

# Mosaic

an interdisciplinary critical journal



---

Essays into the Imagetext: An Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell

Author(s): CHRISTINE WIESENTHAL, BRAD BUCKNELL and W. J. T. Mitchell

Source: *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (June 2000), pp. 1-23

Published by: University of Manitoba

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44029680>

Accessed: 22-05-2020 20:44 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*University of Manitoba* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*

*This is an edited transcript of a two-hour interview with W. J. T. Mitchell, conducted by Christine Wiesenhal (CW) and Brad Bucknell (BB) on March 10, 2000 at the Fort Garry Hotel, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Professor Mitchell delivered the University of Manitoba Sidney Warhaft Memorial Lecture titled "Offending Images: Sensation at the Brooklyn Museum" on March 9, 2000, at the Plug In Gallery, Winnipeg.*

## Essays into the Imagetext: An Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell

---

CHRISTINE WIESENTHAL and BRAD BUCKNELL

CW You describe your recent book, *Picture Theory*, as “basically [the] sequel and companion volume” promised by *Iconology* back in 1986. I thought we might begin with the very obvious material fact of the size differential between these two books. It occurred to me that while Wittgenstein’s “Duck Rabbit” pops up once as a hypericon in *Iconology*, in *Picture Theory*, it seems to proliferate wildly as a meta-picture. These are *Fliegende Blätter*, if I ever saw them! Could you talk a little bit about the structure and the organization of *Picture Theory* as an exercise in “applied iconology,” and could you mention some of the factors that were relevant in the way the book eventually took shape?

WJTM Well, I’ve always been interested in book design, particularly, the design of illustrated books. My doctoral dissertation (later my first book) was called, *Blake’s Composite Art*, and it was about the relationship of text design in Blake’s illuminated poetry. So that was my first and formative scholarly problem, to try to think about a mixed representation, a mixed medium. I grew up in the golden age of comic books as well—the era of *Mad*, *Astounding Science Fiction*, and the Classic Comics. The idea of image and text working in a collaborative form had always been fascinating to me. So, when I wrote *Iconology*, I

Mosaic 33/2 0027-1276-00/024001\$02.00©Mosaic

saw it as a kind of *askesis*—that is, I was trying to listen to the problem of the image-text relation rather than to look at it. I said at the beginning of *Iconology* I wanted to write a book about pictures for the blind, a book of rumors about pictures and how people talk about them “behind their backs” as it were—what you would imagine pictures were if you couldn’t see them, but could just hear what people said about them. So *Iconology* is short partly because it doesn’t give any space to pictures except for a couple of drawings. It’s really focused on what people say to each other about images, the invisible “aural/oral” aura of fantasy and anxiety that hovers around them. I felt at the moment of *Iconology* that it was an important

---

*The idea of image  
and text working in a  
collaborative form  
had always been  
fascinating to me.*

---

theoretical gesture not to be distracted by looking at visual images as if they were transparent or self-evident. In *Picture Theory*, then, I made exactly the opposite move. What I wanted in that book was to be still, to silence the theoretical chatter (at least momentarily) and let pictures talk and to allow visual images to attain some kind of theoretical status. In art historical discourse the picture is so often treated as an object or target, and as

we talk about it, the language pre-empted the picture, a pre-emption that I tried to air out in *Iconology*. The commentary replaces the thing. In *Picture Theory*, I wanted to treat the pictorial object as a *subject* capable of self-reflection, so that pictures could become self-theorizing symbols or “metapictures.” That is what motivates strange, awkward title, “picture theory.” It expresses an imperative “to picture” theory rather than to construct a theory “of” pictures. The aim is to let pictures “do” theory and give theory a physical, visible, figured body.

The other difference between *Iconology* and *Picture Theory* is that the earlier book took theoretical texts as its object—Wittgenstein, Burke, Lessing, Gombrich, Nelson Goodman, Marx—theorists who have important things to say about the relations between verbal and visual representation. The images of *Iconology* are mainly verbal and figurative, “pictures,” as Wittgenstein puts it, that “lay in our language.” They are hypericons such as the cave, the *camera obscura*, and the *tabula rasa*, addressed to the mind’s eye, and designed to explain the very process by which the mind produces and apprehends images. In *Picture Theory*, the objects are poems, paintings, engravings, sculptural objects, photographs,

narratives, films, television programs—in short works of art, forms of mass media, cultural representations. And the aim is to investigate the ways in which these forms theorize *themselves*, not to apply a theory imported from some academic discipline. I wanted to circumvent the familiar theory/practice division, where you say, “I’ve got a method and I’ll apply it to that thing.” I wanted the “thing” to cough up a method that was immanent in its own form. That’s why the duck-rabbit keeps breeding, because I’m trying to think *with* it, instead of thinking *about* it from outside, saying, “I’ve got a theory about the duck-rabbit.” I want the duck-rabbit to tell me where to go. Needless to say, this sort of exercise can never completely elude the categories of cultural theory, semiotics, linguistics, and so forth, but it can come at them from within the density of representations, as it were. My most recent project, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, attempt a similar strategy, and could be called “thinking *with* dinosaurs” (or of dinosaurs as images and metaphors) in the way that Lévi-Strauss defines the totem, as an animal that is “good to think.”

CW Well, you have a good deal of fun, actually, in *Picture Theory*, chasing that duck-rabbit from the pages of *Fliegende Blätter* through Wittgenstein and the psychology journals. And those are moments which seem to belie what you, elsewhere in the book, talk about as its function of “disillusionment, the opening of the negative critical space that would reveal how little we understand about pictures and how little difference mere ‘understanding’ would make” (1994, 6). I am interested to hear you talk a little bit more about the source of that disillusionment for you. Is it a disillusionment linked to the question of mapping out a general theory of representation, or more broadly, to what you posit as the “pictorial turn” of a “post-linguistic, post-semiotic” culture “totally dominated by images” (1994, 15-16)?

