CHAPTER THREE

COMING TO TERMS WITH IMAGES: VISUAL STUDIES AND BEYOND

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1. Visual studies as a *place* for the theory of images

At the very beginning of the first chapter of his seminal book *Iconology,* W.J.T. Mitchell asserts that "there have been times when the question 'what is an image' was a matter of some urgency", referring to the different levels of importance that images had in different historical periods as well as pointing to the unequal kind of power that images exerted over people (Mitchell, 1986: 7). What we came to understand from all the subsequent Mitchell books, especially from *Picture Theory* (1994) and *What do Pictures Want* (2005), is that the question of image/power is today more "urgent" than ever before and "even if the stakes seem a bit lower in asking what images are today, it is not because they have lost their power over us, and certainly not because their nature is now clearly understood" (Mitchell, 1986). It is very well known that the pictorial turn represents for him not the final stage of spectacularized societies, where everything has come to be measured as in favor of or against images (as was the case during the iconoclasm in eighth– and ninth–century Byzantium), but more a kind of uncertainty as to how pictures should be properly understood today and, basically, what is to be done with them. That is why he did not assign to images a newly established paradigmatic status according to which all contemporary phenomena would then normally have to be assessed, but gave them an air of uncertainty and put them somewhere between what Thomas Kuhn called "paradigm" and "anomaly" (Mitchell, 1994: 13), similarly to Boehm. But, it is not just the discourse on images as such that is "somewhere between", in need of a structurally and ontologically more plausible theory; such an uncertainty applies also to visual studies as a new discipline insofar as it is more and more apparently going to refute positions of critical theory and situate itself "somewhere between" ideo-

logical norms and the politics of identity.

What is this "in between" position, why would we need a special kind of theory for whatever happens in this interim area and how can the changes in urgency and the constantly shifting notions of the image be accounted for in the form of a discipline? Here we are dealing with two different but equally fundamental topics: images as objects of cultural production and visual studies as a *place* for the theory of images. In spite of drawing our attention to the predominance of images and the reborn interest in them shown by "non–visual" disciplines like philosophy, sociology and narratology, the pictorial turn has brought to the fore the fact that we basically do not have a clear account of what an image is to begin with and that disciplines historically bound to images, like art history and semiotics, either relate only to what is believed to be a specific kind of images or deal with them necessarily as signs and representations. The indisputable cultural importance of the mentioned disciplines notwithstanding, the term "art" has proven to be too narrow a denominator for art history to retain its status as the master of visual disciplines in contemporary times, while the semiotic concept of "representation" is of very problematic theoretical value when it comes to, for instance, images that are signs of "nothing" in virtual reality.

We must keep in mind that none of the disciplines is aware of its own "shortcomings" or perceives them as an obstacle to maintaining theoretical rigor. Art history, with its fully developed tools of formal analysis and consistent meta–language, is perfectly capable of dealing with both Caravaggio's *Deposition of Saint Paul* and an advertisement for Versace's new line of women's shoes. Of course, having adequate tools to deal with particular phenomena most likely leads to an increased sensitivity to discrimination between the particularities of their purposes, qualities and ontologies. It is a common thing within the humanities to believe that whenever a certain set of images fails to fit into existent disciplinary frames, it is because the social, political and cultural constructedness of the visual field has played a decisive role in this game of power.

While it is impossible to deny this ideological framing, in the following pages I will argue that the recent interventions and theses related to visual studies proposed by Nicholas Davey, Barry Sandywell, Antonio Somaini, Hans Bredekamp, Sebastian Egenhofer, Klaus Sachs–Hombach, Emmanuel Alloa and several others either come from unconvincing principles for which visual studies allegedly stand (ideological framing included) or recognize its strengths exactly in what is believed to be a lack of firm ideological and disciplinary demarcation. Proposed by authors belonging to Anglophone, German and Italian tradition and exposed through

a variety of argumentative and theoretical claims, these positions show, on the one end of the spectrum, the still troubled relationship of visual studies to art history and, on the other, belief in the transformative power of its shifting methodologies. In the already established field of visual studies, a discussion on the very ontological foundation of the discipline is still open. While there is an unequivocal agreement that it should deal with visual phenomena, primarily representations, there is still an air of indetermination as to the scope it should have and the methodology to be adopted. At the same time, for some researchers, the more than two-decade–long dispute visual studies had with art history and the objects (artworks) that the older discipline traditionally claimed is still a fundamental topic. This article will analyze a few of the most recent interventions related to the new discipline, which might reveal old controversies in a new light or open the way for a "new visual studies" altogether.

2. What art has to do with visual studies: an *ontogenetic fallacy*?

A notable difference among various kinds of visual object that consists not so much of how they look as of what they mean to us, Nicholas Davey explains as "ontogenetically" motivated: according to this thesis, the artistic image would be a paradigmatic image, while everything visual outside the realm of art qualifies as a non–paradigmatic image – an anomaly to the norms of value and distinction. Nicholas Davey recently presented the concept of the "ontogeny of the visual", which should, in his opinion, be fundamentally accounted for in the "turn to the ontological which causes problems for the methodological inclusivity of visual studies" (Davey, 2013: 132). In this way he joins the debate on the archetypal question *what should visual studies do?* and thus enters into a more general discussion on the sense people make of particular kinds of image, a discussion that will later in our survey prove to be symptomatic of both the value of images and the disciplinary status of visual studies at large.

