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On The Pictorial Turn

The Anglo-Saxon theory always liked animated stories, and it even produces them, when it can. In 1994 two professors, one in America and one in Switzerland, independently from each other, like the Nobel prize holders, discovered the pictorial turn of human sciences. W. J. T. Mitchell introduced the phrase "pictorial turn" [1], while Gottfried Boehm used the expression "ikonische Wendung", that is "iconic turn" [2] in the scientific discourse dealing with pictures and texts. They both borrowed the rhetorical topos of turn from Richard Rorty, who created something really enduring in 1967 with his "linguistic turn". [3] According to Rorty ancient and medieval philosophy dealt with modern ideas, while the contemporary scene is mostly engaged in words. Rorty traced back the genealogy of the linguistic turn through Derrida and Heidegger to Nietzsche, but he also very often referred to his other great favourite, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Gottfried Boehm from Basle, a prominent personality of art history hermeneutics, interpreted the significance of the notions picture (Bild), image (Abbild), pictorialness Bildnis) and imagination (Einbildungskraft) first of all in the context of the German philosophic tradition (starting from Kant, through Nietzsche and Heidegger to Gadamer) and the work of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty. Basically it can be said that he articulated his own "ikonische Wendung" within Rorty"s linguistic turn, when he emphasised the dominance of pictures and metaphors inside the realm of the Logos and textuality. The main heroes of his story are Wittgenstein from the *Philosophical Studies*, Nietzsche contemplating on non- morally apprehended truth and falsehood and Heidegger with a world concept. Boehm"s writing is not about the cliché that there are more and more pictures around us, but the author argues for attaching greater significance to pictorialness, which determines our epistemology.

W. J. T. Mitchell, an academic from Chicago, editor of the high-ranking Critical Inquiry, questions the almighty power of the linguistic turn and argues for the importance of a pictorial turn, an independent picture theory. According to him the pictorial turn is about that the pictures that surround us do not only transform our world and identity, but also form them more and more. In this way pictures are playing a more and more important role in the construction of our social reality. As compared to this the structuralist and post-structuralist interpretations dealing with textual metaphors oppress pictures and want to rule them. Mitchell argues for the necessity of a picture science and art history, which accepts the different nature of pictures and does not want to interpret them on the model of works of literature, cultures, societies and the subconscious. Mitchell demonstrates the signs of the pictorial turn in Pierce"s semiotics, Nelson Goodman"s analytic art philosophy, Derrida"s criticism of logocentrism, the work of the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault. He finds that the members of this multicoloured company were at least aware of the growing power of pictures, and it can be definitely seen in Wittgenstein"s, Adorno"s or Foucault"s icono-phobia. For example Adorno regarded mass culture built on

pictures as a means of profit orientated monopolistic capitalism and politics, while Foucault found that the society of scenery was only a superficial phenomenon of modernity characterised by the microphysics of power.

However, Mitchell tried to prove the occurrence of the pictorial turn not only on the basis of the arguments of human science. Not only philosophers or sociologists can see its visible signs, but also everyday people. In connection with the modern achievements of picture creation he calls our attention to Jonathan Crary"s imposing list: "synthetic holography, flight simulators, computer animation, robotic picture recognition, beam tracking, satellite maps, motion detectors, virtual reality helmets, magnetic resonance spectrography." [4] Boom industries basically determining our lives, such as film production, medical science, military industry work with these picture-creating devices. The totality of the pictorial turn can be really understood, if for example we think about the Gulf War, which was directed as a media spectacle, and its robot aeroplanes, which also functioned as video cameras showing us the object to be destroyed until the moment of explosion.

Once we are talking about pictures, Mitchell cannot disregard the precedents of art history. This Neo- Kantian discipline, which is regarded to be incapable of revival by so many people, still created some sort of a picture science called iconology. Mitchell thinks that on the foundations of this science put down by Erwin Panofsky critical iconology [5], a valid picture theory could be created. Obviously to do this Panofsky should not be "roasted through Nietzsche"s grill" – as Donald Preziosi suggests [6] – according to today"s post-structuralist taste, but Althusser"s theory of iconology and ideology should be crossed with each other. In connection with the pictorial turn Mitchell also observes that Panofsky is not only a rigorous user of a text orientated picture analysing method, but also a prophet of today"s visual culture research, who wrote a thick book on early Dutch painting as well as a study on cinema or on the radiator grill of Rolls-Royces.

Horst Bredekamp, art history professor at the University of Berlin also answers the actual challenges of the pictorial turn and visual culture creating in a tone preserving the values of art history. Bredekamp discovers the possible foundations of historic picture science in the work of Aby Warburg – not only in Mnemosyne, his famous unfinished picture atlas, but also in his studies on the propagandistic pamphlets of reformation and the stamps of the Weimar Republic [7]. It becomes clear from Bredekamp"s latest lecture (see the selections) that in the pictorial turn he perceives the dominance of post-structuralism. He finds that the inter-textuality of the new interpretations completely buries the picture and pictorialness under itself. We can also agree Bredekamp in that the simple unification of neuro-biology, information technology and art history does not result in an independent discipline. At the same time it is another question that this is not what visual culture researchers are aiming at.

Keith Moxey, art historian at the University of Richester, one of the apostles of visual culture research, has a completely different opinion about the intellectual field of the new inter-discipline emerging. He believes that post-structuralist theories, the social history of art, post-colonialist and feminist criticism could support art history in extending its research field to popular culture and also in regarding its discipline as a part of the politically and rhetorically motivated, historically defined cultural production. It is not new interpretations, new methods, new mediums or techniques that Moxey is missing from classical art history, but self-reflexivity.

Notes

[1] W. J. T. Mitchell: The Pictorial Turn, in *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago, 1994. 11-35. The study was first published in the March 1992 issue of *Artforum*, so priority should be given to him.

[2] Gottfried Boehm: Die Wiederkehr der Bilder, in *Was ist ein Bild*. Hrsg: G. Boehm. München, 1994. 11-38.

[3] Richard Rorty: *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*. Chicago, 1967.

[4] Jonathan Crary: *The observer's methods*. Budapest,1999. 13. It is not only this list that makes Crary's rather significant and surprisingly readable book interesting. Crary"s book is about vision and its historical construction. Its basic statement is that at the end of the 19th century on the different areas of knowledge and social practice the abstract subject was replaced by the embodied observer. Crary's train of thought was first of all influenced by Foucault's writings.

[5] The foundations of critical iconology were put down by Mitchell in his book on *Iconology: Image, text, ideology* (Chicago, 1986). In this book surprisingly he did not analyse the work of Panofsky or Aby Warburg, but the work of Nelson Goodman, Gombrich, Lessing, Edmund Burke and Marx.

[6] Donald Preziosi: *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*. New Haven, 1989. 112. It also belongs to the anecdotal story that Preziosi, who was encouraging the deconstruction of art history, did not really criticise Panofsky, who fell into the forgivable sin of logocentrism, but Michael Ann Holly's "structuralist" interpretation of Panofsky. See also: Michael Ann Holly: *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*. Ithaca, 1984. In connection with the renaissance of Panofsky's work also see a later edition of Perspective study glossed by Christopher S. Wood (Cambridge, 1991) and the latest book of Keith Moxey: *The Practice of Persuasion: Paradox and Power in Art History*. Ithaca, 2001.

[7] Horst Bredekamp: Einbildungen. *kritische berichte*, 2000/1. 36.