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A New Introduction
for the English Reader

The present book was first published in German in 2001 and caused quite a lot of discussion in the humanities, especially, though reluctantly, in the field of art history. Its title, *Bild-Anthropologie*, indicated the choice of an anthropological viewpoint in speaking of "images," a term used in its broadest definition, for *Bild* means in German both "image" and "picture."[1] The first chapter is an exercise in theory, admittedly a rather daunting one, and its rigors should not discourage the reader from consulting the rest. It served a practical purpose in 2001, as a guideline for the research group "Image, Medium and Body" at the School for New Media in Karlsruhe, where members representing several disciplines—including art history, philosophy, and psychology—met to study images in widely disparate contexts. The second chapter looks, in more concrete terms, at the human body, with its capacities for memory, dream, and imagination, as a living medium for images.

The remaining chapters offer case studies in which the theoretical approach described in the first two chapters is applied. They function as independent essays and need not be read in sequence. The third chapter analyses the genesis of the independent human portrait as a picture subject second in importance only to religious themes. The fourth chapter traces the origin of human picture-making back to the funereal realm. Though the discussion covers nothing later than antiquity, this chapter represents, in my view, the nucleus of the book. The fifth chapter investigates, for the first time, a neglected aspect of Dante's picture theory, based on the model of the human shadow. The last chapter deals with photography, more specifically with photography's social uses and private meanings, and reveals that this modern branch of picture-making has in fact a long prehistory.

The question "What is an image?" requires an anthropological approach because, as we will see, the answer is culturally determined and thus a fit subject for anthropological inquiry. The art historian normally addresses other ques-

tions. A work of art—be it a picture, a sculpture, or a print—is a tangible object with a history, an object that can be classified, dated, and exhibited. An image, on the other hand, defies such attempts of reification, even to the extent that it often straddles the boundary between physical and mental existence. It may live in a work of art, but the image does not necessarily coincide with the work of art. The English-language distinction between "image" and "picture" is pertinent, but only in the sense that it clarifies the distinction between the "image" that is the subject of our quest and the "picture" in which that image may reside. At a fundamental level, the question of what an image is requires a two-fold answer. We must address the image not only as a product of a given medium, be it photography, painting, or video, but also as a product of our selves, for we generate images of our own (dreams, imaginings, personal perceptions) that we play out against other images in the visible world.

I do not use the term "anthropology" in the sense of "ethnology," but rather according to its European definition, which needs some explanation. In Europe the term has the broader meaning of a "cultural anthropology," embracing the Kantian definition of a human being and of human nature in general. I insist on these distinctions, just as I insist on the distinction between "images," which are the subject of this study, and "art," which is not, in order to avoid wrong expectations. English anthropologists have accused the so-called "anthropology of art" of lacking any distinctive subject matter and have voted to break with aesthetics in order to overcome "an exaggerated respect for art."[2] I do not want to interfere with this debate as it lies outside the interests of this book.

In Germany, the recent battle cry is *Bildwissenschaft*, heralded by Tom Mitchell as a new kind of iconology. Its newness lies not so much in methodology as in the claim that it enables the study of iconic media not based on texts. The debate, however, centers on the question of whether or not image studies are a part of art history. To my mind, this sets up an unnecessary dichotomy. Even Ernst Gombrich lived comfortably in two disciplines, in his case classical art history and a psychology of perception. Aby Warburg would have developed his own anthropology of images had his thinking not been narrowed by the iconology of Erwin Panofsky and Edgar Wind. I dare to take up Warburg's anthropology, as well as his *Kulturwissenschaft,* without quoting or historicizing him, as his initiatives need to be appropriated for our own time. The same applies to the meaning of "iconology," which has to be redefined for new and broader applications that transcend the borderlines of art history properly speaking.

Historical anthropology—in particular, the research group with this name at the Freie Universität, Berlin—cleaves strongly to the philosophical tradition of Norbert Elias, Helmuth Plessner, and Victor Turner, whose "anthropology of performance" has served as a frequent inspiration.[3] In France there is a similar group, founded by Marc Augé, at the École des hautes études.[4] Augé's position is best studied in his book *Anthropology for Contemporary Worlds.*

His is a social anthropology centered on what he calls "supermodernity" rather than "postmodernism." In his book *La guerre des rêves* (The war of dreams), Augé explicitly refers to Serge Gruzinski's work *La guerre des images* (The war of images), in which the author traces the colonization of images in Mexico and its later impact.[5] An issue of the *Revue de l'Homme*, edited by Carlo Severi, assembles a number of contributors from the disciplines of ethnology, social history, and art history under the heading "Image et anthropologie."[6]