WJTM First, I should say, the trope of disappointment in my writing (or anyone’s, really) is usually a sign that one has wised up about something. Disillusion is actually a positive symptom of the fact that somehow we do keep on learning as we think our thoughts, write them down, and see the error of our ways. The real horror would be to find oneself incapable of disillusionment. Blake says somewhere that “To be in error and to cast it out,” is the most crucial moment of creativity. So that is generally the tone in which I talk about disappointment. It’s also linked to a sense that a crucial part of the theoretical enterprise is humility and a realistic assessment of the limitations of one’s own bright ideas. Even though I started my

scholarly and poetic life as a Blakean and I firmly believe in the creative and poetic imagination, I'm (also like Blake, and despite his reputation to the contrary) a skeptic, a rationalist, and deeply suspicious of mystery. I believe we should try to make things as clear, reasonable, coherent, understandable as possible, and not mystify ourselves with either received ideas or exotic, esoteric conundrums. Life is mysterious enough without our adding to the confusion. This places me, I hope, in what Karel Capek called "the radical center," the true home of dialectics. We need rationality, but we must also recognize, as Kant did, that there is a kind of desire or passion of reason, which goes wild and builds worlds itself. Structuralism was the result of that passion of reason—the fantasy that you could actually systematize human thought so fully that you would have a comprehensive map of it, a Borgesian map that is identical to the territory it maps. When I started working on Blake and the problem of verbal and visual representation, my desire was to map the word and image problem

---

*We need rationality,  
but we must also recognize,  
as Kant did, that there is a  
kind of desire or passion of  
reason, which goes wild  
and builds worlds itself.*

---

so there would not be any loose ends. I kept thinking that the key to the "essence" of the problem was just around the corner. And when I started writing *Iconology*, the idea was to move from the specific case of Blake's composite art to a general theory of the imagetext, a structural master key. *Iconology* is a book about the disappointment of that bit of "theory-hope." But the disappointment was a breakthrough on another front in that it led me to see the relation between theories of

imagery and the fear of images. When it dawned on me that theory itself might serve as a defense mechanism, an expression of anxiety that links the theory quite directly to specific political and ethical issues, fears of the other and of intractable social contradictions, I experienced the disappointment as liberation from a futile quest. Of course, every liberation brings with it a new form of slavery that may be necessarily invisible, and the danger in linking theories to anxiety is a kind of psychologistic or historicist reductionism. But one can enjoy the moment of disappointment while it lasts, as long as one recognizes the inevitability of what George Herbert called "restlessness." (See his poem, "The Pulley.") For me, then, disappointment is the "sadder but wiser" moment; elevated to a principle,

it is very much like the what Keats called “negative capability,” the ability to be in doubts and fears without an irritable reaching after certainty.

CW And related especially to the possibility or viability of a project of mapping out a general theory of representation? The inadequacy of semiotics for that? But not to what you are calling a “pictorial turn,” the increasing predominance and manipulation of images in a tele/visual and electronic culture? I mean, you’re not part of that body of critics who are responding to an increasingly visual culture with some sense of nostalgic anxiety, as in the case of somebody like Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*?

---

*As a writer, I’ve always thought of myself as a hunter-gatherer, rather than a settled cultivator or city-builder. The idea of settling into a transcendental system or method terrifies me.*

---

WJTM Well, to be honest, I am part of that “body of critics,” and that is why I saw *Picture Theory* as a collaborative effort with a number of tendencies in semiotics and art history, the phenomenological critique of art representation, post-structuralism, the use of Wittgenstein, Derrida, Foucault. So, to that extent, I saw myself as “in the swim.” *Picture Theory* was an attempt to harvest a lot of contemporary thinking about representation and art theory from within a variety of concrete practices, and to try to synthesize it, to criticize it in some cases. But my “synthesis” (if it is one) did not issue in any system or method. It has tended to be somewhat anarchistic and eclectic, working by essayistic forays into concrete problems rather than an architectonic elaboration. As a writer, I’ve always thought of myself as a hunter-gatherer, rather than a settled cultivator or city-builder. The idea of settling into a transcendental system or method terrifies me. This may be why I’ve been accused of being “against semiotics.” Mieke Bal has chided me for comparing semiotics to Renaissance rhetoric in its rage for classification and technical nomenclature, and it’s true that I believe in “traveling light” when it comes to technical terminology. I prefer what I call “vernacular theory” or the “immanent metalanguage” of an artistic practice—though I recognize that these pragmatic discourses will often intersect with or borrow from other disciplines (semiotics, linguistics, speech act theory, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, etc.). But I just can’t bring

myself to think of the *sign* as the one fulcrum from which I build everything, or of sign-theory as a “neutral, scientific metalanguage” in which culture can be systematically described. I’m more comfortable (but not totally comfortable), with restless, mutable concepts like representation, mimesis, and the image, which are often regarded as somewhat archaic ideas. But if you’re trying to situate the project, I feel that it swims in the same stream with a lot of other thinking in the last thirty years about culture and representation, signs, images, texts, performativity, perception understood in densely social, political, and material exemplifications. I have wanted to swim at my own pace, in my own way, and not simply sign up to one of the prevailing theories. To that extent, it’s a work that’s very eclectic and tries to pick and choose, to find its way through a whole labyrinth of alternatives.

BB In some books, that would be considered almost a post-modern technique, yet you claim in various places in *Picture Theory* that post-modernism is dead. So, how do you see your re-deployment of figures often thought to be associated or identified with post-modernism now, if not as a connective tissue to the post-modern?

WJTM Well, the first thing I would say is that, almost without exception, the figures I deploy in my books did not regard themselves as post-modern thinkers. And when I say post-modernism is dead, I say it in the way Derrida says, “deconstruction is dead.” Deconstruction is dead, not because nobody thinks about it, or it has no influence or it’s unimportant: it’s something that keeps on dying! In a seminar a few years ago, right after Richard Nixon died, Derrida drew a memorable distinction between kinds of death. He said (and I’m paraphrasing), “the headlines last week said, ‘Nixon is dead. Richard Nixon has died.’ Tomorrow when you pick up the paper you will not see that headline that Richard Nixon is dead. Five years ago, there were headlines in the critical magazines—deconstruction is dead—and then today, the question is—is deconstruction dead—that it keeps on dying, and it’s dying much more in America than it is in France.” So, post-modernism is dying and it was dead in that sense. I believe we should think of the oft-reported demise of Freudian and Marxist theory in the same way.

