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FROM VISUAL CULTURE TO VISUAL COMMUNICATION. THE PICTORIAL AND ICONIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Abstract: The article attempts to approximate the notions of “visual culture”, “visual communication” and “data visualization”, which appeared with the pictorial and the iconic turns. The pictorial turn raised the picture to the rank of a sign system, similarly to language within the poststructuralist reflection. In contrast, thanks to the changes in art history research, Visual Culture Studies came into being, necessitating a definition of the term “visual culture”. Doris Bachmann-Medick characterizes the iconic turn as a late reaction of art history studies to the linguistic turn, which views a painting as a textual and discursive phenomenon. This situation gave rise to Norman Bryson’s semiotics of the image, which employs the notion of “the language of images”, creating the need for a definition of “visual communication”. The expansion of new media poses another challenge to visual culture, which is the need to define “data visualization”. W.J.T. Mitchell announced a new version of the pictorial turn – a turn towards biopictures, or biodigital pictures. These “animated icons” have been given the characteristics of life by the biological-information technology. However, the definition of “data visualization” is shaped by the “digital turn”, which views it as a practice of endowing the raw, mathematical sequences of codes in databases with anthropological and cultural information. Currently, the definition of “data visualization” is also impacted by the theory of databases and software studies by Lev Manovich. Finally, I would like to ask about the risks and benefits of the pictorial and iconic turns.

Keywords: visual culture, visual communication, data visualization, pictorial turn, iconic turn

Introduction

Examining the role of the pictorial turn in contemporary visual culture, the American scholar W.J.T. Mitchell announced his opposition to the domination

of language in his famous text – his manifesto about the pictorial turn.¹ Mitchell suggests that the pictorial turn has a linguistic ground and that it had already appeared at the time when Richard Rorty announced the linguistic turn.² This kind of interpretation is typical for Mitchell, who investigated the image in opposition to the text or as a combination of text and image – “image-text”.³ He claims that the history of culture or the history of philosophy can be characterized as a series of “turns”. The last of these was “the linguistic turn”. According to Mitchell, at that time

Linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, and various models of «textuality» have become the lingua franca for critical reflection on the arts, the media, and cultural forms. Society is a text, nature and its scientific representations are ‘discourses’. Even the unconscious is structured like a language. (...) But it does seem clear that another shift in what philosophers talk about is happening, and that once again a complexly related transformation is occurring in other disciplines of the human sciences and the sphere of public culture. I want to call this shift the ‘pictorial turn’.⁴

Among the early manifestations and symptoms of the pictorial turn Mitchell includes the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce and the various “languages of art” postulated by Nelson Goodman. In their reflections they focus on the iconic systems of symbols, going beyond language. Mitchell also lists Derrida’s grammatology and its interest in writing as a visual trace, the Frankfurt School with its explorations of visual media, and Michel Foucault’s contribution to the studies of “scopic regimes” in the form of his juxtaposition of discourse and visibility. Mitchell claims that in philosophy the pictorial turn can be identified in the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and in the changes in his attitude towards the issue of imagery.⁵ In the logic of images, which Mitchell proposes, we can note two opposite tendencies. On the one hand the pictorial turn emerges as it were from the linguistic turn, and on the other hand the paradigm of language

¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1994, pp. 11-34.

² See *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³ See *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵ This refers to the famous paragraph of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*: “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat itself to us inexorably”. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford 1958, p. 48, § I:115. Mitchell notes that the evolution of Wittgenstein’s thought took him from thinking about meaning in the context of “Picture Theory” towards iconoclasm.

is so strong that it influences the development of visual culture studies, transforming its meaning.⁶

Visual culture

According to Mitchell, the question of the meaning of the notion of the image and its role in contemporary culture is superseding the problem of "language", unresolved by poststructuralist philosophers,⁷ and ushering in the development of visual culture studies, or, as Mitchell calls them, "visual studies", rooted in the semiotics of the image and communication theory.⁸ In this sense the pictorial turn can be seen as a mirror reflection of the linguistic turn, which took place in the works of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Richard Rorty.⁹ Some of the philosophers mentioned here are considered to be precursors of the pictorial turn, although in fact their conclusions relate to the text, not the image. Mitchell presents this approach as follows:

What makes for the sense of the pictorial turn, then, is not that we have some powerful account of visual representation that is dictating the terms of cultural theory, but that pictures form a point of peculiar friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry. The picture now has a status somewhere between what Thomas Kuhn called a «paradigm» and an «anomaly», emerging as a central topic of discussion in the human sciences in the way that language did: that is, as a kind of model or figure for other things (including figuration itself), and as an unresolved problem, perhaps even the object of its own «science», what Erwin Panofsky called an «iconology».¹⁰

In contemporary culture the image emerges as a sign system, like language in the poststructuralist reflection under the aegis of the linguistic turn. Mitchell says that the pictorial turn has brought in Picture Theory¹¹ thanks to the changes in art history research caused by the linguistic turn. Mitchell refers in this way to the awakening of art history from its "dogmatic slumber",¹² initiated by

⁶ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., pp. 11-34.

⁷ See Ibid., p. 13.

