

Theorizing Images

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Edited by

Žarko Paić and Krešimir Purgar

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Dedicated to the memory of Goran Starčević.

Žarko Paić

*Dedicated to Lydia and Hans, who helped me
more than they can possibly imagine.*

Krešimir Purgar

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—Žarko Paić and Krešimir Purgar

INTRODUCTION

ŽARKO PAIĆ AND KREŠIMIR PURGAR

If somebody in the foreseeable future decides to write what then might be called a history of visual studies, he or she will probably soon come to the conclusion that notions of “time” and “history” do not play the same role in the discipline they are about to discuss as they do in *other* disciplines, in which timelines, resemblances and influences constitute the very foundation of their specific knowledge. Introducing the present book, we will argue, drawing on numerous extremely knowledgeable and insightful opinions voiced and research projects undertaken in the study of visual culture, that there is a problematic relationship between the study of images through history on the one hand and the relatively recent phenomenon called *visual studies* on the other. We will argue as well that this relationship is the cause of the still contestable academic status of the new discipline, although its becoming rapidly established in universities worldwide may prove the opposite. The problem, which will be discussed by the contributors throughout this edition, consists of the fact that the study of images, representations and visual phenomena in the widest sense was the subject of human interest for more than two millennia before a group of respectable scholars started a conceptual and institutional demarcation of the area of visual studies (or visual culture, or *Bildwissenschaft* for that matter), an area growing so rapidly that it has easily outgrown, at least in scope, all other visual epistemologies confined within the theoretical boundaries of the philosophy of the image, art history, semiotics or any other discipline systematically related to the visual field.

One should say from the outset that the differentiation between modern and contemporary art in terms of the gap between the aestheticism of the artwork and the aestheticism of the event loses the significance of an epistemological turn. What one today calls “the visual arts” refers for pragmatic reasons merely to a multitude of artistic directions, strategies, and techniques, from painting, photography, and cinema to the body as an idea in the space and time of its performance. To be sure, modern art disappeared when one could no longer define the borders of modernity. This disappearance occurred in the shifts and turns within the notion of the new.

The programme of phenomenology occurred under the motto: back to the actual things! It is known that “return to the image” was a motto of another programme beside phenomenology, albeit close to it. This was an interdisciplinary movement during the 1990s, with two different currents: (1) visual studies and the “pictorial turn” of W.J.T. Mitchell and (2) research on the image and the “iconic turn” of Gottfried Boehm. Briefly, the return to the image meant liberating its pictorial quality from the power and domination of language. In modern art, that freedom proved an irreducible difference. Contrary to the path that the image took after the historical avant-garde movements, namely in the direction of a performative-conceptual turn, painting remained the last domain of “nature”. Another current today relies on various attempts at thinking of the corporeality of the body and its environment in the techno-sphere (from the philosophy of the media to neuroscience, bio-cybernetics, post-humanism, and trans-humanism). The image as color and the body as performance intersect in the digital era of constructing composition itself. In other words, the new nature of the image is no longer elementary. The image generates itself technically, which creates a technological-aesthetical experience of its hyper-reality. Experience and appearance, the traditional categories of early modern aestheticism, have now turned into new categories of approaching the event as a work of reproduction. In the digital setting, experience has turned into the appearance of the real, and appearance into the experience of the hyper-real. Thus, the return to the image seems to have launched it far beyond language, into the black holes of dematerialization. It is for this reason that we must again forget what is supposed to be inherent to the image, what seems to resist any penetration of the linguistic riddle in its search for meaning. It is impossible to return to the image as a “thing” without also returning to language as a thing in itself. Without its language, the image exists only virtually, like a line and a surface in the desert.