BB Which one? I mean, there are so many versions of post-modernism, some more fatalistic or perhaps not useful? Maybe Baudrillard’s.

WJTM The definition of “post-modernism” that I always quote to myself when I get lost in this topic is Fred Jameson’s opening sentence in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), which said, “post-modernism is nothing more than the effort to think historically in an age that has forgotten how.” I’ve always regarded post-modernism as a totally inadequate gesture, but a necessary one just the same. Sometimes you do things and say, “this isn’t enough, but I must do it anyway,” rather in the way I was describing the dialectic of theory-hope and disappointment. Post-modernism was a holding action. It was a way to say, “We are no longer able to accept as true certain of the slogans, received ideas, *shibboleths* that characterized modernism.” We feel that some kind of historical turn has occurred in culture, consciousness, the social order, and we’re going to call that ‘post-modernism.’ Once we gave it a name, of course, we found it everywhere. It turned out that post-modernism might have begun in 1913 or 1848 or 1798, and that it existed right along side of modernism the whole way (as “Romanticism,” for instance)—that it wasn’t after but it was simultaneous and parallel with modernity. Post-modernism was a way of complicating the history of modernity, as much as it was a way of marking our new space. So, it had many, many different kinds of gestures, and when I said it was “over,” I was thinking of that moment in 1989 when it seemed to me to unfold in the rear-view mirror of intellectual history at the same time it became widely accepted as a true name for the present. Another way of putting this was to say that post-modernism (in at least one important sense) was over the minute it “came true” or “came to pass,” when it began to be seen, not as the cutting edge of “the now,” a presently experienced break, rupture, or moment of revelation that things are different, but began to be seen as something receding into the past itself. And that moment for me was 1989, specifically the moment of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the breakup of the Soviet Union. Suddenly the world changed and was no longer divided into these mythic alternatives of the great socialist/capitalist empires, and the whole cold war/nuclear nightmare way of modeling the world. That struck me as a huge historical shift that was not captured very well in the concept of the post-modern. For one thing, its implications ranged well beyond the first world (what Richard Rorty calls the “North Atlantic democracies”) where the post-modern had principally resided, beyond the level of any national culture, much less the boundaries of academic knowledge or intellectual history. It really marked a shift in global culture, and one that post-dated our perception of a post-modern turn. It was a huge shift that, in a way, couldn’t have

been predicted by the thinking of post-modernism. It was brewing, but without a name. So, at that point, I felt this really shows that we're in some kind of different space. We don't have a generally accepted name for this new era yet. The "New World Order" seems to me vapid and uninformative; "Globalization" is redundant, and leaves the question, "globalization of what?" My own candidate as the name of our period is "the age of bio-cybernetic reproduction," a way of updating Walter Benjamin's "mechanical reproduction" for the age of computers and biogenetic technologies, and linking the economic, productive base to the superstructure of representational, cultural forms. The post-modern, then, looks more like a term we (mainly intellectual elites in the first world) used as a holding action in the 70s and 80s to try to mark the distinctiveness and novelty of our own time.

BB If we go back to Jameson's definition, are we any better at thinking historically now than we were previous to 1989? I mean, if the inability to think historically is part of what defines an age, I'm not sure we're any better at doing that. So in Jameson's sense, we seem to be in a kind of—well, maybe as you said—just another version of post-modernism.

WJTM I think we may not be any better at it, but we have some different categories now. For one thing, post-modernism, itself, has been historicized. It's no longer the present. You can see this internally to the academic study of culture, where the idea of the "post" became canonized when people started to write histories of it. When suddenly a required reading list emerged and Foucault, Baudrillard, Debord, the Situationists, certain architectural movements, literary/textual criticism, post-structuralism—they all began to be synthesized and anthologies were produced, courses were taught. I taught them, you taught them (or you took them), and we said, "We're doing an historical survey of post-modernism or the post-modern era." At that moment, it was already in the rearview mirror. It's very interesting the way historical narrative works. We're always making up stories to ourselves about where we are and were collectively. Post-modernism was a very intellectual story, an elite, top-down history centered in philosophy and the arts, and it's no wonder that it was immediately jostled aside by "post-colonial" studies and (more recently) by the "post-human" histories that focus on biotechnology. I'm aware that some people were rather irritated with *Picture Theory* because they were still invested in the vanguard, presentist rhetoric of post-modernism. The "post" was supposed to be the cutting edge, and it was very hard for peo-

ple to let go of that, even though it was clear they were doing it. I remember Hal Foster telling me sometime in the early 90s “I have written my last essay about post-modernism.” He had written ten or so. Are we still post? Do we just “post“ one thing after another, running from pillar to post?

---

*The post no longer does the work it did in the 70s and 80s; it does another kind of work now, as a retrospective term for something that now is in the past, and we need a new term for our time, one that doesn't simply play another variation on the belated, slackening narrative of the post.*

---

The post no longer does the work it did in the 70s and 80s; it does another kind of work now, as a retrospective term for something that now is in the past, and we need a new term for our time, one that doesn't simply play another variation on the belated, slackening narrative of the post. My term for it in *Picture Theory* was “the pictorial turn,” a phrase that is much more limited in scope, attempting to isolate a perennial anxiety about images and representation that has become part of both mass consciousness and disciplined intellectual reflection in our time. If I

were to extend the scope of the pictorial turn to a more general historical periodization, it would be in terms of the new kinds of imaging (exemplified most vividly by cloning) that take the ancient dream of producing a living image, an “animated icon,” copy, or replicant, and making it concrete and real. So “the pictorial turn” in its larger sense is what links our age (the era of biocybernetic reproduction) to its precedents in the history of anxieties about representation—from the ancient idols to the fetishes and totems of colonialism.

