How to Theorize on Images? Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell

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W. J. T. Mitchell is an internationally well-known American philosopher, whose interests lie in the wide area of study of images. He approaches this vivid and ever-changing field by using a diverse spectrum of specialized disciplines, including literary science, aesthetics, art history, semiotics, or cultural studies. His work often discusses visual representations emerging from the everyday pop culture, media and art world, thoroughly elaborating and emphasizing their theoretical, social, economical and political aspects. No matter if there are old biblical stories, totemic symbols or Hollywood blockbusters standing in the center of Mitchell's attention, his relentless effort to point out the misleading transparency of images and the importance of their critical analysis have always been present. W. J. T. Mitchell is an author of several highly acclaimed books, including a trilogy of Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology *(1987),* Picture Theory *(1995) and* What Do Pictures Want *(2006). His latest monograph* Image Science (2016) *provides a reader with an overview of his previous theoretical work on conceptualization of the image and its role in theory, science and politics. The author's work and life has been linked with the University of Chicago for several decades, where he works as a teacher and as an editor of the esteemed journal* Critical Inquiry.

The interview was made in late September 2015 in Chicago. The full version of the interview has been published in the form of an epilogue in the first Czech translation of Mitchell's iconic book Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation *(Karolinum, 2016), which has introduced the famous concept of pictorial turn to academia. The arrangements of the interview were kindly supported by the Fulbright Commission of the Czech Republic.*

The Czech translation of *Picture Theory* provides local readers with an opportunity to read your work in their mother tongue for the first time. Originally, the book was published in 1994, following your previous collection of essays *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. How do you perceive the importance and the message of the book with a distance of twenty years? Has it fulfilled its educative goal, the one, which you emphasize in the introductory part?
Well, I really don't know whether it's fulfilled its goal. It's been read by a lot of people, I think, at least it's sold a lot of copies. There is no way to know exactly what the effect has been. I think it is frequently cited in other disciplines and that's partly because I tried to write it not for specialists, like art historians or technical theorists in semiotics. I wanted to invite a common reader into this basic question, why do we need to

be educated about images? We know that we have to be educated in language, that's always been the case. We have to learn to write and to read, to speak. All those are foundational to normal education, but there is a kind of unevenness when it comes to visual literacy. Images are thought to be transparent, are thought to be self-evident so why should we need to study them? It's the words that are important, so I was partly trying to say simply that images are not just self-evident. Sometimes they contain hidden messages, contain connotations that you don't see at first glance. So we need to have a double literacy in the both words and images and I think that the whole field of visual culture or visual studies generally pursues the same idea, so the work of some my friends and colleagues like Nicholas Mirzoeff and Marita Sturken has taken up these challenges as well, in different ways. So I think *Picture Theory* helped to found this new kind of field, called visual studies, where we don't just look at the world we think about how we look. We think about appearances and we think about what goes on in the visual process when someone sees something. That's important because we live in a society that is filled with visual representations and that mold us into whatever we are and it's part of our necessary toolbox of skills to be able to understand those things, just like language.

***Picture Theory* is strongly oriented towards the relationship between the text and the image. The relationship, addressed from a dialectical and critical perspective, is considered as artificial and well-defined differentiation serving as a kind of vehicle for several cultural distinctions, which should keep traditional norms and positions untouched. Do you see that problem as present in today's culture as it was in 1994? The character of images has changed a lot with the rise of the new digital culture. So, have some of the new media taught us to think outside those cultural distinctions embodied in the figure image-versus-text?**