This is why visual studies is not a history of anything in particular, but still fundamentally depends on everything that has been discussed with regards to images in the past, or, as Marquard Smith puts it, “while visual culture studies as an academic, professional, and bureaucratic area of study may have emerged only recently, the study of visual culture, to say nothing of visual culture itself, has a much longer history” (Smith, 2008a: X). Studies on cult images “in the era before art”, as remarkably explained by Hans Belting, the recent trans-historical connections made between the functions of images in Byzantium and of those of contemporary times made by Marie-José Mondzain and Emmanuel Alloa, the seminal thesis promoted by W.J.T. Mitchell that the pictorial turn is a recurring phenom-

enon attributable to many periods in the cultural history of mankind – all these testify to the fact that images were always here. But visual studies was not.

There are many books and articles on historical concepts and ideas about the image, as well as many writers who aim to explain different theories of the image, many of whom absolutely correctly position reflection on images as early as in the *Book of Genesis* in the *Old Testament*, subsequently making references to the theoretical origins of simulacra and representation in Plato and Aristotle respectively. Some authors rightly draw attention to the surprisingly modern idea proposed by John of Damascus in the eighth century on the difference between the carrier of the image on the one hand and what the image stands for on the other – a historical fact invaluable for the understanding of images today. Speaking of precursors to the iconic turn, that is, to the idea offered by Gottfried Boehm that images are substantially different in nature from what they represent, both Mondzain and Alloa explain that it is crucial that John of Damascus not only distinguishes the *invisible prototype*, meaning the deity or God, from the *visible type* (its representation in image), but that he also transposes the difference between the two into the realm of the visible: “The image is one thing and its depiction another; a difference can always be seen between the two” (Alloa, 2013: 19).

In their analysis of the uses and philosophy of images in Byzantium, both Alloa, in “Visual Studies in Byzantium”, and Mondzain, in her book *Image, Icon, Economy. The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, assert that, in many regards, the dispute that was going on during the 8th and 9th centuries between advocates of the image on the one hand and iconoclasts on the other is a kind of a theoretical prelude to contemporary debates held around the nature and functions of images, a dispute Alloa appropriately calls “a pictorial turn *avant la lettre*” (23). It turns out that the iconophilic struggle for the understanding of images as entities separate from the material presence of the *thing* (or *Idol*) is not substantially dissimilar from our contemporary understanding of images as something distinct from the reality they refer to, cut-outs from the continuity, as Jean-Luc Nancy defines it: “such is the image: it must be detached, placed outside and before one’s eyes (...) and it must be different from the thing. The image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially” (Nancy, 1995: 2).

These evident trans-historical connections, which enable us to understand the past as if it were happening right now, are the origin of the paradoxical aspect of visual studies, still one of its most valuable methodological contributions: on the one hand, there is the intrinsic synchronicity of its

theoretical insights, with images treated as momentarily existing objects; on the other, as will be remarked several times here, images themselves are non-synchronous phenomena because we can only think about them *after* they are made. Sometimes it is days or months after, sometimes it is centuries after. So, visual studies offers a synchronical account of something that is non-synchronical in itself. But the paradox of time that visual studies has become entangled in is not meant to dismiss historical time, but rather to affirm the existence of what we would like to call *iconic simultaneity*: the radical contemporaneity of all visual artefacts, events and spectators in a networked society, the sort of ultimate present that might in some borderline cases make our understanding of images as representations obsolescent.

The concept of *iconic simultaneity*, or the radical contemporaneity of all visual phenomena, that visual studies is trying to master consists of both *heterochrony* and *anachrony*, the concepts that Keith Moxey assigns in turn to the approach that art history must acquire should it wish to overcome the normative time of Eurocentric art-historical thinking articulated in timelines, chronologies and teleological thinking. He wonders whether art history can conceive of time in any other terms, in a sense that would divorce chronology from its identification with a motivated temporal trajectory whose significance is restricted to Euro-American culture. On the other hand, as he puts it,

if the time of the work is not to be restricted to the horizon of its creation, then its status as an agent in the creation of its own reception, its anachronical power, shines through. The “presence” of the work of art—its ontological existence, the ways it both escapes meaning yet repeatedly provokes and determines its own interpretation—comes to the fore (Moxey, 2013: 2–5).