BB What are the implications of remapping the humanities if we're not any longer in a post-modern age? I wonder sometimes if discussions about curriculum or teaching methods or interdisciplinarity aren't somehow still lodged in an earlier conception of the post-modern. What are some of the practical implications for changing the humanities and how do you think cultural studies are influencing those changes?

WJTM Well, in lots of ways. It does seem to me that educational practice is one place where post-modernism necessarily stops being “post.” The

demand of praxis is that we put our money where our mouths are, and ask, "What is this post- a prelude to?" That's what we're working out now. Among the most important issues is the question of disciplinary boundaries and the fate of disciplines. Does "interdisciplinarity"—the much-recited buzz-word—mean goodbye to the old disciplines—a celebration

---

*It would be all too easy to  
celebrate interdisciplinarity  
as we march forward over  
the cliff into oblivion.  
I'm very much in favor of the  
preservation of traditional  
knowledges, and the  
maintenance of the integrity of  
disciplinary formations.*

---

that now, we're all in cultural studies, a super discipline, that absorbs everything into this undifferentiated soup? I think that's a very dangerous notion. Institutionally, cultural studies can and has been used as a way of downsizing universities, of collapsing departments, of eliminating traditional knowledges and forms of expertise. Extremely dangerous kind of thing! Anybody who professes cultural studies had better be very aware of its institutional, political implications. It would be all too easy to celebrate

interdisciplinarity as we march forward over the cliff into oblivion. I'm very much in favor of the preservation of traditional knowledges, and the maintenance of the integrity of disciplinary formations. I'm not somebody who celebrates the end of art history, for example, which is one discipline that I've been most closely associated with. My own department of art history at the University of Chicago had a debate several years ago on whether to change the name of the department to visual culture, visual studies, department of art history and visual culture, or some rubric of this sort. I did not support changing it (although at the same time I was happy to serve as a consultant to the creation of programs in visual culture at Rochester and Irvine where conditions seemed to me different in important ways). I don't want to be a member of a visual culture department. I want to teach visual culture as a kind of dedisciplinary or indisciplinary effort and exercise, but I want to do it in the context of work that is connected with the past in a very firm and disciplined way—with cinema studies and philosophy, for instance. It's much more fun being an anarchist when you've got archaic structures around to work within and against. So, in that sense, I really want to hold on to these traditional

knowledges. The revivification of supposedly “obsolete” ideas is one of my ruling passions. At the same time, I think, one of the things we’re capable of doing that perhaps wasn’t so easy before, is to produce collaborative work, interdisciplinary conversations, and sites of exploration that bring together teams that think across disciplines. There’s no reason why our courses shouldn’t be inhabited by students and taught by instructors from different disciplines and that they shouldn’t learn how to talk to each other.

CW Well, you just a moment ago used “dedisciplinary” and “indisciplinary” as roughly equivalent. Do you draw a distinction there? And to what extent do the inauguration of new “trans-disciplinary” pedagogies risk assuming an intra-disciplinary critical fluency with which younger students cannot be familiar? Are we—like Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick*—pulling up the ladder behind us?

WJTM This is one (among many) of your really good and important questions. Here’s what I think is entailed in the distinction between “indisciplinary” and “dedisciplinary. Let’s, just, first, call disciplinarity something like ‘elder knowledge’ or tradition, a social system of mentors and disciples, passed on skills, techniques, and archives. A dedisciplinary exercise, I think, is one which recognizes a disciplinary frontier and determines, for some reason (we hope a good one) to cross it. There’s a kind of necessity to the move, dictated by the question at hand. There’s also a more playful, experimental crossing of borders that we sometimes describe with the phrase “thinking outside the box.” *These*, I think, are dedisciplinary acts. Indisciplinarity is the more scary, vertiginous activity. It arises when you’re lost. We might put it in Heideggerian terms: you’re in the forest, you’re in the wilderness, and you’re looking for a clearing. You’re inside the labyrinth, and you don’t know what method is the right one, and so, there’s a certain amount of trial and error, even something arbitrary or accidental about your initial move. There’s also a sense that you’re in a zone of turbulence. This is why I describe visual culture as an indiscipline, that is, as a moment of turbulence where anything could come rushing into the discussion—psychoanalysis, media theory, technology, art history, textual theories, semiotics, cognitive science, phenomenology. Numerous ways of thinking could come to bear, and you don’t know which one will turn out to be foundational—perhaps none of them. This kind of interdisciplinarity may converge, of course, with the experimental or playful “thinking outside the box.” Needless to say, you will quickly find

yourself in some box or another, but the hope is that it will look somewhat different.

I think of the indisciplinary moment as the one that's best to employ for early education, for introductory courses, because it's so important for students to experience what you might call 'raw' problems, encounters with some experience of authenticity. This is where they are anyway. When people begin their higher education, at least in the States, they come in wide open. They haven't been disciplined yet. They've learned (we hope) grammar and fundamentals in high school. They've gotten some basic skills but they do not yet identify themselves as anthropologists, art historians, literary scholars. We should make something good out of that fact, and not say, "Our job is to professionalize them overnight"—or as we say in the States, "make sure they have a major." In other words, what cultural studies can do, is give us a very new version of liberal education. That's what it's best designed for—the first two years of college, when students' sense of disciplinarity is still in formation, still very volatile. A similar moment occurs, I suspect, when people are making the transition to graduate school. That's the point where we should be letting them say, "Look, you can tackle any problem. Let yourself be guided by questions, by the issues you care about, and then find your way to the discipline that answers those questions." And that may take a long time, or a short time, and it may require that you know more than one discipline. An essential part of liberal education is an awareness of boundaries among disciplines, which can only happen if you begin to think across them, to think about the circulation of metalanguages among them.

