Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology

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1. Why Iconology?

In his 1986 book on iconology, W. J. T. Mitchell explained the task of iconology by using the terms *image, text, ideology*.[1] In my recent book on *Bild-Anthropologie,* I also use a triad of terms in which, for obvious reasons, *image* remains but now is framed by the terms *medium* and *body*.[2] This choice is not intended to invalidate Mitchell's perspective. Rather, it characterizes another approach among the many attempts to grasp images in their rich spectrum of meanings and purposes. In my view, however, their significance becomes accessible only when we take into account other, non-iconic determinants such as, in a most general sense, medium and body. *Medium*, here, is to be understood not in the usual sense but in the sense of the agent by which images are transmitted, while *body* means either the performing or the perceiving body on which images depend no less than on their respective media. I do not speak of media as such, of course, nor do I speak of the body as such. Both have continuously changed (which allows us to speak of a history of visual technologies, as we are also familiar with a history of perception), but in their ever-changing presence they have *kept their place* in the circulation of images.

Images are neither on the wall (or on the screen) nor in the head alone. They do not *exist* by themselves, but they *happen;* they *take place* whether they are moving images (where this is so obvious) or not. They happen via

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1. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986).
2. The present essay is an attempt to summarize and to extend the discussion in my book *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich, 2001). A French translation is due to appear this fall: *Pour une anthropologie des images,* trans. Jean Torrent (Paris, 2004).

302

transmission and perception. The German language ignores the difference between picture and image, which, though it seems to be a lack of distinction, nicely connects mental images and physical artifacts to one another—which also is my intention in this essay. It may, however, be a cause for disagreement among us to identify images in a continuing history, which has not ended with the rise of the digital era. Only if one shares this position does my approach to iconology make any sense. Otherwise, any such attempt would be left to an archaeology of images whose meaning no longer applies to contemporary experience. I like to insist on this predisposition as it is the only reason for the generality of my approach. Instead of discussing contemporary culture, I still entertain the idealism of conceiving an ongoing history of images. It is for this reason that I propose a new kind of iconology whose generality serves the purpose of bridging past and present in the life of the images and that therefore is not limited to art (as was Panofsky's iconology, which I here leave aside).[3]

It may be less disputable to bridge the difference between art and nonart in the realm of images. Such a difference, anyway, can be maintained for the modern era only when art, no longer expected to be narrative in the old sense, keeps the distance of autonomous aesthetics and avoids information and entertainment, to mention just two of the purposes of images. The whole debate of high and low rested on this familiar dualism, whose target, in the meanwhile, has become an occasion for memory. Today, the visual arts again take up the issue of the image, which for so long has been shut off by the dominating theories of art. It is contemporary art that in a most radical way analyzes the violence or banality of images.[4] In a kind of visual practice of iconology, artists abolish the received distinction between image theory and art theory, the latter being a noble subcategory of the former. A critical iconology today is an urgent need, because our society is exposed to the power of the mass media in an unprecedented way.

3. See Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1939).
4. See *High and Low,* ed. James Leggio (exhibition catalog, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 7 Oct. 1990–15 Jan. 1991).

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The current discourse of images suffers from an abundance of different, even contradictory conceptions of what images are and how they operate. Semiology, to give one example, does not allow images to exist beyond the controllable territory of signs, signals, and communication. Art theory would have other but equally strong reservations about any image theory that threatens the old monopoly of art and its exclusive subject matter. The sciences—in particular, neurobiology—examine the perception activity of the brain as a phenomenon of "internal representation," while the perception of artifacts usually receives little attention in this context. I have recently proposed an anthropological approach, anthropology understood in the European sense as differentiated from ethnology. In this approach, internal and external representations, or mental and physical images, may be considered two sides of the same coin. The ambivalence of endogene images and exogene images, which interact on many different levels, is inherent in the image practice of humanity. Dreams and Icons, as Marc Augé calls them in his book *La Guerre des rêves,* are dependent on each other.[5] The interaction of mental images and physical images is a field still largely unexplored, one that concerns the politics of images no less than what the French call the *imaginaire* of a given society.