The way Moxey sees new art history, as methodologically re-shaped and as a place for the “production of meaning”, not bound to the teleological, linear notion of time, is in many ways similar to how visual studies understands negotiations between artifacts and spectators. The only difference (albeit not so small) between the two disciplines is art history’s innate interest in the aesthetic qualifications of the object of study, however these qualifications might be constructed, while visual studies has no preference for objects based on aesthetic discriminations. This claim, though, will prove to be less true if we come to agree with some of the prospects for visual studies and image theory at large offered in this book.

The study of images with the presumption that all visual phenomena are to be treated as simultaneously present, and trying to come to terms

with our contemporary visual culture “as it takes place” (Smith: IX) in an ever-changing global context, has attached to visual studies not just the proverbial accusation of its neglect of the historical context in which art was produced (as presented in the “Questionnaire on visual culture” in the magazine *October*, no. 77, 1996); recently the list has been updated with an accusation of “ontogenetic fallacy” – an even more dangerous neglect visual studies has supposedly been promoting: neglect of the artwork *as such*, which will also be referred to in this book. The question arises of whether the aura of uncertainty or inadequacy surrounding visual studies will affect the integrity of our reflection on images, or whether we will handle them with more ease now that we have a dedicated visual discipline, one that is not bound by ideologies, the politics of identity or *connoisseurship*. Michele Cometa once commented that those 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. At the same time, those who were resistant to acknowledging in images any meaning or power have condemned themselves 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 opposing sides, we could also refer to Keith Moxey, who claimed that there have been moments when art history was about to drown in a swamp of “contextual detail” that surrounded discourses of art, and there have been times when all that mattered was “an internal history of the object that insisted on its freedom from cultural entanglement” (Smith, 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 and multimodal, let alone multimedia, forms?

Cometa and Moxey imply that there is evidence of the 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 the concepts of the *pictorial* and the *iconic* turn changed our vernacular involvement in regard to images, it has become clear that it was not only a newly discovered social, political or sexual construction of the visual field that brought turbulence into disciplinary knowledge, but that images have their own “pictorial logic” with powers exceeding those purely iconic or visually discernible. The turn towards images (Mitchell, 1994; Boehm, 1995) is a turn towards 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 to 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 clarifying by 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 not only the old dichotomy of the text–image relationship matters, but now also a whole new epistemology, underway 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, *The Last Dinosaur Book* and *What do Pictures Want* (Mitchell, 1998 and 2005), 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 can speak and show on equal terms, is the new discourse of the power that images have gained thanks to new technologies and particularly thanks to the *abuse* of these new technologies. Following Rancière, this is what we 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 as of a practical coming to terms with a reality dominated by visual phenomena of all kinds. In one of his assessments in his letter, Gottfried Boehm proposed the idea of *the iconic turn* in the wider context of classical philosophy and the philosophy of language of Ludwig Wittgenstein, as well as making 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 proces-

ses of images in the form of a “non-verbal, iconic *logos*” was also to be found in comparable ways in meaning-creating processes in verbal communication (Boehm and Mitchell, 2009: 105). In addition to this, 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 (107). What the *iconic turn* ultimately meant, then, 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” (110).

This is probably the reason why Boehm, in spite of initially calling this new understanding of how images work *the iconic turn*, does not 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” (114). Not contesting the *meritum* of Boehm’s theoretical position, Thomas Mitchell has pointed out that questions of style and fashion in regard to contemporary theory should probably 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?” (115). In other words, should theory not become impure in order to comply better with the impurity of artifacts 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*, 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 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 will probably be required from visual studies, with the possibility of it developing into just another “knowledge project”. While certainly not giving priority to “purity” of theory, the authors in this book inevitably take into account both possibilities.