While acknowledging visual studies for its "clear strength" in the demystification of artwork, looking for dialogical interactions with it and striving towards "a wider consensus of judgmental norms", Davey claims that it "has neglected a fundamental distinction between the ontogenetic characteristics of the designed object and the artwork", which is a failure that "not only threatens the variety of study within visual culture but also disrupts the possibility of radical critique within aesthetic experience" (132). On the other hand, "hermeneutical aesthetics is of strategic importance for bringing to light what is at stake within the study of visual cul-

ture" because "hermeneutical aesthetics insists on making an important ontological distinction within visual discourse between a designed object and an artwork" (132–133). Davey thinks that visual studies as a discipline overrides this essential distinction, which eventually and regrettably leads to a dissolution of the very concept of art. In his assessment, the case has been made for two types of object: *artistic* objects and *designed* objects, where the latter seem to have been deployed metonymically to represent all non–artistic visual artifacts. Davey contends that although many visual artifacts of different historical and cultural provenances may be perceived, described and judged in aesthetic terms, it will do no justice to any of them if we do not make a fundamental ontological distinction between art and non–art, that is, we always have to take into consideration, prior to any aesthetic judgment, the *purpose* for which something has been made and not primarily the social *interactions* of (artistic and non–artistic) signs.

Davey makes a very good point, drawing on Nietzsche and Heidegger, who both believed that the function of art was to withhold something from the viewer in a fashion not dissimilar to that of *camouflage,* where producing convincing effects of make–believe leads to a purposeful deception of a higher degree: in military practice this higher degree consists of the successful deception of an enemy on the battlefield, while in art this deception is to be found in the concealed "message" of the artwork (137–138). There is a huge difference, though, between ordinary and artistic camouflage inasmuch as, according to Davey, "the visual logic of the hidden code must be consistent with that of the surface code or else the implicit meaning cannot announce itself from within the explicit meaning" (138). In other words, the actual visual code of a painting connects explicit and implicit meanings, serving as a sort of token for the meaning of the artwork as a whole. The code is consistent with the artwork: if the visual code changes, the whole artwork changes with it. So, the ontological position of any artistic object is to *be* and to *remain* an artistic object, because its purpose not to serve any other purpose than that of an artistic object is undisputable.

As far as visual studies is concerned, the ontogenesis of the work of art as an object created for different purposes than, let us say, a photograph for a book of culinary recipes, is undeniable. I cannot think of any scholar of visual studies who would contradict this perfectly plausible argument, which basically only confirms the ontological distinction between art objects and non–art objects as a historically and functionally inherited distinction of value and status. The problem that visual studies is particularly focused on is what happens when artifacts at some point enter into a different kind of existence: for example, when culinary recipes become im-

portant formal and structural elements in an artistic performance, or inversely, when pictures like *Mona Lisa* or Warhol's silk prints enter into the vernacular context of global visual culture, when the use of a once ontogenetically pure artifact gets "out of control". At this point an art historian loses his or her priority of overseeing the aesthetic value of a painting, because the time and space of social interactions have attached to it a different sort of value altogether. This does not mean that the ontogenetic code of the artwork has been lost, just that several of its "genes" (to make an appropriate metaphor) have been passed on to different species of objects. The role of art history or hermeneutical aesthetics may be to either create sub-disciplinary discourses capable of dealing with genetically impure objects—as was much earlier envisioned by Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich—or to create a new image theory, regardless of its name, that would deal critically with semiotically or commercially inherited meanings and offer a counterposition to dichotomous (art/non–art) systems of value.[1]

Mentioning the role of art history in a world dominated by non–artistic images, W.J.T. Mitchel says that

> if a pictorial turn is indeed occurring in the human sciences, art history could very well find its theoretical marginality transformed into a position of intellectual centrality, in the form of a challenge to offer an account of its principal theoretical object—visual representation—that will be usable by other disciplines in the human sciences. Tending to the masterpieces of Western painting will clearly not be enough (Mitchell, 1994: 15).

Art history has lost its exclusivity over the interpretation of paintings

[1] It is interesting to note that Keith Moxey attributes to Erwin Panofsky a different role in the development of the contemporary study of visual culture than that attributed to him by Antonio Somaini (2006) or Horst Bredekamp (2003), as we shall see a little later. The paradigm shift, according to Moxey, can be discerned much later, with art historians like Georges Didi–Huberman: "Whereas Panofsky and Baxandall set the work against, or into, the context in which it was produced—approaching the object of analysis as if it were inert and in need of 'explanation' through reference to circumstance that are more stable and less opaque—Didi–Huberman regards the work as an active principle, one capable of generating its own significance" (Moxey, 2008: 135). To this end, Moxey quotes Didi–Huberman, from a passage where the French philosopher clearly takes on what we may call "visual studies attitude": "One must not claim that there are historical objects relevant to this or that duration: one must understand that in each historical object, all times encounter one another, collide, or base themselves plastically on one another, bifurcate, or even become entangled with one another" (Didi–Huberman, 2003: 131).

and sculptures because, during the second half of the twentieth century, artworks started to become part of vernacular culture—of the domain for which they were not intended. This happened not as a consequence of the problematic methodologies of visual studies or any other established or emergent theory, but because art history dealt with historically important objects that popular culture could not or would not do without. Even if Davey did not come to the conclusion that it was not for visual studies to undermine the ontogenetic specificity of artistic objects,[2] I think his insight that artwork needs to speak hermeneutically for itself while addressing the fact that the spectator deserves attention. I also find interesting his admonition that visual studies may fall victim to its unconstrained faith in the power of subjectivity. He writes:

> In the case of the artwork, the spectator is subject to its address. In contrast, the designed object if treated as a sign or symptom of visual culture is subject to the methodological regime of the spectator. The question then arises as to how critical of reflexive methodology visual studies can be? (Davey: 146).