2. Medium and Image

The what of an image (the issue of what the image serves as an image or to what it relates as an image) is steered by the how in which it transmits its message. In fact, the how is often hard to distinguish from the what; it is the very essence of an image. But the how, in turn, is to a large extent shaped by the given visual medium in which an image resides. Any iconology today must therefore discuss the unity as well as the distinction of image and medium, the latter understood in the sense of a carrier or host medium. No visible images reach us unmediated. Their visibility rests on their particular mediality, which controls the perception of them and creates the viewer's attention. Physical images are physical because of the media they use, but *physical* can no longer explain their present technologies. Images have always relied on a given technique for their visualization. When we distinguish a canvas from the image it represents, we pay attention to either the one or the other, as if they were distinct, which they are not; they separate only when we are willing to separate them in our looking. In this case, we dissolve their factual "symbiosis" by means of our analytical perception. We even remember images from the specific mediality in which we

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5. See Marc Augé, *La Guerre des rêves: Exercises d'ethno-fiction* (Paris, 1997); trans. under the title *The War of Dreams: Exercises in Ethno-fiction* by Liz Heran (Sterling, Va., 1999).

first encountered them, and remembering means first disembodying them from their original media and then reembodying them in our brain. Visual media compete, so it seems, with the images they transmit. They tend either to dissimulate themselves or to claim the first voice. The more we pay attention to a medium, the less it can hide its strategies. The less we take note of a visual medium, the more we concentrate on the image, as if images would come by themselves. When visual media become self-referential, they turn against their images and steal our attention from them.[6]

Mediality, in this sense, is not replaceable by the materiality of images as has been the custom in the old distinction of form and matter. Materiality would anyway be inappropriate as a term for today's media. A medium *is* form, or it transmits the very form in which we perceive images. But mediality equally cannot be reduced to technology. Media use symbolic techniques through which they transmit images and imprint them on the collective memory. The politics of images relies on their mediality, as mediality usually is controlled by institutions and serves the interests of political power (even when it, as we experience it today, hides behind a seemingly anonymous transmission). The politics of images needs a medium to turn an image into a picture.

We easily distinguish old from new pictures, both of which require a different kind of attention as a result of their different pictorial media. We also distinguish private from public media, both of which have a different impact on our perception and belong to the different spaces that create them just as they are created by them. It is true that we experience image and medium as inseparable and that we recognize the one in the other. And yet images are not merely produced by their media, as technological euphoria sometimes wants it to be, but are *transmitted* in this way—which means that images cannot be described by an exclusively mediological approach in any satisfactory way.

3. Medium and Body

The use of visual media plays a central role in the interchange between image and body. Media form the missing link between the one and the other as they channel our perception and thus prevent us from mistaking them either as real bodies or, at the opposite end, as mere objects or machines. It is our own bodily experience that allows us to identify the dualism inherent in visual media. We know that we all *have* or that we all *own* images, that they live *in* our bodies or in our dreams and wait to be summoned *by*

6. See Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie,* pp. 29–33.

our bodies to show up. Some languages, like German, distinguish a term for memory as an *archive* of images (*Gedächtnis)* from a term for memory as an activity, that is, as our recollection of images (*Erinnerung).* This distinction means that we both *own* and *produce* images. In each case, bodies (that is, brains) serve as a living medium that makes us *perceive, project,* or *remember* images and that also enables our imagination to censor or to transform them.

The mediality of images reaches far beyond the visual realm, properly speaking. Language transmits verbal imagery when we turn words into mental images of our own. Words stimulate our imagination, while the imagination in turn transforms them into the images they signify. In this case, it is language that serves as a medium for transmitting images. But here, too, it needs our body to fill them with personal experience and meaning; this is the reason why imagination so often has resisted any public control. In the case of verbal imagery, however, we are well trained to distinguish image from medium, while in the case of physical or visible imagery we are not. And, yet, the appropriation of images is less far apart in both situations than our education allows us to believe.

The distinction of language and writing also applies to my case. The spoken language is linked to a body, which, as a living medium, speaks it, while the written language withdraws from the body and retreats to a book or monitor, where we do not listen to a voice but read a text. The act of reading depends on our acquired distinction of word and medium—which, in a way, also applies to the act of viewing images, though we are usually unaware of those mechanisms. In fact, we also, in a sense, read visual images when we distinguish them from their media. Visual media, to a certain degree, match written language, but they have not undergone the type of codification that writing has. Also our ear participates in the appropriation of images when they come with sound and thus offers an unexpected agent or companion for perceiving images. The sound film was the first visual medium to exploit our capacity to link sound and sight closely. It so happens that the accompanying music, already provided for silent movies by an outside pianist, also changes the experience of the same images in the sense that they look different when a different sound track shapes the impression they make on our sentiments.

