

# The Image and the Gaze. On the 'Logic' of Iconic Structures

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## AMBIGUITY OF THE IMAGE

It is not always easy to decide whether something is an image or not. Some objects are images without revealing themselves as such, while others are not images at all, and only appear like them. Design objects for instance have a genuine image-like quality, as their iconicity conceals their materiality, while the actual value of the object is assessed according to its form, its exterior appearance. On the other hand – especially in the context of science and technology – we are confronted with iconic textures like maps, blueprints and diagrams which cannot be subsumed under the category of the pictorial, as they are much closer to writings which have to be 'read' than to images which have to be viewed. This does not mean that one cannot talk about 'the image' in general, just because only particular images and objects exist, and their singularity leads beyond the scope of any unified term – although it appears to be problematic to speak of 'the image' in an all-encompassing singular way, in order to gather and collect the characteristics of 'all' images. In contrast, the pictorial is to be understood in the sense of a special 'mediality', the structure of which is to be examined here. On the one hand, this structure participates in a structure of mediality itself; on the other hand, it preserves a characteristic order in this structure. It can be deciphered as an order of 'showing'.<sup>1</sup> It cannot be deduced solely via the structure of representation, or via the symbolic contents of the depiction, or via the techniques of visualization – the methods of making visible and being made visible. An examination of the close interplay of the gaze and the image must be included in the analysis of the pictorial. It is possible to differentiate between at least three levels of the iconic in this context, (a) the actual depiction or representation which, on occasion, may also turn up blank, (b) the methods of visibility with their specific aesthetic and technical strategies as well as (c) ultimately those conditions which cause the eye to be fettered by a visible object and allow vision to become aware of a visible in the first place.

This last relationship, however, proves to be extremely tricky and conflicted. Its complexity begins with the fact that the image requires the gaze, while gazes do not inevitably generate images. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the image is primarily connected to invisibility,<sup>2</sup> requiring a particular gaze to initially see something *as* an image – a gaze that one can identify as a 'double vision'. This 'double vision' becomes the subject of the interplay between visibility and invisibility in multiple ways. If one wants to decipher the mediality of the pictorial and its structure, then one needs to proceed from this double gaze and its multiple interlacing between 'withdrawal' and 'excess'.

## PICTORIALITY AND VISIBILITY

Initially, to see an image means to perceive something ‘as’ an image as well as to perceive the things shown by the image. The phrasing alone alludes to an instance of duplicity: the ‘image as image’ as well as the ‘image as a thing’ that makes ‘something’ visible or brings it into view, regardless whether it is an object, a figure, a colour or a simple division of a tableau. Thus, a gaping difference exists between pictoriality and the creation of visibility, which nonetheless remains invisible ‘in its quality’ *as* a difference, because that which becomes visible only does so by virtue of the images themselves creating this visibility. This difference ‘marks’ the pictorial, as it is constitutive – *as* a difference – for the visibility of the image itself, as far as it represents the prerequisite for the possibility of iconic visuality. That is: an instance of invisibility constitutes a visibility, with a rift running between the visible and the invisible, not right through the image, but rather across it – in another dimension, so to speak. It does not split the image, it does not divide it, but separates it into image and ‘likeness’ (*Ab-Bildung*), or medium and representation – in this context, the terms ‘likeness’ and ‘representation’ are to be used in their general meaning, from depiction to indication, from symbolization to that which ‘offers’ a view to the gaze.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, this difference leads to a number of consequences. First of all, to see an image therefore means to perceive it *as* an image – and not as something else. This finding also allows for an inversion: A thing that can be perceived as an image may alternatively *not* be seen as such. Accordingly, seeing an image permits a change of attention, the literal ‘reflection’ of the image as a thing, its construction, its usage, its hanging or its materiality. We are not able to perform this change intentionally, we cannot employ it freely to shift back and forth between perspectives; in fact, complicated medial strategies are necessary at times to carry out this inversion, and art has developed numerous practices to blur and irritate the gaze. While we do not control the gaze and thus the image, it is not unusual for the image to control us, to captivate us and to force its direction upon us, making ‘other’ means of detachment and distancing necessary to disentangle ourselves from its illusion and its powers of deception. The other aspect of this difference results in images being less expressive; they are not so much disposed to impart something to the observer, instead, they rather – as has been suggested above – *show*. Images are certainly quite able to ‘tell’ something, but where they represent or intimate something, they represent or intimate in a mode of showing. This showing, or indication, differs from observation and also from comprehension because it opens up a view; but the visible generated thus – even if it is the visibility of a thing – is different from merely seeing a thing. René Magritte coined the *aperçu* that pictures are viewed differently than objects in space.<sup>4</sup> This suggestion hints at the special medial status of the image, namely the difference between the visible, which is constituted by it and the visual that we encounter. It implies that the visible of the image is different from the visible of the non-image that we face in our visual experience – even if the image itself belongs to the things which exist in space and can be experienced as such. This also means that the gaze towards the image differs from the gaze in normal perception, even if they both relate to each other. Apparently, some quality must be added so that something can be seen *in* the image, just as, inversely, something normally pertaining to the object is not enough to turn it into an image; in point of fact, the pictorial quality is experienced first and foremost due to a specific

‘kind of perception’, which turns something into an ‘image of something’, just as the image has a quality which turns the thing, that one can experience visually, into a ‘representation’. The aforementioned difference is not always easy to spot, particularly since many things which ostensibly do not perform as images can turn into an image if one observes them through the lens of the iconic gaze. This gaze, on the other hand, only exists where images have already been experienced: the view of a landscape, a look through a window, mirrors, photographs, monochrome canvasses, masks, patterns on a wallpaper or geometric figures and simple, colored rags nailed to a wall. It is their ‘framing’ which turns these sights into images – although not necessarily, as they can be perceived differently or even not at all.

