

Dictionary of Now

# W.J.T. Mitchell, Hito Steyerl & John Tresch: IMAGE

WELCOME

Bernd Scherer,  
Director Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW)

LECTURE

Bubble Vision

Hito Steyerl

LECTURE

So Many Pictures of Food

John Tresch

BREAK


LECTURE


Iconology 3.0: Image and Theory in Our Time

W.J.T. Mitchell

DISCUSSION AND Q&A

moderated by Bernd Scherer

 The event will be held in English only.

 The bar in the foyer will be open from 5.30pm on.

With every transformation in the media, images newly negotiate between the visible and the invisible. At the beginning of the 1990s, the “Pictorial Turn” diagnosed the ubiquity of images in all areas of life and changed the paradigms of perception in an era that is addicted to images. The field of Visual Culture Studies expanded on this observation and linked it to questions about social and cultural practices of perception, to power hierarchies, visual regimes, and image politics. The ensuing discourse drew attention to the relation between claims to reality on the one hand and visual manipulation strategies on the other, observing both against the backdrop of current debates about post-truth.

For the tenth edition of *Dictionary of Now*, W.J.T. Mitchell, Hito Steyerl, and John Tresch reflect on today’s, status of images and contemporary paradigms of perception: How does cultural knowledge reproduce itself in images? Does global visual knowledge exist and how does the growing individualization of perception impact shared social realities? How does the historical interweaving of pictorial worlds and worldviews affect the scientific, technological, and aesthetic construction of reality?

W.J.T. Mitchell describes three periods of contemporary pictorial sciences from modern iconology to today’s operational images. John Tresch reflects upon the universal readability of signs and symbols. He shows how the phenomenon of food photography in social media networks can be used to think about contemporary cosmograms. In her lecture *Bubble Vision*, Hito Steyerl examines the paradox of immersion in virtual reality. This phenomenon of the immersive space is also taken up in the venue itself: the Pierre Boulez Hall of the Barenboim-Said Akademie describes a spherical space that completes a 360° loop.

Bubble Vision

Hito Steyerl

Immersive technologies like virtual reality and 360° video are built around a well known paradox: the viewer is at the centre, yet at the same time he or she is missing. Hito Steyerl asks how this kind of vision comes about. She speaks about creating a visual paradigm that is shaped by orbs, spheres, and rounded lenses and argues that one could call this paradigm a “bubble vision”.

HITO STEYERL, filmmaker, author, Berlin.

So Many Pictures of Food

John Tresch

Social media overflows with luscious images of food: restaurants have already changed their lighting schemes to improve customers’ shots. These images of consumables on the brink of consumption recap earlier image paradigms: pictures as offerings to Gods; fruits and flowers as testaments of wealth and mementos of death—and also promises of the good life in mass advertisement. But when users now click on desirable images, they are in a new food chain. Each click is fed back into a “diagram” of their users’ preferences and appetites, determining what they are served next. This loop powers the digital economy: tech giants gather user data and marketers collect it to push user’s preferences. John Tresch asks how to redraw the circuits of this predatory cosmos. How does one draft cosmograms of the present without adding further fuel to the dopamine loops and pathological carbon cycles fed by the diet of today’s images?

JOHN TRESCH teaches History and Sociology of Science at the University of Pennsylvania. He is author of *The Romantic Machine: Utopian Science and Technology after Napoleon* (2012) and co-editor of *Aesthetics of Universal Knowledge* (2017). His current projects include *Cosmograms: How to Do Things with Worlds*, on objects used to represent the universe, and *The Reason for the Darkness of the Night: Edgar Allan Poe and the Forging of American Science*. In 2018 he will take up the Mellon Chair in History of Art, Science, and Folk Practice at the Warburg Institute at the University of London.

Iconology 3.0: Image and Theory in Our Time

W.J.T. Mitchell

W.J.T. Mitchell sketches out three phases in contemporary image theory or iconology. The first phase is the rise of modern critical iconology in the twentieth century, from Walter Benjamin to Roland Barthes and the reckoning with time, technology, and capital in the age of mechanical reproduction. The second phase centers on the emergence of the biopicture and the paradigm of biocymbiotic reproduction associated with the convergence of genetics and information science epitomized by the clone. The third phase is the phase we are in. In an attempt to identify significant characteristics to come to a preliminary understanding of this phase, Mitchell explores the contemporary fascination with “operational images,” algorithmic processes in which images interact without human intervention or agency. He asks what happens when machines see or hear each other, and transmit images that induce a response: to what extent is this phenomenon mirrored in the emergence of planetary mechanisms of climate change?

W. J. T. MITCHELL is Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago. He is also the editor of *Critical Inquiry*. His recent publications include *Seeing Madness: Insanity, Media, and Visual Culture* (2012), *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, September 11 to Abu Ghraib* (2011), and *Seeing Through Race* (2012). His newest book is *Image Science: Iconology, Media Aesthetics, and Visual Culture*, published in 2015. Mitchell has received various awards and his articles have appeared in numerous journals, including *Art in America*, *October* and *Artforum*.

Over the last hundred years, the sciences and technologies have shaped our conception of reality, our thought, and our language. In the context of *100 Years of Now*, the *Dictionary of Now* reflects on language's capacity to both depict and create the world. The dictionary focuses on omnipresent universalistic terms that are central to the description of the deep-rooted changes of the present—but which in their current usage are no longer able to grasp them and need to be recontextualized.

Which varieties and shifts of meaning lie at the root of these terms, which readings and subtexts do they harbor? Which social, political, and cultural processes of transformation can be read from them? And how can they be sharpened and adjusted in order to generate scope for linguistic action? In a series of twelve discussions from 2015 to 2018, distinguished representatives from the sciences and the arts, from theory and praxis, question the established meanings of selected terms, updating them against the background of their respective expertise.

A publication to be released in 2019 will bring together the key words and participants from the individual discussions in the series, establishing connections and allowing for new constellations of knowledge.

→ [hkw.de/dictionary](http://hkw.de/dictionary)

→ [#100YrsofNow](https://twitter.com/#100YrsofNow)

→ [#HKWDictionary](https://twitter.com/#HKWDictionary)

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