

W.J.T. Mitchell  
Iconology - Image, Text, Ideology  
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## Introduction

### Iconology

This is a book about the things people say about images. It is not primarily concerned with specific pictures and the things people say about them, but rather with the way we talk about the *idea* of imagery, and all its related notions of picturing, imagining, perceiving, likening, and imitating. It is a book about images, therefore, that has no illustrations except for a few schematic diagrams, a book about vision written as if by a blind author for a blind reader. If it contains any insight into real, material pictures, it is the sort that might come to a blind listener, overhearing the conversation of sighted speakers talking about images. My hypothesis is that such a listener might see patterns in these conversations that would be invisible to the sighted participant.

The book reflects on answers to two questions that come up regularly in these conversations: What is an image? What is the difference between images and words? It attempts to understand the traditional answers to these questions in relation to the human interests that give them urgency in particular situations. Why does it matter what an image is? What is at stake in marking off or erasing the differences between images and words? What are the systems of power and canons of value—that is, the ideologies—that inform the answers to these questions and make them matters of polemical dispute rather than purely theoretical interest?

I call these “essays in iconology” to restore something of the literal sense of this word. This is a study of the “logos” (the words, ideas, discourse, or “science”) of “icons” (images, pictures, or likenesses). It is thus a “rhetoric of images” in a double sense: first, as a study of “what to say about images”—the tradition of “art writing” that goes back to Philostratus’s *Imagines*, and is centrally concerned with the description and interpretation of visual art; and second, as a study of “what images

say"—that is, the ways in which they seem to speak for themselves by persuading, telling stories, or describing. I also use the term "iconology" to connect this study to a long tradition of theoretical and historical reflection on the notion of imagery, a tradition which in its narrow sense probably begins with Renaissance handbooks of symbolic imagery (the first of which, Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1592, was not illustrated) and culminates in Erwin Panofsky's renowned "studies" in iconology. In a broader sense, the critical study of the icon begins with the idea that human beings are created "in the image and likeness" of their creator and culminates, rather less grandly, in the modern science of "image-making" in advertising and propaganda. I will be concerned here with matters that lie somewhere between the broad and the narrow sense of iconology, with the ways that images in the strict or literal sense (pictures, statues, works of art) are related to notions such as mental imagery, verbal or literary imagery, and the concept of man as an image and maker of images. If Panofsky separated iconology from iconography by differentiating the interpretation of the total symbolic horizon of an image from the cataloguing of particular symbolic motifs, my aim here is to further generalize the interpretive ambitions of iconology by asking it to consider the idea of the image as such.

If all this sounds impossibly comprehensive, it may help to note that this study has very definite limits, both in terms of the questions it raises and the body of texts it considers. Except for the first chapter this is primarily a series of close readings of a few important texts in the theory of imagery, and these readings revolve around two historical centers, one in the late eighteenth century (roughly, the era of the French Revolution and the rise of Romanticism), the other in the era of modern criticism. The aim of these readings is to show how the notion of imagery serves as a kind of relay connecting theories of art, language, and the mind with conceptions of social, cultural, and political value.

These connections will lead me down a number of byways that may seem at first glance quite unrelated: Wittgenstein's critique of the "picture theory" of meaning and modern theories of poetry and mental imagery; Nelson Goodman's critique of "iconicity" in relation to semiotics; Ernst Gombrich's argument for the naturalness of imagery, and "nature" as an ideological category; Lessing's attempt to pronounce the generic laws separating poetry from painting, and German cultural independence; Burke's aesthetics of the sublime and the beautiful in relation to his critique of the French Revolution; Marx's use of the

*camera obscura* and the fetish as figures for the psychological and material "idols" of capitalism. The convening of this seemingly disparate assembly of writers helps us to see a number of surprising conjunctions that are not generally noted by intellectual historians: the connection between the "rhetoric of iconoclasm" that pervades Western criticism and the controversy over mental imagery in modern psychology; the link between modern semiotic theory and Hume's laws of association; the polemic against the "fascist" implications of "spatial form" in modern aesthetics and the authority of Lessing's *Laocoon*; the *ut pictura poesis* controversy and the battle of sexes, nations, and religious traditions since the Enlightenment.

