Andrew McNamara, Words and Pictures in the Age of the Image: An Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell

An interview with W.J.T. Mitchell, University of Chicago, editor of Critical Inquiry, and author of Iconology (1987), Picture Theory (1994), The Last Dinosaur Book (1998) and What Do Pictures Want? (2005)

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Andrew McNamara: Your intellectual background is associated more with literary theory or cultural theory rather than art history or the visual arts. What has lead to your interest in the visual?

W. J. T. (Tom) Mitchell: Actually, I've been interested in the visual arts since the beginning of my scholarly career. My dissertation (Blake's Composite Art, 1968) was on the illuminated books of William Blake, and dealt with relationships between poetry and painting, the printed word and the imprinted or engraved image. I wrote the thesis for a literature degree, but I was supervised and examined by art historians like John White (at Johns Hopkins) as well as "hybrid" word/image scholars like Ronald Paulson. I've always located my work in this interstitial space between the arts and media. But it's true that, to art historians, I'm often associated with literary and cultural theory, while my literary colleagues sometimes accuse me of deserting literature for the visual arts. Part of my pleasure in this double identity is no doubt a perverse delight in going against the grain; part of it may be "hard-wired": I am ambidextrous, and thus tend to have a lot of right/left brain "crosstalk" or interference. I respond to verbal metaphors and descriptions with vivid visual and tactile images, and enjoy the magical process of verbalizing about pictures and works of art, especially the ones that seem most reluctant to "say" anything very explicit. I suspect also that my early boyhood experiences with Catholic illuminated missals, especially one that had a tiny ivory relief sculpture of the Virgin Mary encased inside the front cover, permanently imprinted me with a sense that texts and images are indissolubly connected, yet radically different.

AM: Your position may be characterized as seeking to trouble all accounts which try to draw neat conceptual demarcations around labels such as the linguistic or the visual. Is this a fair description?

TM: Yes, I'm definitely out to make trouble for people who like things to be simple. This is partly a matter of taste; I prefer complex things. It's also a matter of faith. I

believe things really are complex. The "linguistic" and the "visual" can't be neatly distinguished because their relation is not one of binary opposition, negation, logical antinomy, or even dialectic in the usual sense. Word and image are more like ships passing in the night, two storm-tossed barks on the sea of the unconscious signaling to each other.

But I don't just want to be a troublemaker. My hope was that Iconology and Picture Theory might disrupt some of our habitual ways of thinking about the relation of words and images so that we could see them in new ways, or recover some old ways that have been prematurely consigned to the dustbin of history. If you believe that the "essential tension" between the seeable and sayable has been dissolved by postmodern theory or semiotics or information science or discourse analysis, then you will neither be troubled nor illuminated by these books. If, on the other hand, you think that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, observation, visual pleasure) is as deep a problem as reading, and not reducible to a form of reading, then you may find these books helpful.

AM: Could you explain how you distinguish the terms "image" and "picture"? What is the reason for drawing such a distinction?

TM: The distinction is not a rigorous or systematic one, but a pragmatic one drawn from usage. Sometimes there is simply no distinction, or nothing at stake in making one. At other times, distinctions may be useful, and I propose three in Picture Theory: 1) the difference between a constructed, concrete object or ensemble (frame, support, materials, pigments, facture) and the virtual, phenomenal appearance that it provides for a beholder (thus, one could say, "bring that picture over here," but it would sound odd to say this of an image); 2) the difference between a deliberate act of representation ("to picture or depict") and a less voluntary, perhaps even passive or automatic act ("to image or imagine"). This is why my title, Picture Theory, would not work very well as "image theory." The force of the imperative, "to picture," would be lost; 3) the difference between a specific kind of visual representation (the "pictorial" image, as opposed to the sculptural, for instance) and the whole realm of iconicity, likeness, and resemblance that is designated by "image." My sense is that this distinction is very hard to translate from English to French or German—image vs. tableau and Bild vs. Vorstellung do not seem to work exactly the same way.

AM: Are these terms exclusively visual?

