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Images Without Objects and Referents?

A Reply to Étienne Jollet's Review of our *Bildtheorie zur Einführung* (*Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 79, 2016, 435 – 439)

In a little book published in 2014, we attempted to systematically introduce a field of scholarship that multiple disciplines – including philosophy, theology, and art history – have participated in developing: image theory. While engaging with the both rich and heterogeneous work in this field, we elaborated a theoretical model that unfolds through three basic concepts: image vehicle, image content, and image referent. With *image vehicle*, we understand a thing perceivable to the senses – such as a bundle of synthetic fibers, a reflective surface, or a painted wood panel – that allows another thing to be seen or recognized; for example, a bear in the bundle of synthetic fibers, spatial depth in the reflective surface, or a room in the painted panel. We call this other thing that the image vehicle makes visible or recognizable the *image content*; and it encompasses, in our view, objects and spaces that we call *image objects* and *image spaces*.[1]

Seeing and recognizing image spaces and image objects is firmly grounded in everyday routines, and yet it is not easy to characterize. It is not a normal perceiving but also not a mere fantasizing. It often occurs in the context of specific social practices and is fed and guided by the perception of the image vehicle. In many cases, the image vehicle is a structured or even a highly structured entity. Formed itself, it forms the image content and establishes conditions for accessing that content.[2] But seeing and recognizing the image content can also affect the perception of the image vehicle and enrich or intensify it.

Image vehicle and image content are thus intimately connected in our conception – they form something like a unity – and yet they must be differentiated from one another. We use the terms *image object*, *image space*, and their umbrella concept *image content*[3] in such a way that they can only be applied to problematic entities. For instance, let us consider a teddy bear. He does not move himself, but he is also not dead. He is made of synthetic fibers and was probably produced in China. As long as one is not ready to accept that bears are inanimate beings made of synthetic fibers and produced in China, then what the vehicle allows to be recognized can hardly be classified as a bear. But the problematic being of this bear does not hinder it from being understood as an image object in the sense we intend and from being able to be treated as if it were a living being; indeed, its problematic nature is a precondition for doing so. This works similarly for image *spaces*. Think, for example, of the reflective surface of a mirror: it lets us see a space, but this space cannot really be where it appears. Why not? Because insofar as the surface is reflective, it will be opaque, and we therefore have to assume that what we find reflected in it cannot be a space that is lying behind it and visible through it. While the reflected space itself will usually be real, it is not behind the reflective surface but rather in front of it, and it also does not belong to the image content. To the image content belongs only the space *in* the mirror, but it will not be able to fulfill the concept of being a space lying behind the mirror surface without being contraindicated.[4]

Nothing that belongs to the image content, be it an object or a space, is as it appears: this formulates the situation in a more familiar language that draws on important aspects of a pretheoretical

understanding of images. Thus, only what is not compatible – on the basis of established assumptions – with the actual nature of the image vehicle can become an element of the image content. That is the reason why we characterized the relationship of the image vehicle and image content as a *conflicting* ("zwiespältige") unity in our book. For while the image vehicle allows, on the one hand, the image content to be seen or recognized, it precludes, on the other, accepting a description of this content – "a bear", "a space lying behind this surface", and so on – without contraindication.

We use the expression *image* as the designation for this conflicting unity to differentiate it, in turn, from a third instance: the *image referent(s)*. As we understand them, image referents can be persons, things, events, feelings, ideas – indeed, they can even be images. They are to be characterized not by ontological concepts (for instance, as "real things") but rather by a functional relation, namely, by how an image or image object *represents* them in the sense of substituting for them under the conditions of certain ways of using an image. One could think, for example, of a sovereign that lets himself be represented by statues to accept tributes in the distant provinces of his empire; of two people who get married and document the wedding with the help of an image in which they can be recognized extending a hand to one another; or of a painting about which a text makes observations that cannot be verified on the basis of the original but can with the help of a reproduction included in the text. Relationships of representing or standing in for are not in themselves specific to images, but that and how images are employed in the context of such relationships is still extremely significant and important to the use of images: such substitutions are the basis of the forms of knowledge and power transmitted by images, which have, as is well known, played a significant role in different historical and social contexts.