There are two pedagogical initiatives I've been involved with in Chicago that might be interesting in this context. One is a new freshman common core which will be called "Media Aesthetics" and its subtitle will be "Image /Sound/ Text." (Aristotelians among us will recognize it as *opsis, melos, lexis*.) We will have a three term sequence in which the first term will focus on the problem of images, but not just pictorial images—they will also deal with the literary image, with the notions of the figurative, the descriptive—the great narratives about iconicity, about idols, and so forth. Classic texts such Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the Biblical story of the Golden Calf, the disputes of the iconoclasts would be part of that, as well as modern and contemporary works that both narrate and theorize the problem of images. The winter quarter would be oriented around the question of sound, orality, speech, music, and again, it would be a multi-media course. There would be cinematic, literary, dramatic, and theoretical questions that address the issue of sound—the role of music in opera,

of what Aristotle called *melos* in tragedy. And then the third term would be focused on textuality as the central issue. The idea in laying this out is to make sure the students understand that disciplines are partly formed in relation to the different sensory and semiotic modalities—forms of representation, sign systems, and perceptual channels—so that they have a sense of the map of the disciplines that is grounded in something other than just the bureaucracy of the university, that really has something to do with how we are constructed as sentient creatures within culture.

So, that's one kind of initiative. Another thing that I do in my classes, and this relates, Christine, to your question about intra-disciplinary critical fluency. We who work in cultural studies have presumably read Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and a traditional literary, philosophical, or art historical canon, and here come our undergraduates, and we're laying all this stuff on them. They don't have the literary background; we plunge them into theory and it's such a freezing bath. One of the things I almost always do in courses that have some kind of interdisciplinary format (or disciplinary for that matter), is to have a key words project where—in the manner of Raymond Williams' great book, *Key Words*—you focus on the vocabulary of a critical formation, whether it's semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxist theory, visual culture, art history. Last fall, I team-taught a large lecture course on the topic of "Representation" with colleagues from philosophy and literature, an introduction to graduate study for master's students. We had the students write brief reference essays on key terms and issues that come up in discussions of representation. The students wrote on notions such as mimesis, semiosis, reproduction, reference, symbolization, indexicality, exemplification, expression, iconicity, and some of the basic distinctions of semiotics, rhetoric, aesthetics, and poetics (including, by the way, those terms themselves). We came up with about 70 key words for the class, and the students each wrote a two page, single-spaced essay with bibliography, and we put them all on the website and made printed versions of them and every student got a packet by about six weeks into the course. And suddenly, they had a common language. They had formed a glossary. They knew that the glossary was provisional, only a starting point. But we now had a room full of "authorities" whose knowledge could be tapped and questioned. What happens when one student in your class is able to say "I'm the mimesis person"? You produce a learning community where people are not in a state of mystification, wondering what the hell the professor means all the time. You make them responsible for the critical languages they employ, and increase both their fluency and their skepticism about the magic of jargon. I think it's a very

exciting time for pedagogy, and therefore also dangerous. The Father Mapple scenario, pulling the ladder up behind us, is a real danger and we need to find common languages for the students, and avoid mystification.

The third thing I should say about this relates to your question about the canon and the conservatism of the position I'm laying out in *Picture Theory*. I think it's crucial that we not abandon what we used to call "the great texts." The kind of cultural studies course that scares me is one in which undergraduates are reading nothing but critical/theoretical scholarly articles that were published in the last ten years. I think that's really dangerous because that's pulling the ladder up. Suddenly, there will be Kobena Mercer, Judith Butler, Hal Foster, or Rosalind Krause, or me, or somebody becoming "the text in the class." I think it's really important that the text in the class be something that is going to be memorable and resonant. So, I tend to teach the classics. My touchstone is, "Is this text good enough so that if I were to

teach it badly, it won't matter?" If the student does nothing except read the readings, and I completely blow it—give them the wrong impression, or I have nothing to say about it—will the student be able to say, "Well, that was a great book," just the same,

and still not have lost out totally? They will still have read *King Lear*. This is true for certain contemporary texts as well. For instance, I've devoted a whole course to Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, focusing on the eye and the gaze. But I read it, not primarily in relation to the Lacanian industry (though I make them aware that this exists, and provide them with a reserve shelf and bibliography), but in relation to everything that Lacan cites in that fifty page segment that he calls, "The Eye and the Gaze." That means the reading list for the course is Lacan, but it's also the writings by Freud that Lacan cites, *The Instincts and their Viscissitudes*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "The Uncanny," the essay on fetishism. It's also Kierkegaard on repetition and Diderot on blindness.

---

*I think it's a very exciting time  
for pedagogy, and therefore  
also dangerous.*

---

CW And all the pictures that Lacan cites?

WJTM And all the pictures. I have the students create an exhibition of all the images that Lacan refers to—Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, the *tromp l'oeil* images, Arcimboldo, the paintings in the Doges' Palace in Venice,

Dali, Roualt, Dürer, Alberti. When Lacan gave those lectures in Paris in the 60s, at the end people rush out to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* and to book stores to read Aristotle's *Physics* because he had cited it in his discussion of the difference between the *tuché* and the automaton. Or he'd say, "If you want to understand repetition, then you must read Kierkegaard." So we turn to Kierkegaard's *Repetition*. The idea of this seminar, then, is to read a contemporary text, one which seems crucial to modern knowledge, in terms of its own archive—and that archive in this case turns out to be a fabulous reading list that includes the Torah, Pliny, Plato, Descartes, Bishop Berkeley, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty. In just a fifty page segment Lacan produces a reading list and a pictorial archive that you could work with for a very long time. So, I think it's really dangerous for cultural studies to say something like, "the conservatives can have the classics. They can have the canon. We reject that because we're in a new age." Politically and intellectually I think this is a huge mistake. Why should they get to have Shakespeare or Milton or Dante? Terry Eagleton wrote once on this kind of liberal progressive rhetoric of getting beyond the classics and saying those are not important anymore. That's what we're fighting over. Who are they going to belong to? If you allow yourself to fall into the rhetoric of defining the classic texts as authored by "dead white males" you are making a big mistake. The whiteness and maleness of these authors is not the only thing that's important about them.

