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REFERENCES

Jacques Derrida, *Trace et archive, image et art : suivi de Hommage à Jacques Derrida par Daniel Bounoux et Bernard Stiegler*, Paris : INA éd., 2014, (Collège iconique)

Dominic McIver Lopes, *Comprendre les images : une théorie de la représentation iconique*, Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014, (Aesthetica)

W.J.T. Mitchell, *Que veulent les images ? Une critique de la culture visuelle*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel ; Paris : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2014, (Perceptions)

Interpositions : montage d'images et production de sens, Paris : Maison des sciences de l'homme : Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art, 2014, (Passages/Passagen). Sous la dir. d'Andreas Beyer, Angela Mengoni, Antonia von Schöning

La Persistance des images, Paris : Le Bal : Textuel : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2014, (Les Carnets du Bal). Sous la dir. de Guillaume Le Gall

- 1 In the 1990s, at more or less the same moment, William J. Thomas Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm announced and described the emergence of a new paradigm of the image, respectively championing the idea of a *Pictorial Turn* (1992) and an *Iconic Turn* (1994).¹ Joined by others, these theoreticians call for a renewed science of the image and a more intent attention to the intrinsic effectiveness of the image. Just when this epistemological turn was stirring particularly lively critical discussions, it constructed itself in the wake of a method introduced into art theory: iconology. This method of interpretation, revitalized by Aby Warburg (1866-1929), and then by Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), during the first half of the 20th century, has featured since the 1990s as both a model and a foil. Generally speaking, the most significant criticisms expressed by the champions of the "iconic turn" with regard to the iconological method are organized around the problem

of logocentrism, understood as an exclusive focus on the contents of meaning. But is the image defined, as a last resort, on the mode of the *symbol*, that is to say as a material entity conveying meaning? Do the elements of signification legitimately hold sway over the form of expression? Running counter to the excessive semiotization of our ways of seeing the image, an important current of the theory of the visible—echoing the “turn” announced by Mitchell and Boehm—calls for the toppling of the predominance of the linguistic model. At the outset, the major problematic challenge has been imposed as follows: how are we to construct a theory of the image which is no longer based on just the linguistic paradigm, but which takes into account the logic peculiar to the visual? This said, not only does it seem simplistic to limit iconology just to the linguistic comprehension of the image, but it would be fruitless to want to replace the predominance of language by the domination of the “specifically visual” (or of the “pictorial”), without trying to understand the complex nature of the image, extended precisely somewhere between signification and materiality.² Many present-day theoreticians are thus drawing radically new perspectives for iconology, and in this way contributing to its critical updating. At long last the discussion seems to be becoming more flexible, shedding certain rigidities.

- 2 Well removed from the usual stereotypes, the investigation undertaken by Dominic McIver Lopes in 1966 in the field of iconic representation will surprise readers who are unaccustomed to Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Trained in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of the mind, the author puts forward a particularly stimulating summary of the liveliest discussions around the iconic experience, taking up a position with regard to the theoretical proposals of Nelson Goodman, Richard Wollheim, and Gareth Evans. But if the conceptual vocabulary of *Comprendre les images* does not always sound familiar, the issues imagined can easily be associated with the above-mentioned discussions on the relation between iconological investigation and linguistic paradigm: “It is natural to be reluctant to use language as a model for thinking about depiction. The possible comparisons between images and language are in blatant contradiction with our intuitions about what differentiates them. But nobody is claiming that images are of exactly the same order as linguistic statements. [...] The fact that images are comparable to language in certain decisive aspects should not necessarily run counter to the impression that we may have, furthermore, about what differentiates them”.³ Without getting into the extremes of pure logocentrism and sterile perceptualism, Lopes describes images as “vehicles of information storage, manipulation and communication”, making it possible, like language, to “represent the world and the thoughts that we have about it”;⁴ but he abstains from likening them too swiftly to linguistic descriptions, because the symbolic structure revealed at the heart of iconic representation also incorporates perceptive elements.⁵ As Lopes hypothesizes at several junctures: “If images are symbols, it is possible that they are symbols whose reference depends on perceptive aptitudes”.⁶ How then are images to be interpreted? Inspired by Gareth Evans, Lopes backs the theory of the recognition of aspect, whereby the distinctive mark of images has to do with their capacity for selectivity. Images are selective by virtue of their explicit refusal to become engaged on certain points. An image must in fact choose to represent such and such a detail of its subject, leaving other details, perforce, aside: with “all the engagements and non-engagements of an image” representing what Lopes calls “the aspect which it presents of its subject”.⁷ Such a theory actually leads to revisiting in different ways the question of interpretation, and it informs current iconology on many points. It helps to