At the College de France, Jean-Pierre Vernant in studying ancient Greece initiated what he termed an "anthropologie historique de l'image," which was concerned in the main with "le statut de l'image, de l'imagination et de l'imaginaire" (the status of the image, of the imagination, and the imaginary).[7] Vernant brought to light close links that exist between the history of visual artifacts on the one hand and, on the other, the evolution of Greek thought to encompass, within the concept of the image, notions of symbol, resemblance, imitation, and appearance. Greece is a unique case, as we have access not only to its early images but also to the writings of its philosophers, which show us how its art was mirrored in contemporary thought. Our access to the common ground between the terminology of Greek art and Greek philosophy may explain why the heritage of Greece still looms large in our terminology and epistemology.[8]

My aim is to respond to Vernant's configuration in proposing a close and fundamental interrelation (and even interaction) of image, body, and medium as components in every attempt at picture-making.[9] I made my entrée to this anthropological discourse with the topic "Image and Death" when, in 1995, I participated in a colloquium dedicated to the meaning of death in the different religions and cultures of the world.[10] It soon became clear that I had hit upon a fruitful area of research for a study of the making of images. Body and medium are both involved in the meaning of funereal images, as it is the *missing body* of the dead in whose place images are installed. But these images in turn are in need of an artificial body in order that they might occupy the vacant place of the deceased. This artificial body may be called the "medium" (and not just "material") in the sense that images needed embodiment in order to acquire visibility. To this end, a *lost body* is exchanged for the *virtual body* of the image. Here we grasp the roots of that very contradiction which will forever characterize images: images make a physical (a body's) *absence* visible by transforming it into iconic presence. The mediality of images is thus rooted in a body analogy. Our bodies function as media themselves, living media as opposed to fabricated media. Images rely on two symbolic acts which both involve our living body: the act of *fabrication* and the act of *perception*, the one being the purpose of the other.

In our times we expect that the death of a public persona will be a media event. The picture of the deceased is meant to introduce the dead in their new (only pictorial) status. The picture occupies the same (or a corresponding)

place in the mass media as did the portrayed when alive. But whereas the picture represented presence when the person was alive, at the moment of death its meaning changes and it represents absence. We thus experience, even today, the survival of that "symbolic exchange" to which Jean Baudrillard dedicated a famous book.[11]

It is however not the meaning of death but the quest for the image that is our topic here. A somewhat similar perspective, at least in part, characterizes Régis Debray's book *Vie et mort de l'image*.[12] In the preface, he calls the image a domesticated "terreur," because its origin "is strongly linked to death." He rightly insists on the importance of the technological and historical evolution of public media and therefore can say "that any fabricated image is dated by its fabrication as well as by its subsequent reception." But Debray gives equal weight to images that live only in our thinking and in our imagination. He cites Gaston Bachelard's formula that "death had first been an image, and it will ever remain an image," since we do not know what death really *is*.[13]

In order to cope with the intangible nature of the mental image, Debray introduces the gaze in its place, for he considers the gaze as the vector for transmitting mental images to material picture and back. While David Freedberg in *The Power of Images* singled out the "response" to images, Debray insists on the gaze as the force that turns a picture into an image and an image into a picture.[14] "The image draws its meaning from the gaze, much as the text lives from reading." The gaze, rather than being a mere tool, implies the living body as a whole. The French term *regard*, with the implication of *prendre garde*, has different connotations than the English terms "gaze," "look," and "glance."[15] In English "regard" and "regardful" come closer to what Debray means by "gaze," as do the words "watch" or "watch out," which appear in the linguistic vicinity of the French *regard*. We are condemned to live in the labyrinth of our own languages, which so often restrict and even close off parts of the semantic spectrum, thereby limiting our ability to describe and at the same time also narrowing our very thinking. The same kind of aporia applies to the vocabulary for the practice of transmitting images (rather than producing pictures). It is not by chance that Debray dedicated another book to the process of transmission (*Transmettre*), a term to which he gives a meaning that transcends the banal sense of "communication."[16]