[2] The concept of ontogenetic difference between artistic objects and non–artistic objects comes eventually down to the most elementary and the most difficult question, "impossible" to answer: *what is art?* An even more complex question is *what is contemporary art?* Moreover, how do we make aesthetical distinctions between different types of object, not just inside and outside the realm of art, but between various objects that unequivocally qualify to carry that label? The criterion of "intended purpose" that Nicholas Davey proposes is certainly universal and one of the most accepted distinctions between art and non–art objects. One improvised definition might then be: *If it is created to be art, then it is art. If it is created to be something else, then it can't be art*. But the institutional theory of art, with George Dickie, for example, as one of its most important representatives, puts the definition of art differently: "A work of art in a classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the art world). The second condition of the definition makes use of four variously interconnected notions: (1) acting on behalf of institution, (2) conferring of status, (3) being a candidate, and (4) appreciation." (Dickie, 2007: 431). Dickie's definition does not disqualify the criterion of the intended purpose, but shows that the status of art can be *institutionally* established just as it can be *individually* proclaimed. But it can be neither established nor denigrated *disciplinarily*. Disciplinary analysis of an object *as* artwork (in art history, feminist theory, postcolonial studies, visual studies, etc.) comes only *after* any particular object has already been accredited with the status of art object. Therefore, its status as art object cannot depend on how it is valued *within* or *by* any single discipline. In other words, the intended purpose—accepted as the classificatory term—cannot be undone.

For one thing, Davey has certainly helped practitioners of visual studies to reflect more on the ontological fundamentals of their own discipline, or at least to be acquainted with what never really seemed its most contestable ground. Let us deal with the possible consequences of his last assertion: it implies that it is a regular procedure in visual studies, firstly, to dismiss the difference between incommensurable types of visual artefacts ("the ontogenetic fallacy"); secondly, once that has been done, every visual object becomes part of (a presumably indiscriminating) visual culture and thirdly, having entered into the domain of visual culture, artifacts are being subjected to the free will of the spectator. Accepting the possibility that different scholars may and will have different understandings of what visual studies is or should be, my opinion is that this emerging discipline can account for the second stage of the mentioned process only, namely that every visual artifact is inevitably part of visual culture conceived in the broadest sense.

The problem with the third stage, the primacy of the spectator, is not that it is wrong as such, but that it does not apply to visual studies insofar as the new discipline specifically questions what Keith Moxey calls the "politics of identity" (2011: 121), positioning itself between the artifact and the scopic regime understood as ideological construct. It was the intention of poststructuralism to equate subjectivity, identity and gaze in order to empower specific groups within contemporary societies so that they could reject normative or prescriptive theories and behaviors. The pioneering work in different areas of thought performed in this respect by Michel Foucault, Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler and many others is all too familiar. The question is whether visual studies subscribes to the politics of identity and spectatorship as a presumption of the ideological, sexual or geographical determination of the given artifact or differs from critical theory inasmuch as it is very "visual studies" to reject such presumptions?

3. Can visual studies become a new *philosophy* of the visual?

Now we necessarily arrive at the point when some disciplinary, methodological and even ethical terms of visual studies should be explicated. Barry Sandywell, a British scholar of visual culture, has recently proposed the very extensive "Seven Theses on Visual Culture: Towards a Critical–Reflexive Paradigm for the New Visual Studies", in which he elaborates the possibility of some kind of philosophy of visual studies as an already seasoned discipline, which may seem to some to be a follow–up to the more "practical" insights offered by W.J.T. Mitchell in his "Showing Seeing: A

Critique of Visual Culture" (Sandywell, 2013; Mitchell, 2005). Even though they are not a direct answer to any of them, in Sandywell's theses we may find a reflection of many of the "fears and fallacies" that have accompanied visual studies from its institutional inception to the present day, as well as the philosophical pillars on which he thinks the new study of the visual should be based.[3] In doing so he very generally but recognizably draws upon the research and heritage of authors from numerous disciplines within the humanities, like Jonathan Crary, Martin Jay, Jacques Derrida, Norman Bryson, Walter Benjamin and Marshal McLuhan, covering altogether seven fundamental topics that "the new visual studies" should depart from: history, artifact, language, technopoiesis, social culture, politics and reflexive praxis. When he speaks of "the historicity thesis", he offers counter–contestant opinions in what seems to be an answer to the decades–old question of whether visual studies is "ahistorical" and how its supposed contention of "the radical presence" can be accounted for.[4] Because "each act of perception depends on prior contexts of mean-

[3] To understand fully the scope of what is apparently a very lengthy text, it may be helpful to note that Sandywell's theses appear as the final text in a book he himself coedited with Richard Heywood and in which Davey's article also appears. In this way we may read Sandywell's thesis not just as individual assertions on the fate and future of the discipline of visual studies, but also as a sort of a game inspired by sometimes more implicit and other times less implicit commentaries to the theses of other authors presented in the collection.

[4] The context of Sandywell's "historicity thesis" has certainly contributed to the vivid discussion of some time ago on whether art history and accompanying subdisciplines (like the traditional "discursive" variant of iconology) should be held responsible for what has been happening in the field of visual culture or the newly recognized field should have its own dedicated theory. Together with certain firm beliefs that insisted on visual studies remaining linked with art history in some respects (Hal Foster, in Smith, 2008a), it was almost unanimously claimed (Mitchell, 1994; Elkins, 2003a; Bal, 2003, among others) that leaving art history out of visual studies has led to a kind of visual essentialism—the primacy of the visual in itself—that has consequently drawn particular attention to many non–artistic objects and therefore dismissed the importance of (art) history. The consequences of such a move, though, remained open, with differing conclusions. Mieke Bal, in her text "Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture", says that "rather than describing concrete artefacts and their provenance, as art history would do, or describing whole cultures, as anthropology would, visual culture studies must critically analyse the junctures and articulations of visual culture and undermine their natural persistence" (Bal, 2003: 18–19). At the same time, she argues against "visual essentialism", or the tendency in visual culture studies "that either proclaims the visual 'difference'—read 'purity'—of images or expresses a desire to stake out the turf of visuality against media or semiotic systems" (Bal: 3).