explain the progressive acquisition of skills (associated with the capacity to recognize) *in contact* with images, and also to show how their frequentation lastingly establishes these skills: “Images are visual prostheses; they extend the informational system by gathering, storing, and transmitting visual data about their subjects, and about ways which depend on our ability to identify things based on their appearance, and which thus increase this capacity”.⁸

- 3 Now available in French, W. J. T. Mitchell’s major work, *Que veulent les images ? Une critique de la culture visuelle* (2005), is the third part of a programme focusing on the comprehension of the visual. *Iconology* (1986) and *Picture Theory* (1994) had enabled him to “resurrect an old disciplinary project” (that of iconology), and deal anew with the question of the meaning and interpretation of features of visual culture.⁹ In this third book, Mitchell seems to have deliberately abandoned “the terrain covered by semiotics”, in order to devote himself more directly to the actual *life* of images, and to the “vitalist force” which prompts us to consider these latter as living organisms, capable of influencing us, seducing us, and galvanizing us. In so doing, he associates himself with many present-day theoreticians working on examining the elements which go beyond or transcend the strictly significative (communicative) function of the image, while at the same time not neglecting it. Above all, in an original and dialectic way, he envisages the fear stirred up by images, and all its forms: a fear of being hypnotized by them in spite of any critical sense, a fear of letting ourselves be persuaded by their magic powers, etc. According to Mitchell, this set of issues is the real object of visual theory. But it is as well to envisage, in tandem, the iconoclastic reactions today observed among certain intellectuals, who, rather than “examining idols” as Friedrich Nietzsche recommended, encourage us to thoroughly denigrate them, and stigmatize those they consider as candidates for idolatry: “the masses, the primitive, the child, the illiterate, the non-critical mind, the being devoid of logic, the Other”.¹⁰ This kind of anthropological undertaking might distance us from the pioneers of iconology, and yet Aby Warburg had made *superstition* the very core of his endeavour displaying in works of art the figurative arrangements supposed to respond to anxiety, without ever conquering it or resolving it once and for all. In his writings, the artistic image appears as a complex anthropological tool, stretched somewhere between belief and reason. Without making explicit reference to this, Mitchell reintroduces his predecessor’s intuition into this terrain. According to his analysis, modern scepticism has not done away with magical behaviour towards images: “Because old superstitions have to do with images—according to which they are endowed with their “own lives”, urging us to accomplish irrational acts, containing potentially destructive forces, seducing us and corrupting us—they are no less powerful today than yesterday”.¹¹ Taking things further, the deep-seated structure of the radical iconoclasm to which images are subject in certain intellectual circles, would, according to Mitchell, also borrow from albeit decried forms of belief. This is a dialectical argument if ever there was, and it is particularly persuasive here. The current state of the themes broached and the tools making it possible to think about the relation of the image to the “Other”, to ideology, and to violence, contribute, moreover, to the book’s evident interest.
- 4 Mitchell’s proposition—concentrating on the life of images—leads him to envisage matters of *orientation* akin to those already used by Warburg and Panofsky: the goal of mapping the movements of image circulation, identifying their origin and their development, is actually one of the central concerns of iconology. In wondering how the

