



W. T. J. Mitchell: Pictures want to be kissed...

13.12.2004 Interview
Iconic Turn Lecture Series
Burda Academy of the Third Millennium

Bilder wollen geküsst werden, denn sie haben ihr eigenes Begehren. Der Erfinder des Pictorial Turn, W.T.J. Mitchell spricht in einem Interview über Lacan und die Frage, was Bilder wollen.

You say that pictures have their own lives and their own desires. You are actually writing a book about the lives and loves of images. Its title will be What do pictures want? What do you think pictures want?

Pictures want to be kissed. But then the question is: What is a kiss? A kiss is a gesture of affection, but it is also something which is beyond affection: the desire to incorporate. It is like something cannibalistic: the wish to incorporate something into you or the wish to be taken in by something. Eating and being eaten. I think one of the constitutive desires that make pictures what they are is that they are designed to be taken in.

But isn't it more or less our own desires that we project onto the images?

First ask yourself what the word to want means. I attribute two meanings to it: One is desire, the other one is lack. In English another way to translate the title of my book would be: What do pictures lack? What is missing from the pictures? I mean that kind of Lacanian* model of desire which is both, a desire for an object or an object choice, but also an object lack or loss. So you need to think the question in this double way. What does the picture require in order for you to understand it, to fulfill it, in order get it what it needs or in order to do the work it was designed to do? There are some very obvious examples of this, especially in religious art or in political art where they wear their heart on their sleeves, they declare their desires. The picture wants your body. It does not just want your consent or your attention. It wants you physically. Some pictures demand sacrifice.

Is this the case with all pictures or just with pictures that are powerful?

I think it is the case with all pictures. There are many different ways in which desire is manifested. Pictures are just as various as human beings. We need to find out what the field of relations is that is established between the beholder and the picture. You also need to know about the projections of the beholder because I certainly would never deny that what pictures want is at least part of what we imaginarily want or what we read them as wanting.

Pictures, you say, can develop their own lives once they have been released. Even when they are actually fakes like the non-authentic photograph of the Abu Ghraib torture that spread all over the world. At one point this picture changed from a picture of humiliation and torture into the opposite, into a picture of apotheosis as you said. Isn't this openness for interpretation a contradiction to its power?

No. It is quite common that pictures come to mean something quite different than what was intended by those who produced them. That is why I think the question to ask would be what the pictures want and not what the producer or artist wants. What the picture wants is to some extent independent and it appears in the interaction of the picture and the beholder. Artists sometimes express this relation when they are halfway through completing a work of art and they say that they get the feeling that something else is taking over. In the creative process in visual arts the artist is literally surrendering the autonomy. That is when you know that the creative process is actually working well.

If you imagine a new science of images, what questions should be at the core of such a science?

Basically it would have to be a psychological science. Then it has to be a gay science in the sense of Paul Feyerabend and his anarchistic theory of knowledge. Science is play. That does not mean that it is not serious. I don't think it can be like a positive science, an experimental science. We have a false picture of science as some kind of logical step-by-step demonstration. I think it has to be much more erratic. We need to have an interdisciplinary reflection on the very notion of science. We need conversations across disciplinary boundaries.

How would you define picture? Is it a sign?

I would rather explain the relation between the image and the picture. If you think of the sign as constitutive in de Saussure's model by the convention then the image might be even non-sign. The image violates the law of the sign. My thinking of the image is that it could be situated at the border of linguistics. The question I would rather want to answer is the relation between the image and the picture. You can hang the picture on the wall but you can not hang an image on the wall. An image is what comes off the picture.

Is it a mental phenomenon?

It is a percept with the illusion. It is what appears in the picture. I think it is very helpful for lots of thinking about the strange relation between images and their materiality to make this fundamental section. The picture is an image in a medium, or an image that is mixed into some picture of an object. Even if the object is shaped as an image or the object has reflected on an image. I think this is an extremely useful distinction.

*Jacques Lacan, französischer Psychoanalytiker, 1901-1981
(Das Interview mit W.T.J. Mitchell führte Annegret Gerleit im Rahmen der Iconic Turn Veranstaltung am 3.12.2004 in München.)

Access interview here: <http://www.iconicturn.de/article.php?story=20041207105458207>
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