⁸ Discussion of Mieke Bal's article "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture" and the author's reply - J. Elkins, "Nine modes of interdisciplinarity for visual studies". *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2003, no. 2(2), p. 232.

⁹ See M. Gołębiewska, *Między wątpieniem a pewnością. O związkach języka i racjonalności w filozofii poststrukturalizmu*, UNIVERSITAS, Kraków 2003, pp. 30-36.

¹⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., p. 13.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹² Ibid., p. 14.

Norman Bryson's semiology of the image. It is to this theoretical perspective that the studies of visual culture owe their way of thinking about the visual arts as "sign systems" with their own "discourse" and "textuality".

The pictorial turn did not appear directly in the area of culture studies, although it was included by Doris Bachmann-Medick among cultural turns (under the analogous German term "iconic turn"). As a confirmation of the fact that the iconic turn has influenced the research into culture and also visual culture studies, Bachmann-Medick explains that:

When we talk about the iconic turn, we do not by any means have in mind only such phenomena as are characteristic of the culture of everyday life. Speaking about it triggers a new perception of the image within cultural studies. Together with the criticism of cognition, and even criticism of language, the iconic turn works for the benefit of visual competence, which, in Western societies, having begun in the days starting from Plato's hostility to images and with logocentrism in philosophy, is still inadequate. The dominance of language in Western cultures for a long time relegated the studies of the culture of the image to the margin.¹³

Bachmann-Medick's conclusions make us realize that the development of the pictorial/iconic turn, and hence the development of visual culture studies is carried out with the support of the critics of language.¹⁴ The Anglophone authors involved in the pictorial turn constantly refer to linguistic theories, trying to adapt them to the task. In addition, literature, linguistics, and semiotics have become matrices for the contemporary concept of visual culture studies related to the pictorial/iconic turn.¹⁵

Characterizing this period in the development of art history, Bachmann-Medick wrote that "Paradoxically (...) the iconic turn was exactly when the history of art (being late) jumps on the train of the linguistic turn and begins to discover the fine arts as systems of signs, as textual and discursive phenomena".¹⁶ In this perspective, the iconic turn is perceived as an opposition to the linguistic turn, which can be seen particularly strongly in the case of the "critical iconology" of Mitchell, dialoguing with Panofsky's *Iconology*, which proposed "the resistance of the 'icon' to the 'logos'."¹⁷

¹³ D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Nowe kierunki w naukach o kulturze*, transl. K. Krzemieniowa, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2012, p. 390.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 394–395.

¹⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁶ D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, op. cit., pp. 394–395.

¹⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., p. 28.

Mitchell's project goes beyond the linguistically mediated iconology of Panofsky understood "as a fractured concept, a suturing of image and text. One must precede the other, dominate, resist, supplement the other. This otherness or alterity of image and text is not just a matter of analogous structure, as if images just happened to be the 'other' to texts".¹⁸ In this sense Mitchell claims that: "the 'icon' is thoroughly absorbed by the 'logos', understood as a rhetorical, literary, or even (less convincingly) a scientific discourse."¹⁹ The presented situation was aptly summed up by Roma Sendyka, who argued that Mitchell's project is in fact a pragmatic project concerning the use of images in everyday culture and science, while Gottfried Boehm poses the basic question about the non-linguistic source of images, about their own 'logos'.²⁰ According to Boehm, the "iconic turn" has a different philosophical background, creating new theoretical perspectives for the reflection on images,²¹ which have been researched primarily in the aesthetic context or, as suggested by Mitchell, recognized as a language and a discursive phenomenon.²²

The sources of the iconic/pictorial turns are common and relate to the iconology of Panofsky.²³ In this sense, as noted by Boehm in a letter to Mitchell:

Essentially, the name 'icono-logy' would be the comprehensive methodological substitute for what art history is supposed to achieve: the understanding and interpretation of the 'logos' of the image in its historical, perception-oriented and meaning-saturated determinedness. Panofsky, (whose authoritative reformulation of the term retains validity to this day) adopted the ancient concept of 'iconologia' and in doing so caused this balance [between textuality and visuality] to shift to the side of textuality, as you yourself have shown in your contribution on the 'pictorial turn'. When the iconic is invoked, it never implies a 'withdrawal' from language, but rather that a 'difference' vis a vis language comes into play.²⁴

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 R. Sendyka, *Poetyki wizualności*, [in:] *Kulturowa teoria literatury 2*, ed. T. Walas, R. Nycz, UNIVERSITAS, Kraków 2012, s. 170.

21 G. Boehm, *Po drugiej stronie języka? Uwagi na temat logiki obrazów*, transl. D. Kołacka, in: *Perspektywy współczesnej historii sztuki. Antologia przekładów „Artium Quaestiones”*, ed. M. Bryl, P. Juskiewicz, P. Piotrowski, W. Suchocki, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2009, pp. 938-942.

22 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., pp. 11-34.

23 G. Boehm and W.J.T. Mitchell, "Pictorial versus Iconic Turn: Two Letters", in: *The Pictorial Turn*, ed. N. Curtis, Routledge, London and New York, 2010, p. 12.

