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***Image: From Being a God[dess] to Become a Flatus vocis  
– Mitchell’s “Family of Images” (part 1)***

***Obraz: Od bycia bogiem[boginią] do stania się flatus vocis  
– „Rodzina obrazów” Mitchella (część 1)***

***Introduction***

Consider the following conundrum:

– What do the reputation of the president of the government, an engineering drawing, the *Venus de Milo*, and your idea of a white rabbit have in common?

Answer: They are all images.

Although the answer to this conundrum is not particularly witty, it contains a lesson that we wish to explain here. The conundrum mentions the president’s reputation. For reputation, the dictionary tells us that it is [...] *the opinion that people in general have about someone or something, or how much respect or admiration someone or something receives, based on past behaviour or character*<sup>1</sup>. To the extent that this is a social construction, an individual’s reputation and public image are coincident. Among the meanings of the term “image” offered by the dictionary are the following: *The way that something or someone is thought of by other people: “The aim is to improve the public image of the police” and Someone’s image is the idea that other people have of that person, esp. an idea created by advertising and by newspaper and television stories: “He’s trying to project a more presidential*

*image*”<sup>2</sup>. In the sentence *This isn’t the first scandal that’s damaged the image of the president*, the words “image” and “reputation” are interchangeable. Thus, reputation is an image – that is said. The conundrum also mentions an engineering drawing and the *Venus de Milo*. It is not necessary to clarify what we mean when we say that technical drawings and statues are images. Finally, the conundrum mentions your idea of a white rabbit. Although there are non-iconic ideas (e.g., infinity), the idea of a white rabbit can be said to be an image (mental). In fact, the dictionary defines “image” as follows: [...] *a picture in your mind or an idea of how someone or something is: “I have an image in my mind of how I want the garden to be”* – and, reciprocally, define “idea” by saying, “an understanding, thought, or picture in your mind”<sup>3</sup>. It is also worth remembering that the word “idea” comes from the Latin term *idēa*, which means “image”, “form” or “appearance” – the same as the Greek term from which it is derived: *ιδέα* [*idéa*]. This use of “idea” is found in phrases such as “Her picture never leaves my mind”. We can therefore say that the president’s reputation, an engineering drawing, the *Venus de Milo* and your idea of a white rabbit are similar in that we can refer to all of these things as an “image”. The moral, certainly trivial, idea that emerges from our conundrum is that we use the word “image” to refer to a considerable variety of different things – from solid, big

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<sup>1</sup> “Reputation”, in Cambridge Dictionary on line, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/reputation> [accessed: 18.08.2019].

<sup>2</sup> “Image”, in Cambridge Dictionary on line, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/image> [accessed: 18.08.2019].

<sup>3</sup> “Idea”, in Cambridge Dictionary on line, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/idea> [accessed: 18.08.2019].

## The Family of Images

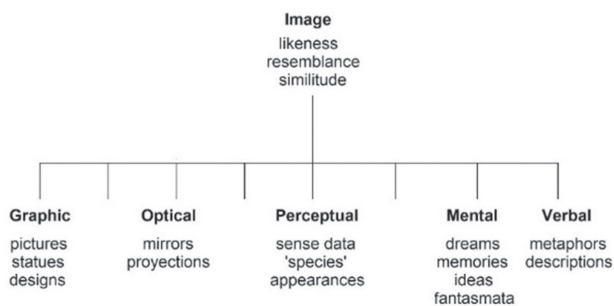


Fig. 1. W.J.T. Mitchell, from *What is an image?* (source: [2, p. 10])

II. 1. W.J.T. Mitchell, z *Czym jest obraz?* (źródło: [2, s. 10])

and heavy things that anyone can see, and with which you could hurt yourself if you stumble over them<sup>4</sup>, to incorporate phenomena that you cannot grasp or show to anyone, because they are not located anywhere. Somewhat less trivial, however, is the fact that within this diversity we can find one of the most puzzling problems in the theory of images.

The variety of things and phenomena that we refer to as an image is so wide, and the perspectives, traditions, and interests of the thinkers who have tried to tackle the definition of this term are so varied, that the discussion about images has become a babble-like conversation. In addition, the extensive semantic field of the term image becomes even more complex if we look at its different translations: “image”, “picture”, “Bild”, “obraz”, etc. – each of them connected to (and entangled in) its own etymological lineage. One of the famous attempts to address this issue is an essay by W.J.T. Mitchell, titled *What is an image?*<sup>5</sup> [1]. In this essay, which is today considered a classic, Mitchell delves into the tangle of meanings, senses, and nuances of things and phenomena that are known as an image. He does so by proposing a taxonomy, which he calls “The Family of Images” (Fig. 1). The Family of images is a development of the conception of images that is currently considered canonical. This conception holds that images are a sign modality.

In this paper<sup>6</sup> we will analyse the discourse on images with respect to the taxonomy of images proposed by Mitchell, and, in particular, we aim to reveal some of its limitations. It is known that Mitchell must be recognized not only for the merit of having been the promoter of the Pictorial Turn, but also for his extraordinary ability and refinement that enables him to reveal some of the underlying issues that polarize (and also encumbrance) the

canonical doctrine of images. Our interest in this author stems from the fact that we consider his contributions to the theory of images – always brilliantly insightful – to be very characteristic of the current course of the debate over images. First, we would like to comment briefly on the title of this paper. The sentence “‘Image’: From Being a God[dess] to Becoming a *Flatus vocis*” includes a logical fallacy, a literary trope known as “antanaclasis”. Antanaclasis consists of using a term deceptively by designating several different notions at the same time. In our case, we use the word *image* as a name that denotes a [type of] specific object, namely, one that at some time and place was taken by God[dess], but also (now making a metalinguistic use of the term) as a word that refers to a certain set of meanings – that is, to things devised by us. This subterfuge allows us to introduce one of the criticisms we will make of Mitchell, that is, the abuse of antanaclasis in his discourse on images.

