

Interview with Professor WJT Mitchell

Budapest, Petőfi Museum of Literature, October 29th, 2008.

Professor Mitchell visited Budapest on the occasion of publishing a collection of his essays translated into Hungarian, *The Politics of Images* (A képek politikája, JATEPress, 2008, szerk. Szőnyi György Endre és Szauter Dóra). He was giving a public lecture on the War of Terror at Central European University, followed by a presentation of his book. The interview is an edited and enlarged version of the conversation with Gyöngyvér Horváth and Dóra Szauter.

WJTM: *I want to address your last question first. You note the curious anachronism in our conversation, which dealt with the theory of images a few days before the historic election of Barack Obama as President of the United States on November 4, 2008. Here is what you have said since.*

Q: As we are editing our talk a week later, and as this week was actually the final week of the election campaign in the US including the election itself, giving answer to all the expectations, worries, hopes and dreams of not only the people in America, but all over the world, we cannot help asking your views and feelings about the election. How do you see the future of the US and your place there as a critic and academic now, after that euphoric night in Chicago?

A: *It is clear that the Obama election is an event as significant as 9/11, and in fact that it marks a certain endpoint to the whole era known as “post-9-11” or the epoch of the Global War on Terror. This will be the case whether or not Obama is a successful president, as of course I hope he is. His image, as I like to say, “goes before” the reality it promises. He is hope personified, imagined, depicted, and incarnated in a real flesh and blood human being of immense talent, intelligence, and integrity. Everyone understands that the symbolism of his victory overwhelms any narrower discourse about party politics with a triumphant icon of human possibility within a democratic society. I say all this without idealizing Obama unduly, and certainly not with an endorsement of all his positions, past and present. He has a deeply problematic profile for a leftist like me, committed to the rights of gays and women to control their own bodies and private lives, and committed to justice and peace between Palestinians and Israelis.*

But at the level of the image, of the imaginary, Obama is impeccable. His meteoric political rise has been inseparable from the production of an icon of future possibility. If 9-11 was a spectacle of the destruction of an image and the onset of an imageless or unimaginable “terror,” Obama has been the central figure in the production of an image, a “blank slate,” as Obama describes himself, for the projection of the hopes of a vast multitude nationally and globally. Every expert (including Obama himself) recognizes his election as the symbol of a major re-alignment, a watershed in human history

As for my tiny place in these developments: as an iconologist, a student of visual culture, arts, literature, and media, it should be clear that there is plenty of work to hand. I have been working on a book about the epoch of the War on Terror, and it is a relief to have at last a sense of the ending of a concept, metaphor, and metapicture that seemed interminable. When do you “defeat” terror? Before or after you find a final solution for nervousness, anxiety, fear, or ennui? This absurd concept, an out of control metaphor made literal and actual by the Bush administration with disastrous consequences, is still invoked faithfully and without question by the New York Times and the new President of the United States. In American politics, there are certain sacred cows that cannot be touched: the War on Terror is one. Israel is another. And a whole cluster of issues around sexuality, reproduction, marriage, abortion—the so-called “moral issues” (what I call “clonophobia”)—generates the domestic idols of the mind that govern real, pragmatic, populist politics in the U.S.

Q:

I must tell you how lucky I feel that I'm finally able to ask the questions I've been collecting for the last few years. Even if since *Iconology* and *Picture Theory* you've published among others on the relationship between landscapes and power, the dinosaur as a cultural icon, and now you're into media theory, I'd like to ask you about the *pictorial turn* first. Western philosophy has been through eras of things, ideas, and words. Now, it's the time of images. How long do you think will this last? And what do you think comes after?

I am going to work from your notes and try to reconstruct what I said.

A:

The pictorial turn hasn't reached philosophy yet.

*What I should have said was that it seemed not to have reached Anglo-American philosophy, or even the awareness of an adventurous philosopher like the late Richard Rorty, who once told me that Wittgenstein's engagement with images, all the way from his "picture theory" of meaning to his claim in *Philosophical Investigations* that "a picture held us captive" was really not all that important. And of course Rorty's "linguistic turn" was my inspiration for the whole concept of the pictorial turn. If we had been talking about European philosophy, however, especially in France, Germany, and Italy, I would have said something quite different. Raymond Bellour has noted that the turn from words to images has been practically constitutive of French philosophy in the 20th century. And I think the reception of my concept of the pictorial turn has been much more engaged and far-reaching in Europe than in the United States, where it tends to be reduced to a vulgar slogan about "pictures taking over from words."*

What is coming after the pictorial turn?