The self-perception of our bodies (the sensation that we live *in* a body) is an indispensable precondition for the inventing of media, which may be called technical or artificial bodies designed for substituting bodies via a symbolical procedure. Images live, as we are led to believe, in their media much as we live in our bodies. From early on, humans were tempted to communicate with images as with living bodies and also to accept them in the place of bodies. In that case, we actually animate their media in order

to experience images as alive. Animation is our part, as the desire of our look corresponds to a given medium's part. A medium is the *object,* an image the *goal,* of animation. *Animation,* as an activity, describes the use of images better than does *perception.* The latter is valid for our visual activity in general and in everyday life. Visual artifacts, however, depend on a specific kind of perception—perception of images, as if they were bodies or in the name of bodies—that is, perception of a symbolical kind. The desire for images preceded the invention of their respective media.

4. Image and Death

This distinction needs a short digression. The topic of image and death caused me to embark on the type of iconology I am presenting here. Though our image consumption today has increased to an unprecedented degree, our experience with images of the dead has lost its former importance altogether. Thus, our familiarity with images almost seems reversed. Whenever archaic societies saw images, they saw images of the dead, who no longer lived in their bodies, or images of the gods, who lived in another world. The experience of images in those times was linked to rituals such as the cult of the dead, through which the dead were reintegrated into the community of the living.[7]

It seems appropriate to remind us of the conditions that contributed to the introduction of physical images into human use. Among such conditions the cult of the dead ranks as one of the oldest and most significant. Images, preferably three-dimensional ones, replaced the bodies of the dead, who had lost their visible presence along with their bodies. Images, on behalf of the missing body, occupied the place deserted by the person who had died. A given community felt threatened by the gap caused by the death of one of its members. The dead, as a result, were kept as present and visible in the ranks of the living via their images. But images did not exist by themselves. They, in turn, were in need of an embodiment, which means in need of an agent or a medium resembling a body. This need was met by the invention of visual media, which not only embodied images but resembled living bodies in their own ways. Even real skulls were reanimated as living images with the help of shells inserted as new eyes, and a coat of clay as a new skin over the face, as early as 7000 BC in the Neolithic culture of the Near East. Both image and medium live from a body analogy. We could speak, in Baudrillard's terms, of a "symbolic exchange" between a dead body and a live image.[8] The triadic constellation in which body, media, and image

7. See ibid., chap. 6 ("Bild und Tod: Verkörperung in frühen Kulturen [Mit einem Epilog zur Photographie]"), pp. 143–88.

8. See Jean Baudrillard, *L'Echange symbolique et la mort* (Paris, 1976); trans. under the title *Symbolic Exchange and Death* by Iain Hamilton Grant (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1993).

are interconnected appears here with utmost clarity. The image of the dead, in the place of the missing body, the artificial body of the image (the medium), and the looking body of the living interacted in creating iconic presence as against bodily presence.

5. Iconoclasm

The link of physical images with the mental images into which we translate them may explain the zeal inherent in any iconoclasm to destroy physical images. The iconoclasts actually wanted to eliminate images in the collective imagination, but in fact they could destroy only their media. What the people could no longer see would, it was hoped, no longer live in their imagination. The violence against physical images served to extinguish mental images. Control over the public media was a guiding principle in the prohibition of images, much as such control had forced their official introduction to begin with. Both of these acts are violent to a similar degree because any circulation of such images rests on open or secret violence. Today's iconoclasm, when images are simply withdrawn from their circulation on the TV or in the press, may be more discreet, but it aims nevertheless at eliminating their public visibility. Seen in today's perspective, the destruction of the Soviet and Iraqi monuments (like any monuments, they were visual media of the most official kind) was anachronistic to the same degree, as such monuments themselves represented the anachronism of public sculpture and therefore lent themselves so easily to public revenge and physical destruction in the old sense. Official images, meant to imprint themselves on the collective mind, triggered iconoclasm as a practice of symbolical liberation. More subtle was the custom to denounce images as dead matter or as blind surfaces that, it was said, pretended in vain to shelter images. This strategy intended to denounce the various media, which, then deprived of their images, did become empty surfaces or mere matter and lost their very purpose.[9]

Some old cultures entertained the practice of *consecrating* their cult images before taking them up in ritual use. At the time, consecration was needed to turn objects into images. Without such a consecration ritual, images were merely objects and were thus regarded as inanimate. Only through sacred animation could these images exert power and their matter become medium. The creation of such images, in a first act, was carried out by a sculptor, while the second act was entrusted to a priest. Even this procedure, which looks like outdated magic, already implied a distinction of image and medium and called for a priest to change a mere object into

9. See *Iconoclash,* ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe, 2002).

a medium. It is also telling that images always implied *life* (in fact, it is our own life that is projected to them), while objects were easily thought as *dead*. The "mouth-opening ritual" in ancient Egypt is reflected in the biblical story of God's creation of Adam, who was first molded of clay and, in a second act, animated. The biblical narrative has a technomorphical basis because it reflects practices in a sculptor's workshop. In advanced cultures, animation no longer remains the task of a priest, but we expect the artist (and, today, technology) to simulate life via live images. However, the transformation of a medium into an image continues to call for our own participation.[10]