Consequently, the *perception of a frame* appears as the quality, which has to be added to the gaze, to perception itself, in order to turn it into an iconic experience. At the same time, framing does not automatically refer to that thing which surrounds an image and separates its interior from the exterior, but rather to the *dispositif* – meaning the system of material and non-material conditions which mark a ‘border’ in numerous possible ways, be it via a real or imagined frame, a certain format or a material medium, like a plate which transforms what is displayed on it invariably into a surface, just to name one of many possible examples. Even images that technically move their edges out of the field of vision, like projections in *IMAX*-cinemas or *Fulldomes*, are characterized by this border, at least by the edge of the screen, the dome, the spatial arrangement and the rows of seats which fix the gaze, and so on: they facilitate the viewing of something *as* the viewing of an image, while they limit the viewing to this function at the same time; their restriction bears comparison with the framing that forces the visual to turn into the iconic and trains or disciplines that which can be tentatively called ‘iconic vision’.

All categories of technical illusionism, which can be addressed as the ‘immersiveness’ of the image, find the source of their dynamic – but also of their futility – in this structure. Its aim amounts to a paradox: the effacement of that which constitutes the viewing of an image – and thus the effacement of pictoriality as a medium. The logic of technological progress exists due to this *telos*: ‘a medium that negates its own mediality’.

## THE ICONIC AND DISCURSIVE ‘AS’

It is, however, the framing *dispositif* that initially turns the image-like into an image and produces the duplicity of ‘viewing something as an image’ and ‘observing something in the image’. Every border is marked with a difference, and it constitutes itself along this difference. Here, it can be designated as ‘iconic’. Therefore, we encounter a variation that concerns Gottfried Boehm’s topic of the “iconic difference”<sup>5</sup>, which originally turned pictorial studies into a philosophical discipline. This also denotes precisely the difference that constitutes the quality of the image as a medium. Consequently, its framing or difference has two results, which coincide directly with the duplicity of the gaze introduced above. (a) First of all, it sets something apart from its surroundings *as* an image and thus emphasizes it. (b) Secondly it makes something visible ‘as a representation of something’, i.e.: it shows something ‘as’ something. Therefore, along with the pictoriality of the image, it characterizes the representation of something ‘as’ a specific representation and consequently generates that which can be denoted as an ‘iconic as’ as distinguished from the ‘apophantic’ or ‘hermeneutic as’. It signifies, even if it generates this significance not in the medium of the sign, but in the

medium of the image. Accordingly, ‘framing / difference’ indicates that which both makes an image possible, and also generates the pictoriality of the image that allows it ‘to show’, ‘represent’, ‘display something’ or make it visible ‘as something’. Because this occurs in the visual medium which is subject to other laws than discursive media like scripts and numbers, it still has to be differentiated from the ‘hermeneutic’ and thus from the ‘semiological’ and the ‘discursive as’ – but initially, such a separation points out nothing more than the necessity of making a distinction between the registers of the ‘sayable’ and denotable on the one hand and of the iconic on the other, while its characteristics *as* a distinction still have to be gauged. In turn, this is the distinction that characterizes the medial peculiarity of the image in contrast to text, script and mathematical structures, as well as bestows the image, its distinct ‘logic’, which does not conform to the ‘logic’ of the symbolic or the discrete and cannot be reduced to them.<sup>6</sup> It reveals that the particular mediality of the image cannot be reduced to a grammatical, semiotic or rhetoric mode; in fact, we are dealing with a systematic incompatibility, which simultaneously raises the question of its describability, which as a discursive description has to remain inadequate with regards to iconic processes.<sup>7</sup> As an additional consequence, any attempts to reduce ‘visual strategies of staging’ to rhetoric, and thus to figures which can be traced back to speech, or to simply conceive the image as a metaphor or a method of allegorization appear obsolete.<sup>8</sup> To put it differently: semiotics, hermeneutics or ‘iconology’ prove to be inadequate approaches for a theory of pictoriality, because they disregard precisely the key aspect that would have to be denoted as the mediality of the image in the proper sense. Moreover, the image resists a thorough discursive analysis, as is shown by the failing of *ekphrasis*, which, by interminable utilization of terminology only shifts and enlarges the gap between discourse and pictoriality instead of closing it. If, alternatively, a discursive analysis is at all possible, if the image can be completely transformed into language, then it would be nothing but a readable text and its observation a continual reading.