CW Yes, well, John Guillory came to mind in relation to your advocacy of the imagetext as a critical and pedagogical tool in *Picture Theory*. The idea of a "heterogenous field of representational practices," you maintain, "is not recommended here for its novelty, but for its *persistence* as a theoretical *tradition*, its *survival as an abiding feature* of poetics, rhetoric, aesthetics and semiotics" (1994, 100, emphasis added). Yet the point of critics like Guillory is that we need to scrutinize such appeals to "the test of time" as a kind of absolutely valid or unproblematic criteria for value. In other words, the weight of received cultural prestige has imprinted itself on certain texts or methods, so their "greatness" becomes a sort of self-perpetuating thing.

WJTM Well I would agree that no canon provides an "absolutely valid or unproblematic criterion for value." What they provide is a reserve of cultural capital, intellectual human wealth that is there to be contested. That's why I think they've got to be fought over, not signed over as somebody else's cultural legacy. Of course, the canon can serve as a protection

for the status quo or traditional values—all the more reason to steal it, and transvalue it. The contemporary debate over the canonization of Shakespeare and the excesses of “bardolatry” is a case in point. Shakespeare is a staple of the culture industry in England, subject to a great deal of vulgar marketing. He’s also a staple of exploitation in American culture, where (for instance) Harold Bloom can trot out the familiar clichés about Shakespeare’s grasp of “universal human values” (which seems to mean, basically, that many of Shakespeare’s characters—Falstaff most notably—remind Bloom of himself). This amounts to a kind of critical puffery, a use of Shakespeare to inflate the prestige of a contemporary literary personality. Probably harmless enough in itself. But it only makes more urgent the need to contest the value of Shakespeare, to re-read (and re-stage) his plays, their historical context, their reception in relation to new bodies of knowledge.

CW A question about a key conceptual tool that you introduce in *Picture Theory*, the notion of the imagetext. I wonder if we could just unpack that a little. How would you respond to Frederick Bohrer’s assertion that the suturing of the visual and verbal fields by the heterogenous representational concept of the “imagetext” undermines the basis of the “pictorial turn” upon which *Picture Theory* is predicated?

WJTM First, I should say something about the status of this concept of the “imagetext.” I don’t think of it as some kind of absolute distinction which is just self-evident and analytically clear at picking out two different kinds of things in the world. I prefer to think of it as the name of a recurrent gap or structural relationship among symbolic practices, a trope that signals a boundary or fold in the field of representation. The overall claim is that representation is heterogeneous and that this is what distinguishes it from the Saussurean concept of the sign, why I find it more useful than the sign, which is modeled on language and has a very definite genealogy involving the arbitrariness of the sign. When I take the theory of representation to sign theory, I point out that Saussure’s picture of the sign is not, as it first appears, based in a simple binary opposition between the signifier and the signified. It has, you will recall, a third element, the bar between them. The signifier is exemplified by the word for “tree,” then signified by an image of a tree, and the bar separates the word from the image. Why does it turn out that in order to show the structure of the sign, Saussure needed to use three different kinds of signs—what Peirce would have recognized as a symbol (the word), an icon (the image) and

an index (the bar)? It suggests that the internal structure of the sign is a mixed medium. The concept of the imagetext is a way of trying to capture the sense that even the “atomic unit” of semiotics—the sign—is a heterogeneous structure of representation, a mixed medium. What this exercise shows, I think, is that the very idea of a single master key to semiosis, aesthetics, or representation, an indivisible unit of all meaningful symbolization, is an illusion projected by the hope for a master theory. Meaning is relational all the way down, and the imagetext is just one way of making that fact visible. But you don’t need to go into a technical space like the Saussurean sign to see it. You can find versions of the imagetext in all kinds of familiar places, you find it in the newspaper, on the cover

---

*The concept of the imagetext is a way of trying to capture the sense that even the “atomic unit” of semiotics—the sign—is a heterogeneous structure of representation, a mixed medium.*

---

of this magazine. You find it in every part of the world of signs we build around ourselves. That’s why, for me, Pierce is the great semiotician, the one who stresses the triadic, heterogeneous character of the symbolic form, giving us a dynamic picture of representation as an activity of generating and proliferating meaning, not merely communicating messages or signals.

So, how does that bear on the issue of the pictorial turn? The pictorial turn, I think, is a moment when one aspect of representation, the iconic, visual, pictorial element, seems to be surging up as a dominant force. I’m echoing, of course, Rorty’s idea of the linguistic turn as a late stage in his (highly condensed) story of philosophy. The shift, as he put it, is that philosophy has three ages. First it talks about things, beings, and ontology; then it talks about ideas, and becomes epistemological, an “idealist” turn. And then there’s a linguistic turn, which he sees as the twentieth century’s moment, the discovery that the problems of philosophy were really always about language. (An interesting feature of this story is that it sends us back to re-read earlier philosophy, so that Descartes, for instance, turns out to have been about language all along). My suggestion, following Rorty, is that a pictorial turn had been welling up within philosophical discourse, right alongside beings, ideas, and words. But the pictorial turn has, I think, always been an anxiety-provoking component of philosophi-

cal discourse. The image, the picture, the visual appearance or symbol, the metaphor, icon, or likeness has always seemed like a “necessary evil” in thinking itself, as if we had some notion of pure, imageless thought that would be uncontaminated by the senses, illusions, or figurative language. Martin Jay documents the history of one strand of this anxiety in *Downcast Eyes* very fully, showing how the “denigration of vision,” and anxieties about pictures and visual representation are a constant theme in modern French philosophy. My suggestion is that the concept of a pictorial turn may help us to historicize this anxiety, to locate it in specific cultural conditions, but also to see it as comparable in its foundational importance to the other great philosophical questions about language, ideas, and things. When, for instance, does Heidegger’s “age of the world picture” come into being? What is the “picture” that Wittgenstein found residing “in our language” so that we could “not get outside it”? Is he talking about certain metaphors, about the way certain philosophical pictures structure the way we think? Do these pictures have to be smashed or corrected? Is this what Nietzsche was conjuring with when he suggested in *The Twilight of the Idols* that we must “philosophize with a hammer,” using our language like a “tuning fork” to “sound the idols” that resonate in our thinking? Do we need a talking cure to get over pictures? And suppose that pictures were an incurable addiction? Would that explain why Gilles Deleuze insists that the task of philosophy is always the same: Iconology.