A lot of questions... I think the word and image problematic, that relationship, that dialectic is still very much with us. In fact, in some ways, I think, there is no way we could ever erase it from the world. And there is one effort to do that, which, I think, is mistaken, but it's very popular, and that's the idea that since we are living in a digital age, analogue representation has been left behind. Now we are told that "everything is digital" but I think it's much more complicated and that's why when I have talked about the digital turn or the digital era I always wanted to put it in quotation marks to qualify it. All the new digital media make possible new forms of analogue experience. In fact, if they didn't do that, no one would have ever had the slightest interest in them. Because writing and reading code in ones and zeros is for only a very few, the programmers. So, something strange has happened to, let's not call it word and image, but the relation of the analogue and digital, which is one of the longstanding ways of differentiating words and images. Words belong to the digital, as the philosopher Nelson Goodman made this out, because the language itself is not constructed as a dense, replete system of notations. Alphabetic writing has a finite number of characters and definite differentiations, A, B, C, D, etc. Whereas painting and visual images are analogue and continuous and densely, you know, the lines can go anywhere. The analogue has fewer rules governing it. There is no grammar of the analogue. So, we've

created a world in which there is a vast new illiteracy about the writing of digital code. Most people don't know how to do it. I don't.

Me neither.
And I don't have any more interest than I do in learning how to repair my car. Somebody else does that. But they do it as a service to a new whole world of analogue representations that has shifted the ground of word and image. It hasn't eliminated it. It's made words and image have a new kind of status. Clearly both of them now can be circulated much more rapidly. That's a revolutionary effect. It's as revolutionary as the invention of the printing press. In early modern Europe and even before that in China when the printing press made it possible to reproduce and circulate both images and words, it had an incredible effect, it produced whole new societies of reading and viewing and the same kinds of things are happening now. Even a medium like television has been drastically changed. Twenty years ago television was a quite a different thing than it is now. There are some studies that show people are disconnecting from the networks, they don't care about the mainstream networks, they don't care about daily news, because they can get it all online and so they separate themselves from what used to be called broadcast television and only treat television as a portal for selected content. So the media have all changed and with it relations of words and images, but fundamentally it still comes down to words, images and – of course there is always a third thing, between or alongside words and images and one way to name that it's sound and music, particularly. This winter I'll be teaching a seminar called *Image, Sound, Text* which will focus particularly on that problem and why there is that third thing, the realm of sound that needs to be taken into account.

If we go back to the rise of new media, are there any specific media that did not exist back in 1994 and nowadays are something very omnipresent, that you would be able to use as an example of this still present image-text relationship?
Well, one thing, I think, it's clearly, changed since the early 1990s is a rise of social media. And I think it was around 2003 when Facebook first appeared. And when you think about the name of *Facebook*, what is it? Words and images, images of faces, photographs, places, but also words that go with them and so it is an image-text medium. But it's a very new and different kind of thing, because it doesn't go through a central hub, in which everything is broadcast from the central source. It's not a broadcast medium but a social medium. And there were plenty of social media before the digital era. The postal system was one of them. E-mail was in a very primitive state in 1994. Now e-mail is our second nature and people like me who were not born digital are already finding difficult to remember what it was like before we had smart phones and e-mail, instant access to encyclopaedic reams of information. It's a very new world and, you know, some people resisted, because they are afraid of it. I think it's good to be skeptical and cautious, but there are many ways in which I love it, especially the rapidity of communication. The other social medium that has been revolutionized is the telephone. People carry around things that they still call telephones, but they are much more than telephones. They are also address books, they are storage media –

my own iPhone has four thousand photographs on it, cause I never take them off, I just keep them there, I look at them. So, the postal system and the telephone – I think of those as social media before the digital era. But now they've been transformed into something much more powerful. It's a wide-ranging influence – political, social and sometimes aesthetic as well.

Many scholars from a variety of disciplines have referred to your *Picture Theory* since 1994, focusing mostly on the term of *pictorial turn*. In a way, the term has become a classical notion marking a new period of academic interest oriented not exclusively towards the media of text but considering visual media and visual communication as well. How do you perceive the life of the term *pictorial turn*, the way, how it has been used within academia, but also outside of it? Obviously, many authors use the term just as a label: now we can concentrate on visual communication and we are going to study images. They do not read the term carefully in a way that there is an idea of perceiving the theory itself as an image expressed as well.