### *Status Questionis: Image theory is unsatisfactory*

We could begin by stating that a thing that, on account of its appearance, makes us respond in the way we would react to an animal, without being one, is said to be an image – “the image neither equates with living bodies nor with the lifeless object”. This definition is questionable (an engineering drawing or an arabesque, e.g., normally do not make us respond in the way we respond to the presence of a living being). What seems unquestionable, however, is that images play an important role in our lives.

We live surrounded by images like never before in the history of mankind. But there were times when opportunities to encounter an image were scarce. For millennia, almost everyone lived and died without ever having seen one of these anomalies that can act upon us as living entities, without being. It must be assumed that this made the anomaly of the images even more overwhelming, and that it facilitated the propensity to invest in them a fabulous halo (which allowed for assigning a sacred status to the institutions that controlled them). Images, as we know, have been taken by god[dess]. The images continue to appear to be something special to us; that is why they abound and proliferate among us in the way that they do. Although for us, accessing them – and even producing and disseminating them – has become an insignificant goal. For this reason, it might come as a surprise to us that, as Julian Bell has pointed out:

*The first words in Western culture concerning man-made images categorically warn us against them:*

*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.*

*Why? What makes the God of the Bible forbid all likeness in the Second Commandment, before pronouncing of killing, adultery and theft?*

*Images draw us in. The desire to make and attend to likeness has been powerful throughout history* [3, p. 9].

That the images were given such exorbitant importance, that they were seen as an attack on God, that they

<sup>4</sup> We say this remembering that the American abstract painter Ad Reinhardt once contemptuously defined Sculpture as “something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting”.

<sup>5</sup> The essay appeared in the journal “New Literary History” [1]. Later as Chapter 1<sup>o</sup> of *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* [2]. We always quote this from here.

<sup>6</sup> This is the first part of an essay paper devoted to the analysis of Mitchell’s doctrine of images. The title of the second part is “Is inscription-Boob- an image? On Mitchell’s doctrine of images – ‘The family of images’ (part 2)”.

were taken as a threat so defiant of their pre-eminence that their proscription preceded the prohibition of murder, adultery and theft – these are behaviours that seem to us to be very far removed from those that are typical of our culture. However, the shadow of this archaic understanding of the images continues to overshadow our understanding of the images themselves. Mitchell says that, [...] *behind every theory of imagery is some form of the fear of imagery* [2, p. 159]. Although our society tends to see itself as a culture that is far removed from magical beliefs and naive animism, [...] *these naive beliefs are alive and well in the modern era*<sup>7</sup>.

In any case, we inhabit a world full of images. And not only do we live with them and view them as part of the props of our environment, we also interact with them continuously, and increasingly. We say this when thinking, of course, of the suggestive images with which advertising tempts us; in the persuasive images with which the mass media haunt us; in the heartbreakingly disturbing, even unbearable, images, that sometimes reach us via our mobile devices (such as the bodies of Salvadorian Oscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter Valeria, lying drowned on a bank of the Rio Grande; they died on June 23, trying to reach the United States); in images of all kinds offered by entertainment industries such as cinema and 3D video games; and also, of course, the enormity of revered images such as the *Venus de Milo* or the *Gioconda*. We also think of images such as dolls and paper airplanes.

We can also think of those images generated by augmented reality, which Pokémon GO fans look for, exploring the cities where they play in order to catch them, train them, and then fight with them, and “animated” images such as the robotic pets produced by Sony (the AIBO Robot Dog) or Tiger Electronics – those strange and captivating “teddy bears” called Furbies, which are provided with artificial intelligence, and that learn to communicate by talking with their owner whilst being able to develop their own character and personality. We can also think of the *Gynoids* developed by companies such as True Companion in the United States, and Orient Industry, in Japan – which are making the old dream of Pygmalion come true – and the “artificial mules” produced by Boston Dynamics, which are robots that can advantageously replace a mule made of flesh and blood. We also think of more humble images, such as artificial plants, fishing baits and duck decoys used in duck hunting; and of dentures, teats (or nipples) of bottle-feeding and pacifiers, and the plans of architects and engineers. As you can see, we have in mind a fairly wide variety of images – and we would like to point out that (1<sup>st</sup>) a large part of these are not mentioned in the usual literature concerned with images, and

(2<sup>nd</sup>) these are also unable to be explained in terms of what is currently understood to be held by a canonical perspective, namely:

*The commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification* [2, p. 8].