6. Digital Shadows

Technology in our admiration today has replaced the former meaning of artistic skill. It is no longer art but technology that has taken over the *mimesis of life*. Its body analogies call up mirror and shadow, once archetypal media for representing bodies. The cast shadow, which inspired Pliny's tale of the Corinthian girl, and the water surface, which inspired the story of Narcissus, must be regarded as natural media for the gaze.[11] But the step toward technical media was short. At Corinth, the girl needed a wall as a medial support in order to outline the cast shadow of her lover. The water reflection, on the other hand, was soon taken up by the reflection of bodies in ancient metal mirrors. Visual media not only act as the body's prosthesis but also serve as the body's reflection, which lends itself to the body's self-inspection. The most advanced technologies today simulate bodies in the guise of fleeting shadows or of insubstantial mirror images, which are expected to liberate us from the laws of gravitation that we are subject to in empirical space.

The digital media reintroduce the body analogy via denial. The loss of the body has already haunted the mirror fantasies of the nineteenth century, when the doppelgänger no longer obeyed the spectator but abandoned the mimesis of the reflecting body. Digital images usually address our bodies' imagination and cross the borderline between visual images and virtual images, images *seen* and images *projected*. In this sense, digital technology pursues the mimesis of our own imagination. Digital images inspire mental images, much as they are inspired by mental images and their free flux. External and internal representations are encouraged to merge.

10. See Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie,* pp. 163, 177.
11. On Pliny's tale, see *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art,* trans. Katherine Jex-Blake (Chicago, 1968), chap. 35; on shadow and painting at Corinth, see ibid., chap. 151, and Robert Rosenblum, "The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism," *Art Bulletin* 39 (Dec. 1957): 279.

The experience of digital images surpasses their intrinsic logic as tools of technology. Bernard Stiegler, in his essay on the *discrete image* ("discrete" in the sciences' sense of a discontinuous and digitally encoded image), has proposed the distinction of *analytic* perception and *synthetic* perception: *analytic* with regard to technology or medium and *synthetic* with regard to the mental image that results in our perception. *Synthetic* and *synthesis,* as terms, are appropriate for describing the forming of an image in our brain. It means, first, analyzing a given medium and, second, interpreting it with the image it transmits. Our images, says Stiegler, do not exist by themselves or of themselves. They live in our mind as the "trace and inscription" of images seen in the outside world. Media constantly succeed in changing our perception, but we still produce the images ourselves.[12]

Image and medium do not allow the same kind of narrative in describing their history. A history in a literal sense applies only to visual technologies; images resist any linear history, as they are not subject to progress to the same degree. Images may be old even when they resurface in new media. We also know that they age in ways different from the aging of media. The media are usually expected to be new, while images keep their life when they are old and when they return in the midst of new media. We have little difficulty in reconstructing the path of images, which have migrated across several stages that imply historical media. Images resemble nomads in the sense that they take residence in one medium after another. This migration process has tempted many scholars to reduce their history to a mere media history and thus replace the sequence of collective imagination with the evolution of visual technology. American authors, as Régis Debray has remarked in his book *Transmettre,* often favor a master discourse that privileges technology at the expense of politics. The politics of images, indeed, surpasses the mere exploitation of visual media. Debray also insists on the term *transmission* in place of *communication,* as *transmission* implies somebody who wants to exert power and to control the circulation of images.[13]

Representation and *perception* closely interact in any politics of images. Both are charged with symbolical energy, which easily lends itself to political use. Representation surely is meant to rule over perception, but the symmetry between the two acts is far from certain. There is no automatism in *what* we perceive and *how* we perceive despite all attempts to prove the contrary. Perception may also lead us to resist the claims of representation. The destruction of official images in this sense is only the tip of the iceberg;

12. See Bernard Stiegler, "The Discrete Image," in Jacques Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews,* trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 145–63.
13. See Régis Debray, *Transmettre* (Paris, 1997); trans. under the title *Transmitting Culture* by Eric Rauth (New York, 2000).

it is only at surface value, amounting only to the destruction of the images'
host media, as those media were said to be misused, that is, used by the
wrong authority.[14]

7. A Living Medium

Image and medium both are linked with the body as the third parameter
to be considered in its own right. The body always has remained the same
and, precisely for this reason, has been subjected to constant change with
respect to its conception as well as to its self-perception. The gap between
the certainty of its physical presence and the uncertainty of its notion never
closes. Bodies are strongly shaped by their cultural history and thus never
cease to be exposed to mediation via their visual environment. Bodies thus
cannot be considered an invariant and do not resist the impact of changing
ideas in the experiencing of them. But they are more than merely passive
recipients of the visual media that shaped them. Their activity is needed in
order to practice visual media in the first place.