Yeah, ok, I see what you mean. Yes, I think there was a kind of too-quick reading of the term as if sometime in the second half of the 20th century words became less important and images became more important, too important. That was wrong, or at least over-simplified. Just to start with. For one thing, images were always important. What happened in the 1980s and the 1990s was that visual arts and visual experience more generally began to be seen as critical problems in a new way. They've always been there, so that's why I think the idea of the pictorial turn, is not just about contemporary world or the modern world. It is what I would call a recurrent historical trope. There was a pictorial turn, for instance, in the 19th century when photography was invented. Everyone saw that a new kind of picture was in the world and that it meant a new kind of possibility for experience and the representation of experience. Also a new threat to traditional ways of making and reproducing pictures. When oil painting was invented in Europe, it created new possibilities for seeing and showing the world. Oil painting could be transported, wasn't locked into a building on a wall. It could be bought and sold, in a different way from mural painting, which was confined to architecture and a fixed location. So, there have been many pictorial turns in history – not that they're all the same! My idea was to think of this as a recurrent, historical trope. Trope just means "turn," as when kind of a feeling of newness enters the world and that newness is focused on a new kind of picture, or the "re-turn" of picture that had been forgotten or banned. This is the usual scenario of idolatry, which involves (in the Jewish or Muslim tradition) a "turning aside" from the unseeable, invisible god, and the return of graven images of the deity. Sometimes a new technology, a new style, or a new medium. Oil paint, for instance, made possible the pictorial turn of the early modern era. So, that's one thing, in fact it's, it really involves two things. One is a critical awareness of the importance of the visual in the expanded field that goes beyond visual art and goes into science, everyday life and many other areas. Then the other is a recognition that historical turning points, moments when people say: "There is something new in the world" are a very old perception. Human beings are always looking at each other and saying: "There is something new, we have done

something different." I'm sure at the moment that the first person picked up a rock and threw it at something, someone must said: "Well that's different, that's new." So, pictures have been one of the foci of the perception, a collective perception, of newness in the world. And so we have many pictorial turns, often associated with an experience of cultural or social revolution.

The last chapters of your book are dealing with images coming from the field of contemporary popular culture, from film and news. The term *transparency of images* is explained in order to reveal our strong belief in the truth of representations, which are in fact mediated by a variety of technological tools, devices and media. Is it possible to think about the transparency of images in connection with current citizen journalism covering political uprisings and protests all over the world? Can we follow a new level of transparency of images here?

Yes, I think it is a new form of transparency and immediacy, especially spatial immediacy. You see something and you feel like it's there. And also that it's not only there but it's *now* so it's temporarily located in the immediate present. You don't have to wait for a picture to be developed. You don't have to wait for it to go through the mail. I can send a picture to the other side of the planet. It will be there in five seconds. So that kind of immediacy, is definitely a major factor in lot of aspects of contemporary life. One of the most serious forms is, as you say – citizen journalism – and the feeling that people are not just isolated individuals but they are members of a community. To be a citizen means you feel like you have political responsibility, that you are connected, and citizen journalism particularly is very powerful. It's had the effect of exposing lots of criminality and particularly criminality by people in power, by governments, and of also helping to mobilize mass movements to call for change. The dangerous threat of these kinds of movements is illustrated by the incredible violence that's mustered to stop them. Even in the U.S. The Occupy movement, which was really driven by social media, aided by it but then involved actual direct immediate confrontation, and the occupation of public spaces, was met by a militarized response all across the country. It was a very kind of dramatic revelation of how insecure the state is that it feels threatened by mass gatherings of citizens in public places. I was shocked by the violence of the police in this country. Of course it was nothing compared to the violence in Egypt and now in Syria, which, you know, is completely over the top. 250,000 people that have been killed in Syria by their own government. That's astonishing. So it's produced a new historical situation I think that the citizen journalist has power to mobilize and expose the truth of our things but also exposes the citizen journalist to reprisal, the violence, the oppression and it shows you how serious the threat is felt to be by authoritarian regimes.