In anthropological terms, I would argue against the rigid dualism that so often claims to distinguish between "internal" and "external" representation, or "endogenous" and "exogenous" representation to use the terminology current in neurobiological research. Our brain certainly is the site of internal representation. Endogenous images, however, react to exogenous images, which tend to dominate in the ongoing back-and-forth. Images do not exist only on the wall (or on the TV screen), nor do they exist only in our heads. They cannot be extricated from a continuous process of interactions, and that process has left its traces in the history of artifacts. This never ceasing interaction con-

tinues even in our era of digital images (*images discrètes*), as Bernard Stiegler has rightly pointed out. "There have never existed physical images (*images objet*) without the participation of mental images, since an image by definition is one that is seen (is in fact *only* one when it is seen). Reciprocally, mental images also rely on objective images in the sense that they are the *retour* or the *rémanence* of the latter. The question of the image is always related to that of the trace and of the inscription."[17] In other words, mental images are inscribed in external ones and vice versa. Augé, for example, speaks of the "dreams" that the individual has, as against the "icons" derived from the public realm that live on in our dreams.[18] In the realm of dreams, the give and take between the private and the collective *imaginaire* is fodder for those who desire political control; in other words, for manipulation by politicians.

I argue in this book that the interaction between our bodies and external images includes a third parameter, one which I call a "medium," in the sense of a vector, agent, *dispositif* the French would say. The medium functions as a support, host, and tool for the image. This notion may meet with some resistance, as we are familiar with the term "media" only in the sense of "mass media." Two observations may help to clarify my argument. First, I do not speak of images *as* media, as is often done, but instead of their need *for* and use *of* media in order to be transmitted to us and to become visible for us. The same images may even migrate in history from one medium to the other, or they may accumulate features and traces of several media in one and the same place. Second, I would contend that our bodies themselves operate as a living medium by processing, receiving, and transmitting images. It is on account of this in-born capacity of our bodies (our minds as part of our bodies) that we are able to distinguish media from images, so that we understand an image to be neither a simple object (a photographic print, for example) nor a real body (the body of the loved one in the photograph). The evolution of pictorial media, in other words, is one thing (the invention of photography, say) and mental disposition (the memory of earlier media or the memory of older images in newer media) another thing. The distinction between image and medium also explains our deliberate, intentional shifts of focus from the one to the other. The role of the human user in choosing what to consider often remains forgotten in the theory of media, but it is this very part of the equation that helps us to understand the "anachronism," to quote G. Didi-Huberman, that is inherent in human imagination and that counteracts the mere linear progress of technical evolution as shown by the visual media.

Two examples will serve to clarify the distinction between image and medium. Iconoclasm, which is violence against images, only succeeds in destroying the medium or medium-support of an image; i.e., its tangible and material or technical aspect. It leaves untouched the image itself, for the image remains with the viewer—and this is so even though it was the destruction of the image that was intended by the act of iconoclasm. Iconoclasm, by depriving an

image of its physical presence, aims also to deprive it of its public presence, its existence in the public sphere. Destruction in such a case is as symbolic as the original installation or introduction of the image into the public space. The destruction is directed against the image (an icon of the enemy in the public imagination, for example), but in fact it damages only the stone or bronze of the medium. When the colossal Saddam statues in Bagdad were overturned, the destroyers were enacting a symbolic victory over the tyrant via his image. But the mere elimination of a public statue or a picture cannot guarantee what it ultimately intends; namely, oblivion or contempt for the image in the minds of the people.

The distinction between image and medium becomes equally apparent when we consider the inherent nature of images as the *presence of an absence*. The image is present to our gaze, certainly. But that presence, or visibility, relies on the medium in which the image appears, whether on a monitor or embodied in an old statue. In their own right, images testify to the absence of that which they make present. By virtue of the media in which they are produced, they already *own* the very presence that they are meant to transmit. The stone or bronze or photograph now owns the only *presence* that is possible, which is in fact the *absence* of the real object. In this lies the paradox of images—in the fact that they *are* or *mean* the presence of an absence—and this paradox is in part a result of our capacity to distinguish image and medium. We are willing to credit images with the representation of absence, because they are present by virtue of their chosen medium. They need a presence as medium in order to symbolize the absence of what they represent. The body analogy here comes into play again. The relation between absence, understood as invisibility, and presence, understood as visibility, is in the final instance a body experience. Memory is a body experience, as it generates images of absent events or people remembered from another time or place. We tend to *imagine* as present what in fact has long been absent, and we impute the same ability to the pictures (such as photographs of the dead) that we fabricate. The mediality of pictures is thus the missing link between images and our bodies.