Perception alone does not explain the interaction of body and medium
that takes place in the transmission of images. Images, as I have said, *happen,*
or are *negotiated,* between bodies and media. Bodies censor the flux of im-
ages via projection, memory, attention, or neglect. Private or individual
bodies also act as public or collective bodies in a given society. Our bodies
always carry a collective identity in that they represent a given culture as a
result of ethnicity, education, and a particular visual environment. *Repre-
senting bodies* are those that perform themselves, while *represented bodies*
are separate or independent images that represent bodies. Bodies *perform*
images (of themselves or even against themselves) as much as they *perceive*
outside images. In this double sense, they are living media that transcend
the capacities of their prosthetic media. Despite their marginalization, so
much à la mode, I am here still pleading their cause as indispensable for any
iconology.

Plato, the first mediologist, strongly resisted writing as a danger for the
body as living memory and called technical memories, like the alphabet,
dead by contrast. What matters here are not his conclusions, which were
already an anachronism in his own time, but his valid distinction between
two kinds of media, speaking bodies and written language, to recall his most
familiar argument. With regard to memory, he introduced an analogous
distinction between living bodies and lifeless images, the one able to re-
member the dead themselves and the other only depicting them.[15] Physical

14. On representation, see Christopher Prendergast, *The Triangle of Representation* (New York,
2000).

15. See Iris Därmann, *Tod und Bild: Eine phänomenologische Mediengeschichte* (Munich, 1995).

images, in his view, only duplicate death, while the images of our own memory bring the dead to a new life. In support of this distinction, he consciously neglected any material images of the dead and discredited all such images as mere illusion. The fact that he foiled the meaning of images of the dead excluded them forever in Western philosophy. He nevertheless developed a most powerful theory, establishing the body as a living medium.[16]

Mental and physical images will merge as long as we continue to assign images to the realm of life and animate media as alive in the name of their images. The contemporary obsession with live images in this respect is proof enough. Images have been imbued both with movement and with speech as in movies or in TV transmission. We anyway closely relate images to our own life and expect them to interact with our bodies, with which we perceive, imagine, and dream them. But the uncertain notion of the body, whose ongoing crisis is evident, has led us to extrapolate the expectation of life and to invest artificial bodies, as against living bodies, with a superior life of their own. This tendency has caused a lot of confusion, turning the very function of visual media upside down. Thus, contemporary media have become invested with a paradoxical power over our bodies, which feel defeated in their presence.

8. Iconic Presence

Images traditionally live from the *body's absence,* which is either temporary (that is, spatial) or, in the case of death, final. This absence does not mean that images revoke absent bodies and make them return. Rather, they replace the body's absence with a different kind of presence. *Iconic presence* still maintains a body's absence and turns it into what must be called *visible absence.* Images live from the paradox that they perform *the presence of an absence* or vice versa (which also applies to the telepresence of people in today's media). This paradox in turn is rooted in our experience to relate presence to visibility. Bodies are *present* because they are *visible* (even on the telephone the other body is absent). When absent bodies become visible in images, they use a vicarious visibility. Recently, this notion has been causing the violent contradiction of the posthuman theories, which urge us to replace such categories by the mere notion of *pattern recognition,* preferably in a technical sense.[17]

We readily delegate the body's visibility to images, which, however, are in need of an appropriate medium in which to become visible. Images are

16. See Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie,* chap. 6, sect. 8 ("Platons Bildkritik"), pp. 173–76.
17. See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, 1999).

present because of and through their media, yet they stage an absence of which they are an image. The here and now of an image, its presence, to a certain degree relies on a visual medium in which it resides (even the images of our dreams use our body as medium). External images, as it were, need a substitute body, which we call a medium. But the ambivalence of absence and presence also invades the constellation of image and medium. Media are present in the ways of bodies, while images are not. We therefore could rephrase *the presence of an absence,* which still is the most elementary definition of images, in the following way: images *are* present in their media, but they *perform* an absence, which they make visible. Animation means that we open the opacity of a medium for the transmission of images.