We will not recount more of the content of this little book here because some of it has already been conveyed in the pages of this journal, namely, in a review by Étienne Jollet. The short remarks above are thus also very far from a summary; they solely serve the purpose of making clear why we find Jollet's objections to the basic premises of our image theory interesting and productive, yet unconvincing.

At a key point in his review, Jollet differentiates between the "image of" and the "image", and suggests that we neglected the "image" in favor of the "image of": "Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl have accomplished an important task in building a consistent series of notions around the 'image of,' defining and measuring the relations between the three main terms: BO [Bildobjekt or image object, to be understood here more generally in the sense of image content], BV [Bildvehikel or image vehicle] and referent. But a 'theory of the image' may also have to deal with the fact that the image can be without object as such; that it imposes itself without referent" (437). Everything here points to the suspicion that we have neglected not just any one part of image theory but rather the decisive part: the part that deals with images as such.

What would be a theory of the image as such? Insofar as a theory of the image vehicle or, more specifically, the image formatting is meant, we would like to emphasize that we devoted half of our two-part study to this topic. The accounts of the palimpsest, the image field, perspective, and so on all aim to analyze what Meyer Schapiro, whom Jollet cites, once called the "non-mimetic elements" of "image-signs" (434).[5] But Jollet appears to have something else in mind: not the image vehicle as distinct from the image content and image referents but rather the possibility of an image that is just as much without objects – or, more generally, without content – as it is without referents.[6] Both possibilities – the image without referents and the image without image content – need to be commented on.

First, we must say that we had the possibility of the image without referents in mind from

the beginning of our theory. Images are without referents in the sense we intend if they are not employed in the context of substitutive relationships. Piet Mondrian's neoplastic paintings, for example, can be viewed as images without referents. But one ascribes a referent to them if one views them following the painter's own interpretation as paintings whose harmony and formal organization divulge something about a future state of society. Then one treats them as things that represent something not yet there, as things that offer insights about this something not yet there through what one can recognize in the paintings themselves.[7]

But are these paintings *images* at all in the sense we elucidated? Can one discern in them something of the conflict between vehicle and content that we placed at the center of our theory? This question concerns the possibility of an image without image content. If Regine Prange is correct, for a time the painter Mondrian (in contrast to the theoretician) systematically pursued the goal of exorcizing every appearance – and thereby every form of image content – from the image so as to expose the vehicle as such in full clarity. In the middle of the 1920s, she argues, he actually achieved this goal. Prange captures this process and its goal with a carefully chosen concept: "the iconoclastic image".[8] It points to the possibility of things whose meaning lies in how they draw on the history of the image so as to lead to its end. One can only understand such things if one relates them to precisely what they are *no longer* supposed to be. In the terminology we proposed, one could also say that Mondrian's neoplastic paintings are borderline cases in which the image content approaches zero. Then the techniques we discussed under the heading of *image formatting* ("Bildformatierung") appear all the more clearly – techniques that serve to demarcate and divide a field, to distribute elements in it, to refer to the viewer's corporeal orientation, and so on. It is also true in this respect that one can only understand Mondrian's neoplastic paintings if one relates them to a previous history of the image. Michael Podro described this connection both tactfully and precisely: "After giving up the representation of subject matter and after a long process of refinement, setting up patterns against or within which irregularities were given play, he [Mondrian] settled on an apparently simple set of the pictorial elements, and these elements were so deployed as to set up variations on themselves […]; it would be hard to conceive of a practice of this kind – this play of variation – without the cultivation of formal relations in earlier depiction […]."[9]

Nothing in all of this contradicts the theory we developed. Our theory is thus absolutely able "to deal with the fact that the image can be without object as such; that it imposes itself without referent" (437). So as to avoid misunderstandings, we would like to stress that the question of whether a given entity has an image content must not be confused with the common differentiation between "abstract" and "figurative" images. Many and perhaps even most abstract paintings exhibit an image content. In what way? Leo Steinberg explains it best. Referring to a representative of abstract expressionism, he once wrote: "Existences other than those of paint are implied when [Franz] Kline's imminent blacks block out the openness of a white space; when pure color patches are allowed to locate themselves at varying distances from the picture plane; when painted canvas permits the illusion that form and space, figure and ground are not of one stuff."[10]

