of vernacular visual language like snapshot photography or multimedia installations done using basic video technologies to which Nicholas Mirzoeff, for example, makes particular reference (Mirzoeff, 2009), are all evidences of “premature” answers that art gave before theory had even posed the questions. At some point, it was easier to establish a new discipline altogether than to re-invent the older one. The difficult relation of art history to visual studies comes to the fore especially at those spectacular moments of breakthrough when contemporary art tries to redefine itself and, consequently, its accompanying theory.

Visual studies as an emergent discipline has taken advantage of one of these moments allowing for the proliferation of images to take part in the continual processes of the discipline's legitimization, no matter from what kind of institutional or media background its new visual objects have been taken (from museums, from street art, from virtual communication space, etc.). In relation to the acceptance of new visual hermeneutics, Dutch theoretician Ernst van Alphen has noted that “the difficult insertion” of Andy Warhol into the domain covered by art history makes it clear that cultural and visual studies are not restricted, as is often believed, to

privileging objects or practices from popular or mass culture. It is not that visual studies privileges certain type of objects and practices, but rather that it doesn't automatically exclude all other types. Both are symptoms of similar circumstances and therefore raise similar questions, which transgress the restricted scope of the singular genealogy of either class of objects (Alphen, 2005: 192). Following this argument, we may come to an assertion that what has been happening during the two decades after the advent of the pictorial turn was the twofold process that I mentioned at the beginning: images were trying to conquer new space within our imagination while theory was struggling to understand and explain the potentialities and consequences of the new imagination-making techniques.

So, what about the object of visual studies? Is visual studies just broadening the disciplinary territories of art history, film and media studies to encompass the totality of both fields of art and popular culture, or is the new visual epistemology undermining the very possibility of retaining any kind of disciplinary borders? In order to be able to answer this question, we must understand *why* and *if* the question matters at all. Why this question doesn't have the same ideological and political weight in, let's say, Anglophone visual theory on the one hand and German *Bildwissenschaft* on the other? Most certainly because the disciplinary genealogies of visual studies and its actual practices differ depending on the particular histories that the scholars in question had to deal with. In my opinion, art history and visual studies are inevitably bound to undergo a divorce, not because their respective objects of study do not converge, for, on the contrary, they sometimes do, but it is an unequal relationship, as visual studies will always rely more on art historical insights than the other way round. This is simply because the art historical agenda has already been set and even though it encompasses an enormous quantity of presumably valuable objects, it is still a *definite* quantity of objects. Listing possible points of fracture between art history and visual studies, James Elkins stated that “from a visual-culture standpoint, art history can appear disconnected from contemporary life, essentially or even prototypically elitist, politically naïve, bound by older methodologies, wedded to the art market, or hypnotized by the allure of a limited set of artists and artworks” (Elkins, 2003a: 23).

We may concur that some of those fears and fallacies still exist, but the real issue would be the presumable *value* of the things that different disciplines devote their attention to. Why should art history be involved with objects that are *not art*, to

begin with? The fact that it deals with only a small fraction of artefacts created by humankind simply cannot be considered a disciplinary drawback but rather an academic straightforwardness. In his book *The Domain of Images* of 2001, James Elkins draws a parallel between art history and the natural sciences coming to the reasonable conclusion that, unlike biology, which treats its objects of study as all equally worthy of our interest, the deliberate discrimination of visual artifacts performed by art history is a consequence of how these objects have been *evaluated* not by art history alone but by aesthetics, philosophy of art and other value-oriented disciplines. Elkins' example is particularly convincing, especially as it may apply, even though in reverse order, to visual studies as well:

The Manets and Picassos of the world are like the spectacular large mammals that capture everyone's attention, but things like insects and protozoa and bacteria are *most* of life, outnumbering large mammals millions of times over. A field that aspires to look as broadly as possible at images has come to terms with its own limiting interests, just as conservators who fight to save the panda have to realize they are saving it, in large measure, because it is impossibly cute and cuddly, not because it is more biologically important or complex than paramecium (Elkins, 2003a: 85-86; 2001: 251).

Although James Elkins has invested enormous intellectual efforts in breaking down the boundaries between “Picassos” and “bacteria”, in one of his more recent comments on the subject he states that “the reason why it continues to make sense to think of art history as a source for a wide visual studies (...) is that art history has one of the richest and deepest histories of encounters with historically embedded objects” (Elkins, 2003b: 236). In this mega- or trans-discipline in which art history would take a lead, other disciplines are welcome too, in order to produce, as Elkins puts it, a “productive iconoclasm” in a manner that Bruno Latour referred to this concept in his seminal project on the war of images (Latour, 2002).

But it looks as if the war of images exploded into a war of disciplinary epistemologies and their respective objects of study. I am referring here to a heated discussion that ten years ago provoked quite a stir in Anglo-Saxon visual theory. It all started with a very thoughtful article written by Mieke Bal for what was then only an emergent *Journal for Visual Culture*. Mieke Bal's article was entitled “Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture” which was in itself already a programmatic statement in relation to how visual studies as a discipline should be approached and what kind of intellectual insights it should deliver. The Dutch author

started her argumentation in a dialectical fashion voting against visual culture as a discipline “because its object cannot be studied within the paradigms of any discipline presently in place”, but standing against art history too, as it is equally incapable of embracing the totality of the visual field: “it has failed to deal with both the visuality of its objects and the openness of the collection of those objects – due to the established meaning of 'art'” (Bal, 2003: 5). So, according to Mieke Bal, visual culture was not yet capable of being a discipline because it lacked a specific paradigm, but further on she acknowledges that visual culture “lays claim to a specific object and raises specific questions about that object” (Bal, 6). In other terms, we knew *what* to talk about but we still didn't know *how*.