### **Images are important – so Knowledge about images is important**

We inhabit a world copiously populated by an extremely diverse range of images. But images – unlike ants, clouds, and gastric juices – do not sprout spontaneously in nature. They are there because we create them, because we wanted to bring them to the world to put them where they are. We live in a world full of images because images matter to us. And, given that we care, knowledge about images must also be important. Do we have sound knowledge about images? It has been said, for decades, that ours is a “civilization of the image”. We have been hearing for more than half a century that “we live in an era dominated by images” (the “era of image”). It has been claimed that, [...] *the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the image* [5, p. 2]. However, the current state of our knowledge about images is unsatisfactory:

*Although we have thousands of words about pictures, we do not yet have a satisfactory theory of them. What we do have is a motley array of disciplines – semiotics, philosophical inquiries into art and representation, studies in cinema and mass media, comparative studies in the arts – all converging on the problem of pictorial representation and visual culture* [5, p. 9].

Mitchell is not the only scholar who has expressed his discouragement over the current state of knowledge about images. This diagnosis is shared by a number of authors. We will illustrate this fact by providing three examples. In *What is a Picture?* Michael Newall makes reference to “the problems of depiction – of what a picture is and how depiction works”, stating: *There is nothing like a consensus yet – indeed there are many competing positions* [6, p. 1], whilst in *La imagen compleja (The Complex Image)*, Josep M. Català Domènech declares:

*The image, as a concept, always belonged to the paradigm of the text. [...] Thinking about the image [...] was thinking about the image as information, as communication, as a message [...]. The concept of image is the product of a textual imagination [...]. Again we ask ourselves then, what is an image? [...] But, if we really want to answer this crucial question, now, in this time of the third millennium, we will have no choice but to forget all the image definitions provided so far. We must forget the philological answers, the historical answers, the aesthetic ones and the philosophical ones that have marked the path of understanding the image until today. We must forget everything, even momentarily, and start from scratch* [7, p. 42].

<sup>7</sup> We take these words of Mitchell, who later adds: *I believe that magical attitudes toward images are just as powerful in the modern world as they were in so-called ages of faith. [...] My argument here is that the double consciousness about images is a deep and abiding feature of human responses to representation. It is not something that we “get over” when we grow up, become modern, or acquire critical consciousness* [4, pp. 7, 8].

Our last example is taken from the *Anthropology of Images* by Hans Belting:

*While it has become fashionable in recent years to speak about “image”, this discourse has brought to light considerable confusion in the language that people use, a confusion that is merely glossed over by the word “image”. [...] Though people are not talking about the same thing, they are nonetheless using the same word. Some authors create the impression that images circulate in disembodied form [...]. Others associate images broadly with the visual realm, as if to suggest that everything that is visual is an image. The “image”, however, is defined not by its mere visibility but by its being invested, by the beholder, with a symbolic meaning and a kind of mental “frame”. Still others identify images wholesale with iconic signs, thus disregarding the difference between the semiotic and the iconic. Finally, there is a school of thought that seeks to protect art from being contaminated by images from mass media or other sources. This confusion of words and meanings give rise again and again to new controversies in which definitions are contested. As a result, we not only speak in the same way about very different images, but we also apply very different modes of discourse to the same kinds of images [8, p. 9].*

One of the reasons for the disquiet caused by the current state of knowledge about images is, in effect, the fact that we call such a disparate variety of different things and phenomena “image” to such an extent that we are not clear about what we are talking about when we pronounce, hear, or read the term “image”. We use this word to refer to so many different things and different phenomena that the question “What is an image?” can be replaced by “What is *not* an image?”<sup>8</sup> “But what is an image?” asks Hans Belting in his Foreword for *Likeness and Presence: History of the Image Before the Era of Art* – after indicating that the history of the images should not be confused with the history of art, he then states: *The term means as much and as little as the term art [10, p. 5].*

### ***The Family of Images***

Although our lives are surrounded by images, although their prominence in our world is manifest (and growing), and although academic interest in images and the number of publications, meetings, symposia, and conferences specifically referring to them have grown exponentially in recent decades, there is a persistent dissatisfaction regarding the achievements of the theoretical discourse on images. Raymond Bellour’s claim “Without any doubt, we know less and less what an image is” – referred to by Belting in his diagnosis of the current *Status Quaestionis* [8, p. 14] – summarizes the intellectual collapse that characterises the current state of image theory.

If the fact of living surrounded by images and living with them is clearly an incentive that urges us to talk about

images, then the need to clarify what we mean when we speak of an “image” has become no less of a pressing demand. When we say “image”, we do not always seem to be clear about what we mean – we can often mean too much (and then the question arises “What is *not* an image?”), or too little (in which case we might only be talking about the *Gioconda* or emulating Roland Barthes’ speech about an advertisement for Panzani pasta).

Given that specifying the meaning of the term “image” poses seemingly insurmountable difficulties, some authors have chosen to follow the initiative of art theorists who, humiliated by the inability to offer a plausible answer to the question “What is Art?” they were left to ponder the idea of “Family resemblances” advanced by Wittgenstein. The *locus classicus* for the doctrine of family resemblances is found in Part I of his *Philosophical Investigations* [11, pp. 65–77] where, within the framework of a discussion about language games – that is, on the diversity of functions given to the term “language” – Wittgenstein says:

*Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all – but they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all “language” [11, p. 65].*

Wittgenstein illustrates the issue by taking the word “game” as an example. After mentioning games such as board games, card-games, ball games, Olympic games, etc., he concludes:

*We see complicated networks of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities of detail [11, p. 66].*

*I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way – And I shall say: “games” form a family [11, p. 67].*

As already mentioned, Wittgenstein’s comment on family resemblances occurs in the context of a discussion about the various uses of the term “language”. This discussion, in turn, occurs within the framework of a more general debate about the meaning of words. Wittgenstein argues that attempts to define the essential meaning of terms such as “language” and “game”, are fatuous. The meaning of a word – that is, what its definition is intended to specify – is not an essence (the essence is presumably shared by the things named using that word). In general, Wittgenstein states that, “the meaning of a word is its use in language” [11, p. 43].