Two chapters of *Picture Theory* are devoted to the particular question of the relationship between violence and images, analyzing examples from public art and film. In 2011, you devoted your book *Cloning Terror* to the topic of images of terror, arguing that the war on terror lacks sense as it is a war against our own feelings and emotions and as it actually helps to spread the terrorism

and gives an importance to it. Nowadays, the visual culture of terror has been flooded by images of the Islamic State, a phenomenon not existing yet in 2011, bringing a new level of professional skills into the area of images of terror. How do you reflect on these new representations brought by the Islamic State?
It hasn't produced any dramatic change in my sense of the way violent images are used to intimidate or to arouse reactions. ISIS did not exist ten, eleven years ago. It was not a factor at all when I wrote *Cloning Terror,* which was during the era of the Bush administration and the invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan. After the election of Obama we had entered into a new era, but there is a continuity between them and that's the Al-Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center. Like Al-Qaeda, ISIS created televised atrocities – beheadings particularly. ISIS is like an evolutionary mutation of Al-Qaeda in my view. The difference is Al-Qaeda had no real interest in conquering territory. It was what Deleuze would call a deterritorialized movement that could be anywhere. It was more like a virus that went global but without very powerful central command and control. So the Al-Qaeda operatives were living in Florida. It was a kind of ridiculous when George W. Bush said: "We will attack and destroy any place that has harbored them." Well, are you going to blow up Florida? Because that's where they were living, in suburban houses. And the whole concept of a war on terror is itself a verbal image. It suggests that the enemy is this emotion and if we declare war on the emotion we'll defeat it but, as you know, war cannot defeat terror; war produces more terror – it is a form of terror, just as terror is a specific form of war. We might as well have declared a war on war! So, it was almost an insane concept to declare a war on terror. You couldn't win such a war. What would it mean? I compare it to a war on nervousness. We'll bomb any place we find nervousness. It was a kind of lunatic era, but ISIS has made one big change. Ideologically it's roughly same formation as Al-Qaeda but tactically, strategically it aims to create a territorial state. It's been very notable ISIS believes in conquering territory and when they conquer it they're not like Genghis Khan running all over the countryside and leaving ruins behind them. They do that, of course, particularly to antiquities valued by the West (a continuation of the strategy of the Taliban in Afghanistan). But they also set up medical centers, repair the highways, introduce social services, and collect taxes, and this is why it's going to be very difficult to dislodge them. They want to be a government, with administrators, police, and even social workers. So in a practical sense, they are quite different from Al-Qaeda. At the level of image making they are, as you say, more sophisticated, more technically adept but the images that it produces – the violent images – have the same goal. The purpose of 9/11, as Osama bin Laden made clear, was to lure the United States into invading Iraq. That was classic, old-fashioned war tactic in which you outrage your enemy, in order to lure them into a war they can't win and then you bleed them dry. The war in Iraq was a terrible fiasco. It cost millions of lives, billions of dollars, it was a huge waste and it morally discredited the US throughout the world. So, Osama bin Laden won that war in every sense. The minute the US invaded Iraq, bin Laden was celebrating because he knew it that would recruit Jihadists from all over the world. The Islamic state pursues the same logic. The reason it makes these outrageous videos, decapitations, atrocities, and destroys heritage sites – all these are classic forms of the destruction of images of the human body, or of highly sacred objects.

Like all iconoclasts, their idea is to traumatize the enemy, to wound their egos and then stir up their emotions so they'll do irrational things like banning Muslims from immigrating to the U.S. This has the effect of lumping all Muslims with jihad, and with ISIS, a dangerous tactic that threates to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. When you treat a whole people as the enemy, pretty soon it begins to feel like it actually *is* the enemy. The iconoclastic practices, and the provocations to Islamophobia don't have any kind of military significance directly, the idea here is much more insidious. The idea is to outrage the enemy so they don't think very clearly about what they're dealing with. Unfortunately, this tactic is working all too well.