Another question that she raises regards what she calls *visual essentialism*, the term vehemently commented on and sometimes highly contested by other participants in this discussion, like Nicholas Mirzoeff, Keith Moxey, Norman Bryson, Thomas Mitchell and others. For Mieke Bal, the essentialist nature of images means primarily two equally problematic things: one being the images' claim to an authentic difference from other phenomena and the other being the authoritarian stance of visual culture towards the domain of images, something it has acquired from the analogous authoritarian position of art history (Bal, 6). It is very interesting to note that an endeavor aiming at a definition of what visual studies is or should be about ends up with a fear of the essential (or even essentialist) characteristics of visual objects that the discipline has as its main target of interest. If we try to find reasons for such a twist, we will probably find it in the dramatic change of the notion or concept of the *object* itself. Mieke Bal proposes as the new object of visual culture not any kind of artistic or profane artifact, but *visuality* as a consequence of the ever-changing contexts in which the *viewing subjects* happen to be, in the sense used by Norman Bryson in his seminal text “The gaze in the expanded field”:

Between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up visuality, that cultural construct, and make visuality different from vision, the notion of unmediated visual experience. Between retina and world is inserted a *screen* of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena (Bryson, 1988: 91-92).

This Lacanian-sounding distinction between physical *act of looking* while perceiving material objects on the one hand and visuality as *cultural construction of reality* on the other was both a theoretical and a practical insight that drew our attention to

image-producing techniques and not just to the reception of images. The site of looking was exactly in-between: it was Jonathan Crary who made us understand that objects are sites at which discursive formation intersects with material properties (Crary, 1990: 31), followed by Mieke Bal who on the same path argued that “visuality as an object of study requires that we focus on the relationship between the seen and the seer” (Bal, 2003: 14). In such a perspective visual studies becomes a discipline with a specific methodology of scrutinizing *series of events*, rather than *physical entities*, which makes of the discipline itself a sort of living theory capable of interacting with its objects-turned-into-events.

The object of visual studies, together with its actual position as academic discipline, thus may seem even more problematic and inexpressible than it was two decades ago. In my opinion it would be wrong to assume that this has something to do with the sheer theoretical divergences among members of various learned communities, but probably more with technological changes in contemporary societies, changes that none of the current visual theories was able to comprehend. By invoking technological changes I don't imply that singular disciplines within the humanities should demonstrate a particular understanding of, for instance, information or computer technologies, at least no more than any of us needs them in his or her regular life. On the contrary, I am relating here more to a distinct kind of theory that sees the human body as a central technological medium of experience in the way that Hans Belting is probably referring to when in his *Anthropology of images* he speaks of a new kind of iconology in which images and their respective media are not separated any more from us as image-perceiving bodies; rather, the two become interdependent: represented object and perceiving subject in his theory become a unique body/media of image-making process. To claim such an anthropological turn in visual theory Belting needed to go to ancient times to remind us to what purpose images served in the first place; why people invented them and why they treated them as if they were living beings:

Images, preferably three-dimensional ones, replaced the bodies of the dead, who had lost their visible presence along with their bodies (...) The dead, as a result, were kept as present and visible in the ranks of the living via their images. But images did not exist by themselves. They, in turn, were in need of an embodiment, which means in need of an agent or a medium resembling a body. This need was met by the invention of visual media, which not only embodied images but resembled living bodies in their own ways (Belting, 2005: 307).

What remains to be seen is in what ways, if at all, visual studies can become a medium in its own right that animates discourses and intellectual insights, or, which is probably too much to expect, how visual theory can become a living being and, according to Hans Belting, become *one* with images and image-perceiving bodies that it is so desperately trying to explain.

References:

Ernst van Alphen (2005) "Notions of History in Art History and Visual Studies", in *Journal of Visual Culture*, pp.191-202.

Mieke Bal (2003) "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture", in *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2003-2 pp. 5-32.

Hans Belting (2005) "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology", in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 302-319.

Gottfried Boehm and W.J.T. Mitchell (2009) "Pictorial Versus Iconic Turn: Two Letters", in *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 50 2-3, pp. 103-121.

Gottfried Boehm (1995) "Ikonische Wendung", in G. Boehm (ed.) *Was is ein Bild*; München: Wilhelm Fink.

Norman Bryson (1988) "The Gaze in the Expanded Field", in Hal Foster (ed.) *Vision and Visuality*; Seattle: Bay Press.

Michele Cometa (2008) "Iconocrash", in Roberta Coglitore (ed.) *Cultura visuale, paradigmi a confronto*; Palermo: Duepunti edizioni.

Jonathan Crary (1992) *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press.

James Elkins (2003a) *Visual Studies – a Sceptical Introduction*, New York and London: Routledge.

James Elkins (2003b) "Nine Modes of Interdisciplinarity for Visual Studies", in *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2003-2 pp. 232-237.

James Elkins (2001) *The Domain of Images*, Cornell University Press.

Bruno Latour (2002) "What is Iconoclasm? Or is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?", in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (ed.) *Iconoclasm - Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, Karlsruhe: Center for Art and Media.

Nicholas Mirzoeff (2009) *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, London and New York: Routledge

W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) *What do pictures Want*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

W.J.T. Mitchell (1998) *Last Dinosaur Book*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) *Picture Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Keith Moxey (2008) "Visual Studies, Historiography and Aesthetics", in Marquard Smith *Visual Culture Studies: Interviews with Key Thinkers*; London: Sage.

Jacques Rancière (2009) "Do Pictures Really Want to Live", in *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 50 2, pp. 123-132.

Richard Rorty, (1967/1992) (ed.) *The Linguistic Turn – Essays in Philosophical Method*; Chicago: University of Chicago Press.