One of the authors tempted by the possibilities of using “family resemblances” to tackle the definition of “image” was Mitchell, who, in “What is an image?” delved into the tangle of meanings, definitions, and nuances of the wide variety of things and phenomena called “image” and proposed a taxonomy called “The Family of Images” [2, pp. 9–14]. The Family of Images can be seen as an attempt to bring to light a philosophical concept of “image” that can guide our research. Mitchell begins his section entitled “The Family of Images” as follows:

<sup>8</sup> This question was asked by Steffen Siegel at the “What is an Image?” Seminar, organized in 2010 by James Elkins. None of the attendees (including Mitchell) was able to offer a plausible answer to this question [9, p. 14 and other].

Two things must immediately strike the notice of anyone who tries to take a general view of the phenomena called by the name of imagery. The first is simply the incredible variety of things that go by this name. We speak of pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and even ideas as images, and the sheer diversity of this list would seem to make any systematic, unified understanding impossible. The second thing that may strike us is that the calling of all these things by the name of image does not necessarily mean that they all have something in common [2, p. 9].

The Family of Images is an attempt to answer the question “what is an image?” by unravelling the tangled con-

cept of images and articulating it in a classification presented in the same way as one would present a family tree (Fig. 2). From the common root called “Image”, Mitchell derives the following branches: Graphic, Optical, Perceptual, Mental, and Verbal. The type of images housed in each of them, he tells us, is the object of study of a specific academic discipline (Art History, Optics, etc.) and for each of them there is a specific institutionalized discourse.

“Presiding over all these special cases of imagery” there is “a parent concept” – *the concept of the image “as such”*, *the phenomenon whose appropriate institutional discourse is philosophy and theology* [2, p. 11]. Against this backdrop, and expressly invoking the Wittgensteinian notion of language games [2, p. 8], Mitchell states that

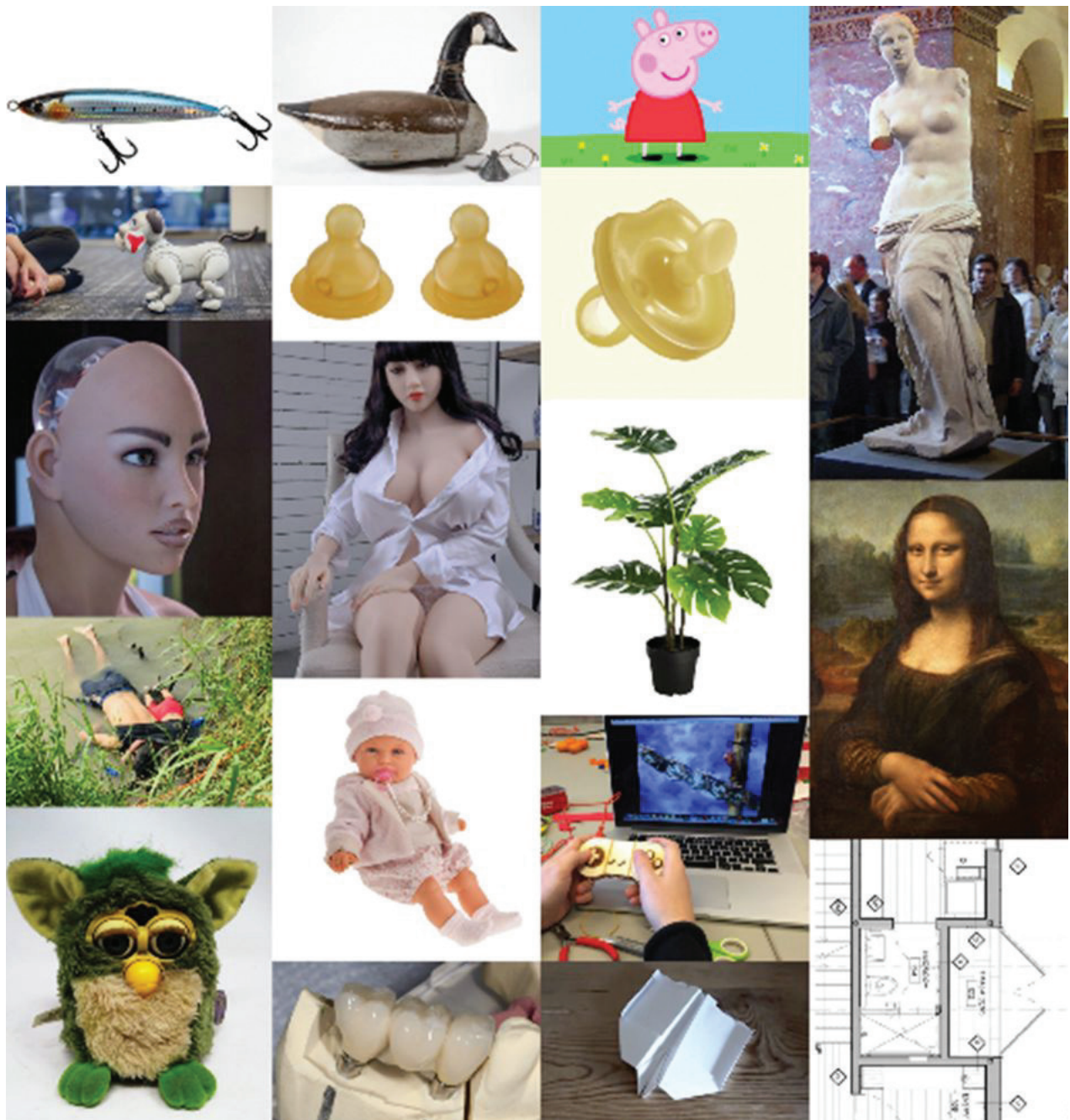


Fig. 2. There are many different kinds of images. Why? (authors' property)