I don't know what is coming after. What do you think? Words, ideas, or things, probably. Philosophy returns from time to time to ideas already discussed.

*But more likely, it is returning to things. This is the wager we put on a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* a few years ago, with a special issue on "Things" edited by Bill Brown.*

Maybe there's nothing else than things, ideas, words and images. And none exists without the other. *My whole sense of the relation of these terms in recent years has been that ideas, words, and images have enjoyed an increasing power over things and material practices more generally. Certainly a hallmark of the Bush administration was its claim to have surpassed what it called the "reality-based community" of policy experts. The Bush era was driven by ideas, very big, abstract ideas such as Freedom, Democracy, and of course Good and Evil. The problem is that their "ideas" were not based in critical reflection, and were not measured against realities. The Bushies were genuine idealists: they believed that they could re-shape their ideal world by force, and most notably, by bombing recalcitrant populations that did not welcome their ideas. That is the whole meaning of the War on Terror: it is a verbal conceit, a metaphor, an image, has been rendered literal, actual, and terrifyingly real. This process of literalization has also occurred with the peculiar trope of the cloning metaphor in our time, which is a literalizing and realizing of an ancient metapicture, the idea of the image as a living thing. The coupling of these two figures constitute the iconic constellation I have called "cloning terror." So how long will this last? Is it coming to an end? I hope so. What comes after; if we can trust the ability of Hollywood to predict the future, is disaster. As American comedian Bill Maher notes, every disaster film seems to require a highly popular Black president who seems powerless to stop the oncoming asteroid on a collision course with earth.*

Q:

Your iconology is also emphatic about the ethics of images. *Picture Theory* ends with the suggestion that even if we can't change the world, we can make it better with a better understanding of images. I would argue with this point. To put it simply, it's becoming a commonplace that commercials are manipulating us. However, being aware of this does not prevent me from buying

the product days later. Image lives on somehow and run out of control. Does consciousness really save us?

A:

No, not at all. *That is why it is so difficult to persuade someone to give up a belief or an ideology by rational argumentation. [I confessed next to an embarrassing episode of weakness.] When I was in graduate school at Johns Hopkins in the 1960s, I spent my entire yearly stipend on a Ford Mustang convertible with a dark blue exterior and light blue leather interior. Men my age will understand what possessed me. It was not the car itself, but an image of the car with myself in it, and a gorgeous babe next to me. When I met my wife, she tolerated the Mustang with good humor, and later informed me that she picked me out as a husband in my spite of my auto fetishism. I told her that she fitted perfectly my image of a babe stretched across the hood of my car. This led to 40 years of marriage, so far.*

So what's the point of "image critique" if it cannot successfully resist the power of images? Well, actually, I think it can produce a certain resistance, or immunization to infectious images. But it has to do so with appropriate antigenic images to counteract pathogenic images. Certainly the election of Obama, and the apotheosis of his image, has dealt a decisive blow to racist ideologies and the images that accompany them. In fact, within African-American visual cultural studies in recent years, it had already become commonplace to talk (albeit with a high awareness of anachronism) about a "post-racial" era. Once again, the image preceded the reality, in the form of a whole series of iconic Black figures in American popular culture—Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Colin Powell—and a whole new generation of artists, intellectuals, and political figures who belong a different era from the fiery, angry orators of the Civil Rights era—Jesse Jackson, the Reverend Wright. African American visual artists in recent years have moved beyond the imagery of identity politics into more complex explorations of bodies, visuality, and the shifting, multiple codes of identification. Darby English's brilliant book on "post-racial" Black art, How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness, is the best thing I know on this whole process.

Above all, we must detach image critique, or critical iconology, from a default language of iconoclasm, which dreams of destroying bad images, or just all images tout court. I've always been suspicious of the rhetoric that pretends to destroy images. I prefer the Nietzschean strategy of "sounding the idols" with a hammer or (even better) a tuning fork. No dreams of destruction, or annihilation of the offending images, but a critique that makes them speak, makes images disclose their emptiness or their plenitudinous harmonies—sometimes both at the same time.