TM: Neither term is exclusively visual. For that matter, words like "see" and "paint" are not exclusively visual either, but may be transposed into verbal contexts with more or less violence. The question is, what sort of violence, to what purpose. My sense is that "picture" is relatively more closely tied to the visual than "image" (which can refer to non-visual likeness or similitude in any medium or sensory channel) and thus "picture" produces a stronger effect when it is yoked with a word like "theory" that has connotations of abstraction, non-concreteness, discursivity, and invisibility. To picture theory is to exert a certain violence on it, to overcome its resistance to visual images and metaphors, to give a body to that which seems incorporeal. My discussion of Wittgenstein's ambivalence about images and pictures (from his early "picture theory" to his late iconoclasm) is meant to illustrate this sort of violence or

paragone between word and image. What does it mean to say "a picture held us captive and we could not get outside it"? (Philosophical Investigations, 115).

AM: Could you explain what is at stake in drawing this distinction between "image" and "picture"?

TM: What's at stake in the distinction is the ambi-valence, the incurable splitting of visual experience, especially when focused on objects or pictures of objects, or pictures of nothing, "pure" abstractions. This is the doubleness that constitutes the ability to see a picture, or perhaps to see tout court. The shuttle between "seeing" and "seeing as," to take Wittgenstein's terms, or the equivocation between the picture as window and the picture as colored, painted, marked surface. This is why multi-stable images like the Duck-Rabbit are so fundamental and universal a feature of visual culture, why any picture can become a meta-picture.

AM: What is the basis of your assertion that the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the image? What is the problem? Does the image present an ethical concern, a political difficulty or an epistemological dilemma?

TM: Like most statements of this kind, this is meant as a provocation to see what sort of thinking it might produce. I was echoing W. E. B. Dubois's claim that the problem of the twentieth century was the issue of race. Of course it is idle to believe that any one issue is "the" problem of a century, but it may be productive to treat the claim as a thought experiment. As it happens the problem of race actually has a lot to do with the question of image—that is, with stereotyping, with visual imprinting, with the semiotics of color and physiognomy, with a whole cluster of assumptions about the visibility of race, and its transmission by genetic "iconisms"—visible or invisible templates that allow the reproduction of "identities." Re-reading Dubois, I was struck by how many terms in his analysis, from the "veil" that separates the races, to the "color line," to the "Invisible Empire" that masks itself in white sheets (the Ku Klux Klan) made it clear that racism (like sexism and prejudice against "others" more generally) is deeply linked with questions of imagery and visual representation. We have to ask ourselves what the relation is between visuality and the construction of social otherness: would a blind society be capable of racism?

I was also thinking, of course, of the widespread assumption that visual media have assumed an unprecedented dominance in the modern world, that television, movies, advertising, and political propaganda exert enormous power over politics and the consciousness of great masses of people. This view is a commonplace, not only in the work of advanced theorists (the late Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle comes to mind), but also in popular "wisdom" (e.g. Andre Agassi's camera commercial telling us that "image is everything").

My remark, then, was meant to mimic and focus critical scrutiny on this widely accepted cliché. Is it in fact the case that images, and especially visual images, are now "everything"? (I might just note that now a soft-drink commercial has been released telling us "image is nothing, thirst is everything"). If by images we mean visual images and media, the answer seems to me far from straightforward. On the one hand, it's true that modern manipulators of visual media reach far more people with their images than anything dreamed of by the ancient idol-makers. On the other

hand, the skepticism and cynicism about images has never been so great, and many of the real forces that impinge on daily life (the global circulation of information and commodities among multinational corporations) are radically invisible, and deliberately, necessarily so. The much-heralded expansion of visual experiences offered by new technologies like "Virtual Reality" and cyberspace (the Internet) seem to me more like a contraction of vision. VR is a visually impoverished medium that reduces visual experiences to the dimensions of a video game, and "surfing the net" is a radically non-visual and disembodied experience. The current "scandals" about net-surfers who distribute pornography and "portray" themselves with fraudulent sexual, racial, or generational identities need to be understood concretely. They are taking place in the solitude of study carrels and computer workstations mainly through verbal communication, with vision and touch left to the imagination.