II. 2. Istnieje wiele rodzajów obrazów. Dlaczego? (własność autorów)

he intends to examine: *Some of the ways we use the word “image” in a number of institutionalized discourses – particularly literary criticism, art history, theology, and philosophy* [2, p. 9].

In his proposal, Mitchell mentions the notions of family, parent concept, genealogy & family tree, and argues that – as our understanding of images is based on entrenched social and cultural practices “in a history fundamental to our understanding... of what images are” – he will trace a genealogy of the family of images [2, p. 9]. But the genealogy he proposes to us is not one that goes back in time, tracing the ancestor that the family generated – such as when Julius Caesar traced the *gens* of the Julia family, reaching back his lineage to the goddess Venus and her son, the Trojan prince Aeneas. Such a genealogy would not make sense, since the relationship between the branches of its tree is not that of a diachronic sequence, but that of a synchronous catalogue.

This genealogy is also unlike that established by zoologists when they determine, for example, the common ancestor of “Darwin’s finches” – a group of 15 different bird species discovered by Darwin in the Galapagos Islands. This is because the origin of the Family of Images does not lie in a remote original ancestor from which a variety of disparate descendants would have (adaptively) derived (statues, reflections in mirrors, dreams, metaphors, etc.), but in a “parent concept” – that is, a certain understanding of what an image is. And this idea – conceived by way of the *fons et origo* of the subject, thematised by all institutionalized discourses on images – is not located at the beginning, but at the end of the story, that is, you do not start with it, you obtain it. This is the result of enlightenment that is reached after examining “some of the ways we use the word “image” in a number of institutionalized discourses”. Notice that now we are not talking about images (“We speak of pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles...”, Mitchell had said), but of a certain idea about what an image is – which is reached by inferring this from the different meanings attributed to the term image in various institutional contexts. Here, as in other passages, Mitchell’s speech slips through the ambiguities of antanaclasis.

More than a list of ancestors that culminates in the ancestor from which would have originated the graphic, optical, perceptual, mental & verbal sub-families of the images, this genealogy consists of a story that refers to the avatars of a trans-historic nature that could evoke the figure of the Count of St. Germain.

Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves... [2, p. 9].

This genealogy could be seen as a *Bildungsroman*, understood in the way described by Arthur Danto when he speaks of progress in the understanding of Art:

*In the German genre of the Bildungsroman – the novel of formation and self-discovery – the story is told of the stages through which the hero or heroine progresses on the way to self-awareness. [...] And that awareness,*

*though the end of the story, is really “the first day of the rest of her life”* [12, p. 5].

The narrative running through this story is basically the following: if they were considered gods, the images would have been seen as copies, to finally be understood as signs. They were taken by god[desse]s, eg. in the world where the people of Israel emerged:

*When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father’s household gods* [Genesis 31:19].

*Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father’s household. But why did you steal my gods?* [Laban tells his son-in-law Jacob, the husband of his daughter Rachel] [Genesis 31:30].

*Make us gods who will go before us* [the Israelites asked Aaron] [Exodus 32:23].

*You shall have no other gods besides Me* [Deuteronomy 5:7].

After, in the “era of art” (Belting), the images became imitations that, by copying aspects of the things of the world, re-produced the effects produced by the things copied. Leonardo, who described the painting as “the sole imitator of all the visible works of nature”, said:

*And the painter [...] achieves directly the imitation of the things of nature. By painting, lovers are attracted to the images of the beloved to converse with the depicted semblance. By painting whole populations are led with fervent vows to seek the image of the deities [...]; by painting animals are deceived* [13, pp. 20, 21].

Eventually, it was understood that an image is nothing more than a sign. In an interview published in 1961, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler – Picasso and Braque’s dealer at the time they invented Cubism – emphasized that understanding Cubism and modern art in general requires us to understand that painting is a form of writing (*écriture*):

*A woman in a painting is not a woman; she is a group of signs that I read as “woman”. When one writes on a sheet of paper “f-e-m-m-e”, someone who knows French and knows how to read will read not only the word “femme”, but he will see, so to speak, a woman. The same is true of paintings; there is no difference. Fundamentally, painting has never been a mirror of the external world [...]; it has been a creation of signs, which were always read correctly by contemporaries, after a certain apprenticeship, of course* [14, p. 63].

We will see that Mitchell reverses the sense of the historical development of this story – placing not at the end, but rather at the beginning, the understanding of images that comprise the original referent of the term (i.e. the terms used in ancient times that we translate to “image”), that is, not statues and paintings, but mental images. In any case, this *Bildungsroman* provides us with a great and compelling narrative of the way things must be seen. Let us see how he constructs it.