The book *Cloning Terror* develops in many aspects your previous book *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images* from 2005. *What Do Pictures Want* develops the idea of bio-digital images which do not only represent but that also act because of their ability to live and now even to mutate. You use the example of a clone, of an artificial image that can become alive and that embodies our fear of crossing a fragile border between what stays in the status of imaginable and what becomes realizable. Drawing on that, you described our current historical period as the age of *bio-cybernetic reproduction*. Why do we experience mostly negative, fearful reactions to the bio-digital images and why there is a lack of positive conceptions of the new bio-digital culture?
Yea, that's a very interesting question. I don't know if I have a very clear answer to it. People have always felt anxiety over technological innovation. The industrial revolution produced enormous displacement of populations. The invention of the media, the invention of television was regarded by some people as a terrible kind of degradation of culture. Illustrated books were thought to be kind of, you know, serious books don't have pictures in them. Picture books are for children but we grown-ups, we just read the words, that's the important part. So there's always been a kind of anxiety about innovation, but I think it's several degrees more intense with the bio-cybernetic revolution. Partly because on the one hand, the biological side involves the tinkering with life processes themselves. So, biologically engineered foods, the idea of engineered organisms, has a kind of resonance with the old idea of biological warfare – unleashing plagues. So I think there is a big phobia around biological experimentation as such. That it might produce monsters, mutations, if you look at popular culture, that's everywhere!

Although there is one example of positive images of mutation, and that's the whole X-Men saga, which I love. It's basically an allegory of generational change of young people who have special powers. Some of them can read thoughts, some of them can move mountains, some of them can shoot fire out of their fingers. Some of them like Wolverine are almost indestructible. And they are outcasts from society. They are new and different and yet they are loved. Everybody wants to be an X-man or an X-woman. We would all like to have special powers, so there is a sense of in which there is a bio-avant-garde that is breaking loose from the old ways of being human. Some people call it the post-human, going beyond what the human could do and it's sometimes utopian or revolutionary. It's a kind of fantasy of what the new biology could make happen.

The other side of this is the cybernetic which is not so much about us but about the machines we make. And those machines might get out of our control. I mean, the great fable of this was the film called the Matrix in which the machines are only keeping human beings alive as batteries – energy sources to keep the computers running and because we've destroyed the atmosphere of the world, and the world is inhabitable. So humans are all comatose, living in life support pods. They basically live in suspended animation while dreaming of a world – and there is a very funny moment when agent Smith explains to Morpheus: "We thought we could make you happy by making the world perfect for you. Utopia where everybody would have plenty of stuff but you didn't like it, you hated it. So, we decided to make a world roughly the way it was in the mid 1990'." It's a hilarious moment and then he goes on to say: "By the way, your time historically has passed, you're obsolete and we are the future." Then he puts it as an even more violent metaphor when he says: "You are nothing but a cancer on the planet and we are the cure." So, there is a combination of utopian and dystopian thinking in the bio-cybernetic revolution. That's why I think it is an updating of Walter Benjamin's notion of technical, mechanical reproduction, now oriented toward information science, biology and genetic engineering whereas for Benjamin it was about the assembly line, factory production, and so forth. So, in my view, there is always going to be technophilia and technophobia together and the iconologist, the student of culture, needs to look at both sides of it. So, I don't just emphasize the terrible and anxious images. Even with cloning, I think we have to take cloning as a production of living images and think about it in two ways. One is reproductive cloning – making new organisms, the other is therapeutic cloning which is making new tissues. On the one hand you're repairing bodies, on the other hand you are creating new bodies. Well, I think repairing is good, making new bodies is probably not so good. Certainly not at the present time when 90 % of the organisms produced in the laboratory are horribly suffering, short-lived, miserable creatures. So what you're doing is bringing horror into the world.