ing, forms and rituals that are destined to be overtaken by future, hitherto unanticipated acts of meaning" (Sandywell: 650), the notion of any kind of unification of knowledge, let alone universalist epistemes based on the traditional demarcation between disciplines, is highly problematic. In spite of that, the modern history of humanities "reveals how every discipline that has tried to conceptually delimit vision—philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, sociology, poetics, phenomenology and so on—implicitly draws upon particular images of *imageing* and thereby imagination" (651). Sandywell argues, following very clearly the fundamental paths of the social–critical wing of visual studies (Mirzoeff, 2002, 2011a, 2011b; Sturken and Cartwright, 2006) that any critically engaged programme of visual studies must recognize the "plurality and heterogeneity of *practices of seeing*"; insofar as "individuals *see* with their senses, cultures 'envision' through their collective memories, metaphors and technical diagrams. Rather than naturalizing 'seeing' we should think in terms of changing 'scopic regimes'" (Sandywell: 651–2).

On the same path, but with the inclusion of the deeper historical timeline, is the standpoint of Antonio Somaini, who thinks that study of visual culture should not be confused with its imminent effects—spectacularization, simulation, panopticism, control society—even though their discernment and analytical elaboration are, not without reason, almost automatically attributed to the disciplinary field of visual studies (Somaini, 2006: 27). According to him, visual studies should be "a genealogical enterprise", because everything that enters into its analytical scope has a history of its own, the contemporary transformations and epistemological ruptures that inevitably occur in transhistorical enterprises notwithstanding. Pointing to a historical timeline on which contemporary visual culture can be defined as year zero, he traces the origins of the interdisciplinary study of the visual as far back as modern art history—to an era when discourses on the regimes of visibility had been established:

> A significant aspect of researches of the art historians between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, in fact, was dedicated to the project of a history of styles conceived as directly correlated to a history of perception and of vision in particular. The idea of the historical nature of perception and vision is constantly reformulated within the writings of Riegl, Wölfflin, Panofsky and Benjamin. By referring to the essay "The problem of form" (1893) by Hildebrand, both Riegl and Wölfflin tried to root their "art history without names" within the sphere of the conditions of possibility of experience and of seeing in particular. Such conditions of possibility, though, are not related to a Kantian, a–historical transcendental subject but are a domain of constant transformation (Somaini: 29).

In this respect, we must mention the assertion that Horst Bredekamp made about a commentary by Erwin Panofsky, from his essay, written in 1930, about the difference between the original and a facsimile reproduction. Panofsky claims that reproductions are not to be judged in terms of "right" and "wrong", but that we must accept the reality in which many more things—as reproductions—will become available. We must sharpen our capacities to make meaningful distinctions between them as the line that separates originals and reproductions becomes less and less visible (Bredekamp, 2003: 421). Andrea Pinotti uses a similar disciplinary "reshuffling" to see the role of Alois Riegl in the contemporary understanding of art. Pinotti says that Riegl was the first to conceive of artistic style not in terms of something naturally given or intended to look natural (as in realistic styles), but rather as an autonomous construction of reality in which the painterly image is just a tool that makes any construction possible (Pinotti, 2008: 2).

The small but prominent group of fathers of art history to which Somaini, Bredekamp and Pinotti make reference have transmitted their understanding of the unstable nature of the artwork to the present time, which has helped to shape not just visual studies or *Bildwissenschaft* in the narrow sense, but also what is known as *Kunstwissenschaft* in the German–speaking world and "the new art history" in the Anglophone tradition. All this testifies to the fact that visual objects change over time, not only by becoming naturally old but also by becoming "new" again through numerous contemporary revisitings, reassessments, analytical reconsiderations and clarifications.[5] This is the reason why the world presents to us as "always already been seen" and why, according to Sandywell, the new visual studies promises to become an exemplary site of both the radical social and hermeneutic turns, because "the systemic deconstruction of institutional formations as 'canonicity', 'genre', 'disciplinarity', 'normal

[5] In the study of images, numerous attempts have been made in order to better grasp their manifold nature. The "new art history", as one of the pioneering efforts made in that direction, provoked significant turbulence in the discipline of art history and proved to be a successful attempt to "modernize vision" within the established politics of artistic value. Although never officially proclaimed as a distinct sub-discipline within traditional art history, the inclusivity of its methods, which embraced the emergent understanding that all visual phenomena influence art to some extent, meant the new art history was far from not being recognized or meta–theoretically acknowledged. The best approach to its differences and specificities in comparison to traditional methods within the discipline is through individual authors' approaches, as in Baxandall (1972), Alpers (1983) or Moxey (1991, 1994, 2001 and 2013). Excellent attempts to conceptualize and delimit the field are to be found in Bal and Bryson (1991) and Harris (2001).

inquiry', 'methodic perspective' and the like now takes centre–stage as part of a radically reflective hermeneutics of cultural orderings" (Sandywell: 655).