Q:

This is a question I must ask you not only because the title of our compilation is *The Politics of Images* but also because it is the end of October 2008 and it couldn't be more up to date. To what extent has the presidential election in the US been a rivalry of images?

A: *It has absolutely been dominated by images, and you hardly need me to lay that out for you. Elections are always about images: images of attack and caricature; the invocation of stereotypes; acts of defacement. And then there are the idealized images, crystallized as sound-bites: youth, energy; age, experience. Most important, there is the image of the elected sovereign, sanctified in the secret holy ritual of the election, the fundamental mystery of democracy as a secular religion. It always amazes me that the moment of election produces such a striking transformation in the image of the President-Elect: Obama goes from being a popular icon, a rising star, an object of slurs and racist assaults, of ridicule as a "mere celebrity," a hollow, vain idol in one night to become a hallowed object, an incarnation of a national imaginary. At the first press conference after his election, the entire press corps rose to its feet when he entered the room, a sign of respect that would have been unthinkable a few days earlier. The election sanctifies him, which of course also has dangerous consequences. His elevation to the Elect means that any transgression (see Bill Clinton) that defiles the sacred precincts of the Oval Office becomes the object of a quasi-religious persecution and revenge. Among Obama's many talents is his understanding of imagery, both his*

own individual iconicity, and the more general cultural framework in which he operates. He showed astonishing maturity and good judgment in the campaign, reining in his own rhetorical skills and concentrating on projecting an image of gravitas and maturity. A candidate needs to project himself as presidential to have any hope of actually becoming president. As always, the image goes before the reality.

Q:

One of the first conclusions of my students when reading Picture theory was that pictures are things to be afraid of. In a review on Picture Theory I even read “Mitchell, the iconophobe.” Do you consider yourself an iconophobe?

Not at all. I can't understand how anyone who read my books carefully could come to this simple-minded conclusion. The fact is that

I love images. I was raised as a Roman Catholic and learnt to respect them. I was also told not to worship them, and that an over-estimation of images could lead beyond proper veneration to improper adoration, and the turning of the image into an idol with magical powers. So my love of images is not a simple or unmixed emotion, but a provocation to analysis, critique, and an enlarged understanding of the power of images for both good and evil.

Iconophobes know more about—or perhaps I should have said, they have a greater estimate of—the power of images than anyone else. They think that images have great powers over other minds (not their own, of course). They tend to project fantasies of what idolaters must be like—subhuman, perverted, victims of a brutish false religion that degrades them morally.

They know more even compared with those who worship images.

More precisely, they always have to claim a true understanding of images, in contrast to the benighted, superstitious knowledge they attribute to the idolater. The key thing to understand here is that iconophobia and iconophilia, iconoclasm and idolatry, are not neatly separable binary oppositions, but the constitutive dialectics of image effects. An iconophile can and probably will fear images as well as adore them, just as any form of love worth the name will include an admixture of aggression and fear. To be in love, after all, is to be (so we say) “in thrall” to someone else, in a position of subjection and vulnerability.

Idolatry and iconoclasm then are social relationships mediated by images, as of course are all social relationships. The problem of the image is therefore coeval with the problem of the Other, and all our relationships with other people, singly and collectively, are mediated by images in the form of stereotypes, caricatures, and fantasy-laden narratives. And the Other is routinely described as someone who over-values certain images, who is an idolater. That is why what I call “secondary beliefs”—beliefs about the beliefs of other people—are so pervasive in the attribution of fetishism and idolatry to others, most notably religious and racial others. Iconology could perhaps use an intervention from game theory, which analyzes the way people try to predict the behaviour of their antagonists, to produce an account of the imputation of idolatry.

You told the Story of a young Taliban student. Private conversation about the Buddha statues destroyed: not because we hate it but because you love it so much. Give us 5 million dollars to feed our children and we keep the statues.

Yes. This story illustrates the question of secondary beliefs about images perfectly. The Taliban student explained that the reason the Bamiyan Buddhas had to be destroyed was because the West was making such a fetish of them, not because the Taliban themselves were worried that a local cult might spring up around them. The more publicity and money the West showered on the statues, the more determined the Taliban became to destroy them. And the destruction, by the way, was not merely the annihilation of these images, but the production of secondary images of the destruction

that were circulated widely by the Taliban in calendar art, as evidence of a holy act. Iconoclasm is often, as in this case, not merely the destruction of an image, but the production of an image of destruction.