Since the days of Galileo or of Röntgen, however, we are familiar with another kind of absence, namely, absence from sight and not absence as such. The worlds of the telescope or those represented by X-rays are never visible in the way human bodies are. They are present and yet remain invisible. We need visual media with their prosthetic function when we want to watch a microcosm or outer space. But even here we replace the remote targets of vision (let me call them bodies) with images, which not only use technology but are entirely dependent on it in order to make these worlds present to our sight. Such images are of even greater importance than they would be in an average situation. We often forget that they only simulate the immediacy of a perception, one that seems to be our own but, in fact, is theirs. The recent debates in the journal *Imaging Science* and elsewhere belatedly abandon the illusion in the belief that scientific images are themselves mimetic in the same way in which we want and need images. In fact, they are specifically organized to address our visual naïveté and thus serve our bodies, as images have done forever.

The new technologies of vision, however, have introduced a certain abstraction in our visual experience, as we no longer are able to control the relation existing between an image and its model. We therefore entertain more confidence in visual machines than we trust our own eyes, as a result of which their technology meets with a literal blind faith. Media appear less as a go-between than as self-referential systems, which seem to marginalize us at the receiving end. The transmission is more spectacular than what it transmits. And, yet, the history of images teaches us not to abandon our views of how images function. We are still confined to our single bodies, and we still desire images that make personal sense for us. The old spectacle of images has always changed when the curtain reopens onstage and exhibits the latest visual media at hand. The spectacle forces its audience to learn new techniques of perception and thereby to master new techniques of representation. But the body has remained a pièce de résistance against the

accelerating velocity of media, which are coming and going. Those images, which we invest with a personal significance, are different from the many ones that we only consume and immediately forget.

9. Mixed Media

It is obvious that media come rarely by themselves and usually exist as what is called *mixed media.* This term, however, does not describe the precision and complexity of their interaction. Media are intermediary by definition, but they also act as intermediaries among themselves in that they mirror, quote, overlap, and correct or censor one another. They often coexist in layers whose characters vary according to their position in history. Old media do not necessarily disappear forever but, rather, change their meaning and role. The term *intermediality* therefore would be more precise than the term *mixed media.* Painting lived on in photography, movies did in TV, and TV does in what we call *new media* in visual art. This means not only that we perceive images *in* media but also that we experience images *of* media whenever old media have ceased to serve their primary function and become visible, on second look, in a way they never had been.

Marshall McLuhan has dealt with this phenomenon in his cogent essay "Environment and Anti-Environment."[18] His assertion that a medium becomes the object of attention only after it is supplanted by a newer medium, which discloses its nature in retrospect, prompts several conclusions. Current media dissimulate their true strategy behind the effects of their seeming immediacy, which remains their very purpose. It may be added that our perception skills, also, are built in layers that enable us to distinguish media of different kinds and from different ages. Accordingly, media continue to function even if their original use belongs to the past. Thus, today's media sometimes adopt a *storage,* or memory, capacity when they administer an electronic archive of images that come from far away. Sometimes, new media look like newly polished mirrors of memory in which images of the past survive, much as images did in other times in churches, museums, and books. It especially deserves attention that we feel addressed even by very old images that reside in obsolete media. Obviously, there is no automatism involved. Images entertain and open a complex relation with their media and thereby with us.

In the midst of the high tide and speed of today's live images, we often watch the silent images of the past with a gaze of nostalgia. It was a similar experience when the faithful in the era of the Catholic Reformation turned to religious icons, which antedated the rise of Renaissance art.[19] The old

18. See Marshall McLuhan, "Environment and Anti-Environment," in *Media Research: Technology, Art, Communication,* ed. Michael A. Moos (New York, 1997).
19. See Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich,

icons thus became the focus of a new mise-en-scène, which resulted in baroque installations, like huge altarpieces as stages, with political overtones. And the framed easel picture, when it came into use, still contained the memory of the icon, whose basic shape, a framed and a movable panel, it continued to employ while it changed in meaning and visible structure altogether. The invention of the easel picture illustrates the complexity inherent in visual media, which can be reduced neither to materials nor to techniques.[20] The early modern picture, together with the perspective it offered, was an exclusively Western invention. It invested the human subject, who became self-conscious at the time, with images—or, rather, pictures— needed for self-reflexivity. One may say that the panel picture was a *medium for the gaze,* while the photograph, in which the body is mechanically recorded, in the beginning was welcomed as a *medium of the body.* This meant that the body created its own trace without relying on the observing gaze of a painter any longer. In today's digital mise-en-scène of photography the interrelation among medium, image, and body again has changed dramatically. The situation is especially complex in film images, which are neither viewed on the film itself nor affixed on the movie screen but, as we know, come about via projection and via deception of a spectator who appropriates them in the double-time rhythm of public projection and personal imagination.[21]