The crucial point, then, of understanding what visual studies is and which epistemological direction it is going to take would be to try to answer the question of *on behalf of whom* this new discipline is speaking, or rather *who is speaking through it*: is it a spectator who is always, as Nicholas Davey contends, under the influence of various determinants that exist independently of the object of study and therefore make it impossible for him (the spectator) to grasp the artwork's address (Davey: 147)? Is it composed of social and cultural formations, that are historically unstable and that ask us to constantly shift from the Cartesian belief in the power of images and visibility at large to the contemporary fear of images and of their power to control and monitor us (Jay: 1993)? Or is it the image or artifact itself (whether "artistic" or "designed") that we should mainly account for whenever there is a dispute over meanings and interpretations? Concerning the last question, we should bear in mind that Mitchell's typology of images, from his *Iconology* (1984), as well as the concept of "metapictures" from *Picture Theory* (1994), were both attempts at paving the way for the new hermeneutics of seeing, where images alone would have the necessary abilities to not just address the spectator, but to "speak" for themselves. The position that visual studies has eventually taken is based on the assumption that images speak through themselves as well as emanating meaning through the spectator and the culture that he or she is immersed in. The project of visual studies aims at clarifying the radical impossibility of either subsuming the shifting notions of contemporary visual epistemologies in a single disciplinary frame or taking immutable sides in the discussion of how images generate meaning.

4. The concepts of images: natural consciousness and critical discourse

However, there is a much greater problem regarding the priorities and types of the questions to be answered: the disciplinary question comes only *after* the ontological question; not the one that would draw a distinction between "artistic" and "designed" objects, which (far from being irrelevant) seems not that complicated, but that of the nature of the image itself. Even though I argue throughout this text that the study of images and the notion of the image as a visual and cultural phenomenon are inextricably linked, for methodological reasons it is necessary to presume that the occurrence of a phenomenon precedes reflection on it. Drawing on

Mitchell's distinction between the meanings of the words *image* and *picture*, Sebastian Egenhofer states that a "picture *exists* or, rather, *persists* through time. The image, however, is always only given in the present of the beholder. It is the beholder's gaze that awakens the phenomenon in the existing material" which is the reason why images (in the widest sense) are ontologically settled in a kind of twofold "scandalous" and constantly shifting mode of being characterized by "nonsynchronicity" (Egenhofer, 2013: 190). This nonsynchronicity means that images can only be comprehended taking into account the historical and conceptual gap existing between the time of the construction of the singular image and the time of the perception of it. Since we are never able to grasp an image's "immediate present" and its "sensual evidence", this shifting character, this "incommensurability", is for Egenhofer the true nature of the image, definitely something more like a *happening* than "only" a being. Keith Moxey points to the same thing, stating that

> the experience of the image is distinct from the time that surrounds it. A work can stop us in our tracks, so to speak, and insist that we acknowledge a form of perception that differs from that of the context in which it appears. [the idea of] *Difference* thus attempts to capture the perceptual awareness that temporalities precede our presence and depend on it (Moxey, 2013: 5).

The faculty of images to produce meaning for us *now*, as a dialectical kind of knowledge created of both the terms of production and the terms of perception, speaks for their *heterochrony*. In the same way, their capacity to *always* produce new meanings over time speaks for their *historicality*. The most important consequence of both Egenhofer's and Moxey's insights is, in my opinion, threefold: firstly, that a possible understanding of images lies in the deconstruction of this paradoxical shifting ontology; secondly, that images cannot be defined as such, that is, as entities extrapolated from a complex entanglement of materiality, temporality and perception; thirdly, and probably most importantly for the future assignments of new visual studies, images are neither a reflection nor a product of any kind of "natural consciousness" or metaphysics. Moreover, Egenhofer contends that

> even if we allow ourselves to think of the image's relation to its world in the most naïve and crudest sense—as a similarity based, for example, on physico–physiological relations between surfaces of things and space, the human retina, and a painted surface—this is no way a guarantee of something like the *truth* of the image" (Egenhofer: 188).

We may therefore understand his thesis not just as a critique of natural consciousness, which is more often than not attributed to images on the basis of their resemblance to natural objects or phenomena, but also as a critique of the current sciences of images, especially of methodologies based on semiotics and phenomenology.

In what follows I would like to extend the argument and point to some other promising efforts that have recently been made (the differing theoretical widths of the single concept notwithstanding) in order to complement the traditional disciplinary structuring of images as sometimes natural and at other times consensual signs of visible phenomena, or, if we prefer, as phenomenology and semiotics. In this respect, Neal Curtis observed that despite the advances made in visual studies and in the more traditional area occupied by aesthetics, in both academic and popular discourse, images are still valued as a resemblance or copy of something that preceded them, something material that, by the sheer virtue of temporal priority, gains an aura of authenticity insofar as the realm of images remains a world of appearances of the second order, of copies that lack the substance of the original thing or phenomenon (Curtis, 2011: 1090). This is probably true not just in the Platonic sense of images as simulacra of reality, but in the paradoxically opposite way as well: as has been shown by Oliver Grau, in virtual reality we have to deal with images that are representations of nothing, even if we may sense in them representational qualities. The effect that they have over us in terms of both their production as technically generated appearances *and* of the immersive quality of the experiences they create is of a completely different order (Grau, 2003). Drawing on Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) and Jacques Lacan (1977a and b), Curtis develops a triadic distinction of sorts of images, which are not to be confused with typology of any kind, but are more like conditions of the creation, production and consumption/circulation of visual things. Presented with (admittedly Lacanian) linear logic, images, for Curtis, may be subsumed under the notions of *imagination*, *imaginary* and *imagery*. Ontological questions like those posed in a very diverse manner, as we have seen, by Nicholas Davey or Sebastian Egenhofer, for instance, are left aside in favor of a concept that should engage with a somewhat different set of constituent elements in pictures.

What are these elements and in what way may they show us an exit from paradigmatic discourses? For one thing, all of the three instances are etymologically anchored in both material practice and phenomenal experience, connected to important moments in which images play a decisive role in life, an idea similar to the causal structuring of the visual sense of the world we saw earlier, in Sandywell's thesis, according to which every

human science conceptualizes its own "images of *imaging* and thereby imagination".