24 Ibid., p. 12.

Mitchell proposed that "One way of dealing with this problem would be to give up the notion of metalanguage or discourse that could control the understanding of pictures and to explore the way that pictures attempt to represent themselves – an 'iconography' in a sense rather different from the traditional one".²⁵ Still, he does not provide any solutions to this problem; he writes that "The pictorial turn is not the answer to anything. It is merely a way of stating the question".²⁶ Boehm, who tried to work out the philosophical basis of the understanding of images,²⁷ goes one step further:

Images have all too long been «read» in order to find in them a hidden meaning and subtext or a story that could be told. And yet they are not by any means only signs, reflections or illustrations, and they have an impact force of their own, which, it seems, does not give speech access to itself.²⁸

In describing the relation between visual culture studies and the pictorial turn, what seems interesting is an alternative way of their development, in which art history is the intellectual centre of the contemporary changes taking place in the interdisciplinary research based on the achievements of cultural studies. Art history had to undergo changes in the era of digital technology, which creates a fertile ground for the transformation postulated by Hans Belting, i.e. the conversion art history into media history.²⁹ Mitchell, who believes that if

²⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., p. 24.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ G. Boehm, *Die Wiederkehr der Bilder*, in: *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. G. Boehm, Fink, München 1994, p. 12.

²⁸ D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, op. cit., p. 391.

²⁹ In the opinion of Hans Belting, art history or according to his nomenclature, „history of the image”, has always been the history of the media. From the oldest manual techniques to the digital procedures, images highlight the „technical conditioning” that exploits their „media properties” H. Belting, „Obraz i jego media. Próba antropologiczna”, transl. M. Bryl, *Artium Quaestiones XI*, ed. K. Kalinowski, P. Piotrowski, W. Suchocki, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań, 2000, pp. 303–306. This allows us to understand that Belting’s attempts constitute a project to create the history of the visual /pictorial media. This shift also introduces a new understanding of art history, including visual media within the scope of its deliberations. In his project of media history, the researcher does not propose the inclusion of art history in the expanded scope of media theory, or any similar annexation, but only draws attention to the fact that art history has long dealt with the issues of media, understanding them as a means of expression of creative ideas. See M. Bryl, *Historia sztuki na przejściu od kontekstowej „Funktionsgeschichte” do antropologicznej „Bildwissenschaft”* („Casus” Hans Belting), Ibid., pp. 237–293. For this reason, Belting postulates the inclusion of the deliberations on the video within the scope of art history, thus indicating the areas of interest of media history. This project shows the genesis of the anthropological Bildwissenschaft considered as equivalent to visual culture studies.

the pictorial turn is currently taking place in "(...) cybernetic technology, the age of electronic reproduction has developed new forms of visual simulation and illusionism, with unprecedented powers".³⁰ He claims that "a pictorial turn of a culture totally dominated by images has now become a real technical possibility on a global scale".³¹ This situation is relevant for visual culture studies, whose examples illustrate the contemporary transformations of the definition of visual culture.³² Mitchell understood the pictorial turn as:

(...) a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that 'spectatorship' (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of 'reading' (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality.³³

Visual culture studies in the face of the pictorial turn have an advantage on art history turned into media history. But there is another alternative between art history and cultural studies, which may lead to a reflection on the image and visibility. Margaret Dikovitskaya claims that "Visual [culture] studies has not replaced art history or aesthetics but has supplemented and problematized them both by making it possible to grasp some of the axioms and ideological presuppositions underlying the past and current methodology of art history".³⁴ This can occur thanks to the introduction of interdisciplinary reflection initiated by British cultural studies, and then continued, among others, by gender studies, queer studies (gay and lesbian studies), and African-American studies. These theoretical perspectives made it possible to cross the boundaries between the fixed disciplines of knowledge, which has interesting applications in the visual culture studies. This point of view allows us to understand the specificity of visual culture studies, which is based on the strategy of constructing a theoretical-methodological framework. This divisions depart from the ones adopted within the humanities.³⁵

30 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., p. 15.

31 Ibid.

32 See Ibid.

33 Ibid, p. 16.

34 M. Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture. The Study of the Visual after Cultural Turn*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, p. 72.

35 N. Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Routledge, London and New York 1999, p. 4.

The situation of the visual culture studies described above illustrates the contemporary transformations of the definition of the concept of visual culture. Mitchell believes that the emergence of the pictorial turn can lead to a picture theory.³⁶ This sub-discipline falling within the scope of visual culture studies grew out of “the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or ‘visual literacy’ might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality”.³⁷

Mitchell’s understanding of images resides in the general concepts that anchor the different relationships between figures of knowledge. In his *Iconology*, he suggests that the image/picture is not just a special kind of sign, but also a primary concept. Mitchell then takes textuality to be the “foil” of imagery, a secondary notion that can be understood as an alternative model of representation.³⁸ The debate on the meaning of the term “visual culture” should consider the fact that this notion is rather confusing, understood both as a field of knowledge, and as a subject of research, and its very definition has troubled the theoreticians to quite an extent. It was perhaps Mitchell who summed up the situation most accurately, writing that one cannot adopt the generally available meanings of the words “visual” and “culture” to develop a satisfactory definition of visual culture.³⁹ Starting with this assumption, Malcolm Barnard decided to devote an entire chapter of his book to an attempt to define separately the terms “visual” and “cultural” to create a context for further reflection on visual culture.⁴⁰

The described procedures lead in fact to an increasingly “global” meaning of this term. Instead of clarifying it, theorists elaborate on the new contexts in which we can talk of different aspects of visual culture, but also of visibility in contemporary culture. It is a matter for a separate discussion whether this kind of strategy is useful, or whether it leads to conceptual confusion. Suffice it to mention that after a few years Barnard abandoned the “broad concept” of visual culture to describe instead several ways of understanding paintings and other works of art that are only marginally related to their cultural function.⁴¹

³⁶ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, op. cit., p. 15.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1986, p. 43.

³⁹ W.J.T. Mitchell, “What is visual culture?”, in: *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside*, ed. I. Lavin, Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton 1995, p. 208.

⁴⁰ M. Barnard, *Art, Design and Visual Culture. An Introduction*, St. Martin’s Press, New York 1998, pp. 10–31.

⁴¹ M. Barnard, *Approaches to Understanding Visual Culture*, PALGRAVE, New York 2001, pp. 1–3.

In the last few years, the number of publications on visual culture studies has increased extensively, and almost each of them attempts some definition of the notion of “visual culture”.⁴²

But let us return for a moment to the beginning. One of the first books making an attempt to explain the term “visual culture” was *The Art of Describing* (1983) by Svetlana Alpers. The author openly admits to having been inspired by Michael Baxandall, but as the material for her analysis she chose 17th century Dutch paintings, rather than paintings from the Italian Quattrocento.⁴³ In the context of the present considerations, the polemic of Georges Didi-Huberman published in his famous work *Confronting Images*⁴⁴ also seems interesting. Alpers observes that the concept of narrative is relevant for the Italian Quattrocento painting, because the images belonging to this historical period are based on some story. In contrast, she claims that Dutch 17th century painting cannot be perceived in this way, because these are images that are not associated with any story.⁴⁵ Alpers questions the thesis of Alberti, who said that a painting is a kind of narrative, or *istoria*.⁴⁶ The author of *The Art of Describing* believes that the reduction of an image to narration or story is a theoretical misunderstanding. According to Alpers, the meaning and visuality of Dutch painting is to be found just under “the surface of images”. What we see is all there is to see and understand, and visualization becomes a goal in itself.

From this theoretical perspective, *The View of Delft* (1658-1661) by Johannes Vermeer, analyzed by Didi-Huberman, does not refer to any earlier textual source. Didi-Huberman up to a point agrees with the opinion of Alpers, and concedes that Vermeer’s image cannot be assigned to any story. He writes bluntly that “the view of Delft is just a view”.⁴⁷ Alpers says that this image allows us to see

⁴² Currently, the publications within visual culture studies include:

1. *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. N. Mirzoeff, Routledge, London and New York 1998, 2002, 2013.
2. *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, eds I. Heywood, B. Sandywell, M. Gardiner, G. Nadarajan, C. Sonssloff, Berg, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2012.
3. *Visual Culture: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, eds J. Morra, M. Smith, Routledge, London and New York 2006.
4. *Visual Culture Studies. Interviews with Key Thinkers*, ed. M. Smith, SAGE, Los Angeles, London, 2008.

⁴³ See S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1983.

⁴⁴ See G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania 2005.

⁴⁵ See *Ibid.*, pp. 240–247.

⁴⁶ Leon Battista Alberti has written that „The greatest work of the painter is the *istoria*. Bodies are part of the *istoria*, members are parts of the bodies, planes are parts of the members”. L.B. Alberti, *On Painting*, transl. J. R. Spencer, Yale University Press, New Haven 1970, p. 70.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

what Delft looked like in the times of Vermeer, and one can read from it not only the topography of the city, but also the appearance of the buildings (architecture and urban planning), the landscape, and the people. In the image we thus see not only the “view” of the city, but also a set of visual signals, which may be perceived as part of “visual culture”. The images analysed by Alpers also speak of the acts and techniques of seeing and capturing images, and of how the science of those times accounted for them.⁴⁸ Didi-Huberman shares Alpers’s observations, writing that “what is painted on Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century is what was seen in the so-called ‘visual culture’ of the times (the term is borrowed from Baxandall); *it is* what was seen, seen exactly, through techniques of description and scientific measurement of the perceptible world”.⁴⁹ Alpers used the term “visual culture” to refer not only to visual competence, but also to the technical conditions for creating images among specific social groups (both images “seen” and “painted”). Alpers compares 17th century Dutch paintings to other kinds of visual representation, such as maps, scientific illustrations, and various means and methods for creating images that were available at that time.⁵⁰ Her explorations thus focus not so much on painting, as on the broader category of “visual culture”. At the same time, this was one of the first definitions of visual culture ever formulated.⁵¹

However, in his polemic Didi-Huberman talks about a completely different visual model. The image is deprived of meaning (it does not tell any story), but shows us the painter’s way of seeing reality (meaning is replaced by seeing). Didi-Huberman calls this model “visual reflection”, which is the ability to create a transparent and highly accurate representation of the subject (this depends on the technical skills of the painter). In the case of the *The View of Delft*, the subject is urban landscape. It is difficult not to notice in this painting a huge amount of detail and various objects.⁵² Alpers claims that Dutch painting in

⁴⁸ See S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, op. cit., pp. 123–124.

⁴⁹ G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, op. cit., p. 241.

⁵⁰ See S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, op. cit., pp. 119–168.

⁵¹ See M. Rampley, *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*, ed. M. Rampley, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2005, p. 12. Cf. S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁵² G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, op. cit., p. 164. Didi-Huberman believes that *The View of Delft* can be interpreted in a completely different way, as exemplified by a lengthy excerpt from Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, in which we find the following description: „At last he came to the Vermeer, which he remembered as more striking, more different from anything else that he knew, but in which, thanks to the critic’s article, he remarked for the first time some small figures in blue, that the ground was pink, and finally the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall. ‘That is how I ought to have written, he said. My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with several coats of paint, made my language exquisite in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall.’ Meanwhile he was not uncon-

the 17th century was connected with a theory of seeing. As an example in support of this thesis, she mentions the invention of *camera obscura*, which links the mode of painting of Vermeer, who used it, with photography. In this sense, the painting, like a photographic image, is inextricably linked with the knowledge of the depicted object, which is subordinate to the artist's perception.⁵³

Although Didi-Huberman agrees with the suggestions of Alpers, he criticizes her strategy for the reduction of visibility and her one-dimensional approach. In her book, Vermeer's painting becomes a transparent "plane of representation" devoid of materiality, and 17th century Dutch painting becomes subordinated to the scientific model of seeing – a technique for reflecting and representing reality. The main theoretical assumptions contained in the book *The Art of Describing* come down to the rejection of iconicity, which makes one look for a story in the picture. However, Didi-Huberman writes that the difference between this position and the views of Alpers and Erwin Panofsky is illusory. In fact, the assumptions of Alpers prove to be insufficient, as her concept of visual culture involves the subordination of the image to the object represented and reduces painting to the process of description. This point of view is also revealed in the title of her book, *The Art of Describing*. This assumption would eliminate the dichotomy between real-life representation and its symbolization, and as

scious of the gravity of his condition. (...) He repeated to himself: 'Little patch of yellow wall, with a sloping roof, little patch of yellow wall.' While doing so he sank down upon a circular divan; (...) he rolled from the divan to the floor, as visitors and attendants came hurrying to his assistance. He was dead." M. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 5: *The Prisoner*, transl. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, The Modern Library, New York 1992, p. 136. The quoted fragment is not about a description of the city. The fragment of the wall is not its representation, and neither is it a detail subordinated to the whole. The experience described by Marcel Proust refers to matter and emerges from its properties. The yellow patch of colour does not allow Bergotte to look at anything else and causes his death. This scene was invoked by Didi-Huberman to talk in a completely different context about *The View of Delft*, which is not an iconic model and diverges from the ideas of Svetlana Alpers. "Descriptive surfaces" – in the terminology of Alpers – covering the whole of the surface of the painting and identical with it are supplanted by a complex plane defined as the pan, which is connected with the traumatic experience of death. The described transformation allows Didi-Huberman to compare the garishness of the yellow colour of the wall to the visual intensity of the symbol. Didi-Huberman reminds us that in the Freudian interpretation: "The symptom is (...) a two-faced semiotic entity: between radiance and dissimulation, between accident and sovereignty, between event and structure. That is why it presents itself above all as something that 'obscures the situation', to quote Freud (...), although it is 'plastically portrayed', although its visual existence imposes itself with such radiance, such self-evidence, such violence." G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, op. cit., p. 261. The yellow patch in Vermeer's painting draws the eye, and the fragment of the wall fractures representation to such an extent that the painting ceases to be a "descriptive surface" and becomes primarily a material surface. Cf. A. Leśniak, *Obraz płynny*, op. cit., pp. 85-87.

⁵³ See S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, op. cit., pp. 169-221.

a result Alpers' book has contributed to the development of research into the mechanisms of visualization and reception, the relationship between the image and the viewer in the so-called aesthetics of reception, which assumed addressing the presumed expectations of the viewers. Such an attitude encourages us to engage in a dialogue with the image, in image – viewer interactions leading to endowing the image with meaning. The approach of Alpers resulted in the fact that defining visual culture became a discourse burdened with a large number of metaphors. It is not difficult to guess that the very phrase “the art of describing” led to the emergence of metaphors of an “(...) iconic nature which – as you might guess – affect the recipient’s imagination and serve as a point of comparison, illustrating what ‘something’ looks like”.⁵⁴ The high degree of metaphorisation of such formulations is a tendency in contemporary humanities, which strive for inter- and transdisciplinarity. Visuality has affected the ways of conceptualizing social reality, making metaphorical thinking the basic of the methodological paradigm.

Visual communication

The next issue I would like to address in this article is an attempt to define another term relating to the development of visual culture studies, which is “visual communication”. It is worth mentioning that this term has linguistic origins; it derives from the idea of “the language of images”. The very existence of such language is subject to criticism; many authors have questioned it mainly due to the fact that the image “does not mean anything because it does not rely on the meaning of words. Its semantic function is realized only on the discursive level: to pick up the meaning of an image is to read it, decode it in terms of verbal language, translating visual qualities into something that is different from them – an equivalent text”.⁵⁵ If the image cannot be in any way reduced to a verbal text, the legitimacy of the “language of images” seems to be questionable. Building an academic subject, or sub-discipline, on these foundations, also seems unjustified. One may recall that Bryson, relying on Meyer Schapiro’s analysis of Vincent van Gogh’s painting *Old shoes with laces*, wrote that the image “does not surrender to the text or the title describing it; it spreads between it and itself an area of visual difference, in which it engages in a game of iterations with similar images of shoes.”⁵⁶ For this reason, the concept of the “language of images” seems to be an example of “panlinguism” and “linguistic determinism”

⁵⁴ A. Ogonowska, *Twórcze metafory medialne*, Baudrillard – McLuhan – Goffman, UNIVERSITAS, Kraków 2010, p. 11.

⁵⁵ S. Czekalski, *Intertekstualność i malarstwo. Problemy badań nad związkami międzyobrazowymi*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2006, p. 200.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

(the terms borrowed from Göran Sonesson), in which “language is a universal code of meaning for non-discursive systems of signification, or in other words, constructs their level of the signified”.⁵⁷ This type of thinking can be also described as an example of the reduction of visual problems to linguistic ones.

It is not surprising that the term “language of images” is very difficult to find in any theoretical text. One scholar who uses such formulations is Christian Leborg. However, the term may be part of a theoretically misguided project, because in most cases it is not implemented in practice. It regards the image – to paraphrase Derrida – as a “dangerous supplement”, an element that “complements” or “supplements” writing. It implies that “Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a *lexis*”.⁵⁸ For this reason, Roland Barthes’s semiology questioned the concept of the “language of images” because it “reduces the image as a signifier to the signified of linguistic concepts, transcendental to its visual substance”.⁵⁹ However, “The image is essentially irreducible to the text as a form of verbal thought, does not present it or translate it, just as writing is not reducible to the voice expressing the thought-of meaning and does not communicate speech”.⁶⁰ Thus the concept of the “language of images” prompted the formulation of the postulate of autonomy and specificity of the medium of painting, in which the figurative and iconic layer of the image can in no way be translated into verbal language or text. This postulate has been repeatedly invoked in relation to other visual media, for example the medium of film.

Turning to the definition of the concept of “visual communication”, it should be noted that the term is ambiguous and vague. Analyzing the contents of one of the leading publications in the field of visual communication, *The Handbook of Visual Communication*, one may get an impression that the discipline has developed along the lines of visual studies postulated by Mitchell.⁶¹ In this sense, visual communication can be considered a classic example of what Derrida called a “dangerous supplement” (here, to aesthetics and art history),⁶² which inevitably leads to the absorption into its scope of such fields as the theory of

⁵⁷ G. Sonesson, *Pictorial Concepts. Inquiries into the semiotic heritage and its relevance for the analysis of the visual world*, Lund University Press, Malmö 1989, p. 116; cf. R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, transl. A. Lavers and C. Smith, Hill and Wang, New York 1968, pp. 9–10.

⁵⁸ R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, transl. A. Lavers, The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, London 1972, p. 109.

⁵⁹ S. Czekalski, *Intertekstualność i malarstwo*, op. cit., p. 199.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 207.

⁶¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, no. 1 (2), pp. 166–169.

⁶² Cf. W.J.T. Mitchell, “Showing seeing...”, op. cit., pp. 166–169.

perception, semiotic studies of images, or visual rhetoric. The discussion of such issues leads to the situation in which the essence of visual communication is brushed aside, or “supplemented” (by other disciplines). Thus, in order to define visual communication, other concepts are invoked to explain its nature.

This method of “supplementation” is particularly evident in the definition of visual communication given by Christian Leborg. The scholar employs the notions of the “grammar of visual communication” and the “language of images” to define the concept of visual communication. He claims that “The reason for writing a grammar of visual language is the same as for any language: to define its basic elements, describe its patterns and processes, and to understand the relationship between the individual elements in the system”.⁶³

It seems that the trend described above is not confined to visual communication. At one time, research on film, or film studies, took an almost central position in the humanities. In this situation, other methodologies and theoretical findings from other disciplines in the humanities were absorbed into film studies. This led to the emergence of film sociology, psychology and anthropology.

Data visualization

Biology and digital technology have jointly produced the form that Mitchell has called “biopicture”. A biopicture does not resemble a representation, or a simulation, but it is rather a replica, or a “living copy”, created using biocybernetic instruments. Mitchell writes:

A new version of the pictorial turn has taken place in the last twenty years or so. It is a turn toward the ‘biopicture’, or (more precisely) the ‘biodigital picture’, the icon ‘animated’ – that is, given motion and the appearance of life by means of the technosciences of biology and information. The twin inventions of computers and genetic engineering have produced a new twist in the ancient trope of the pictorial turn, and especially in that aspect of images that has likened them to life forms – and vice versa.⁶⁴

Mitchell views the turn towards the biopictures as a version of the pictorial turn. In a sense the biopictures that arise out of the development of biotechnology are alive, like the cloned sheep Dolly. Peter Zawojski notes that “the image (...) is a living replica arising as a result of the meeting of digital technology

⁶³ C. Leborg, *Visual Grammar*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2006, p. 5.

⁶⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2011, p. 70.

with biology, physics and aesthetics in the 'act of creation' (Bildakt), to use a term employed by Mitchell after Horst Bredekamp".⁶⁵ We can talk about creating digital images by cloning them by means of biocybernetic techniques.

The development and visualization of data in the era of the new media is stimulated by the digital turn, which has marked its place in contemporary humanities. Owing to such changes, we can already say that:

This situation poses a new challenge for contemporary humanities. Traditional research methods no longer suffice here. There is an urgent need to employ new concepts and research tools that would enable us to process and understand vast amounts of information (big data). From this arose the idea of combining humanistic reflection with new digital tools that can be used for processing, visualization, presentation and popularization of research results. This trend is referred to today as digital humanities.⁶⁶

The digital turn has transformed contemporary culture and has led to the emergence of "information society"⁶⁷ and "network society".⁶⁸ Competences related to digital media have become crucial in today's world, and people who do not possess them may be excluded from the community. At the same time the amount of digital data which we deal with in everyday life is increasing almost exponentially. The popularity of such websites as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter is also growing. There are also increasing numbers of bloggers, people who use mailing lists, chat rooms, or become members of online communities using social media. This trend is also accompanied by the archivization of digital data, the formation of web galleries and digital museums. Reading and collecting e-books is growing in popularity, and Amazon offers more and more books in digital form. The commercial, public and administrative importance of various media institutions and digital research centres is also increasing, just as the importance of education in the field of visual and digital media. A question may thus be posed: what will become of the world after the digital turn? Can we already talk about a post-digital society, in which the changes and transformations described here have already taken place?

⁶⁵ P. Zawojński, „Nowy ikoniczny zwrot”, [in:] *Materia sztuki*, ed. M. Ostrowicki, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych UNIVERSITAS, Kraków 2010, p. 470.

⁶⁶ A. Radomski, R. Bomba, „Zwrot cyfrowy w humanistyce”, [in:] *Zwrot cyfrowy w humanistyce: Internet/Nowe Media/Kultura 2.0*, ed. A. Radomski and R. Bomba, E-naukowiec, Lublin 2013, p. 7.

⁶⁷ See.

⁶⁸ See M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. 1, Blackwell, Oxford 2011.

The answer to such questions is not simple or straightforward. It all depends on the further development of the new media. Only time will tell what kind of world we will live in. However, if the new media develop in accordance with the trends outlined here, it is expected that their development could lead to the emergence of two independent tendencies. The first one will involve even further development of the new media. This can certainly lead to socio-cultural changes affecting human civilization that have been hinted at here. The other trend will most likely arise out of the acceptance and affirmation of the new media, with a simultaneous appreciation for the old media, especially film and television. It seems that the traditional cinema and participation in various television programs will not disappear. These media will also undergo a process of digitization. It is difficult to underestimate the future of digital and interactive cinema. The importance of high-definition TV and other digital entertainment media will also increase.

In the current progress of the development of digital technology the concept of visualization is gaining new meaning. Nicholas Mirzoeff claims that "One of the most striking features of the new visual culture is the growing tendency to visualize things that are not in themselves visual. Allied to this intellectual move is the growing technological capacity to make visible things that our eyes could not see unaided (...)"⁶⁹ From this point of view, information can also be considered as something that is not visual. In his book *Postmedia* Piotr Celiński argues that "At the current stage of development of digital technology (hardware and software) visibility is primarily a practice of endowing the raw, mathematical sequences of code in databases with anthropologically and culturally accepted forms (by psychology, anthropology of perception, and visual semiotics), i.e. relating them to familiar elements of the traditional visual culture (e.g. the display screen as a reference to the TV screen, a web page as a reference to a printed newspaper)".⁷⁰

In the era of the new media, images have the greatest cultural potential. I have written about this (as Sidey Myoo) as follows: "The concept of the picture seems to be insufficient and disintegrates when it is applied to a 3D environment and the phenomenon of interactivity. (...) What emerges here is the epistemological or anthropological observation: man is surrounded not so much by images of reality, as by the reality of the media (...)"⁷¹ In this situation, one should inquire about the nature of media reality and/or the reality of the image.

⁶⁹ N. Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

⁷⁰ P. Celiński, *Postmedia: Cyfrowy kod i bazy danych*. Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 2013, p. 172.

⁷¹ S. Myoo, „Tożsamość człowieka w środowisku elektronicznym”, *Kwartalnik filmowy* 2008, nr 62/63, p. 143.

The answer to this question seems to be problematic. It is difficult not to get the impression that the reality of the image may resemble virtual reality, which Jean Baudrillard calls the world of appearances or hyperreality. This reality produces a situation in which "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real."⁷² Celiński constructs his definitions of data visualization on the basis of the theory of databases, put forward by Lev Manovich within his *software studies*.⁷³ In this context, Manovich's concept of the database called *media visualizations* seems to be particularly interesting.⁷⁴ It is a digitized database of film, photography, literature, television programs and music videos. The definition of data visualization constructed in relation to these concepts employs such phrases as "new visual environment", "the social democratization of visual economy" co-ordinated by media institutions, or "the formal opening of visual language and images".⁷⁵ One should ask therefore what these phrases mean. The answer to this question may have to involve the recognition of a high degree of metaphorization in these formulations.

Summary

In this paper I have set myself the goal of describing some changes in contemporary culture that may arise in the context of the pictorial/iconic turn and its numerous variations and transformations taking place mainly in the digital environment. Such turns lead to the creation of new terms and new trends in socio-cultural reality. In conclusion one should ask yet another question: what are the risks and benefits of these changes in contemporary culture? It seems that the main threat that we may have to face, arising out of the dynamic development of visual and digital media, is a special kind of "blindness" of which Paul Virilio wrote in *The Vision Machine*. We must realize that the more images will surround us on all sides, the less, paradoxically, we will in fact see with your own eyes. In this situation, we will probably need to use an increasing number of prostheses of sight, i.e. "vision machines" - visual and digital media set for this purpose. If Mirzoeff's claim is true, and if "modern life takes place onscreen,"⁷⁶ then we can expect that the number of people who will live their

⁷² J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, transl. P. Foss, P. Patton and Ph. Beitchman, Columbia University Press, New York 1983, p. 25.

⁷³ P. Celiński, *Postmedia*, op. cit., p. 175.

⁷⁴ L. Manovich, "Media Visualization: Visual Techniques for Exploring Large Media Collections", in: *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, vol. 7: *Media Studies Futures*, ed. K. Gates, Blackwell, Oxford 2012.

⁷⁵ P. Celiński, *Postmedia*, op. cit., p. 175.

⁷⁶ N. Mirzoeff, *Introduction to Visual Culture*, op. cit., p. 1.

life within media and virtual reality will only increase. Non-mediated face to face communication will be replaced by mediated communication operating interface to interface.⁷⁷ Furthermore, if these trends continue and intensify, we can soon expect a society whose primary objective will be the dehumanization and depersonalization of the human subject and a “blind” surrender to computers.

On the other hand, the benefits from the development of visual and digital media can be as substantial for humankind as the risks. The increase in sensitivity to images can make us notice such dimensions of reality as were once unavailable to us. The ability of “visual thinking” as opposed to thinking based on the use of textual and linguistic structures may lead to a new kind of visual perception. The benefits of the pictorial/iconic turn are endless.

However, at present the questions concerning the visual and digital media have already met with serious theoretical reflection within visual culture studies and media studies. It is more and more often suggested that these two areas of research can merge into a single discipline of visual media studies. This is perhaps the first step on the path that was already determined at the beginning of the development of these fields, and within the research as it is developing today, having begun with a reflection on the visual media and picture theory, and moving towards research into new media and contemporary culture. However, we will have to wait for a definitive resolution of this problem. It is all up to the future development of the directions of research and socio-cultural trends discussed here that will help define the shape and dimensions of our existence in the future.

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⁷⁷ See L. Manovich (2001).

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OD KULTURY WIZUALNEJ DO KOMUNIKACJI WIZUALNEJ. PROBLEMATYKA ZWROTU PIKTORIALNEGO / IKONICZNEGO W KULTURZE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ (streszczenie)

Artykuł jest próbą przybliżenia pojęć „kultura wizualna” „komunikacja wizualna” i „wizualizacja danych”, które pojawiły się przy okazji zwrotu piktorialnego i ikonicznego. Zwrot piktorialny spowodował, że obraz urasta obecnie do rangi systemu znakowego, podobnie jak język w refleksji poststrukturalistycznej. Natomiast dzięki przemianom historii sztuki pojawiają się studia kultury wizualnej. Razem z ich powstaniem rodzi się również potrzeba zdefiniowania terminu „kultura wizualna”.

Doris Bachmann-Medick charakteryzuje zwrot ikoniczny jako opóźnioną reakcję historii sztuki na *linguistic turn*, która odkrywa malarstwo jako fenomen tekstowy i dyskursywny. W tej sytuacji rodzi się semiotyka obrazu Normana Brysona, która odwołuje się do pojęcia „języka obrazów”. Jest to kolejna potrzeba zdefiniowania terminu „komunikacji wizualnej”.

Ekspansja nowych mediów stawia kulturę wizualną przed kolejnym wyzwaniem, którym jest potrzeba zdefiniowania terminu „wizualizacja danych”. Mitchell zapowiada nową wersję zwrotu piktorialnego, który odbywa się w kierunku bioobrazów, albo biocyfrowych obrazów. Tym „ożywionym ikonom” nadano cechy życia za pomocą biologiczno-informacyjnej technologii. Jest to kolejny zwrot piktorialnym, który Mitchell nazywał zwrotem biopiktorialnym. Jednak definicja pojęcia „wizualizacji danych” jest kształtowana przez „zwrot cyfrowy”, który powoduje, że „wizualizacja danych” jest praktyką nadawania surowym, matematycznym ciągom kodów baz danych bezpiecznych antropologicznie i kulturowo kształtów. Obecnie definicje „wizualizacji danych” buduje się również w oparciu o teorię baz danych i *software studies* Lwa Manovicha. Na zakończenie chciałbym postawić pytanie dotyczące zagrożeń i korzyści wynikających z obecności zwrotu piktorialnego i ikonicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: visual culture, visual communication, data visualization, pictorial turn.

Konrad Chmielecki