10. Traditional Images?

The roles that have been assigned to image, medium, and body constantly varied, but their tight interaction continues up to the present day. The *medium,* despite its polysemantic character and polyvalent use, offers the easiest identification and is for this reason favored by contemporary theories. The *body* comes next, but it is all too often and all too neatly played out against current technologies and considered as their obverse. It therefore needs a new emphasis on bodies as living media, able to perceive, to remember, and to project images. The body, as owner and addressee of images, administered media as extensions of its own visual capacities. Bodies *receive* images by *perceiving* them, while media *transmit* them to bodies. With the help of masks, tattooing, clothing, and performance, bodies also produce images of themselves or, in the case of actors, images representing others—in which case they act as media in the fullest and most original

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1990); trans. under the title *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994), chap. 20.

20. See Belting and Christiane Kruse, *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes: Das erste Jahrhundert der niederländischen Malerei* (Munich, 1994).

21. See Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie,* chap. 4, pp. 108–13.

sense. Their initial monopoly on mediating images allows us to speak of bodies as the archetype of all visual media.

There remains the image, the first of my three parameters, which turns out to be the most difficult to determine. It is easier to distinguish images from their media and from bodies than to identify them in positive terms. The dualism of mental and physical images has to be considered in this respect. Images not only mirror an external world; they also represent essential structures of our thinking. Georges Didi-Huberman has, surprisingly, spoken of the "anachronism" inherent in images.[22] In fact, they do not just present an unwelcome anachronism in contemporary theories in which technology and mediality are favored. They also behave in an anachronistic manner with regard to the progress inherent in the history of media with which they do not keep pace. Günther Anders as early as the 1950s spoke ironically of humans as antiquated beings, whom he wanted to defend for that very reason. Today's quest for virtual reality and artificial intelligence is a telling confirmation in this respect, as it reveals the urge to go beyond the limits of real bodies and thereby also to beat the so-called traditional images.

Lev Manovich claims that in the digital age the traditional image no longer exists.[23] But what is a traditional image? Is it traditional merely because it still interacts with our bodies? Or do we all too quickly denounce predigital images as mere tools of naive imitation charged with duplicating the visible world? Was Baudrillard right when he sharply distinguished images from reality and accused contemporary image practice of forging reality, as if reality existed totally apart from the images by which we appropriate it? Is it possible to distinguish images from so-called reality with such ontological naïveté? A trap of another kind waits for us in the familiar distinction of analogue media and digital media—analogue with regard to the world they reproduce and digital with regard to an alleged total liberation from any mimesis. We walk into a trap when we simply transfer this distinction from media to images, where it does not function at all.

It is an unjust simplification to speak of historical images as merely imitative and thus to deprive them of their role as pilots for the collective imagination. Vilém Flusser may go too far when he speaks in his philosophy of photography of images as "magical" and assigns them to our lives "where

22. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images* (Paris, 2000).
23. See Lev Manovich, "Eine Archäologie der Computerbilder," *Kunstforum International* 132 (1996): 124. See also Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, 2001), and the criticism of this position in Anette Hüsch, "Der gerahmte Blick" (Ph.D. diss., Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe, 2003).

everything repeats," while in the world of invention everything changes. But we must admit that he is on the right track here. He also maintains that "images intervene between the world and us. Rather than representing the world, they obstruct it and cause us to live with them, which we made ourselves."[24] The retroactive function of representation, in the widest sense, is thus well put into place. However, we cannot speak of images in just one sense but, rather, must classify images with different aims and effects. Today, images in the realm of information enjoy an undeserved prominence, as do images in the realms of entertainment and advertisement. Entertainment, as in movies, however, has an immediate access to our private stock of images, which remains anachronistic in Didi-Huberman's sense. Images that serve our cognition are very different from those that address our imagination.

11. The Colonization of Images

The difference between image and medium clearly emerges in a cross-cultural context. It is obvious that media, such as film or TV, easily enter different cultural environments where the resulting images nonetheless continue to represent a particular local tradition. This even applies to photography, as Christopher Pinney has demonstrated in his book on Indian photography.[25] It therefore is not at all self-evident that the global dissemination of visual media, however rooted they are in Western culture, will cause a worldwide spread of Western images or, even less so, of Western imagination. The opposite is more likely to happen if economic conditions will allow another course of events.