For Curtis, the first realm, *imagination,* refers to the single moment of creation that differentiates all produced artifacts and enables them to be discernible. This instance both refers to the moment of the singularity of artistic revelation (*instituting* or *radical imagination*) and to the industrial production of pre–established images (*instituted imagination*) (Curtis: 1097; Castoriadis, 1987). The second realm, the *imaginary,* is the space in which imagination acquires a different meaning, leading to a different kind of image altogether:

> In some respects the antithesis of the instituting imagination, the imaginary is the realm in which a particular social–historical or political form is maintained. If the imagination is the realm of radical creativity in which new images are continually being brought forth, the imaginary is the realm in which they are ideologically reproduced" (Curtis: 1101).

Finally, *imagery,* for Curtis, in spite of being linguistically no more than a collective noun for images, is a metonymically charged word that stands for the social interactions and political economy of the visual field. The realm of *imagery* is the "place" where *imagination* as "radical creation", under the influence of the social interactions of the *imaginary,* usually gets subdued and transformed into fetishes, brands and "symbolically exchangeable" goods. It is the realm of confrontations, displacements and ideological struggles. However, Curtis asserts that the realm of *imagery* (that is, impure images contaminated by the political economy of the sign) is "integral to both the dissemination of a specific ideology and the instigation of a new distribution that is potentially transformative if not revolutionary" (1096). While it goes without saying that (almost) every image traverses all three realms in a linear fashion, necessarily acquiring different meanings and statuses along the way from "imagination" to "imagery", it is highly disputable whether images could ever acquire a "revolutionary" potential, given the fact that this traversing is always irreversible and exclusively one–directional, meaning that, for instance, an artifact created as a fruit of "radical imagination" may, in the realm of imagery, easily find itself transformed into a status different from that of radical imagination (such as newly acquired political significance, iconic meaning, a better price...) and, once the invisible line that separates individual realms is crossed, the transformed artifact can never lose this new status and restore itself to an unadulterated state of either pure imagination or pure image. If we would like to retain the possibility of the revolutionary power of images, then their cultural meaning in the last stage of "imagery" must not fol-

low the path established by the linear logic from creation to consumption, as consumption is a feature of "symbolic exchange", in which the difference between objects (whether "artistic" or "designed") is replaced with their semiotic equivalents (Baudrillard, 1976). Signs cannot exit the semiotic order and regain the status they had prior to meaning generating processes.

This linear development of the qualities of images is clearly absent from the "Seven Theses on Visual Culture" proposed by Barry Sandywell, making their fragmentary structure a more nuanced theoretical tool. However, what is shared by Curtis and Sandywell is their insistence on the unstable character of the artifact, its susceptibility to various determinants of culture, geography and time. In both approaches, images and artifacts are explained more like receptors of different influences than emanators of specific intrinsic qualities, thus sharing a firm anti–essentialist stance. The problem, then, is how we conceptualize and make use of these mechanisms of transaction, which are capable of transforming any kind of visual communication into politically charged utterances understandable to all. One of the functions of visual studies should be precisely to uncover "conditions of visibility [that] are not themselves visible" (Sandywell: 656), because knowing how cultural formations are made, how they transform vision into visuality, how one has to deal with the everyday transactions of images/artifacts, are all symptoms of the economy of pleasure and should be dealt with in political as much as in artistic or aesthetic terms. Sandywell shows a great deal of faith in visual studies' ability to perform precisely this kind of social anamnesis, where visual artifacts should take the role of the main antagonist and allow us to know not primarily what and how we see—as this has already been performed by other disciplines, such as psychoanalytic theory, semiotics or cognitive sciences—but how we *come to see* and *not to see* the realities of everyday life. The crucial problem for visual studies, then, as I stated earlier, is the following: should it let images and artifacts speak for themselves, or should it speak on behalf of them? Do the images *alone*, or does the *study* of images, have the potentiality for the new visual rhetoric that Sandywell envisions as one of the key transdisciplinary domains within the new visual studies?

5. Images and the power of critique: intensity instead of essence

In the context of the previous discussions to which I have made reference in this text regarding historicity, (anti)essentialism, relation to other disciplines, the role of vernacular visuality and the like, once more the paradox-

ical status of images and artifacts in visual studies comes to the fore: if this discipline, as I argue, claims to have retained what Nicholas Davey calls the "ontogeny of the visual", and if images flow in a linear fashion from the moment of creation to the moment of their immersion into the socially determined realm of "imagery", where they become open to every possible interpretation—as Curtis contends—how exactly can "what has been made socially and historically be 'unmade' through critique and social transformation", as Sandywell would like it to? Is it not perhaps the case that the process of the unmaking of the meanings and statuses of the image or artifact can only be carried out by dismissing the ontogenetic difference between art and non–art, a difference visual studies should subscribe to unless it wants to be accused of the "ontogenetic fallacy"? The paradox is contained in the following: on the one hand visual studies contends that images should freely cross disciplinary boundaries, that popular TV series and masterpieces of art should be explained in the same context of contemporary visuality (Elkins, 2003a) and that meaning is not intrinsic to any visual artifact, and hence cannot be explained in terms of "natural consciousness", as Egenhofer has demonstrated. But at the same time, it is not the artifact itself that can perform this multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary critique, hidden within the contingent power of images that visual studies wishes to awake.

The meanings of images *could* maybe be undone, reversed, reformulated or situated in a completely different location within the fabric of social interactions, but the operations required to activate these mechanisms cannot come from *within* images themselves, as it is not they that are able to start the operation of reformulation: it is the power of *critique* of images that ignites the power of images. In my opinion, this statement is not just the foundation of the new visual studies, but also of the pictorial turn and several theoretical approaches that have gained prominence over the last couple of decades. The only response to the admonition of Nicholas Davey about the methodology of visual studies and its general neglect of differences in the values and epistemological levels of images is to face visual studies with its own genealogies and the ideologies that have shaped over time what still seems to be contestable or at least unknown territory.