In contrast, the approach presented here insists on a fundamental untranslatability, an incommensurability of images and other medial modalities. It suggests taking the gaze as a starting point for deciphering the peculiarity of the pictorial; and thus to place the pictorial in the spectrum of perceptions, which originally don’t have a seamless relation with terminology. Consequently, this approach insists on the intuition that the relation between image and gaze defines the specific format of the medium, which requires other means than those borrowed from sign theory or literary studies and linguistics. The precise examination of this intuition leads to the discovery of a series of divisions that structure the relation between image and gaze; the use of the plural form is meant to underline the fact that this structure consists of a system of differences, of *aporias* and *chiasmi* which evoke varied series of ‘perforations’. And the task of a philosophy of the pictorial that bases itself on the gaze has to be committed to reconstructing the mediality of the image and the specific scopophilia it evokes from this inherent system of differences. At the same time, this approach also highlights manifold traces of invisibilities that organize the complex interplay of ‘withdrawal’ and ‘excess’ in the image.

## REFLEXIVITY AND DEFRAMING

The first principle of the gaze's division is constituted by the framing mentioned above. Not only does framing situate a difference via pictorial means, by intersecting or separating, but it is also based upon a material arrangement, which focuses the gaze to the same extent that it indicates and signalizes – be it via the rim of an ocular, the lens of a projector, a screen or spatial boundaries and the like. This has always been utilized or reflected upon by the arts – whether in the form of mirrors that invert or unveil elements not covered by the spatial arrangement, as in the case of Diego Velázquez *Las Meniñas*,<sup>9</sup> or the pastose and expressive quality of coloring that exposes as well as suspends the corporeality of the object in works by Cézanne or Van Gogh. But, at the same time, modernism has pointed out the impossibility of this endeavor. Take, for example, Maurice Denis' plain remark that, before it becomes a “naked woman” or an “anecdote”, an image is “essentially a level surface which is covered by paints in a certain arrangement”,<sup>10</sup> to which Man Ray adds that “as a form of expression, the art of painting – as a simulation of matter or of an arbitrary inspiring subject – [is] characterized by the color and structure of the material, that is by pigments and other materials that can reduced to two dimensions.”<sup>11</sup> If the surface, the materiality of the image – or its *dispositif* – happens to be the prerequisite of presentability – a fact which, when applied to the gaze, becomes the precondition for viewing to literally turn at the borders of pictoriality – then framing, in turn, evolves into the principle of a reflexivity that draws attention to something which is veiled by the image at the same time: the scene of its visualization. The viewing of the image shifts between these two poles. This is the reason why we referred to a ‘double’ gaze: its viewing, as far as it perceives anything in the image, requires the refraction and inversion of the gaze at the image, in order to make it possible to discern between picture and ‘depiction’ or medium and representation at any time. The viewing of an image is necessarily reflexive, and this also means that one is able to turn towards the pictoriality of the image itself – and to know at all times that one is viewing an image.

Theoretical possibilities are not real possibilities; in fact other prerequisites are necessary to turn one into the other. For this does not only concern the reflection of the representation's form, but also the exposure of mediality itself; i.e. the appearance of the medium ‘as’ a medium, which allows an analysis of its structure, just as making it visible includes a paradox. Therefore, the principle of reflexivity is likewise a prerequisite of viewing the image and of the discovery of mediality itself. Only because of this principle, a media theory of the image exists. Art has always capitalized on this – exemplarily in Magritte's reflections on the image in *Les mots et les images* (1929) or the indistinguishability of transparency and opacity in Marcel Duchamp's *Grand Verre* (1923)<sup>12</sup>, the large window-image which, at the same time enables and obstructs the view through it; the sites of fracture that are present in this work anticipate those interferences that later constituted the actual genre of video art. By deceiving the eyes and other paradoxical strategies it seeks to refract – manifestly as well as latently – the illusionism of pictoriality, as a way to make the elements visible that generate visibility in the first place.

But this can be inverted as well, because the conditions of reflection are simultaneously the conditions of its very negation. The desire for technological perfection in the production of

images aims in this direction: in this sphere, iconic reflexivity becomes a tool of illusion. Thus, framing and deframing refer to each other; just like difference and its annulment via ‘immersion,’ which share a similar connection. Both shift like foreground and background in an optical illusion and terminate the varied history between art and technology. Their correlatives constitute the strategies of visualization concerning the mathematical construction of the image as well as the device-based manipulation of the field of vision and the systems of optics, which equally direct and blind the gaze. But because reflexivity as the constituent of image-viewing cannot be completely effaced, they also grow to monstrous proportions and turn into a synopsis and totalization of the gaze, as demonstrated most notably by the techniques of illusion prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: their enhancement and excess exposes an ‘iconic claim to power’, which Nietzsche and Heidegger have demarcated as a general characteristic of the technological in the shape of a ‘will to power’.