image “circulates, spreads and gives rise to new occurrences”, the contributors to the collective work edited by Guillaume Le Gall, *La Persistance des images*, are involved in a similar quest for the “mechanics of images”.¹² The essays brought together in this volume open up the way to a broader reflection about the effectiveness of images, conducted through the lens of specific studies. Conceived by Aby Warburg in the last years of his life, (the 1920s), the *Atlas Mnemosyne* was also intended to list the movements of image circulation. It thereby responded to a thoroughly predominant problem: how to *situate oneself* in the very vast history of artistic images? How to handle and organize this material? With its large panels of stretched canvas on which the reproductions of works were arranged, the *Atlas Mnemosyne* made it possible to experience the mainsprings of the visual and highlight the challenges of artistic creation for Western civilization. In the wake of such an iconological project, and in particular through the strength of Georges Didi-Huberman’s analyses,¹³ the editing of images henceforth constitutes a model for the production of knowledge—in particular in the field of art history. The reflections in the volume *Interpositions: montage d’images et production de sens* ideally display the significance of this model. Following the introductory proposal written by Andreas Beyer, the conference from which the proceedings are taken made it possible to single out some of the especially productive effects of editing: “During those three days, based on a twofold gesture of dislocation and recomposition within a new constellation, it was demonstrated that the procedures of editing give rise to confrontations, reciprocal shocks, conflicts and echoes between visual units, causing a new sense to spring from these latter. So it is that, far from being limited to an inert role of separation, the spaces between the images become the places of an interposition capable of activating the visual production of meaning”.¹⁴ The assemblage of pre-selected (or dismantled) eclectic elements in fact helps to make new associations possible, and encourages other forms of knowledge as well as novel representations. The critical potential of editing is today becoming widely acquired.

- 5 The present-day theory of the image comes in the wake of iconology, by virtue of the explicit re-use of several problematic themes which are central to this method, and permit its critical redevelopment: 1. Reflection about iconic representation, about its relation to language and its specific logic; 2. The investigation into the dynamics of the image (circulation, persistence and development); 3. The study of the effectiveness of images and the production of many different kinds of knowledge under the effect of editing operations. These three areas of present-day research about the image will certainly profit from being made further use of in future works.

NOTES

1. Cf. on this jointly announced turn : Gottfried Boehm, “Iconic Turn, Ein Brief”; W. J. T. Mitchell, “Pictorial Turn. Eine Antwort”, in *Bilderfragen : die Bildwissenschaften im Aufbruch* (edited by Hans Belting), Munich : Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2007, p. 27-47.

2. On the image/language relations, and to imagine a viewpoint slightly offset with the theory of the contemporary image, one might read to advantage the philosophical developments transcribed in: Derrida, Jacques. *Trace et archive, image et art* followed by *Hommage à Jacques Derrida* par Daniel Bounoux et Bernard Stiegler, Paris : INA, 2014, (Collège iconique). The idea that there is in the image (filmic in this case) a “reserve” of words that the film does not exhaust seems especially stimulating to me.
3. McIver Lopes, Dominic. *Comprendre les images : une théorie de la représentation iconique*, Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014, (Aesthetica), p. 77-78
4. *Ibid.*, p. 28
5. As is shown by Jérôme Dokic in his very stimulating article, “the interpretation of the image is very considerably restricted by what we are capable of perceiving in the image”, *La Persistance des images*, Paris : Le Bal : Textuel : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2014, (Les Carnets du Bal), p. 37.
6. McIver Lopes, Dominic. *Comprendre les images*, *Op. cit.*, p. 134
7. *Ibid.*, p. 145
8. *Ibid.*, p. 173-174
9. Mitchell, W.J.T. *Que veulent les images ? Une critique de la culture visuelle*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2014, (Perceptions), p. 28
10. *Ibid.*, p. 29
11. *Ibid.*, p. 39
12. *La Persistance des images*, *Op. cit.*, p. 22-23
13. “When art is on the contrary conceived, as with Aby Warburg or Walter Benjamin, from the angle of *profanation*, impurity, social hybridizing and historical tragedy, then the atlases which offer its visual presentation appear in the explosion and division of a domain that is always contaminated, always liable to ambivalences and symptoms” (*Interpositions : montage d'images et production de sens* (edited by Andreas Beyer, Angela Mengoni and Antonia von Schöning), Paris : Maison des sciences de l’homme : Centre allemand d’histoire de l’art, 2014, (Passages/Passagen), p. 106.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 11