One of the recurring topics in relation to the self–legitimization and self–reflection of visual studies is the question *what is an image?* The paradoxical nature of the discipline contained in the mentioned twofold parallel process developed out of the attempt to demarcate the area of study on the one hand, together with an attempt to define the principal objects of study on the other. It was argued during the Stone Summer Seminar, organized by James Elkins in Chicago in 2008, that, in order to resolve this

parallelism, in which the discipline and its object may never come to terms with each other, continuing to deal with strictly separate sets of problems, it would be necessary, if not plausible, to answer the essential or essentialist questions about images, then at least to create a sort of taxonomical grid in which different kinds of image would strive to find their ontological ground.[6] One of the assessors of the seminar's discussions, Klaus Sachs–Hombach, himself an author of different attempts to classify images and an initiator of the extremely influential German wing of the general theory of images, commented that nobody would doubt that it is quite impossible to differentiate and classify images according to clear–cut metalevel categories and asked: why would we need such categories to begin with? Sachs–Hombach points to what I consider to be a very symptomatic issue in relation to the doubts existing around visual studies when he says that "within art history we have different theories of art, but we do not question the status of art history or art science". The reason why the lack of a consistent taxonomy of images is still considered to be a problem has to do with the fact that "image science is not yet established as a proper academic science" (Sachs–Hombach, 2011: 229). He then enlists "five tentative theses" that may help to institute a viable image science (*Bildwissenschaft*) and which I give here in a very digested form:

1) The absence of taxonomy within the theories of images reflects "political interests", which at the moment insist on visual studies remaining in the status of what Thomas Kuhn calls "preparadigmatic science";
2) While there cannot be an equation between "art" and "image", image science is still dominated by art history, which inevitably favors the

[6] One of the most recent attempts (one of enviable breadth) to tackle those issues was the seminar organized by James Elkins within the activities of the Stone Summer Institute in Chicago in 2008, titled interrogatively *What is an Image?* Over seven days, the most prominent scholars from the theory and history of art, philosophy and other related disciplines gathered to discuss the proverbial cluster of questions on the ontologies and modes of being of images. The subsequently published volume (*What is an Image*, edited by James Elkins, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011) gathered the standpoints of the participants (Mitchell, Boehm, Mondzain etc.) and was accompanied by various assessments from theorists who were not present at the seminar but later on made their commentaries on topics raised during discussion and also presented additional theoretical opinions on issues not always directly raised by the participants in the seminar. Incredibly heterogeneous in viewpoints and scope, but still extremely informative, the volume has proven to be a veridical reflection of the basic impossibility of answering the question of the ontology of images and, in my opinion, remains a good example of fluidity in theoretical conceptions *within* and *about* visual studies.

analysis and interpretation of only one specific type of image;

3) Image science does not have to give answers to all possible questions regarding images, but must possess "a conceptual determination" that would be capable of making distinctions between different sets of objects;
4) There have to be two general directions within image science: one to deal with historical issues, the other to deal with the functions, contexts and specific uses of images;
5) A general science of images should start from the features of images that are not "controversial" and therefore can be used as theoretical common ground. Two of these features may be *anti-essentialism* and *representationalism*.

Even though they are more elaborate in the original form, if still admittedly "sketchy", to use Sachs–Hombach's own word, there is a line of thought discernible in the five statements that points to the conception of image studies as a kind of anti–theory, one that is left to be shaped and paradoxically explained by what it studies instead of trying to conceptualize its object in the tradition of critical theory and the identity politics that flourished along its path. Few questions appear immediately: what theory would not want to at least address, if not fully explain, every phenomenon that it may find interesting? What epistemology would deliberately confine its universe to the restricted horizon of knowledge only because a more established discipline already claims some of the objects that a newer discipline wants to account for? What discipline would introduce itself without a disruptive redefinition of existing theoretical and terminological apparatuses? Or, are precisely these tactics of indetermination the only way to establish a new structure of knowledge with the image as a constitutive element, an element that every ideology, artistic style, fashion trend and visual artifact whatsoever claims as its own?

To deal properly with what appears to be the ontological ground of image science, we must recall the already foundational *in–disciplinarity* of visual studies that Thomas Mitchell opted for in his text "Interdiscplinarity and Visual Culture", where he stated that we must make a distinction between "top–down" interdisciplinarity, a "comparative, structural formation that aims to know the overarching system or conceptual totality within which all the disciplines are related" and the kind of "compulsory" interdisciplinarity characteristic of studies in gender, sexuality and ethnicity that is "improvised out of a new theoretical object and a political project with its attendant urgencies. They are knowledge projects, but they also have more or less explicit moral and political agendas" (Mitchell, 1995: 540–44). In his more recent, reassessed idea of it he stated that, no matter

which of the above one falls into,

> interdisciplinarity turns out to be as nonthreatening to the disciplines as it is to corporate capitalism. It just reinstalls the same old disciplinary values of rigorous normativity, productivity, originality, and explanatory power at a higher level. Fate turns into providential design, and the breakup of the disciplines is rectified by their convergence at a higher level – the emergent program, the conglomerate or consortium, or a humanities institute, a kind of hothouse for testing out new hybridizations of professional and disciplinary discourses (Mitchell, 2009: 1026).