So there are, undoubtedly, abstract paintings that exhibit an image content, and even paintings like Mondrian's, in which the image content approaches zero, can be considered images in the context of the terminology we proposed, though they may be a critical borderline case. But if there are things that the predicates "abstract" and "image" equally apply to, then this raises the suspicion that there could conversely be things one can call "figurative" that are still *not* images in

a certain sense. And indeed, not all artifacts in which one can perceive nameable figures necessarily exhibit an image content. As we suggested earlier, what is called *image content* in our theory is intimately connected to problems of classification. An image content is something that is logically contraindicated within the context of a certain conceptual system.[11] One therefore has to consider the possibility that image contents may disappear or reappear with changes to a conceptual system. To explain this, it helps to return to a series of banal examples that we already alluded to, namely, the teddy bears, stone lions, snowmen, and other such things that Ernst Gombrich discussed in *Art and Illusion* and other works. With these examples, Gombrich made a philosophical point by having his reader imagine a conceptual system in which *in addition* to polar bears, brown bears, grizzly bears, and so on, there are also teddy bears; in addition to African lions, mountain lions, and so on, there are the stone lions that guard the entrance to single-family homes; and in addition to firemen, mailmen, and so on, there are snowmen.[12] A lot in this conceptual system would be completely different from the one familiar to us. For example, one would be able to assert that some bears, lions, and men are made by human hands but others not. One could have a concept of what an artifact is, but one could barely have a concept of the image that would even roughly coincide with the concept of the image we have in mind. In any case, teddy bears, stone lions, and snowmen would stop being images in the sense that we have tried to explain here.

In this piece, we can only allude to this problem of classification that Gombrich noticed and the consequences it has for image theory. But it should at least be mentioned because it makes clear that our image theory presents an irreducible logical content – a logical content that does not in any way lead to an ahistorical perspective. On the contrary, it allows one to realize that image contents depend on discursive contexts, which, for their part, are subject to historical change and are also certainly never entirely stable. Gombrich's thought experiment leads to insights into the relativity of what is called image content in our theory. The possibility of understanding teddy bears, stone lions, and snowmen as images (in the sense explained above) depends on conceptual presuppositions, and we may not assume that they are universally shared. That does not mean, of course, that we could simply revise the relevant presuppositions. What would one think of an image theorist who draws biologists' attention to the fact that their discipline has inexcusably neglected teddy bears, stone lions, and snowmen?

Have we been able to rebut Etienne Jollet's objection? We have probably still not entirely understood what he means when he differentiates the "image" from the "image of" and suggests that we neglected the "image" in favor of the "image of" (437). Did he indeed have, as we have assumed, the possibilities of images without image contents and referents in mind – possibilities that he incorrectly presumes we neglected in our theory? Could he not also have been thinking of an image content whose vehicle fundamentally eludes observation: something like a kind of hallucination?

There are two clues that this is actually the crux of the matter. The first is Jollet's criticism of our use of the term *image*. With this term, *we* would like to understand the conflicting unity of image vehicle and image content. Jollet, in contrast, seems to think it better to restrict this term to what we call image content. He would like to give it more or less the meaning that the word *image* often has in French and English (for instance, René Magritte must have been referring to image objects with the word *image*, and when today W. J. T. Mitchell says "image", he always presumably means image content[13]). It is of course possible to formulate our thesis using expressions that are better tuned to the semantics of French, English, or other languages. And,

in fact, one can learn a lot about conceptual differentiations from discussing the terminological difficulties that result from translation.

Unfortunately, Jollet did not make any detailed proposals about terminology. In the end, he is also not nearly as concerned about terminology as about the question of the relationship between image and art. If we interpret him correctly, he is thinking of two modes of engaging with the conflicting unity of vehicle and content. In one mode, one is always focused on the content without being interested in how the vehicle transmits it. Jollet would like to differentiate this mode from another one that concentrates on the "materiality" of the vehicle (439). He identifies this mode with art. One is doubtlessly meant to think here of the legacy of formalism: art as defamiliarization, as being oriented toward the medium and signifier, and so forth. The claim at the basis of this idea – namely, that the difference between vehicle and content only becomes thematized in art – demands an in-depth discussion. One would have to sufficiently specify the claim such that one is not forced to imply, for instance, that all nonartistic engagement with images is blind to signifiers or forgets the medium. But even if one finds Jollet's intended differentiation between two modes of dealing with images convincing, still nothing speaks against using the term *image* as we have proposed, namely, to designate the conflicting unity of image vehicle and image content. This does not prevent one from expressing what Jollet would like to say, that is, that not every way of engaging with images is artistic. It also makes it possible to name and investigate more precisely what Jollet thinks is the distinguishing feature of artistic engagement with images: the concentration on the image vehicle as opposed to the image content or image referent.