That last word, however, brings us back to the problem of the image—the mental images provoked by a set of verbal signs. So perhaps the problem of the twenty-first century is that of the image, after all. My hope is that we can take this proposition, which currently operates as a kind of sound-byte in much media criticism and theory, and actually ask what it means. My claim that there is a "pictorial turn" in contemporary cultural theory is an attempt to focus on this possibility. By "pictorial turn," I definitely don't mean simply to recite the commonplace about the "new dominance of the visual," but to remark on the way that images and visuality have emerged as a specific point of irritation in contemporary theory, an unsolved problem or anomaly. This problem is just as formidable as the one that faced theorists who first set out to devise a science or philosophy of language, setting the stage for the "linguistic turn" in twentieth century thought.

AM: You stated in Iconology that you began writing the book with the idea of forging "a valid theory of images" but found that it turned into a study of the fear of images—a struggle "between iconoclasm and idolatry." Now in your most recent publication, Picture Theory, you argue that a pictorial turn is occurring that will overtake the linguistic turn. I was wondering whether your initial hypothesis still held. Will our ability to cope with a visual turn be hampered by a continuing propensity to swing between iconoclasm and idolatry?

TM: Yes, it will. The human capacity for over-estimation of images remains undiminished. The reverence for, or hatred of icons, of substitutes, fetishes, is certain to continue. One side of this is simply misplaced politics. There is a reality outside of images, even independent of them. We can't know it, but we have to operate as if it was there or we'll go mad. Well, now the world has gone mad with images, the frenzy of the visible. We suspect that there may be nothing else but images, a spectral succession of simulacra. Language, in the form of science, theory, ruthless critique, dialectics, anti-dialectics, rides to the rescue, only to get swept into the bottomless pit of signification.

This is the postmodern, Baudrillardian story of the image. It's the absorption of critique of the spectacle, as Debord predicted, into the spectacle. As for "our ability to cope" with the "visual turn", it's important to ask who it is that is supposed to do the coping, and why. Baudrillard copes by writing in a radically iconoclastic style, what we might call (echoing Fred Jameson) "the hysterical sublime," a style filled with nihilistic and apocalyptic premonitions and outrageous one-liners ("the Gulf War did

not take place"). Ordinary people cope, I think, with complex strategies of irony, ambivalence, and disavowal. They (we, that is, you and I) live in a world that we know is filled with idols and fetishes, and we "sort of" take them seriously. Did the ancient Israelites really believe the Golden Calf was their god? We'll never know, but it seems safest to assume that opinions were mixed, and that some of them (Aaron, for instance) saw the Calf as a practical necessity to preserve national unity in a fragile social entity. Unfortunately, many of our smartest critics (inspired perhaps by Moses, or Adorno) seem to think that modern forms of idolatry (i.e., mystification by images and ideologies) have to be met with a ruthless iconoclastic critique that gives no quarter to the idolaters. Moses has them massacred, and then forces the survivors to melt down the Calf and drink the molten gold. This seems to me a bad prescription for "coping" with a turn toward idolatry. It is a scenario that is repeated endlessly when critics and cultural theorists set themselves up as an intellectual elite that "knows better" than the mass public how it is being manipulated by images and visual media. It meets idolatry with iconoclasm, an encounter that prevents acknowledgment or negotiation; it isolates critical intellectuals as a priestly caste that has received the invisible truth in a writing that the masses do not understand.

AM: Can you indicate how you approach these issues differently?