Q:

We have heard a lot today about war, terror, and politics, I would like to move away from this topic to art history writing and to its relation to visual culture.

Visual culture is now more of an institutionalized discipline, it found its place and it is accepted and thought widely. However, here in Hungary, art history writing is still following a quite traditional route, which is nearer to and influenced more by the German tradition than by the Anglo-Saxon. It is not articulated clearly, but I have a feeling that many art historians, mostly those from the older generation, are afraid of visual culture as a phenomena, as they think that visual culture would simply consume, absorb traditional art history writings and that would mark the end of that tradition. I would like to hear your opinion on this view. Do you think visual culture got an adequate reading?

I think visual culture is, from one point of view, simply the expanded field of art history. But of course it is also an expanded field for other disciplines such as cinema studies, anthropology, and studies in literature and culture. I've argued that it is an especially „dangerous supplement” for art history because it takes up the general issue of visual images, and the seeing of the world as such, which should have been central to art history, but was somewhat shunted aside in its development (but not by figures like Aby Warburg). I can see why art historians might find it threatening, but I think the anxiety is misplaced. I think it brings new frontiers to art history (scientific and medical imaging; mass media; fashion and advertising; the world of the ordinary and the everyday). It's less a threat than an opportunity to apply the skills central to art history—formal and contextual analysis; iconography and iconology; the critique of style and modes of representation—into other fields that are discovering the pictorial turn, but have hardly a clue to how to deal practically with it.

Q:

Linked to my earlier question, surprisingly you, as a par excellence visual culture person said in an interview, that you appreciate very much the early German art historians' approach, and that of the Vienna School scholars, and see their work as a possible model to follow. Perhaps it is related somehow to what Mieke Bal said, that 'close reading' has gone out of style, or what Michael Ann Holly wrote, that in its origins, art history was more interpretive discourse, and was engaged more with theoretical issues. I am interested why do you see the early Vienna School art historians as still relevant to study and follow?

A: *As I mentioned above, I think the Vienna School had a much more ambitious program than later art history, and that a general field theory of iconology that would trace the migrations of images across the media, was central to the initial impulse of art history. I disagree with Mieke Bal that "close reading has gone out of style." I think close reading will never, and should never, be minimized as an essential feature of iconological practice. But I also want an iconology that maps the routes and boundaries of image circulation, their evolution and taxonomy, the way they move into and out of works of art, and across the borders of media. That is why I have to insist that "visual studies" is not some ultimate horizon, but itself a delimited field of study that cuts across iconology at a ninety degree angle, and perhaps across media studies at some other acute or obtuse angle. Not all visual experiences are of images (in fact, most of them are not). And not all images are visual. An image is not just a graphic or optical depiction; it can also be a verbal likeness, a metaphor. (This is Peirce's elementary semiotics of the icon). Images circulate across the borders between different types of media, and visuality is only one component or element of any conceivable medium. All media are mixed media, with distinct and specific sensory ratios of sound and sight and tactility, as well as specific semiotic ratios of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism. So iconology, visual studies, and media studies have to be understood as distinct gateways into the*

whole realm of human culture and symbolic behaviour. Each has something to contribute, and each has a slightly different relation to the academic field known as art history, which is a multi-medial discipline if there ever was one.

Q:

I would like to quote a short passage from your book the Picture Theory (p209). It is referring to a museum context, where, as you have written, people spend more time reading the labels than actually looking at the pictures. The quotation goes like this: "Texts present in general, a greater threat to concepts of the „integrity” or „purity” of images than vice versa. For one thing, they unavoidably literally impose themselves within and around the pictorial object, on the walls, outside, inside, and on the frame, even „in the air” through which the object is seen and discourse about it is conducted." How can we protect images from texts? Do they need to be protected? Should we do this? Or can we do this at all? Or will images protect themselves?