To illustrate what this book intends to do, I will use as an example a 1974 work by the Korean-born video artist Nam June Paik. The archetype of his long series of TV-Buddhas, this work employs the short-circuit technique, which was state-of-the-art at the time (Fig. I.1).[19] A short circuit, produced by a video camera, projects the same image twenty-five times a second onto a TV monitor. That image is of a Buddha statue, which itself is placed in front of the TV screen. The work reflects (and parodies) the relation between TV and TV viewer. It also is reminiscent of the then-current fascination with life images, which J. C. Bringuier in the *Cahiers du cinéma* called the "mystique du direct." Bringuier illustrated immediacy in time between picture and viewer with a 1961 photograph of a newscaster on French TV whose image is caught on the monitor while he speaks.[20] In his TV Buddha, Paik offers a configura-

Fig. I.1. Nam June Paik, Installation view of the exhibition "Projects: Nam June Paik" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. August 29, 1977 through October 10, 1977. Gelatin silver print, 17.8 x 24.1 cm. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/ Licenced by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

tion of image, medium, and body that looks like a subversive demonstration of the way in which their interaction works.

There are two media here (statue and TV), but only one Buddha image— for the Buddha Figure already is an image, and it creates or reflects the same image, as if in a mirror. A viewer is included as well, who receives an image of his or her own. Paik does not address the usual viewer, but instead represents Buddha as a viewer. By means of the so-called Buddha statue (which incidentally is not actually a statue of a Buddha but of a Buddhist monk), and the mirror (which is not actually reflecting but rather simulated by the short circuit between the camera and monitor), Paik creates a deceiving tautology between the speed of the new medium (TV) and the sculptural immobility of the old medium (the statue), both of Japanese origin but the one recent, the other several centuries old. As we compare the dual medium (the one old and three-dimensional, the other new and electronic), the non-identity of image and medium is confirmed. The image we see twice is neither in front of the TV (the statue) nor on the TV screen. It emerges in our gaze, and with a paradoxical ambiguity, for it straddles the boundary between two media which both receive it and yet do not catch it. In a 1974 performance, which took place beside the work, the artist himself replaced the sitting statue in front of the TV, thus offering yet another variant of the circular interrelation of image, medium, and body.

A note on how the present book, originally published in German in 2001, fits into the context of my long-term research may be of some interest to the reader. Its antecedents were such publications as *Likeness and Presence* (in German, *Bild und Kult*) whose reach excluded antiquity and also bypassed modern picture practice, and thus seemed to restrict my inquiry to picture-making.[21] In 2003, lectures at the Collège de France opened my eyes to the significance of the human gaze in picture theory. They took me into a *histoire du régard* (history of the gaze) and thus expanded my understanding of the three concepts—image, medium, and body—which guide the present book. The first products of the Paris lectures were two essays published in an anthology titled *Bilderfragen* (Picture issues).[22] Essays on the window paradigm in the history of looking and on our changing view of the heavens followed.[23] The most important result, however, was a book published in 2008 with the title *Florenz und Bagdad. Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks*,[24] due to be published in translation by Harvard University Press in 2011, with the new subtitle: Arab Science and Renaissance Art. Its main arguments have been summarized in English in the short essay "Perspective: Arab Mathematics and Renaissance Western Art," which appeared in a 2008 issue of *European Review*.[25] Finally, a book should be mentioned that exists in German and French only (*Das echte Bild*), which asks the question why humans, despite all evidence that the quest is hopeless, nonetheless continue to search for something like a *true* image, especially in the religious sphere.[26]

I cannot let the present book go without a few remarks on the unavoidable pitfalls of translation. Despite a close collaboration with the patient translator, Thomas Dunlap, who was an incredible help, the results are far from what I would like them to be. A book that has been thought and written in German, should be rewritten, and reconceived, as a new book in English—a task impossible for me to even consider. Nam June Paik, a great artist and a playful user of such languages as German, English, French, Korean, and Japanese, once wrote that we believe we think *with* or *in* languages, but more often languages think with us. I subscribe to the truth of this statement wholeheartedly. My desperation with the translation grew to a point where I decided to omit an entire chapter because it seemed to resist any meaningful translation. That chapter, "*Das Körperbild als Menschenbild. Eine Repräsentation in der Krise*," can be found only in the French, Spanish, and several other translations. The reader may be startled or irritated by some passages in the present translation. I therefore offer the following chapter in hopes that it will clarify at the outset some of the fundamental ideas developed in the rest of the book. Also of possible help are two essays published in English in *Critical Inquiry* and in the *Clark Studies in the Visual Arts*, both in 2005.[27]