### **“Image”:**

#### ***The term in its strict, proper, or literal sense***

Mitchell points out that it seems reasonable to assume that the reason we call such a variety of disparate things an image is that the term “image” is not always used in the

same way. It is suggested, therefore, that one way to untangle this mess would be to start “by asking which members of the family of images are called by the name in a strict, proper, or literal sense” – with the implication that the rest “involve some extended, figurative, or improper use of the term” [2, p. 12]. Mitchell admits that it is hard to resist the temptation to consider that the “appropriate” sense of image corresponds to the type of things housed in the Graphic and Optical branches of his tree – which are [...] *representations we see displayed in an objective, publicly shareable space* [2, p. 13]. But this suggestion is a Socratic ruse. We soon discover that Mitchell’s purpose is to argue that [...] *contrary to common belief, images “proper” are not stable, static, or permanent in any metaphysical sense, [...] they are not perceived in the same way by viewers any more than are dreams images* [2, pp. 13, 14]. After proceeding with the intention of undermining the conviction that the metaphysical consistency of real and material images is greater than that of mental images, Mitchell reveals his viewpoint on this matter by stating:

*It’s time now to acknowledge that this whole story could be told another way, from the standpoint of a tradition which sees the literal sense of the word image as a resolutely non- or even anti-pictorial notion. This is the tradition which begins, of course, with the account of man’s creation “in the image and likeness” of God* [2, p. 31].

This, no doubt, is a stunning statement – and no less startling is the embedding within it of one Mitchell’s favourite motto: “in the image and likeness of God”. First, we see that Mitchell places the discovery of the true answer to the question “what is an image?” not at the end of a long historical process of cognitive progress, by virtue of which the appropriate solution to the question of “what is an image?” is finally reached, but rather *ab initio*, returning to the biblical sources (sources that he seems to discover in the masterpiece of a prominent 12<sup>th</sup>-century polymath born in Córdoba during the twilight years of Spanish Jewry’s golden era, the *Guide of the Perplexed* by Maimónides)<sup>9</sup>.

With an interest in paying attention to this *acknowledgement* (“It’s time now to acknowledge...”), because it reveals the route that this author will take in search of the genealogical answer to the question “What is an image?”

The most crucial reference to images of the tradition that man was made in the image and likeness of God is the mandate: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image”. Compliance with this exhortation and the idea that

the *literal* sense of the word *image* refers to “a resolutely non- or even anti-pictorial notion” fit well – and this link is consistent with a reminder formulated by Mitchell in the first paragraph of his Introduction to *Iconology: This is a book... about vision written as if by a blind author for a blind reader* [2, p. 1].

### **Image = Sign**

The biblical tradition is declared iconoclastic. But it is here, however, or precisely, where Mitchell finds the means by which to strengthen his answer to the question of “What is an image?” – an answer which, as already stated, is nothing more than the idea that image = sign (a sign, we can now add, that he understands to be “resolutely non- or even anti-pictorial”). One of the most remarkable passages of “What is an image?” is the paragraph that illustrates the thesis of image = sign.

If there were no more minds there would be no more images, mental or material. The world may not depend upon consciousness, but images of the world clearly do. And this [...] *it is because an image cannot be seen as such without a paradoxical trick of consciousness, an ability to see something as “there” and “not there” at the same time. When a duck responds to a decoy, or when the birds peck at the grapes in the legendary paintings of Xeuxis, they are not seeing images: they are seeing other ducks, or real grapes – the things themselves, and not images of the things* [2, p. 17].

The argument that leads us to conclude that the existence of images is mental seems so convincing that it should be scrutinized carefully, because it leaves a residue that we would not want to leave abandoned to their fate.

Mitchell states that to be an image is to be a sign. Within the framework of this presumption, its reasoning fits perfectly with the explanation of the notion of “sign” offered by Semiotics. In any classification of the sign as an element of a process of significance, it always appears as something that (being there, *in presentia*) is put in place of something else that is *in absentia*, or not physically present. Peirce defined it as [...] *something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity* [16, CP. 2.228], a definition that can be translated as follows: something that, in someone’s eyes, is put in place of (*or stands for*) something else – not replacing that other thing as a whole, but representing some aspect of it or replacing it in some of its capacities for the purpose of a particular practical use<sup>10</sup>.

Two implications emerge from this definition. The first is that, *stricto sensu*, nothing can be said **TO BE** a sign. In and of itself, nothing is a sign. We can take as signs things such as words, images, sounds, smells, flavours, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning – they become signs only when, mentally relating them to something else, we invest in them some form of meaning. One of the central principles of semiotics is that signs are not a class of objects. They only exist in the conscience of

<sup>9</sup> We think it is important to note that Maimónides has been described as “an iconoclastic firebrand”. This is described by Dani Rabinowitz, referring to the characterization of Maimónides offered by Josef Stern in *The Matter and Form of Maimónides’ Guide*. The phrase “an iconoclastic firebrand” appears in the review of Rabinowitz “A Unified Reading of Maimónides’ Guide” (June 10, 2014), *vid.* in <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/unified-reading-maimonides-guide/>. In *The Matter and Form of Maimónides’ Guide*, Stern describes the Maimónides as a complex thinker and characterizes it by offering an extensive sequence of traits that ends like this: *Maimónides the proto-Spinozist, proto-Kantian, or proto-Levinasian, and, of course, Maimónides the iconoclast* [15]. Naturally, Mitchell does not ignore the iconoclassical propensity of Maimónides, whom he calls “Talmucic scholar” and places [...] *a religious tradition obsessed with taboos against graven images and idolatry* [3, pp. 31, 32].