A: *We cannot ultimately protect images from texts. But surely this has been one of the central goals of art history: to insist on looking at images with sustained attention to all their features—style, iconography, materiality, context, social use, psychic effects—without reducing them to a wall label. The paradox is that art historians also provide the wall labels, but (one hopes) always with an implicit warning to the user: this is not the whole story. This is just a starting point.*

And in any case, images have their own quiet way of resisting reduction to verbal formulas and messages. The evidence for this is everywhere: in the highly variable subjectivity of beholders' responses; in the tendency of images to outstrip the narratives that are supposed to explain them, and the historical "explanations" that are thought to contain them. Michel Foucault urged viewers of Velasquez's Las Meninas to forget what they know, all the proper names and dates that obstruct the perception of this painting, in order to allow a "grey, anonymous language" to sublimate itself out of the painting.

Q:

We know that our way of seeing and our understanding through the act of seeing have biological, environmental and cultural roots as well. In the context of art history, you pointed out a problem, that although dealing with images, art history has not developed yet a theory of seeing. I entirely agree with your opinion, and would like to know in details what precisely do you mean on theory of seeing. I am asking this question knowing that a new approach has emerged in art history, called neuroarthistory (John Onians), which is trying to develop a method that would take in account the biologically and environmentally determined factors of seeing. Neuroarthistory claims that these factors do influence the art-making processes of certain cultures, regions and artists. Were you thinking about this biological base when talking about the theory of seeing? Would it really art history's job to develop this theory?

A: *Yes, although I would be wary of attaching myself to any reduction of the visual process to a biological automatism. I think we can learn a great deal from those who study the automatisms and reflexes of seeing, and in fact there is a long tradition of this kind of work that pre-dates neuroscience, in Rudolf Arnheim's use of gestalt psychology, and J. J. Gibson's classic work, The Perception of the Visual World. [check title] When I argued in „Showing Seeing” (in What Do Pictures Want?) that the visual process has to be understood as a complex dialectic between nature and culture, this is what I had in mind. I am happy to welcome insights from cognitive science and neuroscience, but not if they become a straitjacket that prevents us from taking account of vision as a field of cultural semiosis, affect, and desire. The psychoanalysis of the visual process is, to me, just as indispensable as the account of seeing as cognition and reflex. Visual culture is premised on the notion, not only that vision is culturally constructed, but that culture is visually constructed. We will not have a proper balance in this field until we have grasped both ends of this structure.*

Q:

Since the time I got Griselda Pollock's new book, the Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum, which book is build upon a tour in a virtual museum that collects objects related to feminism and several aspects of womenhood, I keep asking people how would their ideal museum room look like. So, if you would get a chance to select from all the pictures or objects of the world, whether they are real or virtual objects, theoretical pictures or metapictures, what would you select to build a museum room? How would you display them? And how would you expect the spectators to behave there?

A: *I suggest an exhibition of "offending images," by which I mean two things: 1) images that offend people, that are deemed obscene, sacriligeous, or otherwise outrageous, and 2) images that people offend by trying to deface, destroy, or disfigure them. There would certainly have to be a Golden Calf (perhaps the Damien Hirst version next to Poussin's painting of this subject), and perhaps a replica of the Afghan Buddhas. There would also be a quota of pornographic and disgusting images, in which X-rated films and inflatable dolls would be juxtaposed with pagan statues of naked men and women, phallic and vaginal icons, filthy, stinky fetish objects, voodoo dolls, and half-human, half-animal images. There would also be a section of the exhibition devoted to audience participation, in which hammers, stones, rotten eggs, feces, and other weapons could be used to smear, deface, and destroy the offending images. Outside Damascus, I am told, there are still statues of pre-Islamic idols that are ritually stoned by Muslims on their pilgrimage route. Piles of stones are even provided for the convenience of the pilgrims. Perhaps this could be a model for the interactive portion of the exhibition.*

Q:

In the lecture you gave at the CEU in Budapest you were talking about the war on terror as being a slightly absurd phenomena, but surely a wrong idea. You expressed your hope that with a new leadership there is a chance for the US to cease this war. You also mentioned that for decades there were no presidential election which would mobilize so many people all over the country that this one. As we are editing our talk a week later, and as this week was actually the final week of the election campaign in the US including the election itself, giving answer to all the expectations, worries, hopes and dreams of not only the people in America, but all over the world, we cannot help asking your views and feelings about the election. How do you see the future of the US and your place there as a critic and academic now, after that euphoric night in Chicago?

A: *As you can see, I have now answered this question at the outset. Thank you very much.*

Thank you for the interview.