TM: My sense is that the great challenge to studies of images and visual media is to find a third way between iconoclasm and idolatry. Some clues are to be found in anthropology and psychoanalysis, the former because it attempts to treat idolatry and fetishism as alternative cultural practices, and doesn't begin with assumption that they are perversions; the latter, because it takes a non-moralistic, therapeutic stance toward the perversion or (in Lacanian psychoanalysis) treats it as a basic feature of normal psychology. I think we should also be looking at other kinds of objects, alternatives to the "idol" and the "fetish" with their connotations of violence, voyeurism, and sado-masochistic sexuality. I'm particularly fascinated with the concept of the totem, which seems to me quite distinct from both the idol (the object of mass worship) and the fetish (the object of private perversion). Totems are more equivocal in their status; they aren't gods, typically, but ancestor figures. Their sacredness often seems transitory and temporary, confined to a ritual moment (usually a meal) followed by a return to profane or ordinary status. They are more like what D. W. Winnicott called "transitional objects"—objects of play such as toys, dolls, stuffed animals, and blankets—than fixed or obsessional fetishes. I'm currently working on a book about popular fascination with dinosaurs (the "Jurassic Park syndrome") as a form of totemism.

It might be helpful, then, to analyze contemporary images and visual media, in terms of totemism. Among other things, it would relax the moral vigilantism of the critique and actually allow us to learn from and about idolatry rather than engaging in denunciations. Perhaps the real lesson of the story of the Golden Calf is that this was an emergent totem cult mistaken for idolatry by a jealous god and his zealous prophet.

AM: I'd like to pick up on this point about iconoclasm and cultural critique. I think it is possible to explain Adorno's iconoclasm in terms of his ambition to maintain aesthetic judgment—that is, to discern between good and bad; to discriminate critically; to raise the question of value, especially a non-instrumental criterion of value—in the face of, what appeared to him, the contrary capitalist socio-cultural

impulse both to install a "critical free zone" of empty and instant gratification, and to judge everything by its use value (practical vs. abstract, relevant vs. obscure, applicable vs. useless). Cultural studies sometimes invokes such distinctions in an attempt to evade a hierarchy between high and low art. It aims to understand what Adorno called "the culture industry" virtually from the position of its consumption. Now art historians—as well as critics and anyone else who seriously engages with the arts—still grapple with the issue of aesthetic judgment: is it art? Why? Is it good art? For what reasons? Who decides? The reason you might appear an interloper in art history is that your work would seem to sit more comfortably within the cultural studies model (which scrutinizes and seeks to understand broad cultural developments, artifacts and their conceptual processes). Aesthetic issues, on the other hand, do not seem to be pivotal to your work. Is that a fair assessment?

TM: I'm sure you're right that Adorno's iconoclasm stems from his desire to maintain aesthetic judgment, to discriminate art from non-art, good from bad. One problem I have with the Adorno (and Horkheimer) of "The Culture Industry" is that they tend to confuse these two forms of discrimination: "works of art are ascetic and unashamed; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish"; "the culture industry does not sublimate; it represses"; "a laughing audience is a parody of humanity." One could go on to find examples of categorical moral/aesthetic judgments derived simply from the distinction between art and the "culture industry." Many of these judgments hit the mark, or elicit the pleasures of righteous indignation, but the pleasure quickly turns to ashes. The difference between good and bad is not the same as the difference between art and non-art. Most art (say about 98%) is bad, mediocre, or just average. A tiny portion is good, and we should rejoice in that and make considerable fuss over it. Some products of mass culture are good; most of it is bad. Sometimes a laughing audience is a vicious parody of humanity; other times it is the very face of the human. A lot depends on what they are laughing at—Chaplin or Mickey Rooney. These "judgments," of course, are notoriously slippery. But at least they are based on a relevant domain of things to be compared and judged. Adorno's automatism—"art yes, culture industry no"—is redeemed by his wit, range of reference, and passion, but it is a dead end for progressive thinking about visual art and media. I find Walter Benjamin's openness to the critical and liberatory potential of mass culture much more congenial and, above all, more dialectical in its avoidance of moralistic judgments based in generic differences.