Over the years, issues of disciplinary borders and, more precisely, of the particular *object* of visual studies have become salient in the process of the discipline’s self-legitimization. Should visual studies as a comprehensive approach to images 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 our 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 refer to 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 evidence 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 types of objects and practices, but rather that it does not 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 since the advent of the pictorial turn is the twofold process that was mentioned at the beginning: images have been trying to conquer new space within our imagination while theory has been struggling to understand and explain the potentialities and consequences of 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 does this question not have the same ideological and political weight in, let us 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 have had to deal with. In our opinion, art history and visual studies are inevitably bound to undergo a divorce, but not because their respective objects of study do not converge, for, on the contrary, they sometimes do; however, 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 these 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 artifacts created by humankind simply cannot be considered a disciplinary drawback, but rather an academic straightforwardness. In his book *The Domain of Images*, from 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 effort 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 the manner that Bruno Latour referred to this concept in his seminal project on the war of images (Latour, 2002).

But it seems the war of images exploded into a war of disciplinary epistemologies and their respective objects of study. We are referring here to a heated discussion that, ten years ago, provoked quite a stir in Anglo-phone visual theory. It all started with a very thoughtful article written by Mieke Bal for the then only 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 words, we knew *what* to talk about but we still did not 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 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) charac-

teristics of theoretical 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 the 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). From 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-events.

The object of visual studies, together with its actual position as an academic discipline, may thus seem even more problematic and inexpressible than it was two decades ago. In our opinion it would be wrong to assume that this has something to do with the sheer theoretical divergences among members of various learned communities; it probably has more to do with technological changes in contemporary societies (Žarko Pačić refers to it as *techmosphere*), changes that none of the current visual theories was able to comprehend. By invoking technological changes, we do not 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, we are 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 no longer separated from individuals as image-perceiving bodies; rather, the two become interdependent: represented object and perceiving subject in his theory become the unique body/media of an image-making process. To claim such an anthropological turn in visual theory, Belting needed to go to ancient times to remind us 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).

In a different, still comparably “animistic” manner, W.J.T. Mitchell ascribed images a life of their own, with qualities possessed only by desiring subjects. This coming to life was, in his account, grounded on basically the same premise as Belting’s: that it is *people* who create images, only to get something in return from them. When Belting’s historical terms, under which images that were created “in the era before art” as replacements for the missing subjects of cult (Belting, 1997), are applied in a more secular fashion, as they were by Mitchell, then this primordial urge to receive pleasure, fear and religious comfort from images explodes in a historically and theoretically distinctive manner: we then speak of the pictorial turn or the increased level of activity that images have taken on.

* * *

This collection of essays has been prompted by this same “primordial” urge and, while acknowledging the limits of any such endeavor, it tries to follow as many paths, uncovered by some of the most prominent figures in image theory today, as it possibly can. The initial idea for this book came from several exceptional presentations given at the conference “Visual Studies as Academic Discipline” held in Zagreb in November 2013. The book is, however, in many respects different from the conference insofar as it includes articles by scholars not present in Zagreb, as well as articles by scholars who were present but who have completely revised and ex-

tended their papers for this publication. This is why we consider *Theorizing Images* to be even more insightful and engaging: as the title indicates, this book *theorizes* images, but it is not a theory *of* images because, as stated in the first part of the introduction, visual studies cannot lead to a unified theory of images unless we agree upfront upon a unified *ontology* of images. Although that would be a different task altogether, we believe that all the contributions in this book (in different ways and at different pace), by theorizing images in their aesthetic, historical, media and technological guises, pave the way for the future of visual culture and for the image science that will make this future more comprehensible.

Michele Cometa thinks it is not at all paradoxical to look back at the history of cave art in order to understand what the future of our visually constructed world might look like. In his article “The Challenge of Cave Art. On the Future of Visual Culture” he builds an argument based on the understanding of images as a specifically human endeavor which has characterized all historical epochs going back to the most ancient times of human activity, already discernible in drawings left by *Homo sapiens sapiens* on the rocks inside caves. Here, Cometa not only follows the intellectual path established by Hans Belting and W.J.T. Mitchell in his understanding of the urge to make images as universal principle of humankind, but also argues that the study of cave art may lead to a better understanding of *all* pictures. What is particularly interesting is how he structures his argumentation, posing ontological dilemmas concerning images: the *what*, *when*, *how* and *where* of an image provides useful links to the history, present and future of image studies. Likewise, Cometa shows to what extent art history, anthropology and visual studies must be intertwined should we wish to understand the activity of images in all their historical, artistic and media incarnations.