I don’t see the pictorial turn, then, as unique to our time, even though there is no question that it is a commonplace of our time. Part of what’s at issue here, is how does a cultural moment define itself? You will rarely get an argument from anybody if you assert that this is a time in which visual media, images and pictures are everywhere. That is a received idea. It is not the cutting edge of controversy to say that there is a pictorial turn in this sense. My aim is, in a sense, to name the cliché, to identify it, and to put it on the table for analysis. How does the sense of a pictorial turn get fleshed out? Is it, for one thing, really “pictorial” in any pure sense of the term? The concept of the imagetext becomes useful at this point for calling attention to the fact that television is not, as is often said, a purely visual or pictorial medium, but a mixed medium of image/sound/text. There are peculiar sub-relations among those media, and we have a shorthand for that, we call it “a visual medium.” So, the question is, “Why do we call television a visual medium?” when a moment’s reflection reveals that it isn’t, it’s a mixed medium. Why do we label it as “visual” and tell ourselves a story of the advent of TV as a pictorial turn?

BB Well, you would see the pictorial turn then as being less deterministic than say—I wouldn't exactly call Baudrillard deterministic but there's something kind of fatalistic about the simulacra, since how could you tell the difference between the image or the real, if you take his line of reasoning. So, you don't see the imagetext, then, as being this kind of deterministic cultural process?

WJTM No, I don't. I think it's the heterogeneous playing field in which agents find themselves, and I tend to think of the imagetext also in relation to the Lacanian triad of the imaginary, symbolic, and the real. There is an uncanny resonance between the Peircean triad (symbol, icon, index) and the Lacanian trio of "register." So one way to think of the pictorial turn is as what Žižek calls the "plague of fantasies," the eruption of the imaginary in daily life. But that does not loosen us from the grip, and necessity, of paying attention to, the symbolic on both language and negation, the law. Nor can you get away from the trauma of the real, which is always there. Think of the bar between the imaginary and the symbolic, the crevasse that Foucault talks about in his discussion of Magritte's "This Is Not a Pipe." That's where the real is, the history that breaks "through the cracks" between the image and the word, the seeable and the sayable. Fred Jameson suggests that "history is what hurts," because, I think, it tears apart the veil of representation that buffers us from the world, the verbal and visual media that screen experience for us. The idea that everything has been reduced to images, illusion, and simulation, that reality has been completely replaced by simulacra, leads very quickly to a kind of nihilism, and ultimately, I think, to a kind of stupidity. Baudrillard is virtuosic at playing out the rule of the image, the pictorial turn, as a kind of a totally enveloping subjection to what he calls "the evil demon of images." The Baudrillardian critique (if it is that) is a kind of ironic, celebratory iconophilia shot through with iconoclastic gestures. But I want to configure the pictorial turn as something that *appears* to be monolithic but is actually mixed, heterogeneous. And I also want to say that it's not just a matter of the present supposed dominance of "visual media" but an abiding problem in human cultures that can be found in ancient narratives. The Biblical episode of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32) is a story of a pictorial turn. The Israelites turn aside from the law—and, it turns out, from a law they don't know about yet—and turn to an image to show them the way. And then the symbolic, in the form of the Mosaic law—writing, the text, the father—returns to punish them. A pictorial turn occurs every time there's an episode of iconoclasm. That's why the idea of

the pictorial turn is a movable trope like the imagetext. It isn't to be understood as something that only resides in one place or only happens once, but as a wedge or lever for prying apart representational practices. An analogy for the imagetext is Derrida's idea of difference/*différance*—a seam or suture in representation, and the pictorial turn is also a trope, only it's historical in the sense that a move has occurred, in which pictures (of some kind) have emerged as a frightening new force on the horizon. This is something that you can find in many different historical periods. I'm sure you could, right now, elaborate on a number of highlights—17th-century France is a great moment for pictorial turns and anxiety about spectacle; the moment of the invention of photography, or of cinema, or of perspective are other examples.

BB Well, I guess, in talking of Baudrillard, you've just been speaking *contra* Baudrillard. What does it mean, in more concrete terms, to come to the conclusion you do, in *Picture Theory*, that "illusion isn't everything and vice versa"? It seems to head in the Baudrillardian direction, but obviously does not want to go there.

CW Yes, it's an interesting moment in the book because you talk about illusion as signaling a formal condition of consciousness. If that's the case, then how could it not be "everything"?

WJTM Because consciousness doesn't stay the same. Consciousness is temporality and transformation, and that means it gets disappointed or disillusioned, and that's when it knows that something was an illusion. The interesting thing about illusion is not just being in it, but falling out of it, and we experience both. That's really what consciousness is, the dialectic between illusion and reality, the imaginary, its symbolic interdiction, and the moment of rupture when the real appears. Suppose that now, or as of five minutes ago, we stopped being mistaken about something, in the grip of some fantasy, or some false code, and now we find ourselves suddenly in the sphere of the real. This doesn't happen very often, admittedly, but when it does, we recognize it individually and collectively as fundamental to our experience of learning. That's what cognition is, it's saying, "I don't believe that anymore. I used to think that. I used to even *know* that. Now, I'm not so sure." The illusion is shaky or it somehow has cracks in it and I want to make those cracks get wider so I can see what is underneath that. So, it seems to me that it's a basic postulate, illusion cannot be everything. It can only be in some kind of dialectical relationship with the real, and if

we think of illusion as mainly connected to fantasy or the imaginary, it has a dynamic relation with the symbolic as well. Even if we don't know what the real is, the symbolic is always coming in to interdict fantasy and to say, "You are forbidden to think that way or to think *with that*" ("that" usually being an image of some sort). The Biblical image of the Golden Calf and the Mosaic law are in a dialectical relation—the false, illusory image of God opposed to the word of God. The Israelites want a leader: are they going to be lead by the image or are they going to be led by the text? The imaginary and the symbolic are in a struggle there, and maybe both of them are on the side of illusion. The real is the massacre of 3,000 Israelites, as a result of this intransigent choice. All of the people who are on the side of the image—over there, and everybody who is on the side of the text—over here. The trick is to read this story outside those choices.