My only apology for these strange conjunctions of topics and texts is that they seemed to surface as I pursued the theoretical questions that inspired the study in the first place. Every theoretical answer to the questions, What is an image? How are images different from words? seemed inevitably to fall back into prior questions of value and interest that could only be answered in historical terms. The simplest way of stating this is to admit that a book which began with the intention of producing a valid *theory* of images became a book about the *fear* of images. "Iconology" turned out to be, not just the science of icons, but the political psychology of icons, the study of iconophobia, iconophilia, and the struggle between iconoclasm and idolatry. The movement of this book is thus from modern attempts to establish a true theory of imagery (Gombrich, Goodman, the early Wittgenstein) to the "classic" accounts of imagery these theories sought to replace. In the process, my theoretical ambitions have inevitably been chastened by my narrow limits as an intellectual historian. My hope is that this critical fall into the space between theory and history will open up a region for other scholars to explore, and that it will suggest something about the necessary limits of any attempt to provide a theoretical account of symbolic practices.

Since the subtitle of this book is "Image, Text, Ideology," it might be useful to say a word about these terms. "Imagery" is the main topic of the whole book, so I won't attempt to define it here, other than to say that I have tried not to rule out any widely used sense of the term. "Textuality," on the other hand, I have treated in a relatively cavalier and unsophisticated fashion: its role in this study is simply as a foil to imagery, a "significant other" or rival mode of representation. "Ideology," finally, I have used in a deliberately ambiguous sense, to play off what I take to be a kind of doubleness in its historical usage in Marxist criticism. The

orthodox view is that ideology is false consciousness, a system of symbolic representations that reflects an historical situation of domination by a particular class, and which serves to conceal the historical character and class bias of that system under guises of naturalness and universality. The other meaning of "ideology" tends to identify it simply with the structure of values and interests that informs any representation of reality; this meaning leaves untouched the question of whether the representation is false or oppressive. In this formulation, there would be no such thing as a position outside ideology; even the most "demystified" critic of ideology would have to admit that he occupies some position of value and interest, and that socialism (for instance) is as much an ideology as capitalism.

I would like to keep both these meanings of ideology in play in this book in order to preserve and perhaps to confront certain values that seem to be entailed by each of them. Simply to work with the neutral account of ideology as a system of beliefs and interests is to forsake the critical force of the notion, its ability to mobilize interpretation, the uncovering of that which is hidden. The notion of ideology as false consciousness involves a salutary skepticism about explicit motives, rationalizations, and claims for various sorts of naturalness, purity, or necessity. The drawback of this notion, on the other hand, is that it can lead the critic of ideology into the illusion that he has no illusions, that he stands outside history, or "for" history as the agent of its inexorable laws. My notion of ideology, then, will attempt to play both sides of this street, using the interpretive procedures of ideological analysis to reveal the blind spots in various texts, but also using those procedures to criticize the very concept of ideology itself. As it happens, the notion of ideology is rooted in the concept of imagery, and reenacts the ancient struggles of iconoclasm, idolatry, and fetishism. Those struggles will be the subject of the final chapter of this book.

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## Part One

# The Idea of Imagery

It is one thing . . . to apprehend directly an image as image, and another thing to shape ideas regarding the nature of images in general.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Imagination* (1962)

Any attempt to grasp "the idea of imagery" is fated to wrestle with the problem of recursive thinking, for the very idea of an "idea" is bound up with the notion of imagery. "Idea" comes from the Greek verb "to see," and is frequently linked with the notion of the "eidolon," the "visible image" that is fundamental to ancient optics and theories of perception. A sensible way to avoid the temptation of thinking about images in terms of images would be to replace the word "idea" in discussions of imagery with some other term like "concept" or "notion," or to stipulate at the outset that the term "idea" is to be understood as something quite different from imagery or pictures. This is the strategy of the Platonic tradition, which distinguishes the *eidōs* from the *eidolon* by conceiving of the former as a "suprasensible reality" of "forms, types, or species," the latter as a sensible impression that provides a mere "likeness" (*eikon*) or "semblance" (*phantasma*) of the *eidōs*.<sup>1</sup>

A less prudent, but I hope more imaginative and productive, way of dealing with this problem is to give in to the temptation to see ideas as images, and to allow the recursive problem full play. This involves attention to the way in which images (and ideas) double themselves: the way we depict the act of picturing, imagine the activity of imagination, figure the practice of figuration. These doubled pictures, images, and

1. See F. E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* (New York: New York University Press, 1967).



figures (what I will refer to—as rarely as possible—as “hypericons”) are strategies for both giving into and resisting the temptation to see ideas as images. Plato’s cave, Aristotle’s wax tablet, Locke’s dark room, Wittgenstein’s hieroglyphic are all examples of the “hypericon” that, along with the popular trope of the “mirror of nature,” provide our models for thinking about all sorts of images—mental, verbal, pictorial, and perceptual. They also provide, I will argue, the scenes in which our anxieties about images can express themselves in a variety of iconoclastic discourses, and in which we can rationalize the claim that, whatever images are, ideas are something else.