Current image theories, despite their claims to universal validity, usually represent Western traditions of thinking. Views that are rooted in traditions other than Western have not yet entered our academic territories except in ethnology's special domains. And, yet, non-Western images have left their traces in Western culture for a long time. I therefore would like to end my essay with two such cases, the remembrance of which may replace an impossible conclusion. The one is primitivism, which, a century ago, dominated the scene of avant-garde art. The other is the colonization of Mexican images, half a millennium ago, by the Spanish conquerors.

Primitivism was the longing for an alien and even superior art where art, in the Western sense, had never existed. The exclusively formal appropriation of African masks and "fetishes" resulted in a perception that sepa-

24. Vilém Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (Göttingen, 1989), pp. 9–10; my translation.
25. See Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London, 1997).

rated image and medium. Picasso and his friends never reproduced any
African figures as such but, rather, transferred African forms to Western
media, such as oil painting. To be more precise, primitivist artists extracted
their own images of what the African artifacts looked like and reapplied
them to modernist art. In the first moment, they did not care about the
significance the images had for the indigenous people but abstracted from
those images what they reinterpreted as style, thus dissolving the original
symbiosis of image and medium. The images that the African artifacts were
meant to convey at home totally differed from the ones a Western audience
would identify in them. In other words, the same visual medium trans-
mitted images of very different kinds in the original situation and in the
Western situation. The Western audience did not merely misunderstand
what it saw; it also invested the imported works with mental images of its
own. It is in keeping with this dual process of deappropriation and reap-
propriation that the link with living rituals was lost in a double abstraction:
abstraction in terms of the images' translation into modernist style and ab-
straction in terms of their transfer to gallery art.[26]

   The colonization of indigenous images as a result of the Spanish con-
quest of Mexico has been beautifully analyzed by Serge Gruzinski, whose
book *Images at War* provides a convenient guide for the topic.[27] Two dif-
ferent issues in this historic situation may be singled out for my purpose.
The first is the clash between seemingly incompatible concepts of what im-
ages are, which caused the Spaniards to reject the possibility that the Aztecs
had images at all. The Spaniards denounced Aztec images as merely strange
objects, which they defined as *cerniés* and thus excluded from any compar-
ison with their own images. The same rejection applied to the native reli-
gion, which did not seem just a different religion but no religion at all. In
fact, the images on both sides represented religion, which was an additional
reason for the Spaniards to recognize nothing but idols or pseudoimages in
Mexico. In a countermeasure, the importation of Spanish images became
an important part of Spanish politics. But to introduce the foreign "icons"
into the "dreams" of the indigenous, a mental colonization was needed.
Heavenly visions were enforced on selected Aztecs to guarantee the ap-
propriation of the imported images, which meant that living bodies be-
came involved in that image transfer. The project was complete only when

   26. See *"Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,* ed.
William Stanley Rubin (New York, 1984).
   27. See Serge Gruzinski, *La Guerre des images: Christophe Colomb à "Blade Runner" (1492–2019)*
(Paris, 1990); trans. under the title *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to "Blade Runner" (1492–
2019)* by Heather MacLean (Durham, N.C., 2001).

the imported images also had taken possession of the mental images of the others.

The project of the Spaniards, which was carried out with relentless zeal, provides an easy insight into the mechanics of image transmission, which never spares the mental part but considers it the true target also in the public space. My last example seems to be far removed from today's concerns, and yet I have chosen it precisely because of its seeming anachronism, which nevertheless makes it applicable to my argument. It is *not* applicable for the reason that the colonization of our imagination still goes on today and even happens within our own hemisphere, as Augé has demonstrated so well in his book *La Guerre des rêves.* It *is* applicable because it explains the interaction of image, body, and medium in a striking way. It was not only the Spanish images but also their media—canvas painting and sculpture—that caused resistance among the indigenous, whose bodies (or brains) lacked any experience of this kind.

Spanish art was surely involved in this event, as it was art that, at the time, provided the only visual media in existence. But the imported artifacts did not matter as art. They mattered only as agents of the all-important images. It therefore would be redundant to stress the political meaning, which is self-evident in this case. Only art in the modern sense, an art with a claim of autonomy, today attracts the familiar controversies about political stance or lack of political meaning. In our case, however, the depoliticization of the indigenous images was nothing but another act of politics. It was only in Spain that Aztec artifacts became classified as art and collected as such in order to become deprived of any political or religious significance and to remain outside the circulation of images. It is not necessary to draw parallels to our time, in which art constantly becomes neutralized by the art market.

Originally, iconology, in art history's terms, was restricted to art alone. Today, it is the task of a new iconology to draw a link between art and images in general but also to reintroduce the body, which has either been marginalized by our fascination with media or defamiliarized as a stranger in our world. The present mass consumption of images needs our critical response, which in turn needs our insights on how images work on us.