Keith Moxey, in his article “Material Time, Images and Art History”, argues that the ontological foundation of images is perhaps best looked for neither in their “social” function nor in what images “naturally” are. Traditional humanistic disciplines have tended to approach images either as if they possessed some objective meaning or as if they were carriers of subjective messages, provided by spectators instead of artists/creators. Moxey asks what happens if we approach images as if they were neither subjects nor objects, but belonged in a continuum between these poles. What, then, is this point of transcendence beyond which the subject/object opposition turns into something more pertinent to images and their meaning? According to Moxey, artistic or pictorial artifacts do not just occur *within* time, but also create time as their vital and inherent propositions. From the Mayan depictions in Bonampak as early as the eighth century B.C. all the way

up to contemporary art, only by grasping the presence of time in the particular artwork can we become capable of transcending our habitual subject/object oppositions and therefore eventually of uncovering radically new image ontologies. Moxey describes the presence of time in various artworks not just by directing our attention to their historical time, but to the sort of intellectual time that is inscribed both into their formal and material qualities. Most importantly, he engages with time because “what strikes a viewer as significant in one moment will not perform the same function in another. One form of time can only be activated by its encounter with another”.

Many contributions in this book show that, in the emergent field of visual studies (and to a certain extent in the German *Bildwissenschaft* as well), it is not just a discussion on the ontology of images that has been regularly addressed; the very ontological foundation of the discipline *as such* is still open. While there is an unequivocal agreement that it should deal with visual phenomena in full spectrum, from pictorial representations to phenomenal experiences, probably exactly because of the vast range of possible objects there is still an air of indetermination as to the scope visual studies should have and methodology to be adopted. At the same time, for some researchers, the more than two–decade–long dispute visual studies had with art history—and objects (artworks) that the older discipline traditionally claimed—is still a fundamental topic. The article by Krešimir Purgar analyzes some of the most recent interventions related to the new discipline that might reveal old controversies in a new light or open the way, as Barry Sandywell suggests, for a “new visual studies” altogether. In his text “Coming to Terms with Images. Visual Studies and Beyond”, Purgar traces uncertainties regarding what visual studies does or should do and discusses propositions and possible directions offered by some authors deeply involved in questions of both the ontological and disciplinary nature of images. What Purgar gradually uncovers are the specific dynamics inherent to both the problematics of the image and the field of visual studies; these dynamics render both of them ontologically and disciplinarily undefined, yet surprisingly vital.

After discussing the historical, ontological and disciplinary concerns pertinent to images and visual culture, the book proceeds to the relationship between images, technology and media. We thought it would be best introduced through a sort of archeology of contemporary media studies, which is masterfully provided by Antonio Somaini in “The ‘Medium of Perception’. Walter Benjamin’s Media Theory and the Tradition of the *Media Diaphana*”. The article aims to make us familiar with the complex notion of *medium* in Benjamin’s theoretical writings, of which the essay

The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility is certainly the best known. But Somaini's analysis operates in a direction that will uncover *medium* as "the spatially extended environment, the *milieu*, the *Umwelt* in which perception occurs". In doing so, the author will bring us closer to an understanding of contemporary media, because today, as several following contributions will show, the medium is no longer just a connection between sender and recipient, but a complex networked system, precisely the *milieu*, the *Umwelt*. Antonio Somaini makes his point by approaching Benjamin from three different perspectives: analyzing the historical dimension of perception, disentangling different meanings of the term medium and, finally, putting Benjamin's thought into the context of the post-Aristotelian tradition of the so-called *media diaphana*: a tradition of texts that focuses on the role played by diaphanous substances such as air, vapor, smoke and clouds – "the environment in which our sensory experience takes place".