You may be right that "aesthetic issues", at least in the sense of thumbs-up/thumbs down value judgments, are not the central focus of my work. I prefer focusing on moments of turbulence and controversy in the sphere of value, moments when the very grounds of judgment are in question. I personally think Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing is a wonderful film. At the same time, I think its political "message" (if it has one) is probably incoherent or retrograde. It was also a film that produced, in its moment, a remarkable public debate and helped to create a new audience for African-American filmmakers. Final judgments of goodness or badness seem to me relatively uninteresting in a case like this. The other artists I discuss in Picture Theory—William Blake, Robert Morris, Velasquez, Walker Evans, James Agee, Toni Morrison, Magritte, Malevich, Jasper Johns, Maya Lin, Frederick Douglass, and Oliver Stone— are there because they challenge standard canons of value, not because they are "good" or "bad". Sometimes (Oliver Stone's JFK comes to mind) they are both. As Norman Mailer put it, "JFK is one of the worst great movies ever made".

The other crucial thing to say about aesthetics is that it is, classically, a much bigger topic than the evaluation of works of art. It is, as the origin of the word indicates, the analysis or critique of the senses. This is the sort of aesthetics that Benjamin was concerned to revive, and it helps to explain his uneasiness with fixation on judgments of the "unique" and "valuable" work of artistic genius. Aesthetics is about the cultural construction of the sensorium, the divisions of labor among the senses, the history of vision, hearing, touch, the experience of beauty, ugliness, sublimity, shame, shock, wonder, the uncanny, etc. Works of art, visual media, audio-visual archives, inter- and multi-media, new technologies of the body and the senses are all part of this comprehensive sense of aesthetics. That doesn't mean that "art" is swallowed up by mass media or the culture industry. In fact, the distinctiveness of artistic institutions— their objects, practitioners, sites of display, models of spectatorship—only emerge against the background provided by a more general aesthetics that can map the ever shifting boundaries between visual art and visual culture as a whole. Art is a permanent capacity of the human species. That is why it has a history in which it can seem to die, disappear, only to be rediscovered or reinvented under the most unpromising circumstances.

AM: Would it then be more accurate to say that this struggle between iconoclasm and idolatry continues because we still flounder on the conceptual difficulties posed by the nature (resemblance)/convention distinction?

TM: No, it has nothing to do with a failure to make conceptual distinctions. The power of images is pre-conceptual, fundamental to the formation of concepts in the first place (it might be useful here to recall what Kant said about the blindness of concepts without sensations). No act of clear-sighted critique, analysis, rigorous description and distinction making is going to overcome superstitions about images. This is simply one of their most fundamental differences from language, and of course they infiltrate language everywhere, percolating up through its rough basement in the form of metaphors, descriptions, and formal gestalts. The nature/convention distinction is durable, indispensable. No matter how many times "nature" is revealed to be actually a matter of convention, it remains always to be revealed, exposed, unveiled. "Nature" has been the repressed category in cultural studies long enough now to seem like the point of keenest interest when it resurfaces, as it does for instance in Donna Haraway work on primatology and cyborgs or Eve Sedgwick's recent writing on shame and affect.

If anything, the struggle between iconoclasm and idolatry continues because we insist on treating conceptual distinctions as absolute, to be preserved at all costs, or as mere illusions to be overcome at all costs. This struggle feeds, for instance, on an absolute distinction between "us" (iconoclasts) and "them" (idolaters). Have you every noticed that it is always someone else who is taken in by an image? The person who laments the dominance of the visual rarely does so by way of confessing complicity in idolatry or fetishism. The fetishist is always someone else who needs to have their perversion drummed out of their head, at which point the distinction will be overcome. If they are critical intellectuals, they will then be freed from superstition and "nature" into the clear-sighted constructivist-conventionalist consensus.

AM: Further to this point, you assert that the response of art history to the linguistic turn has ended up with the "predictable alternatives" emphasizing textuality or that visual arts are sign systems to be read and read as conventions. I was wondering what your problem with this approach is considering that many of the art historians you mention favourably (Bryson, Krauss, Marin, Damisch) do emphasize such issues?