BB But the illusion and fantasy aren't necessarily identical?

WJTM No, I'm suggesting that fantasy would be one of the mechanisms by which illusions are proliferated (artistic media would be another), but the symbolic is also capable of generating its own illusions—for instance, the illusion that there is a law which protects us against fantasy, a law against images, and it's absolute and you had better follow it to the letter, to the death.

CW "Nothing lies outside representation" (1994, 419). The claim is tantalizing in its ambiguity. Do you mean "lies" as in "exists" or "lies" as in the sense of an "illusion" that is "built into the very conditions of sentience" and "extends [. . .] into the universal structure of ideology or false consciousness" (1994, 343)?

WJTM I love your reading of that. I suppose I should have known that was in there but I never thought about it as lies, as in "true lies." I thought of it as "residing" or "being located outside," and the main pun I was working with was the idea of nothing as absence or as itself a substantive. The word "representation" I think, is one of the those really resonant, unsurpassable terms that, for various reasons, we are always trying to "get beyond"—to exactly what isn't always clear. Cultural studies and much of contemporary theory has had great difficulty with the concept of representation. There's been an effort to transcend or bracket it, to connect it with a bad conscience around "naive" mimesis, "mere" copy theories, or correspondence models of truth. Sometimes representation seems to be

equivalent to ideology or false consciousness as such, or bad political traditions such as liberalism with its notions of representation and representativity as crucial to political forms. To some extent, I regard the exile of representation as one of those cycles of intellectual fashion that designates a term as the “scapegoat” concept. It’s almost a perverse axiom with me to resist these cycles. Just when I began to hear everybody saying, “Let’s not talk about representation, we are beyond that,” that’s exactly when I want to talk about it. I feel a similar thing has happened with the concept of “form” in the study of art and literature. At the last (1999) meeting of the Modern Language Association, Edward Said organized a Presidential Forum on the question of scholarship and commitment, and he asked me to prepare a talk for it. So, needless to say, with my perverse streak, I wrote a paper called “The Commitment to Form,” because I couldn’t bear the idea of talking about my commitments to social justice or educational progress, the things that, of course, one is “committed to” in the usual sense. I wanted to find a way to think commitment against the grain of what is expected, independent of voluntarism or decisionism, as a necessity one awakens to. One thing that is often taken for granted is that we’ve gotten beyond formalism, that “mere” formalism is old hat, and now we

---

*Another way to put this is,  
I love to bring ideas that are widely  
regarded as obsolete or  
unfashionable back to life.*

---

have left behind the bad conscience of organic form, of ideologies of totality, and coherence, in favor of celebrations of constructedness, artificiality, and fragmentation. So I presented a brief genealogy of the actual fate of formalism in mid-twentieth century criticism, trying to show that it’s a key word for

Adorno and Frederick Jameson—whose first book, *Marxism and Form*, is still a classic—and for a clearly “committed” critic like Said, who is—and not just in his music criticism, but everywhere—asserting that a crucial part of his task as a political critic is to be involved in issues that can only be grasped by formalism. Another way to put this is, I love to bring ideas that are widely regarded as obsolete or unfashionable back to life. I’m less interested in what we used to call “the history of ideas” than in the *survival* and *rebirth* of ideas and images. That’s why I wrote a book about dinosaurs, a survey of the very image and metaphor of obsolescence and extinction in what we think of as our modern world. The same impulse to

revive the dead, out of date thought is at work there. I wrote *Iconology* at exactly the moment all my art history students were saying, “iconology is not what art history is about. That’s what it was about back in the days of Panofsky, back in the days of the Warburg Institute. They cared about iconography, iconology, but we are now into the social history of art.” Well, that’s fine, I have nothing against the social history of art, but the very fact that nobody wanted to talk about iconology, was to me a really good reason for insisting on bringing it up. Again, I see this impulse as related to the issue of elder knowledge and traditional discourse, my need not just to repeat the old sayings, but to try to renew them and bring them back to life for us. Or to find the ways that we are, without realizing it, repeating the past even as we congratulate ourselves on leaving it behind. That is, I suppose, why I agree with Bruno Latour that “we have never been modern,” and why I insist these days in asking, not “what do pictures mean?” or even “what do pictures do to us?” but a more bizarre, disturbing, and archaic question—namely, “what do pictures *want*?”

NOTE

1/ Title of a late 19th-century German magazine in which the rabbit-duck image originally appeared. The title means “flying pages.”

---

W. J. T. MITCHELL is the Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor in English and Art History at the University of Chicago. He has been the editor of *Critical Inquiry* for the last twenty years. He has also edited several important collections on literary and cultural theory and several single volumes of his own, including *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986), and *Picture Theory* (1994), which won the College Art Association’s Morey Prize for art history, and the University of Chicago Press’s Laing Prize for the outstanding book by a Chicago faculty author in 1996.

CHRISTINE WIESENTHAL’s recent publications include “Taking Pictures With Stephanie Bolster,” a study of ekphrasis in contemporary Canadian poetry, forthcoming in *Canadian Literature* (2000). An earlier version of this essay, translated into French by Charly Bouchara, appeared in *Ellipse: Writers in Translation* 61 (Spring 1999): 57-70.

BRAD BUCKNELL’s *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics: Pater, Pound, Joyce, and Stein*, is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.