<sup>10</sup> We follow here the explanation of Umberto Eco [17, p. 27].

an interpreter. As Peirce states, *Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign* [16, CP 2.172]. Put another way, *Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as “signifying” something – referring to or standing for something other than itself* [18, p. 17]. The second implication is that if there is no consciousness that, when perceiving a certain thing, correlates it with another, then there is also no sign.

With this in mind, it is understood that Mitchell’s argument is semiotically flawless. When it is assumed that image = sign (and, from here, it is concluded that [...] *an image cannot be seen as such without a paradoxical trick of consciousness, an ability to see something as “there” and “not there” at the same time*), we must also accept that images do not exist the way ducks and lakes exist – whose existence does not depend on a consciousness that, when perceiving them, relates them to something else. In the apocalyptic scenario conceived by Mitchell (“if ... my mind, yours, all human consciousness were annihilated”), the ducks and the rest of the physical world “would continue to exist quite nicely” [1], but the existence of the images would vanish.

### *The tatusas*

Let us now place ourselves in the apocalyptic scenario conceived by Mitchell. Imagine what would happen to duck decoys arranged on the waters of a lake by a hunter who, just before the catastrophe, was about to hunt there. The ducks would still be there. Given that there are no consciences endowed with the “ability to see something as ‘there’ and ‘not there’ at the same time”, we should not use the term “image” to refer to things that, rocked by the undulations of the water, sway on the surface of the lake among ducks made of flesh and blood – in order to relate to them in the same way as ducks, because “they are seeing other ducks”. We are abiding by Mitchell’s dictum, so when we speak of these things we will not say that they are images. We will instead refer to them as tatusas.

After *demonstrating* that tatusas (in and of itself) are not images, Mitchell abandons them to their fate. However, we might be interested in them and ask a question. Even if we accept that we should not refer to as images those things that sway on the surface of the lake, that cast a shadow on it, that generate reflections in the water that are indiscernible from those produced by real ducks, and that such flesh and blood ducks see as other ducks, *does this necessarily mean that we should not talk about them?* We think not.

### *Conclusion and proposal of an alternative approach to the study of images*

Although we admit that we should not refer to images as tatusas, this does not *annihilate* our interest in them or our willingness to study them seriously and objectively for the purpose of rigorously shaping scientific knowledge about them. Although tatusas are not used as signs, they can still be employed in other ways – as hunting decoys, for example.

We certainly agree that to speak of something as a sign is to say very little about it. Anything can be said to be a sign. Thus, to refer to something as a sign is no different to saying that it is a thing. There is nothing (object, being, or entity) that cannot be declared a thing (it is for this reason that philosophers have coined the expression “thing-in-itself”). So, to answer the question “what is an image?” by answering, “it is a sign” is to devalue the notion of image to the status of *flatus vocis*. In the nominalist tradition of medieval philosophy, this Latin expression (which refers to the action of expelling air through the mouth, emitting “voices of air”) refers to the argument that the “universals” do not exist at all – that is, they do not refer to something (an “essence”) that has a “real” existence. Umberto Eco has linked the expression *flatus vocis* with *la reflexio ad phantasmata*, stating that *Language names by blurring the irrepressible proof of the existing individual* [19, p. 32]. We use it to suggest that to settle the issue of “What is an image?” by declaring that “images are signs” is to hollow out the notion of the image in a way that renders it useless.

It renders it useless because, as we have seen, there is nothing (idea, thing or phenomenon) of which cannot be said “this is a sign”. So, considering what in Linguistics, Logic, Semiotics, etc. is named “the law of inverse ratio”, namely, the greater the comprehension of a term, the lesser its extension and vice versa – we could say that to answer the question “what is an image?” by answering, “it is a sign” is to provide a rather poor explanation of what images are – of what images are *de facto*, as a matter of factual facts. On the other hand, if instead of talking on images as a whole (= in abstract & *in vacuo*), we talk about a certain concrete image, certain image of a duck used as a decoy, e.g., we find that this concrete tatusa-duck can be related with some idea of ducks in general, or with that of a specific duck, or with that of a specific variety of duck, or perhaps with a down feather pillows brand, or also with the gray gyrfalcon, as it feeds mainly on ducks, and, of course, even with Mitchell’s speech about duck decoys. Any of these applied developments of the Mitchellian “trick of consciousness” – which consists of to see something as “there” and “not there” at the same time – is a circumstantial and contingent interpretation (an occasional reading) of the tatusa that is there – and an interpretation in nothing different from the very diverse interpretations we can make of anything else in the world: a duck of flesh and blood, a lake, a stone, a frog, the rainbow, the behavior of our neighbor, the meaning of a poem, etc. However, it is obvious that the same as a ball admits to be employed in applications in which the drawing of a circle may not be used (and vice versa), a tatusa-duck can do things that cannot be done by a photo of a duck, nor by a drawing of Donald Duck, nor by the plane drawn by an engineer, nor by a mental image of a duck that I handle in my head while I dream (and vice versa). But, when we place ourselves in the phantasmagorical sphere of signs, this disparity of the uses of images is eclipsed or becomes irrelevant – as well as the factual (and not merely “symbolic”) correlation between the physical conformation of a concrete image



and the concrete functions in which it can be employed as a tool-artifact (or “technical-artifact”)<sup>11</sup>. The fact that we make images as disparate as duck decoys, ducks photos, Donald Ducks, plans drawn by engineers, Artworks,