TM: I think the linguistic turn was liberating, was illuminating, especially in these writers, and in very different ways. But it has now become routinized. The revelation that an image is readable as a text is no longer a revelation. To a student of Renaissance painting, imbued with what David Summers calls the "language of art," as well as the ut pictura poesis tradition and the rhetoric of images, the "revelation" was simply a transcoding of traditional modes of interpretation into new languages, the lingo of linguistics and semiotics. New things have indeed been revealed by this transcoding. But some old and abiding things may have been forgotten in the process. I think of the relation between word and image, or what Foucault called the "sayable" and the "seeable," as the fundamental dialectic of cognition and perception. To apprehend the "Real," in Lacan's terms, requires a negotiation of the "Imaginary" and the "Symbolic": they are woven in a kind of braided chiasmus in the very process of perception. This means that, of course, we will "read" the visual, treat the image as a text. We have never had any choice but to do this in some way or other. But we also have no choice but to "see" the verbal, to treat the text as an image. Whenever we deal with representations, media, art forms, or percepts we are dealing with "mixed media," or what I've called "imagetexts." There's no such thing as an unmixed medium (though this utopian concept continues to haunt artistic practice and theory).

So my uneasiness with the linguistic turn in art history is directed at this illusory sense that semiotics and linguistics have now given us the key to meaning, even a "science" of the visual image. (I don't think any of the figures you mention have taken this view, though Norman Bryson comes close to it in his essay on "Semiotics and Art History," co-authored with Mieke Bal, in Art Bulletin a few years ago). I think visual artists, connoisseurs, and most art historians know intuitively, however, that an image cannot finally be "cashed in" for words—that's what the saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words," really means. And if we are, indeed, undergoing a "pictorial turn," it seemed to me that this might be a moment when those who pay a lot of attention to visual images might be in a position to say something worth listening to, and that it wouldn't be just the "news" that textual procedures can get meaning out of images. That's why I recommended attention to "metapictures," images that try to show us what images, and indeed the whole visual process, look like.

AM: Isn't the concern of such art historians not simply "literature" but the literal (refer Ch. 7 of Picture Theory)? Does not the issue of the icon simply blur this perennial difficulty in that the visual image is often viewed in terms of resemblance and hence equated with the natural, not the textuality of a linguistic sign? Being natural, so the assumption goes, visual meaning is not "arbitrary," but fixed and therefore has a more fixed system of meaning. What would your position be in regard to these conceptual difficulties that seem to plague art history?

TM: It would take all day to clear up the confusions in a familiar set of associations—such as the linkage of the image with resemblance, nature, the non-arbitrary, and therefore "fixed" meaning—and the parallel column of linkages—

between words, difference, convention, and the arbitrary (and therefore "unfixed"?) meaning. One problem is that every link in both chains is capable of being shattered, and is shattered in actual artistic practices and in the uses of images and words. Some words are images (bang!); all spoken words are acoustical images (that's the condition of their iterability), and Saussure thought the signifier/signified relation in language could be illustrated as a word/image emblem (see his famous "tree" icon). Some images are words, or are meant to be immediately replaced by or "seen as" verbal signs (this is where writing comes from).

The really fundamental problem, though, is the idea that distinctions like nature/convention, resemblance/difference, motivated/arbitrary can somehow be deployed to stabilize, regulate, or "get to the bottom of" the difference between images and words. My argument is that there is no getting to the bottom of this difference by resolving it with some conceptual distinction: it is itself a "bottom," fundamental and constitutive of thought and discourse. (This is also, I take it, Foucault's point about the verbal/visual calligram in Magritte's This Is Not a Pipe). The best strategy, then, is to note the way these distinctions drawn from semiotics, philosophy of language, etc. are being deployed in specific situations to make claims about particular images and texts, and to ask what values, interests, and desires are being mobilized under cover of the neutral, scientific terminology. If the whole point turns out to be some "demonstration" that images are more "fixed" in their meaning than words, then I think it's time to tune out.

AM: You suggest that some of our most muddled thinking arises when we make distinctions absolute—for example, when we decide finally that the visual arts can be categorized as either nature or convention (as you say, this is a durable distinction that carries a lot of cultural baggage). We also tend to be most deluded when we believe ourselves free of the problems, which arise from such emphases. This is interesting because a lot of theoretical effort has gone into disposing of the nature side of the equation because it is viewed as leading to a narrow and restrictive definition of the visual arts. If we were to follow your advice and not dispose of the nature (resemblance) emphasis, could you explain what is gained by maintaining this emphasis? What would be the benefits of examining the visual arts through the lens of nature (resemblance)?