It is subject to another shift with relation to the digitalization of the pictorial, its constructability without an index, which photography invariably still left intact. Since this development, effects have written themselves into the visible, without being visible themselves, because no residual traces remain. Image and gaze submit to the regime of those elements that keep themselves unrecognizable as a regime. Accordingly, these ‘imagings’ use devices and algorithms to install orders of signs that cause the pictorial itself to withdraw, only to generate it anew as an ‘iconic grapheme’ by means of numerical and statistical methods.<sup>13</sup> But technology does not continue with the classical *illusio*, insofar as this would always relate to a *mimesis* based upon ontology, but as *simulatio* that proves to be committed completely to the ‘art’ of the mathematical which proceeds *syntactically* and therefore independent of any discrete content. That which is ‘on offer to be viewed’ does not conform to immersion or *illusion* anymore, but turns into fictionality. Here, the term of the ‘fictional’ does point to literary forms, but refers to the mathematical term *existence*, which only denotes a *possibility* subject to the restriction of formal coherence, not a reality. This becomes particularly virulent in the case of digitally generated ‘images in science’, which do not proceed from mimetic reference, but are based on the computer-aided processing of probabilistic amounts of data, which are used – often with the aid of ‘smoothing’ and the truncation of extreme values – to make something visible that otherwise would not submit to any kind of visibility. This is not the interplay of generating visibility and invisibility that dominated visualization for centuries, but rather the representation of something non-visual which only follows a ‘graphemic’ and not a visual ‘trace’.<sup>14</sup> As a result, we are dealing with abstract patterns that – as with scanning tunneling microscopy – are generated by scans of distances and their statistical extrapolation, and only function as genuine scriptures. Of course, the explosiveness of an ‘iconic ideology’ lurks within these depictions, which systematically play with the most prominent characteristic of the image: the power to make something visible and to feign verisimilitude in the process. The image employed as an argument in scientific discourse is in danger of succumbing to this ideology.

## IRREPRESENTABILITY

As the development of the technical generation of images progresses in this manner, from *illusio* to graphemic *simulatio*, it simultaneously follows a ‘logic’ in which the division of the gaze is annulled; a division that appears as constitutive of the image as a medium. Thus a

tendency appears that suggests the erasure of the image as such and its morphing into three-dimensional structures or walkable spaces. But this tendency also exploits the order of framing or difference to the same extent as it is teleologically guided by the images' principle of reflection. Here, the paradox of the endeavor reveals a central feature of the structure of the medial itself. While images are cut by their framing and their visible elements are raised by *dispositifs* and implemented by technical devices, these remain without outline *in* the image itself. They do not stand out. The prerequisites of pictoriality thus assert themselves as something that is irrepresentable within the pictorial. Every image is divided by this difference between representation and irrepresentability, which can never be effaced or obliterated by any kind of technical *perfectio*. In other words: the image withdraws its own mediality. It keeps its mediality in the sphere of the invisible. This invisibility corresponds to a 'dialectics of mediality' that consists of the medium's peculiar quality to conceal itself in its appearance.<sup>15</sup> We look by the means of devices, optical appliances or techniques of visualization, but we do not look at them. We recognize or observe something due to the manner of its shape, its coloring, due to a specific direction of the image or choice of detail – but, as modalities of production or enactment, these elements remain merely accompaniments: *they show themselves*. Even when we encounter only algorithms which calculate images as graphs we look right through them. While the medium *as* a medium allows the possibility of refraction and thus a reflection at any time, it forfeits its function concurrent to the degree of its surfacing *as a medium*: the self-observation turns into a disruption, a dysfunctionality, as has been the topic of e.g. Nam June Paik's early television art which addressed the blindness of the apparatus.

The distinction which thus emerges is *preliminary* even to the "iconic difference"; it enters into it as an 'interplay' of appearing and vanishing. It would be possible to speak of a 'difference concerning the difference', although this is not the distinction between picture and 'de-piction' respectively medium and representation, but rather the distinction between medium and mediality, image and pictoriality. It enters into a relation of *negativity* towards the represented and visible. This explains the reference to invisibility: It points to the contours of a *negative aesthetics of the image and the medium*. They suggest, that only the image as well as its representation appear – but not the mediality: it remains at the back of visibility as something that is always hidden. It constitutes this visibility, but, as a conditional, it does not generate a position in the image, in the field of vision, because it initially opens up and directs the image *as* an image.

This finding is characteristic for every medium qua 'middle' or 'mediation', insofar a *genuine dualism* is inherent in this 'inbetweenness': to expose itself in the process of representation while not making itself recognizable. While images are able to express or represent *something* – and in this they appear "similar to language"<sup>16</sup> to the same extent that they refuse language itself – they cannot represent *by what means* they represent: *this shows itself*. The showing conforms to irrepresentability: it is neither able to show *at what* it is pointing, nor *by what means* it is showing. Instead, it points in a certain direction, uses allusions, displays or parades itself. Here, the figure of 'showing / concealing' can be borrowed from Wittgenstein's early work. Language, as is formulated in the *Tractatus*, can speak only because of its "logical form", which, however, cannot be expressed in words. Thus, it is not able to additionally express its own structural or performative format: This "shows itself".<sup>17</sup> Images direct the attention in a similar manner, they make something recognizable, *they show*, but in a way

which *does not show the modalities of their showing in the process* – they elude the visualization of their function where it concerns the creation of visibility. In the image, showing corresponds to the aesthetic dimension. It points out the duplicity of semblance and appearance and leads – beyond the legible, the *dispositif*, the framing and the ‘iconic as’ – to the manner of its specific phenomenality. An image, as it represents something, must appear in the same instant, which means that it must show *itself* in the process of showing and exhibit the means of its representation, its structure as a medium and its materiality, while these suspend and limit the representation at the same moment. The whole complex logic of the ‘showable’ and the ‘unshowable (non-showable)’ is linked to this, in a manner which corresponds to the relation between effable and ineffable present in the discursive. Concerning language, Wittgenstein came to the conclusion that „one [...] [cannot] describe the nature of language employing language”<sup>18</sup>: „Language has to speak for itself.”<sup>19</sup> He adds: “We are confronted by a kind of theory of relativity pertaining to language.”<sup>20</sup> The philosophy of language fails, because it has to express itself in language about language. Thus, a withdrawal remains, a “negative mediality of language”<sup>21</sup>, which was analogously expressed by Heidegger’s tautological aphorism that language is only language: “Language is language. Language speaks”.<sup>22</sup> This holds also true for the image. ““What the image tells me is itself,”” notes Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*: “That is, its telling me something consists its own structure, *its* own lines and colors.”<sup>23</sup>

## THE LOGIC OF SHOWING

Whatever an image shows or incorporates, whatever it says or represents, it does so in the mode of showing. Showing has a different format than telling (itself). Converted and brought close to Nelson Goodman’s difference between “denotation” and “exemplification”<sup>24</sup> as well as the difference between “representation” and “presentation” in the approaches by Susanne Langer, Husserl and Gottfried Boehm,<sup>25</sup> it proves to be fundamental for the analysis of the aesthetic of the pictorial and its structure. At the same time it indicates another difference, which intersects the image invisibly and irrepresentably, because it precedes every instance of constituting the iconic. Additionally, the specific ‘logic’ of iconic mediality becomes legible here. Images *present* – despite all the systems of significance and re-consideration, of symbolization and interpretation which open and domesticate the gaze – and this presentation, this ‘making present’ also generates their peculiar proximity to evidence. This is the reason for the abundant presence of pictorial strategies; from illustration to allegedly documentary photography and the pictorial character of the news up to the use of images in the intrinsically image-less natural sciences: *they all serve a production of evidence which cannot be generated discursively*. The gaze is not only offered something to observe in the image; in fact, it experiences something non-negotiable, as in the literal sense of ‘evidence’ – the true seeing, including that leap into the eyes which cannot be dis-regarded. Conversely, it is therefore not knowledge or understanding which is characteristic for the pictorial, but the *force creating such evidence*, which also excludes its negation. This exclusion of negation forms the actual focus of the ‘short media theory of the image’ as set down by Freud in ‘The means of representations in dreams’, the pivotal chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.<sup>26</sup> The bizarre forms of dream logic proceed from this. „[I]n any event, a painted, or plastic image, or a film [...] cannot present what is not the case”, thus the corresponding assessment

– once more from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Inquiries* – and the *Big Typescript* adds: “I am able to draw an image of two men fencing with each other; but not of two men not fencing with each other (meaning an image that represents only this).”<sup>27</sup> This means – as the *first characteristic of iconic ‘logic’* – that the status of negation in the pictorial proves to be precarious, as there is no adequate visual correlative to it: “One cannot draw the contradictorily negative, but only the contrary (in the sense of representing it positively).”<sup>28</sup> Above all, showing is not able to withdraw itself; it is unable to negate. This is also due to the fact that the image lacks a grammatical site for the subject. While self-reference exists, it is only possible in a very indirect manner and, again, only while employing the means of visibility, for instance by an image within the image, which refers to the first. This fact implies – as the *second characteristic of the logic of the image* – an additional format of paradox. While, in the discursive mode, this is based on a connection between a self-reference and a negation, which generates the antinomy in the sentence, the image only allows pareidolia, or metastable interplays between figure and background, as Wittgenstein illustrated with his example of the “duck rabbit”.<sup>29</sup> Here, both facets of the paradox appear simultaneously, though not in a relationship of affirmation and negation in order to oppose each other; in contrast, they rather demand a continual shifting of attention, which makes their inverse orders exclude each other.<sup>30</sup> While it is possible to paint contrasts and opposites in this way, these are of a different kind than negative ‘ipsoflexivities’ like ‘This is not sentence’ or ‘This sentence is false’. No image is able to demonstrate that it is not an image; at most it can remove itself like in De Kooning’s erased drawing by Robert Rauschenberg (*Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953) or resort to cancellations like in Jörg Immendorf’s *Hört auf zu malen* (1965), where the traces of deletion or of the annulled painting are retained and are thus exposed. Even René Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (1928-1929) requires the counteracting sentence; but at the price of an instability developing between image and language, which leaves the observer systematically in the dark about which element has to be given priority.<sup>31</sup> Of course there are ‘manipulation,’ ‘retouching’ or ‘dissemblance,’ and also ‘fogging’ and ‘blurring,’ to make something appear indistinct and vague; these techniques stick to the history of images like shadows, but they always retain an affirmative momentum – even when they deliberately intend to deny, denounce or conceal something, they still demonstrate the thing that was denied and denounced in the first place and thus display it as well.

As an additional effect – *the third characteristic of an iconic logic* – the pictorial lacks any capability of restraint, of distancing consideration: in the process of showing it has to position itself. Accordingly, an equivalent to the subjunctive in language is missing; therefore the use of images in sciences which debate in the discursive mode appears problematic. The language of the subjunctive is constitutive for the entire rhetoric of the natural sciences as well as of the empirical social sciences; it embodies not only the discrete ethos of science, but also the latent reservations towards one’s own results, the principle of revisability and the parenthetical authority of truth. But because the image is always interlinked with evidence, which becomes manifest or not, skepticism is alien to the pictorial. Certainly, there are occlusion, preliminary and fragmentariness, but they remain in a mode of presence throughout. The power of pictoriality is based on the magic of such a presence. It imposes itself without reservation and forces the gaze into a ‘scopophilia’, an inescapable addiction of the eyes.

## THE GAZE ‘OPENED UP’

The lack of negation, metastability, the interplay of pareidolia and an impossible subjunctive are the ciphers of a different ‘logic of the image,’ not indications of its failures that are assigned to position it beneath language, textuality and rational discursiveness. Instead, they delineate the limits of one kind of representability, which provide it with a genuinely affirmative character. “‘What the image tells me is itself,’” as Wittgenstein put it, but it also affirms itself. This is the true meaning of evidence: an ‘addiction of the eyes’ and ‘to the eyes’ – the usurpation as well as empowerment of vision. It attracts but also disciplines the gaze. At the same time, it is based on the evocation of a presence that, to the same degree, amounts to the evocation of evidence. Therefore, showing the limits of representability and the production of evidence coincide directly, and consequently define the aesthetic autonomy of the image. Insofar evidence originates from perception, it contains a perception-that (*quod*) before it turns into a perception-of-something (*quid*), as was already pointed out by Kant.<sup>32</sup> It does not concern the witnessing of a thing as such, but rather the ‘gift’ of becoming visible itself.<sup>33</sup> No kind of seeing may doubt the existence of the ‘that’ without doubting itself in its role as visual perception, just as – by the way – images are unable to not show something: a specific kind of *ek-stasis* is inherent to them. *Ekstasis* stands for ‘standing outside one’s self’ or emerging. The terms ‘existence’ and ‘appearance’ mean the same: something appears, something exists. The roots of evidence, especially of evidence as related to pictoriality, can be found in this connection. It is also interlinked with the ability of the image to cause a perception and to captivate the eye.

But this evidence, conceived of in such a way, turns out to be a ‘fractured evidence’. It shifts between the non-negatability of the iconic showing, which reveals a presence that, on the other hand, is also not present. But it is exactly this gap which forces one to look at the image, to view it. Jacques Lacan has connected this kind of compulsion to desire, which is a desire for visibility as well as a desire *for* the gaze and a desire *of* the gaze. This matches the “endowment of the gaze” of the image itself, because, as Lacan made it clear, to create an image means to *bestow a gaze* – and this means, in the same breath, *to give oneself, to surrender oneself*.<sup>34</sup> In the image itself, such a gaze does not possess a donor, and therefore cannot be answered; it can only be received, i.e. accepted. In a manner of speaking, all painters, creators, directors or video artists surrender their gaze – and it is this surrender that characterizes the hazard of their efforts, just as the image links it to a desire that aims at being looked at to the same extent that it desires to observe seeing itself. It indicates that point that equally ‘ap-proaches’ and ‘ad-dresses’ the gaze, just as, on the other hand, looking at an image means paying attention to the gaze’s direction while seeing. This is not a definable position or characteristic *in* the image, this is not something that can be deciphered: *The evidence of pictoriality does not possess a decipherable center.*

The difference of *studium* and *punctum* – which goes back to Lacan and was put into focus by Roland Barthes in his philosophy of photography – is connected to this: the *studium*, as an encoded and thus learnable sphere of experiencing an image, allows the reading of the image, while the *punctum* stays uncoded; it denotes the actual irresistible quality, that which, according to Barthes’ explicit description, is not identifiable in the image and which approaches and attacks the observer instead.<sup>35</sup> Conforming to the invisibility present in the medium, it both seduces the gaze and *forbids it to look away*. The captivating quality of the

image, this specific intensity, but also power, delineates the characteristic that eludes understanding to the same extent that it ‘looks’ at the observer and forces him to see. Images and faces share this quality: it is not us who gaze at them, but we are gazed ‘at’ in return and ‘positioned’ as well. Being looked at precedes the gaze; this is why Deleuze and Guattari speak of a “face-like quality” concerning the image<sup>36</sup>, which always contains – however subtle – the ‘trace’ of the other. *Images are equal to such countenances which do not let go and demand an answer, a ‘return of the gaze’.*

Therefore it is possible – apart from the refraction of the gaze at the frame and even beyond the demonstrated duplicity of telling and showing – to detect another *principle of the gaze’s division: the exchange of gazes between image and observer*, which presupposes that *gazing at an image always equals answering a gaze*. The effects of this exchange point far beyond the *dispositif* of visibility, because they do not concern the character of the image as a sign, but rather its “aura”.<sup>37</sup> This also means that, in media theory, no image can be reduced to its techniques of visualization; instead, it requires the constitution of a theory of the image that proceeds from the gaze, and the examination of the specific exchange of gazes and its effects, because only this displays that momentum concerning the image that, in Walter Benjamin’s choice of words, *constitutes the gaze’s impact*.

## CHIASM OF GAZES

On the other hand this means that a *relation to alterity* is inherent in every image, insofar as it is marked by the *responsive structure of the exchange of gazes*. Hence, the actual subject-matter of an aesthetics of pictoriality arises. Psychoanalysis, in particular, tried to fathom the abyssal depth of the pictorial time and again with a string of different approaches. This is particularly true for that otherness that no gaze can ever perceive, because it constitutes pictoriality in the first place. Images do not only present *something* to look at; instead, because of the process of showing, *an other gazes out*. Thus, two different perspectives cross on the pictorial *tableau* – making it possible to find a *third principle of the gaze’s division* there, which configures this crossing, a *chiasm* which first and foremost determinates the mediality of pictoriality in all its intricacy.<sup>38</sup>

John Berger wrote that “[e]very image embodies a specific kind of seeing,”<sup>39</sup> thus different kinds of gaze are necessary to decipher them as such, because one must not forget that each different gaze perceives different things, as can be exemplarily demonstrated with a look at Jan Vermeer’s *The Art of Painting* (1660-70). Because the painter is turning his back towards the observer, the painting performs a feat that – according to Lacan – is impossible for a self-portrait: it observes itself ‘in the act of observing.’ Here, two perspectives make themselves accessible to the observer: that of Vermeer, who is looking at his model and his canvas and that shows the picture in the moment where he has just started to paint; and, on the other hand, one’s own, which is observing the painter, while the artist himself is removed from the gaze. No one is able to observe himself from behind; the gaze onto the back remains rather disquieting, and thus the extraordinariness of Vermeer’s *Art of Painting* is based on the feat of marking the indelibility of difference by the back view and the double gaze.<sup>40</sup>

Hence, the *chiasm of gazes* points exactly to this intrusion of an alterity into seeing: the observer’s gaze is foiled by a confrontation with an image, just as the gaze of the other, who is offering himself via his medium, is hit and violated by the observer’s vision. In the literal

sense, chiasm means a cross-wise intersection. Things that cross each other normally intersect in one point; but if one thinks about the directions of the lines forming the cross spatially – in three dimensions – in the form of ‘skewed lines’, then there is no point in which the lines intersect. This is pointed out by the way the expression ‘chiasm’ is normally used. It is a disparity that does not work out anywhere. The ‘chiastic’ would be that which cannot be aligned, however hard one struggles for identity. Accordingly, a lapse is inherent to it, a *fundamental incommensurability*.

In this sense, every viewing of an image is a chiastic event, and no construction of the image will ever be able to get hold of it. In other words: The viewing of the image proceeds *from there*, from something that is at the same time indeterminate and open, from a gap, which, as such, remains *irrepresentable*, and thus *inaccessible* as well. It points, again, to an instance of invisibility, insofar as the gap bestows a gift that cannot be gazed at. It withdraws itself, while constituting an excess at the same time. The fascination of the image has its source in this excess: for this reason the image always proves to be more than what can be said or construed; and it is also for the same reason that the image approaches me, imposes itself on me, entreats my gaze and lures it, as Lacan expressed it, into its “trap”<sup>41</sup> – and, once again, it is art that finds its particular domain, its game of mirrors, in this trap and its literal ‘reflection’.

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1 Cf. Dieter Mersch, ‘Kunst und Medium. Zwei Vorlesungen,’ in *Gestalt und Diskurs* (Schriftenreihe der Muthesius-Hochschule), Vol. 3, Kiel, 2003; Dieter Mersch ‘Wort, Bild, Ton, Zahl. Modalitäten medialen Darstellens,’ in *Die Medien der Künste: Beiträge zu einer Theorie des Darstellens*, München: Fink, 2003, pp. 9-49.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Das Sichtbare und das Unsichtbare*, Munich: Fink, 1986; Bernhard Waldenfels, ‘Spiegel, Spur und Blick,’ in *Homo Pictor*, ed. by Gottfried Boehm, Munich and Leipzig: Saur, 2001, pp. 14-31.

<sup>3</sup> Waldenfels also stresses that this is not only a figure of reflection: “The enigma of visibility lies in the fact that the becoming as well as the making visible employ the means of the visible” (Waldenfels, 2003, p. 5). This, on the other hand, gives rise to the question how the constitution of visibility can be become visible in turn.

<sup>4</sup> René Magritte, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. by André Blavier, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Vienna, 1985, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gottfried Boehm, ‘Die Wiederkehr der Bilder,’ in Gottfried Boehm (ed.), *Was ist ein Bild?*, Munich: Fink, 1995, pp. 11-38. Since then the term has had a career in different guises.

<sup>6</sup> I have taken a closer look at the hypothesis of the incommensurability between the basic medial formats of writing, images, numbers and sound in my article ‘Wort, Bild, Ton, Zahl. Modalitäten medialen Darstellens’ in Mersch, 2003, pp. ,

<sup>7</sup> Cf. regarding this question cf. Gottfried Boehm and Helmut Pfotenhauer (eds.), *Beschreibungskunst – Kunstbeschreibung*, Munich: Fink, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning this tightly employed perspective from literary studies cf. e.g. Bettine Menke, ‘Bild – Textualität. Benjamins schriftliche Bilder,’ in Michael Wetzels and Herta Wolf (eds.), *Der Entzug der Bilder*, Munich: Fink, 1994, pp. 47-65.

<sup>9</sup> Diego Velázquez’ painting *Las Meniñas* has brought forth an abundance of interpretations, among others by Michel Foucault, John Searle, Hermann Asemissen and others. Concerning the non-opening imagination of Velazquez cf. esp. my deliberations in ‘Ästhetischer Augenblick und Gedächtnis in der Kunst. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Zeit und Bild’, as in FN 1., pp. 151-176.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Denis, quoted in Werner Haftmann, *Malerei des 20. Jahrhunderts*, München: Prestel, 1965, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Jahn, Katharina Lepper and Hannelore Kersting (eds.), *Man Ray* (exhibition catalogue), Stuttgart et al. 1998, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. also Axel Müller, ‘Das ist kein Fenster. Überlegungen zu einer zentralen Bildmetapher bei René Magritte und Marcel Duchamp,’ in Mersch, ‘Ästhetischer Augenblick und Gedächtnis in der Kunst. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Zeit und Bild’, as in FN 1., pp. 127-138.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dieter Mersch ‘Das Bild als Argument,’ in *Ikologien des Performativen*, ed. by Christoph Wulf and Jörg Zirfas, Munich: Fink, 2005, pp. 322-344.

- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Also Dieter Mersch, 'Visual Arguments: The Role of Images in Sciences and Mathematics', in: *Science Images and Popular Images of the Science*, ed. By B. Hüppauf, P. Weingart, New York: Routledge 2008, p. 181-198.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. also Dieter Mersch, 'Medialität und Undarstellbarkeit. Einleitung in eine 'negative' Medientheorie,' in *Medialität und Performanz*, ed. by Sybille Krämer, Munich: Fink, 2004, pp. 75-96.
- <sup>16</sup> Theodor W. Adorno insisted on the "similarity to language" of music in a similar context, but of course in a way that this similarity would only manifest itself where music departed from language's function as statement. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Fragment über Musik und Sprache,' in *Musikalische Schriften III*, Gesammelte Werke, Vol. 16, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, pp. 251-256; and Theodor Adorno, 'Musik, Sprache und ihr Verhältnis im gegenwärtigen Komponieren,' in: *ibid.*, pp. 649-664.
- <sup>17</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (Kritische Edition), ed. by Brian McGuinness and Joachim Schulte, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, esp. 3.262, 4.022, 4.12-4.1212, 4.126, 5.62, 6.12, 6.36 and 6.522.
- <sup>18</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen*, Vienna Edition, Vol. 3, Vienna and New York: Springer, 2000, p. 30, No. 3.
- <sup>19</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Grammatik*, Frankfurt am Main, 1973, p. 40.
- <sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein, 2000a, p. 33-34.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. Dieter Mersch 'Negative Medialität. Derridas Différance und Heideggers Weg zur Sprache' in *Journal Phänomenologie, Jacques Derrida*, Vol. 23, 2005, pp. 14-22.
- <sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1975, p. 13.
- <sup>23</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971, S. 175, § 523. (Philosophical Investigations, transl. G.E.M Anscombe, Oxford, 1953, p.143 § 523), German Original: "Das heisst, dass es mir etwas sagt, besteht in seiner eigenen Struktur, seinen Formen und Farben."
- <sup>24</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Sprachen der Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995, p. 57 ff.
- <sup>25</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophie auf neuem Wege. Das Symbol im Denken, im Ritus und in der Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1984, p. 61 ff., 172 ff., 261 ff. On Husserl cf. Lambert Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005. Cf. also Boehm, 'Repräsentation – Präsentation – Präsenz,' 2001, pp. 3-13.
- <sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1961, p. 259 ff.
- <sup>27</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript*, ed. by Michael Nedo, Vienna Edition, Vol. 11, Vienna and New York: Springer, 2000, p. 83 No. 4; Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen* as in FN 18, p. 56, No. 5
- <sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen*, as in FN 18, p. 56, No. 6.
- <sup>29</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* as in FN 23, part II, XI, p. 228 ff.
- <sup>30</sup> Cf. also William J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 35 ff.
- <sup>31</sup> On René Magritte see my remarks in *Was sich zeigt. Materialität, Präsenz, Ereignis*, Munich: Fink, 2002, p. 295 ff.
- <sup>32</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1956, A 225, B 272 f.
- <sup>33</sup> While the term 'gift' has been made a topic by Derrida –tracing it back to Marcel Mauss –, here something completely different is focused upon: the perception of a given as something that is 'given beforehand' and not already constructed by perception. For the usage of the term, cf. Dieter Mersch *Ereignis und Aura*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002, p. 47 ff.
- <sup>34</sup> To show an image thus means to 'provide' a gaze. Cf. Jacques Lacan, 'Linie und Licht,' in: Boehm (ed.), *Was ist ein Bild?* as in FN 5, pp. 60-74, 70 .
- <sup>35</sup> Roland Barthes, *Die helle Kammer. Bemerkung zur Photographie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, especially p. 60 ff.
- <sup>36</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus*, Berlin, 1992, p. 230 ff.
- <sup>37</sup> Cf. Mersch, *Ereignis und Aua*, as in FN 33, p. 75 ff.
- <sup>38</sup> On the crossing of gazes, although understood differently in each case, cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Der Zweifel Cézannes,' in Boehm, (ed.), *Was ist ein Bild?*, as in FN 5, pp. 39-59; and Lacan 'Linie und Licht,' as in FN 34, p. 64. However, the crossing of gazes in Lacan is developed from the encounter with alterity..
- <sup>39</sup> John Berger, *Sehen. Das Bild der Welt in der Bilderwelt*, Hamburg: Reinbek, 1974, p. 10.
- <sup>40</sup> On Jan Vermeer cf. my remarks in 'Ästhetischer Augenblick und Gedächtnis in der Kunst. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Zeit und Bild,' as in FN 1., pp. 151-176.
- <sup>41</sup> Cf. Lacan, 'Linie und Licht,' as in FN 34, p. 61.