<sup>11</sup> For notion of “tool-artifact”, readers can refer to Martin Heidegger’s classic essay *The Origin of the Work of Art (Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, 1935–1937, 1950 and 1960)* [20]. For notion of “technical artifact” readers can refer to Peter Kroes’s *Technical Artefacts* [21]. (In general *technical artifacts* are material objects that have been deliberately produced by humans in order to fulfill a practical function. As it is known, Aristotle explained his doctrine of the four causes – material, formal, efficient and final – by referring to technical artifacts such as houses and statues [*Physics* II.3]). We consider important to remind readers also of the notion of “affordance”, coined by James J. Gibson (one of the most important contributors to the field of visual perception) in 1966. An affordance, in Gibson’s sense, must be understood as an action possibility available offered by an object (or surface) – an image, e.g. – to a particular living being in a specific environment. The notion of *affordance* is perhaps most easily understood through a simple example. Among others examples, Gibson gives the following one: *If a terrestrial surface is nearly horizontal (instead of slanted), nearly flat (instead of convex or concave), and sufficiently extended (relative to the size of the animal) and if its substance is rigid (relative to the weight of the animal), then the surface affords support* [22, p. 127]. We think that the idea of affordance, borrowed from perceptual psychology, can be helpfully applied to the domain of images understood as tool-artifacts – i.e. as utensils intended to be handled (even manipulated) in different ways, and *not* only as objects for sight, either being *readed*, or being aesthetically contemplated.

etc. evidence that images are – and should be seen as – tool-artifacts which are intentionally produced to be employment in a disparate diversity of uses – in a disparate diversity of uses that a good theory of images should not neglect.

So, we think that to settle the issue of “What is an image?” by declaring that “images are signs” is to hollow out the notion of the image in a way that reduces it to the condition of an empty *flatus vocis*.

However, to claim that something is a thing that, without being a duck, has the virtue of being seen as a duck by other ducks, reminds us of a fact that is certainly remarkable and worthy of being taken into consideration. In fact, if we have been making duck decoys for centuries (and other things like this), because of this and for this. We assume that this is one of the reasons why we, and also Mitchell, talk about duck decoys and other tatusas – in addition to, of course, talking about how we make images work as signs.

In his *Picture Theory*, after stating, *Although we have thousands of words about pictures, we do not yet have a satisfactory theory of them*, Mitchell suggests: *Perhaps the problem is not just with pictures, but with theory* [5, p. 9]. We also agree with this suggestion.

Translated by  
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## Abstract

The subject of this work is the images, or more accurately said, the state of our knowledge about the set consisting of artifacts such as the *Venus de Milo*, the *Gioconda*, the duck decoys (or “fake birds”) used to hunt ducks, toys such as a doll or a paper airplane and drawings such as the planes drawn up by engineers or architects. Our purpose is to discuss the understanding of images currently considered canonical – i.e., the theory that states that images are a modality of signs. We will do this by analyzing “The Family of images” a proposal developed by W.J.T. Mitchell in a famous essay entitled “What is an image?”. After introducing readers to the subject and outlining a diagnosis about the current *status questionis* of theory of

images, we will study Mitchell's proposal and criticize the thesis (assumed and brilliantly presented by this author) that states that images are nothing more than a more or less *sui generis* modality of signs. Finally, in the section dedicated to the conclusions, we will outline a proposal of an alternative approach to the study of the images that, instead of seeing them as signs, considers them as tool-artifacts.

**Key words:** W.J.T. Mitchell, image, sign, artifacts, tools

### ***Streszczenie***

Tematem artykułu są obrazy, a ściślej mówiąc, stan naszej wiedzy o zbiorze artefaktów, takich jak Wenus z Milo, Gioconda, bałwanki kaczek (alternatywnie „Fake birds” lub „Bird decoys”) używane w myślistwie, zabawki, takie jak lalka lub papierowy samolot oraz rysunki zrobione przez inżyniera czy architekta. Naszym celem jest omówienie rozumienia obrazów, uważanych obecnie za kanoniczne, czyli de facto przedstawienie teorii stanowiącej, że obrazy są modalnością znaków. W tym celu zamierzamy przeanalizować koncepcję „Rodziny obrazów” opracowaną przez W.J.T. Mitchella w jego słynnym eseju zatytułowanym „Czym jest obraz?”. Po zapoznaniu czytelników z tym tematem i przedstawieniu próby diagnozy przyczyn dyskomfortu wywoływanego przez *status quaestionis* na podstawie teorii obrazów chcemy przyjrzeć się propozycji rozumienia tej kwestii przez Mitchella i krytycznie zanalizować przyjętą przez niego tezę, która głosi, że obrazy nie są niczym więcej niż modalnością znaków *sui generis*. Na koniec w części poświęconej wnioskowi zaprezentujemy swoją propozycję alternatywnego podejścia do badania obrazów, które to stanowisko każe traktować je jako artefakt-narzędzie, nie zaś postrzegać jako znaki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** W.J.T. Mitchell, obraz, znak, artefakt, narzędzie