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## What Is an Image?

There have been times when the question “What is an image?” was a matter of some urgency. In eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium, for instance, your answer would have immediately identified you as a partisan in the struggle between emperor and patriarch, as a radical iconoclast seeking to purify the church of idolatry, or a conservative iconophile seeking to preserve traditional liturgical practices. The conflict over the nature and use of icons, on the surface a dispute about fine points in religious ritual and the meaning of symbols, was actually, as Jaroslav Pelikan points out, “a social movement in disguise” that “used doctrinal vocabulary to rationalize an essentially political conflict.”<sup>1</sup> In mid-seventeenth-century England the connection between social movements, political causes, and the nature of imagery was, by contrast, quite undisguised. It is perhaps only a slight exaggeration to say that the English Civil War was fought over the issue of images, and not just the question of statues and other material symbols in religious ritual but less tangible matters such as the “idol” of monarchy and, beyond that, the “idols of the mind” that Reformation thinkers sought to purge in themselves and others.<sup>2</sup>

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. It is a commonplace of modern

1. See Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974–), vol. 2, chap. 3, for an account of the iconoclastic controversy in Eastern Christendom.

2. See Christopher Hill’s chapter on “*Eikonoklastes* and Idolatry” in his *Milton and the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 171–81, for an introduction to this problem.

cultural criticism that images have a power in our world undreamed of by the ancient idolaters.<sup>3</sup> And it seems equally evident that the question of the nature of imagery has been second only to the problem of language in the evolution of modern criticism. If linguistics has its Saussure and Chomsky, iconology has its Panofsky and Gombrich. But the presence of these great synthesizers should not be taken as a sign that the riddles of language or imagery are finally about to be solved. The situation is precisely the reverse: language and imagery are no longer what they promised to be for critics and philosophers of the Enlightenment—perfect, transparent media through which reality may be represented to the understanding. For modern criticism, language and imagery have become enigmas, problems to be explained, prison-houses which lock the understanding away from the world. The commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification.<sup>4</sup>

My purpose in this chapter is neither to advance the theoretical understanding of the image nor to add yet another critique of modern idolatry to the growing collection of iconoclastic polemics. My aim is rather to survey some of what Wittgenstein would call the “language games” that we play with the notion of images, and to suggest some questions about the historical forms of life that sustain those games. I

3. Susan Sontag gives eloquent expression to many of these commonplaces in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), a book that would more accurately be titled, “Against Photography.” Sontag opens her discussion of photography by noting that “humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato’s cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth” (p. 3). Photographic images, Sontag concludes, are even more threatening than the artisanal images Plato contended with because they are “potent means for turning the tables on reality—for turning *it* into a shadow” (180). Other important critiques of modern imagery and ideology include Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–51, Daniel J. Boorstin’s *The Image* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), Roland Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977, 32–51), and Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

4. For a compendium of recent work predicated on the notion that images are a kind of language, see *The Language of Images*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

don’t propose, therefore, to produce a new or better definition of the essential nature of images, or even to examine any specific pictures or works of art. My procedure instead will be to examine some of the ways we use the word “image” in a number of institutionalized discourses—particularly literary criticism, art history, theology, and philosophy—and to criticize the ways each of these disciplines makes use of notions of imagery borrowed from its neighbors. My aim is to open up for inquiry the ways our “theoretical” understanding of imagery grounds itself in social and cultural practices, and in a history fundamental to our understanding not only of what images are but of what human nature is or might become. Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures “made in the image” of a creator, to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image.

### The Family of Images

Two things must immediately strike the notice of anyone who tries to take a general view of the phenomena called by the name of imagery. The first is simply the wide variety of things that go by this name. We speak of pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and even ideas as images, and the sheer diversity of this list would seem to make any systematic, unified understanding impossible. The second thing that may strike us is that the calling of all these things by the name of “image” does not necessarily mean that they all have something in common. It might be better to begin by thinking of images as a far-flung family which has migrated in time and space and undergone profound mutations in the process.

If images are a family, however, it may be possible to construct some sense of their genealogy. If we begin by looking, not for some universal definition of the term, but at those places where images have differentiated themselves from one another on the basis of boundaries between different institutional discourses, we come up with a family tree something like the following: