

W.J.T. Mitchell, **What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images**, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 380 pp., \$22.50 (paperback).

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W.J.T. Mitchell has long argued that there has been a visual turn, or what he calls a “pictorial turn,” in contemporary culture and theory in which images, pictures and the realm of the visual have been recognized as being as important and worthy of intense scrutiny as the realm of language. While the “linguistic turn” (Rorty) in the 1960s called attention to the role of language in culture, theory, and everyday life,¹ the notion of a “pictorial turn” signals the importance of pictures and images, and challenges us to be observant and informed critics of visual culture.



W.J.T. Mitchell

In his engaging and only partially ironic titled book *What Do Pictures Want?*, Mitchell explores the life of visual culture in our individual and social lives, providing a comprehensive and integrated discussion of the historical, cross-cultural and theoretical implications of the power of images and pictures. Long our major iconographer, Mitchell is Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago, and editor of the interdisciplinary journal, *Critical Inquiry*.²

In *What Do Pictures Want?*, Mitchell combines a dazzling array of theoretical discourses to develop analyses, interpretations and provocations that enable us to better understand the modalities and power of visual culture. Drawing on a distinguished career as author, lecturer, and editor, Mitchell has pulled together major articles, addresses to scholarly conferences, and new work to present his most comprehensive and probing book to date on contemporary visual culture, one that was awarded the Modern Language Association’s prestigious James Russell Lowell Prize in 2006.³

¹ On Rorty on the “linguistic turn,” see http://www.richard-t-hull.com/publications/rorty_rev.pdf and <http://content.cdlib.org/xtf/view?docId=ft109nb02h&chunk.id=d0e5082&toc.depth=1&toc.id=d0e4388&rand=eschol>.

² For the *Critical Inquiry* website, see <http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/>.

³ Listings and an overview of Mitchell’s work can be found on his home page at <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/faculty/mitchell/home.htm>. His other major works include *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, and *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. The former established Mitchell’s project of critical iconology, while the latter established the “pictorial turn” and grounded his project of

Organized as a systematic architectonic, in *What Do Pictures Want?*, Mitchell divides his subject matter into three parts on Images, Objects, and Media, bolstered by theoretical analyses and interrogations of specific constituent parts of pictures and visual culture. The text generates engagement with a dazzling panorama of sources and literature, and a wide variety of topics concerning the life in images in culture and society. His vision and tools are highly eclectic, drawing on anthropology, biology, art history, Marxism, Freudianism, semiology, and a broad array of contemporary critics and theorists. Indeed, his footnotes provide a tour through current discussions of a tremendous diversity of issues in cultural theory, aesthetics, media theory, and visual culture.

Although his work may be foreboding to those not versed in the profession of art history and discourses of contemporary theory, Mitchell excels in clear definitions, detailed examples, and provocative and original insights. He opens his magnum opus by defining his terms and noting that the “book as a whole...is about pictures, understood as complex assemblages of virtual, material, and symbolic elements” (xiii). Distinguishing between images and pictures, Mitchell takes pictures in an extremely broad sense ranging from those things we hang on our walls, to the “picture shows” we see in the cinema or art museums, to “pictures in the mind” that constitute our views of the world (xiii). After suggesting the complexity of the concept of pictures and need to reconceive of their nature and multiple roles in our lives, Mitchell goes on in the three parts of the book to interrogate the key aspects of pictures starting with images, defined as “any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other” and makes its appearance as a picture (xiii-xiv).

Mitchell’s instructive studies of images in Part One includes probing discussions of images as “vital signs” that play a key role in social life, and of connections between images and desire and the “surplus value” they generate. He opens with an extremely effective gambit of using detailed readings of images of the 9/11 terror attacks and of the cloned sheep Dolly to illustrate the sway of images and the ways that they can evoke powerful fears, as well as seduce, attract, and illuminate our daily lives. While pictures can be destroyed, images can continue to live on, haunting, tempting, and perhaps frightening or inspiring us. They are thus part of what Freud and others designated “the uncanny,” and which critics today refer to as “strange attractors,” or noxious repulsers as the case may be.



“picture theory.” Both are advanced in the text under review, which contains studies from the mid-1990s through the following decade.

In Part Two, Mitchell interrogates the relation between images and objects, while exploring fascinating subcultures of found objects, founding and offending objects, objects and empire, romanticism and the life of things, and original reflections on totemism, fetishism, and idolatry. Mitchell's reflections on objects and empire are a tour-de-force, and his use of concepts of idols, fetishism, and the figure of the totem to explicate the working of imperialism is brilliant. For Mitchell, the construction and use of these categories, often used to denigrate "primitive" or "savage" people, can be seen as "objectivist projections of a kind of collective imperial subject, fantasies about other people, specifically other people's beliefs about certain kinds of objects" (163). Nailing the role of these concepts in establishing and ideologically grounding imperialism, Mitchell writes:

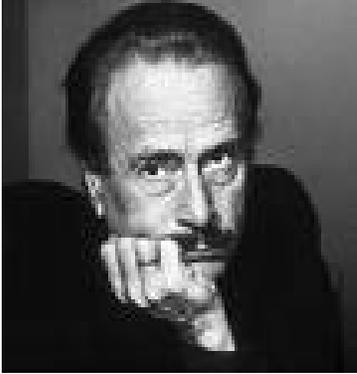
"Totemism, fetishism, and idolatry are thus 'secondary beliefs,' beliefs about the beliefs of other people, and thus inseparable from (in fact, constitutive of) systems of racial or collective prejudice. They involve quite general notions about the operations of the 'savage' or 'primitive' mentality — that the natives are invariably gullible and superstitious; that they live in a world of fear and ignorance where these objects compensate for their weakness; that they lack the ability to make distinctions between animate and inanimate objects" (162).

In a dazzling historical overview, Mitchell suggests that: "It is tempting to summarize the history of imperialism as the sequence from idolatry (empires of conquest and colonization of territory) to fetishism (mercantilist, seafaring empires) to totemism (the mature, that is to say, British, form of empire, combining mercantilism and territorial expansion, the spread of trading monopolies and religious missions)" (163).

In a subsequent stunning analysis, Mitchell suggests that if "idols, fetishes, and totems were the bad objects of imperialism, we need to ask ourselves what is the bad object of *empire*, of the dematerialized, virtual world of globalization we now inhabit" (167). The answer here is *fossils*, those material remains of extinct life, which "signify species death, the utter vanishing of an entire class of living things" (167). While we gaze at fossils in museums with great fascination, they also call attention, Mitchell notes, to species extinction, raising the specter of the disappearance of human beings, a possibility made real in a cybernetic and post-humanist world, as Mitchell will discuss in a later chapter" (167).⁴



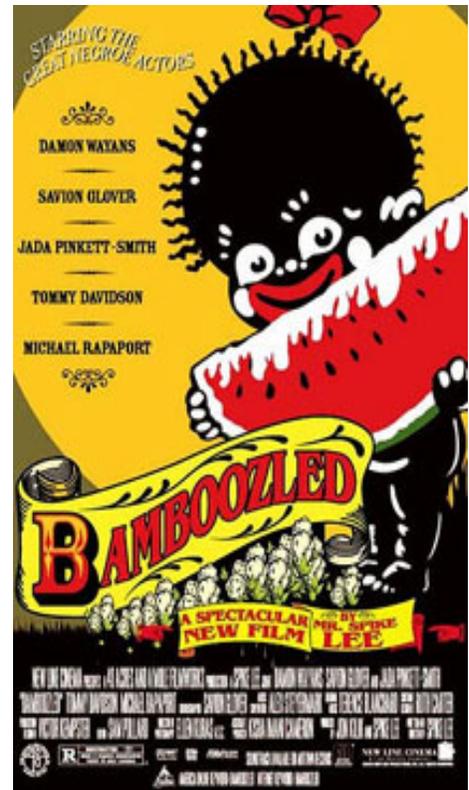
⁴ The analysis of the fossil and the "cult of the dinosaur" (167) was the topic of another book by Mitchell and Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species and Posthumanist Theory*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2003, which can be explored at <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/hfs.cgi/00/15356.cml>.



Part Three engages media and as Mitchell puts it: “If images are life-forms, and objects are the bodies they animate, then media are the habitats or ecosystems in which pictures come alive” (198). Recognizing the importance of Marshall McLuhan for media theory, Mitchell proposes a less ambitious project for McLuhan’s “understanding media” that he calls “addressing media” (203f). By this he means confronting media “not as if they were logical systems or structures but as if they were environments where images live, or personas and avatars that address us and can be addressed in turn” (203).⁵

A medium, Mitchell suggests, is more than the material substrate of images, but composes, as Raymond Williams proposes, “a material *social practice*, a set of skills, habits, techniques, tools, codes and conventions” (203). But while Williams wanted to replace the whole idea of medium with social practice, Mitchell wants to keep media as a “middle ground between materials and the things people do with them” (204).

After some useful clarification of concept of media (205ff), Mitchell engages in extremely rich studies of specific media, taking certain key artists or works as exemplary or illustrative of his theoretical perspectives. A chapter on painting focuses on a range of abstract art; his analysis of sculpture uses British artist Anthony Gormley as a case study; his optic on photography takes American photographer Robert Frank, and more broadly American photography, as its subject; the engagement with film interrogates Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*, and a study of “The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction” takes popular science fiction and cyborg films, digital culture, and some contemporary art as its domain. In each case, Mitchell illuminates the particular medium, key illustrative examples and cases, and makes many original observations and analyses concerning his subject-matters.



⁵ Curiously, although in this quote Mitchell proposes an environmental approach to media that fits into his vitalistic perspectives, it seems to reject a systems theory approach in a discussion of Niklas Luhmann after first critiquing Luhmann and systems theory (208f). Mitchell then seems to invite systems theory into part of his media theory (209f), signaling his openness to a wide diversity of theories — but perhaps also occasional theoretical muddle. Revealingly, Mitchell does not use systems theory in the studies of specific media in Part Three that privilege art history and cultural studies approaches.

For instance, the reading of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* interprets the film as a "metapicture that explores the media of television, cinema, writing, sculpture, dance, and the Internet, as well as specific generic usages of media in fashion, advertising, news, stand-up comedy, and the minstrel show" (295). It critically interrogates a wide range of racial stereotypes of African Americans, inspiring Mitchell to a penetrating analysis of stereotypes as an important type of "living image" in the middle ground between fantasy and ideology, a mask and veil that separates people, and yet an invisible and ordinary vehicle of prejudice and racism (295f).⁶ For Mitchell:

Bamboozled is a metapicture — a picture about pictures, a picture that conducts a self-conscious inquiry into the life of images, especially racial images, and the way they circulate in media and everyday life. Here is Lee's own comment on this

I want people to think about the power of images, not just in terms of race, but how imagery is used and what sort of social impact it has—how we talk, how we think, how we view one another. In particular, I want them to see how film and television have historically from the birth of both mediums, produced and perpetuated distorted images. Film and television started out that way, and here we are, at the dawn of a new century and a lot of that madness is still with us today (301).

Hence, in *What Do Pictures Want?* Mitchell carries out tour-de-force readings of specific images and pictures like 9/11, Dolly the cloned sheep, the Golden Calf of Biblical lore, the dinosaur, many icons of art history, including the sculptures of Anthony Gormley, the photos of Robert Frank, and lesser known works of contemporary art, deftly deploying hermeneutics, semiotics, rhetoric, and a range of critical theories. Yet Mitchell insists that he is primarily concerned "to put our relation to the work into question, to make the relationality of image and beholder the field of investigation ... to turn analysis of pictures toward questions of process, affect, and to put in question the spectator position" (49).

If pictures, then, could be taken collectively as a person, W.J.T. Mitchell has written a splendid biography of a fascinating and highly complex individual. While Mitchell argues against crude anthropomorphizing and vitalizing of images, it seems impossible we will ever just let images be images —inanimate specters with no intrinsic value other than what we, as living things, impose upon them. The "living image" seems an apt metaphor for these things that do seem to demand and desire that invariable "something" from us in our individual and social life.

Although Mitchell resists ascribing a primacy to biology (89), in the title and unfolding of *What Do Pictures Want?*, as a "thought experiment" (30), he adopts a vitalistic perspective, and asks us to consider images as living, organic beings that make demands of us, embody desires, and radiate value. Of course, we know that images fascinate and sometimes horrify us, appall and seduce us, and that we are deeply

⁶ From Stephen Duncombe's review in this journal, we assume that Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen's *Typecasting: On the Arts & Sciences of Human Inequality* provides a hefty and important work on stereotypes; see <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/133/65>.

attracted to and live within a world of images. Clearly images have value and generate surplus-value, sometimes quite significant value as art auctions, copyright legal battles, and advertising budgets indicate. Yet Mitchell also suggests, signaling the quasi-irony of his title and quest, that perhaps pictures want nothing of us, but nonetheless we should consider them as living beings, try to comprehend them on their own terms, situate them within their life-histories and environments, study their effects and after-life, and try to detect their mysteries.

Indeed, both idolaters and iconoclasts attest to the vitality and power of images. Idolaters, who fetishize art works, artifacts of media culture, advertising images, celebrities or the like, demonstrate the power of images in our society, an almost taken-for-granted assumption of art history and cultural studies which indeed helps legitimate the disciplines. Iconoclasts too testify to the power of images in our culture, as when the Taliban destroyed ancient Buddhist temples in Afghanistan. Or, taking our own example, in the early 1990's Sinead O'Connor ripped up a picture of Pope John Paul II on *Saturday Night Live*, subsequently stalling her mainstream career for well over a decade from the backlash that resulted against her decidedly political statement. O'Connor's action and the response to it indicate the confluence of idolaters and iconoclasts alike on the power of images. The picture was merely that—a photograph. O'Connor did nothing to the Pope himself, nor to the church, in the act of tearing the picture, but to millions of practitioners of the Catholic faith, she committed an act of symbolic violence upon an individual person and upon a collective belief system embodied in a religious social institution. The act was recorded as another image on *Saturday Night Live*, creating a media spectacle of an iconoclastic attack on the Pope. Yet, from a skeptic's perspective, it was a non-event — merely a picture of a person destroying a picture.⁷



Arguing that we have a “double consciousness about images” (8) whereby we are attracted to them and can be distanced and sharply critical at the same time, or critical and yet take them as serious objects of study, Mitchell proposes a “third way” beyond idolaters who simply celebrate images, or iconoclasts who want to blast them away. Against these one-sided approaches, Mitchell recommends “Nietzsche’s strategy of ‘sounding the idols’ with the ‘tuning fork’ of critical or philosophical language. This would be a mode of criticism that did not dream of getting beyond images, beyond representation, of smashing the false images that bedevil us, or even of producing a definitive separation between true and false images. It would be a delicate critical practice that struck images with just enough force to make them resonate, but not so much as to smash them” (8-9).⁸ Mocking the iconoclast, Mitchell notes in an

⁷ One can view the original NBC broadcast on YouTube by clicking here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Owa_CFBaWpw.

⁸ Although Mitchell opens by taking “pictures” as his key concept and is famous for recommending a “pictorial turn” in the study of culture, often the term “images” for him stands in for “pictures” when he is discussing his project and/or field of inquiry. Likewise, in Part One on “Images” he has a chapter titled “What Do Pictures Want?” We suspect that his tendency to collapse images and pictures into each other in

oft-quoted *bon mot*: "Pictures are a popular political antagonist because one can take a tough stand on them, and yet, at the end of the day, everything remains pretty much the same" (p. 33).

On the whole, Mitchell succeeds in convincing readers to take pictures seriously, and his categorical distinctions are useful and enlightening, his analyses often brilliant, and the scope of the project is highly impressive, but we must admit some reservations about his occasional positioning images as subaltern and gendered (29f, 34ff, 46, *passim*). It is true that sometimes images are denigrated, held in contempt, or abused, but the very power of images to create idolaters and fetishists, as well as iconoclasts, attest to the frequent power of images' over people. We are also skeptical that it helps to gender "images as women" and analogize the question "What do images want" with Freud's infamous query of "What do women want?" (35), or Fanon's query: "What does the black man want" (29).

Images and their embodiment in pictures may be an Other to human beings and perhaps subordinate to words in many people's view of things, but it is not clear that they embody subordinate subject positions, nor are they oppressed in the same ways as women and people of color. Nor are images in general gendered, although they certainly can be in some discourses or instances. No doubt Mitchell is being ironic and provocative and uses the notion of images and subalternity to provoke us to reflect on images and how we see and use them, but, like Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* that he so cogently reads, the gamble is a tricky one in an era of intense race and gender critical consciousness.

Moreover, we are skeptical of some of Mitchell's claims concerning what images desire, just as we were put off by his gendering images and positioning them as subaltern. Is eliciting a reaction the same as desiring one? Can we speak of images as animate subjects/objects to our flesh and blood subjects as things that "want" from us as much as we want something from them?



Mitchell states: "Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language" (47). We are not sure, however, that pictures can demand equal rights, as it is generally groups of oppressed people that demand rights, but we would agree that images are as important as words in our contemporary society and are equally worthy of our attention.

And when Mitchell says that "[w]hat sculpture wants is a place, a site, a location both literally and figuratively" (250), he is basically articulating his own view of sculpture, congruent in this case with many art historians, rather than the voice of sculpture itself.

Further, while it is easy to agree that "media want you" (221), it is not the medium per se that has this wish, but an entire assemblage of institutions, practices, discourses, and humans finding themselves in this matrix. Mitchell's primary focus is on Images, Objects and Media and he defocuses attention on the artist or artfactor, the art/artifact production apparatus, aesthetics, and audience reception or effects of the work, although sometimes these issues arise and are in play in his rich and productive text. Mitchell is often

many of his discussions indicates the primacy of images in Mitchell's imaginary within his "picture theory," since for Mitchell images can be eternal, whereas pictures necessarily suffer the ravages of time.

very good, moreover, at inserting his analyses into socio-political contexts and developing what Walter Benjamin called "dialectical images," as when he interrogates the image of the raptor in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* that has its DNA code superimposed on its image (figure 80 on p. 316). Spielberg's cybernetic image embodies the most up-to-date cinematographic and computer technology and the most ancient forms of life, highlighting a new cultural dominant played against a once-dominant species. Thus the image encompasses: "The inseparable but contrary twins of biotechnology, constant innovation and constant obsolescence, the creation and extinction of life, reproductive cloning and the annihilation of a species, are fused here in a single gestalt" (324).

Finally, Mitchell's ambitious work also aims at providing critical perspectives on the contemporary era, as when in a discussion of fossils and dinosaurs, he notes how they point to the obsolescence of an entire species and world, and remind us of the finitude of our own species and the social system of capitalism that appears in the era of globalization like the final horizon of human history. Yet capitalism with its Moloch-like greed and unrestrained consumption of finite natural resources like oil, points to the possibility of a collapse of our ecosphere, as Al Gore and critics of global warming remind us. Furthermore, as Mitchell indicates in his chapter on "biocybernetic reproduction," with the forces of biotechnology and computerization working together new life forms are emerging that could produce a posthuman era. In a digital culture, culture, technology, and even human and natural life are up for grabs, generating new types of texts, cultural forms, people, and images, providing critical cultural and communication theorists an ever-expanding agenda. In this project of engaging the contemporary, we can thank W.J.T. Mitchell for helping us along the way, grasping the importance of the visual and the need to take pictures seriously.