In his article "Eyes in the Window. Intermedial Reconfiguration of TV in the Context of Digital Public Spheres", Stefan Münker explains the changing nature of the classic visual media of the twentieth century—television—showing how it evolved during the last few decades and how it has gone through substantial changes in the twenty-first century, eventually to become much more than just "window to the world", as media theorist Thomas Hutchinson called it almost seventy years ago. Münker explains that new digital and network platforms open new possibilities for this "old new medium", because it paradoxically renders technology more human than "new new media". Thanks to its adoption of digital broadcasting, television is no longer technologically inferior to other digital media; on the contrary, says Münker, as a reaction to the digital revolution and the consequent changes in user expectations, the medium of television has developed a broad range of (inter)medial strategies. Four of these strategies he discusses in this book: 1) the online presence of the various broadcasting corporations and the program-related internet offers on their respective websites; 2) the online presence of the channels in the form of online media libraries; 3) the adaptations of internet-specific medialities in television programming, and 4) the integration of genuinely web-produced content into programming.

Adriano Fabris, in "Philosophy, Image and the Mirror of Machines", claims that new technologies have the power to erase the traditional distinction between theory and practice, because they now allow people to achieve all their goals that previously belonged to either theory or practice. Borders between the two become invisible and our need to make a distinction between them becomes obsolescent. But what is even more important,

Fabris suggests, is our inability to distinguish between what has been created “naturally” and what has been created “artificially”. It transpires that, even if people generally feel discomfort when faced with interventions in natural order—like genetic experiments with plants or the cloning of the human genome—concepts such as *nature* and *reality* and their deployment as control mechanisms have already been lost. Fabris believes there *is* a solution through which human beings can regain this division: people must either always be reminiscent of the times when they had control over machines that worked for them or they have to find *in machines* the perfection they have always aspired to. When it comes to the understanding of images, this means that people must always be aware of the “traditional” power of images on the one hand (as insightfully demonstrated by David Freedberg almost three decades ago) and of the new power of *imaging technologies* on the other.

The consequences of the Heideggerian concept of technology in the age of digital communication is shown in the next article, “Technosphere – A New Digital Aesthetics? The Body as Event, Interactivity and Visualization of Ideas” by Žarko Paić. Here the author takes very wide perspective on the outcomes of modern society after the end of metaphysics and at the beginning of the era of computation, screens, immateriality and illusion. It is a radically new situation for human beings because now, Paić suggests, they must adapt to a new speed of digital streams, emanating at all times, while their visual field is surrounded by intermittently pulsating video screens fed by digitally created images and simulacra of all kinds. To make us understand fully this radical shift, Paić makes a distinction between technique and technology: “Technique belongs to computer-based thinking in natural sciences, e.g. mathematics and physics. Digital design, on the other hand, refers to the technology of the transfer of information. It is a feature of the computer method of generating reality”. The article discusses the philosophical (cognitive) and material (bodily) consequences of this fracture, claiming that technique was always tied to the analog system of nature, but technology intends to open the digital network order beyond the differences between nature and culture.

The contributions that follow by Klaus Sachs-Hombach, Dieter Mersch and Sybille Krämer can be considered classic “bildwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen” (image science analysis) in the theory of pictures. In “Pictorial Act Theory. Images as Communicative Media”, Klaus Sachs-Hombach contends that pictures are predicative entities capable of acts of showing and communicating and therefore able to convey meanings both similar to and different from natural language. However, the similarities should be looked for on a very general level of communication, because

both pictures and texts always convey meanings by mediating messages or creating some *object* of communication. Where pictures differ from spoken language is in *how* those messages are mediated and *what* this object of communication looks like. With this in mind, Sachs–Hombach’s predicative image theory departs from similarities between pictorial and verbal communication, because the analogy between the two no longer works when specific “communicative acts” are concerned. He distinguishes four basic levels of complexity in predicative theory: 1) an image merely illustrates properties; 2) an image serves as a visual pattern of certain classes of objects; 3) an image indicates that the illustration depicts a particular individual object that is meant to be a reference to particular properties, and 4) an image is linked to an assertion or an appeal, i.e. it can generally convey an attitude towards an object.