One of the important topics of *Picture Theory* might be called *otherness*. The term reflects a distinction between the image and the text, but it refers even to other traditionally preserved distinctions like sophisticated and primitive, artificial and natural, poetry and painting, human and animal etc. In your book *Seeing Through Race*, you claim that it is impossible to live in a "color-blinded" society since the notion of race is one of fundamental elements creating our social reality. And in *What Do Pictures Want* you consider *stereotypes* to be an important category of *living images*. In relation to the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and to the "refugee crisis" in Europe, do we experience a new influx of representations of otherness drawing on norms and values of nationality and race? How do you explain that the society – 20 years since you published your essay on Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* –still discusses this very same topic of racism?

A funny thing has happened in the last year or two with respect to race. There was a moment, in fact a whole period, when people thought that race was a non-important issue anymore. The kind of symbolic moment for this was the election of Barrack Oba-

ma. The fact that we elected a black president was taken to mean that America has overcome its racist history. And even before that there was a long period of discussion of what was called the post-racial era. They said: Well, race is an obsolete concept, it's just a myth. There are no races. So, since we know that now there is no biological basis for race, we can leave it behind. All that was radically mistaken. It turns out that racism doesn't depend upon the concept of race. It's an emotion which is deeply programmed in some people usually by their upbringing, which they're taught to be suspicious of others who are regarded with very negative emotions. Whole groups of other people, who they can identify on sight. "That's a black man," is equated with "that's a dangerous person, that's hostile person, that's not just the other but the enemy." A similar kind of thing happened with Islam and islamophobia. In fact that there is a small percentage of Muslims in the world involved in Jihad became projected as a stereotype on entire, huge civilization of people who are basically no different from you and me. So, the concept of race and racism, I think, has come back with a vengeance and particularly in the last couple of years when it's been a kind of epidemic killings of black men in America by the police. We also knew there was a very systemic racism in the incarceration rate. A huge percentage of black men in America were in prison at one time or another. So, it felt to many people as if this illusion we had that race was behind us and racism was behind us, all that that was suddenly punctured. We had images from every side showing, "No, it's right here, it's still as bad as ever." But I would contrast it with another thing, a parallel phenomenon that occurs over the last decade and that's at the level of gender and sexuality where America has undergone a real revolution, a cultural revolution, a revolution of sensibility in which homosexuality has become acceptable in a way that it never was. And even conservatives like our conservative Supreme Court finally had to recognize, gay people have just as much a right to marry as anybody else. Even if thirty years ago people thought marriage was only between a man and a woman, there was no other alternative. The thing that's happened in American popular culture in the last couple of years is not only the emergence of positive images of gayness and queerness, but also a phenomenon called transgender identity or transsexual identity. So suddenly, very famous people are coming out of the closet. It's the second wave of the gender and sexual revolution. Most recently, a person formerly known as Bruce Jenner, the Olympic decathlon champion, is now Caitlyn Jenner and he is not just a sixty year old man dressing up in women's clothes, he's a Vogue model! He's on the cover of fashion magazines. And he's an incredibly gorgeous woman! It's produced a whole set of interesting reactions. On the one hand there are the die-hard conservatives saying: "Oh! It's the end of the world... decadence, alternate sexualities, new alternative lifestyles, terrible, terrible!" But they can't stop it. Then on the other hand, on the radical queer left they're saying: "Well this is not all that good either because all it means is we are becoming normal. We like being perverse! We like being different! So, now we can be, we can fight in America's wars, we can get into the military and we can get married. Big deal!" So, there are these two opposite reactions. But I think if we look at what's happened in America, in the cultures of everyday life, race has come back and racism has come back with a kind of violence. Gender, sexuality on the other hand, have undergone a real revolution and it can't be reversed.

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