In this light, the five tentative theses by Klaus Sachs–Hombach, which may have seemed like an unexpectedly defensive theoretical agenda of image science, clearly appear more like an admonition against the construction of yet another "knowledge project" with "political agendas" that is bound to be "as nonthreatening to the disciplines as it is to corporate capitalism". While it is not likely that any discipline within the humanities will ever pose a threat to corporate capitalism, whether it is methodologically nomadic or politically instrumentalized, it cannot be utterly irrelevant who is in control of the regimes of visibility, who creates the ontogenetic predisposition for various types of artifacts and who is, in turn, "only" capable of discerning the paradoxical inextricability of images as *objects* of study and the *study* of images as such. If image science concentrated on both, the *what* and the *how*, then object and study would likely become even more intertwined, as fundamental questions on the specific nature of images would continue to be posed together with efforts to demarcate the still contestable ground of visual studies. In an attempt to answer the question of *what visual studies want*, I think the most correct or the least "controversial" answer would be that it wants to *come to terms with images*. But in the circularity of ontological determination of both object and discipline, it is still unclear which one will follow the lead of the other. Maybe it is the fate of the discipline of visual studies to be constantly haunted by the essentialist dilemma, prompted by images and their particular "wishes".

On the other hand, following the proposal made by Gottfried Boehm, the whole essentialist idea that we believed existed around the secret of the image may fall apart should we come to an understanding that "iconicity is not a question of essence, but of degree" (Boehm, 2006: 248). By the same token, if visual studies is still burdened by the ontology of image, might we then envision image science too in terms of degree rather than essence? First and foremost, this would signify the definitive failure of disciplinary knowledge to provide an answer to what we believed were essential pillars

of every traditional visual theory. Moreover, "intensity" as a theoretical presumption has already begun appearing, in one form or another, in new art history, "new iconology" and visual studies: if, following Mitchell, we just take the pictorial turn as an example of different levels of "urgency" in our relation to images, the whole epistemology of turns (linguistic turn, pictorial turn, spatial turn etc.) can already be understood as a matter of intensity due to the fact that, for instance, images were always present, to some extent, within language and literary texts, in the form of metaphors or ekphrastic descriptions. Intensity, in this case, may be a consequence of two necessarily related phenomena that were among the fundamental "evidence" of the occurrence of the pictorial turn: first, of our increased *interest* in visual matters as a society as a whole (literature and cultural "texts" included), and second, of the more and more prominent actual *presence* of visually motivated concepts (Mitchell, 1986 and 1994; Derrida, 1978). This shifted sensitivity to visual impulses provoked by both changes in the material world—*images*, *imagination*, *imagery* (Curtis, 2011)—and our recently acquired susceptibility to the neuro–cognitivist construction of the visual field—mental images, matrixes, virtual realities—could also be explained precisely in terms of the reborn popularity of phenomenological reasoning.

Following the trail marked by Gottfried Boehm, Emmanuel Alloa is among those authors who have pointed to interesting developments in the field of visual/image studies, especially when he observes that the phenomenological tradition, from Husserl and Sartre to Marleau–Ponty, must be credited with the important insight that

> iconicity is not a quality of the object, but of a way of looking at the world which not only implies that any object can possibly become an image, but also—inversely— that every image we are looking at can only be seen as an image because it is rooted in a pervasive iconicity which serves as a matrix for potential images to come (Alloa, 2011: 149).

If this is true, he adds, then the classical distinction that ruled western ontology, the distinction between a difference in degree and a difference in essence, will effectively collapse. From the point of such a "phenomenological turn", this would not raise just the problem of philosophy losing its foundation and firm theoretical ground; the whole modern project of images, informed by functions, meanings and concepts of representation, would then lose its specificity, its "sovereign realm", a domain where the rules of iconicity alone once governed and where the idea of a universal

science of images once existed (Alloa: 150).[7] Valuing images by degree instead of essence, or, to put it differently, by how we *come to see* and *not to see* the realities of everyday life, instead of based on their ontological ground, would mean that neither "the new visual studies" proposed by Barry Sandywell nor "the new image science" sketched by Klaus Sachs–Hombach can have either firm disciplinary ground or a definite set of theoretical objects. The reason why it is more promising to look at *when* and *how* images take place instead of *what* they are, then, is because "images have no domain nor realm of their own, they are fundamentally pervasive and always essentially out of their place [...] so the fundamental 'atopia' of the image relation dismantles a logic of localization and opens up perspective of an iconic force field" (Alloa: 150–151).

Thinking in intensities would mean that, for example, images of art were not to be judged in terms of exclusive belonging to the aesthetic domain, just as images of non–art would not be excluded from participating in this domain. While in this case it might be more difficult to discern the demarcation lines on which the ontogenetical difference between *art* and *other* is based, thinking in intensities would certainly not erase them, just, maybe, pose questions of aesthetics more urgently in the discussion of art today. Visual studies would then easily find itself acquitted of the accusation of confusing objects with absolute value with those of relative or circumstantial value, but at the same time, it would find itself in a radically new situation in which it would have to engage with the intensities of the aesthetic value of images—the only thing it deliberately left to art history. What any contemporary science of images can do in this respect is to try to conceptualize intensities, levels, localizations, modalities and circumstances. Whether this might lead to a new kind of revolutionary interdisciplinarity of levels, statuses and topographies instead of disciplines and how that would affect our visual communication and understanding of images is yet to be imagined.

[7] Emanuel Alloa has subsequently elaborated more on his thesis on "intensities" in an article where this new theoretical urgency is explained in continuation of a discourse about three possible impulses inherent to the iconic turn: archeological, poetical and epistemic. In this way, he suggests that the need for the re–working of traditional concepts of the image has to be part of the parallel process of the re–working of image theories as well. According to Alloa, such a process may consist of the redefinition of iconology as "symptomatology", and analysis based on the disciplinary "extensity" of visual phenomena may become an exercise in "intensities", while firm indications and values may be better explained as contingencies, as in the relation of "indicative" and "subjunctive" (Alloa, 2012: 144–159).

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