TM: It isn't just a question of making distinctions absolute, but of sliding from one distinction to another, and thinking that the second one provides the deep truth or bottom line. So someone asks what the difference between words and images is, and the reply is, it's the difference between convention (the arbitrary sign) and nature (resemblance). Then someone else comes along and says no, these are false, binary oppositions, reified essences, and the fact is that there is no difference between words and images because all signs (including images) are arbitrary and conventional, and anyone who disagrees is a fascist who believes in nature and essences.

I want to stop this "debate" before it gets started. It's not going anywhere conceptually or politically. The first step is to slow down, and ask how we got from word vs. image to convention vs. nature. Did we think images were "natural" because the objects they represent are often easy to recognize? Is it because we can tell that Magritte's pipe represents a pipe "just by looking at it," whereas the words "this is not a pipe" require knowledge of a language? Could we substitute for the words "nature" and

"convention" the "easy" and the "difficult" or the "automatic" versus the "learned"? Would we be comfortable taking this as the ultimate truth about the difference between words and images, or would we want to raise questions about cases that go against the grain--words like "Dada" that seem to come spontaneously out of baby's mouths long before they have a language, or images (like Magritte's pipe) that seem to resonate with invisible connotations that go well beyond literal denotation of a smoking instrument?

The nature/convention distinction has been one of the most durable ways of describing the difference between images and words. It goes back at least as far as Plato's Cratylus and continues to play a role in contemporary debates. I have two suggestions to make about the use of this distinction. The first is not to suppose that it explains everything, or that it provides the "deep truth" that underlies the difference between word and images. Nature/convention is only one of several distinctions or what I call "figures of difference" between words and images. Others include the metaphysical distinction between space and time (Lessing's favorite), the sensory division between the eye and the ear, or grammatical distinctions like the analogical vs. the digital (Nelson Goodman). The fact that so many powerful and disparate forms of differentiation have been used to explain the relation of words and images, and the fact that none of them finally succeeds in stabilizing this relation, suggests to me that the word/image difference names something truly fundamental to culture, a basic and perhaps universal fissure in cognition, perception, and representation. That doesn't mean, I must insist, that there is an "essential" difference between words and images, one that can be given by any reduction of the problem to a conceptual binary opposition. There are numerous distinctions that emerge whenever a culture sets out to reflect on differences in the kinds of symbols it uses. These distinctions come loaded with associated values and political conflicts, which is why debates about signs, symbols, and artistic media rarely remain neutral or dispassionate, but move toward polemic. The space between words and images is a kind of void into which (and from which) ideas, passions, narratives, representations emerge. It is the "third space," the in-between where contingency rules.

AM: So what is your strategy here? Do you wish to resolve the debate?

TM: I don't want to neutralize polemic. I just want the stakes to be as clear as possible. But to get back to the thrust of your initial question, and to my second suggestion about what to do with the nature/convention distinction: what would be the benefits of looking at the visual arts through the lens of nature and resemblance? Wouldn't this roll back, in some sense, the politics of the arbitrary sign, and along with it, and the whole radical critique of representation? Not at all. It would simply move this critique off its fixation on the linguistic turn and its associations with conventionalism, relativism, and nominalism. The theoretical victories won against all forms of "naive" (fill in the blank: transparency, mimesis, resemblance, copy, representation, realism, naturalism, positivism...) need not be repeated endlessly. How many times do we need to unveil the fact that something taken to be "natural" is really only a convention? Isn't it more interesting to take this for granted, and ask precisely what nature is being constructed by a convention? One of the things I admire about Rosalind Krauss' The Optical Unconscious is the way its obsession with language and the arbitrary sign finds its way all the way down to a nature of drives and automatisms. Suppose nature "itself" also does things that are not "necessary" or

"motivated," but are pure sport, caprice, chance, contingency, and play, with no predetermined payoff in evolutionary competitiveness. Suppose nature herself is an artist who makes beautiful things (the wings of butterflies) for their own sake (this was the view Lacan absorbed from Roger Caillois's wonderful little book, The Mask of Medusa). Or suppose nature, like the unconscious, were structured like a language, speaking to us in tongues that we have projected onto her? Perhaps we can stop treating nature as a scandal, and pay attention to what she is saying, and to the multiplicity of identities or "natures" we are capable of constructing.