On the other hand, Dieter Mersch, in his “Pictorial Thinking. On the ‘Logic’ of Iconic Structures”, establishes a different kind of theory, in which images are generated by “thinking pictorially” in a way that engages one’s visual sensory apparatus and many other visual–cognitive capacities that Mersch explains in detail in the text. For example, he starts from the insights of Maurice Merleau–Ponty, according to which images are ambiguous entities that exist only if a gaze is thrown upon them. So images, without having somebody looking at them, may only “half” take place, so to speak. Their objective properties cannot be determined in absolute terms insofar as there is no possibility of directing a permanent gaze that could turn images into absolute things. Mersch says that this impossibility or lack of vision should be addressed in detail because it is a constituent part of a media process in the first place. He calls this process “double vision”, and for him it becomes the very subject of the interplay between visibility and invisibility in multiple ways. “If one wants to decipher the mediality of the pictorial and its structure”, Mersch argues, “then one needs to proceed from this double gaze and its multiple interlacing between ‘withdrawal’ and ‘excess’”.

Yet another insightful variant of theorizing pictures is to be found in the engaging prose by Sybille Krämer. Her text titled “Point, Line, Surface as Plane. From Notational Iconicity to Diagrammatology” states from the outset that, although we live in a three–dimensional world, the invention of the two–dimensional flat picture surface was one of the greatest cultural achievements. What may appear as a downsizing or diminishing of our spatial experience of the world is, according to Krämer, an overcoming of our natural cognitive borders. In the text she focuses on unveiling how, on a surface covered with diagrammatical symbols, *spatial relations* can take our interest over more common *epistemic tasks*; in other words, how to

learn to see characters by *gazing* at them, instead of *reading* them. She systematizes artifacts such as scripts, graphs, diagrams, maps etc. under the common denominator of *inscriptions*, i.e. *the diagrammatic*, and differentiates them from images of art on the one hand and the instrumental images of science on the other. Her concept of *notational iconicity* will eventually be employed to work against the traditional “blindness” of graphic texts, and what makes inscriptions different from ordinary images is what Krämer calls “operative iconicity” [operative Bildlichkeit].

Contrary to the belief that the human race is inevitably striving towards the utmost visibility and ultimate transparency of all media it uses for everyday communication (or exactly because of that), Asbjørn Grønstad claims that there is a tendency in contemporary video art and movie-making that *can* and *will* make no use of high definition, 4K television technology or the technical perfecting of images aimed at crystal-clear screens, purity and clarity of vision. What Grønstad gradually uncovers in his text “Impaired Images and the Boundaries of Discernibility” is a kind of “rhetoric of impurity” that is built on the notion of opacity and other theories of filmic post-representation. He examines “the strange and optically regenerative practices by which materially impaired images exploit their own opacity to attain a new modality of existing as a visual artifact”. Drawing mostly on examples taken from Bill Morrison’s found footage film *Decasia* (2002), Grønstad will make reference to numerous precursors to Morrison’s “aesthetics of precarity”, finding them both in other directors, like Walt Disney and Jean-Luc Godard, and in visual arts at large, for example in Kasimir Malevich and Mark Wallinger. In his article, the author systematically foregrounds this newly uncovered attraction for low visibility in images, and for their *beautiful* formlessness and impenetrability.

The last two contributions are dedicated to the emerging field of fashion studies and its relation to a society permeated with images. Alicia Irena Mihalić makes an important observation which relates not only to the world of fashion, but also to art and media: she contends that the concept of temporal gaps, which were previously considered a key element in the functioning of trend mechanisms, has today been challenged by the mixing up of all historical styles, eventually turning the contemporary visual arena into a permanent showcase of all known artifacts. What comes out of her widely encompassing text “Protean Images of Fashion. Revaluation of Past Styles in New Settings” is that it is not only fashion that seems a trivial phenomenon full of short-term creations that are able to grab our attention only for a season or two; this principle of “fashionability” and constant change may be ascribed to all images of media, art and culture. This is implied in Mihalić’s statement that “fashion did not only arise from one