A new openness to nature in discussions of the visual arts, then, could have all sorts of implications. It would reopen the problems of realism and illusion, asking why it is that not just anything can serve the purposes of realism, why illusion isn't "arbitrary" but seems to obey constraints that are independent of any choice or decision. It might help us to distinguish different levels of nature—"first" and "second" nature, for instance—the realms of biology, animal behavior, organismic drives and the sphere of deep custom, habit, ideology, and "anthropological universals." On the specific problems of the visual arts, it would help to remind us that visual pleasure, affect, and desire are grounded in a scopic drive which, if Freud and Lacan are right, has as much to do with nature as the oral, anal, or genital zones. If language and speech, no matter how arbitrary or conventional its sign units, are fundamental constituents of human nature based in orality, vision and visual culture seem equally fundamental: perhaps the paragone of word and image should be recast as a contest between the mouth and the eye. Magritte's pipe might be read as a collision between the scopic and the oral. In any case, there is no reason to suppose that visuality can be exhaustively explained on the model of language. Vision has its own nature, and lovers of the visual arts should be attentive to it on its own terms, and not be ashamed if they fail to transcode it into textual, discursive, or linguistic metalanguages. All the naive "superstitions" about visual representation (transparency, mimesis, resemblance, idolatry, fetishism, etc.) that have supposedly been surpassed by a sophisticated conventionalism can be re-opened with a new clarity and critical attention if we can get beyond the negative reflex that has become attached to the category of nature. This is already happening, as I've suggested, in the work of Donna Haraway and Eve Sedgwick, among others.

AM: You argue against the proposition that there is a single over-arching theory that encompasses and resolves all the issues raised here and discussed in your books. How would you explain your kind of relativism? What stops an "astute relativism" from ultimately being just relativism?

TM: Nothing. At the end of the day, I'm probably just a relativist like all my fellow citizens are, which means that I'm a relativist until the shoe pinches. Then I want to get to the bottom of things. "Relativist" strikes me as the least interesting and informative label I've ever allowed anyone to pin on me. I'm not sure a T-shirt with the words "Asute Relativist" would be any more comfortable. I actually think of my skepticism about over-arching theories, not as a form of relativism, but as a kind of hard-headed faith in the progressive, historically evolving character of human understanding, coupled with considerable anxiety about the human capacity for forgetting and relapsing into ignorance). The insistence on theoretical totality and closure is, in my view, quite incompatible with an empirical or scientific attitude toward knowledge. All such totalities can produce are quasi-religious systems (hence, a new round of idolatry vs. iconoclasm) or reactive forms of relativism and nihilism.

I'm generally more comfortable with the relativists and nihilists--until the shoe pinches.

AM: Finally, how would you describe the critical role of your "astute relativism"? Do you aim to intervene to transform a situation? To transform our perceptions and knowledge of an object? What role does your work play in a culture undergoing a pictorial turn?

TM: My aim is to get at the wonder and strangeness of the world of words and images around us, to map that world as carefully as possible in the blind faith that it will be useful to do so. I want to intervene in academic, professional discussions of symbols and visual representations by testing the limits of disciplinary expertise, drawing us out of our depth, beyond our competence, into "indisciplinary" moments of experimentation, surprise, and cognitive failure. For the culture more broadly conceived, my hope is that we might find a way to write about the images and words that comprise our culture in ways that are critically acute and widely accessible. My fondest wish would be for an incredibly complex, subtle, and nuanced account of human symbolic behavior that would be universally understandable. On that score, I've obviously been a miserable failure.