But why is it so important to keep in mind and also terminologically stress the conflicting unity of image vehicle and image content? We also offered an answer to this question in our little book. It may be that we sometimes engage with image contents as if they were removable from their vehicle. And image theory must also be able to describe such ways of engaging with images. But image theory can only do this if it insists that there cannot be image contents without vehicles – or stated differently: that every image content is always given and perceivable in a specific way that is determined by the formatting of the image vehicle. If image theory is to be an instrument for criticism, then it itself must not start hallucinating.

We interpret Etienne Jollet's critical observation that we hardly mentioned "mental images" as a second, significantly clearer hint that he might have meant something like a completely unmediated image content with "image" as differentiated from "image of": "The authors have not dealt with what is nowadays called the 'mental image' (for centuries, *fantasma* and *idea*): what one sees in his/her own head. It would not have been necessary to stress the fact that these notions may not correspond to an actual image; but it matters here because there is, at the very heart of the problem of the image, a question of 'comprehension', of the variety of meanings. And dealing with the Lockean or Humean 'idea' might be a way to understand how the intentional object the authors call 'image' may have to do with what is not an object, which might also be intentional (e.g., the use of a mental image for a project) and might not (e.g., when something imposes itself in the mind)" (437).

We gladly admit this omission, but at the same time we would like to point out that a developed theoretical terminology about images is necessary to meaningfully discuss in what respect one could call mental representations images at all and what is gained by calling them such. Is there an equivalent in them to what we call the image vehicle in our terminology? Are they an extreme case of images whose content is only accessible to a single person and whose vehicle fundamentally eludes observation such that even the person

who grasps the content (or is grasped by it) never sets eyes on the vehicle as such? Such questions could perhaps help to clarify the status of these representations. We can thus absolutely imagine that one could approach this difficult topic on the basis of an already developed image theory, but we doubt that one could make it the center or starting point of a theory of images. Our skepticism is also related to the metaphysical starting point of our approach. Like David Summers, our theory assumes a shared world in which physical things and people are fundamental entities.[14] In this shared world, one can of course talk about experiences that cannot be shared – dreams, inner representations, sensations – but they are not the basis of our theory.

To explain this using an art-historical example: for quite a while, one has been used to the thought that single markings of color in a painting by, let's say, Claude Monet could be grasped as substitutes for sensations this painter once had. Stated more precisely, this means that the image vehicle – the light-reflecting surface of a Monet painting – functions as a substitute for a sensory field, namely, a field of vision, while the things and spatial relations perceivable in the image vehicle are analogous to objects constituted in the painter's perception. The gradual appearance of image objects and spatial relations in the process of viewing the painting then refers to the process of constituting the contents of perception from sensory data. This further leads to the fascinating fantasy of being able to see a piece of the world through somebody else's eyes. But the painting itself is a physical thing, which can be found as such in a museum, private collection, auction house, or on an ironing board, and *that* is the reality that we constantly see ourselves confronted with as image theorists. Sensations and objects of the painter's perception only interest us if we have to talk about them in a specific case when we want to make clear what the painting refers to (*if* it refers to anything). Monet's art, in which one can ascertain an inner relationship between impressionism and symbolism,[15] may of course invite the objection that outstanding representatives of aesthetic modernism may have understood the world of individual consciousness – sensory perceptions, memories, dreams, and also hallucinations – and not the shared world of bodies, persons, and institutions as the basis of their image production. History and the present are undoubtedly rich in further examples of images that were or are produced and perceived under completely different metaphysical conditions than those that we have employed in our attempt at a theory of the image. But the task of a systematic image theory cannot lie in integrating the diversity of past and current ideas on the nature of images; instead it must, in our view, try to create a conceptually consistent and also transparent basis for analyzing images.

In sum, we hope that this reply can contribute to clarifying possible misunderstandings and to furthering dialogue within the discipline. Perhaps our remarks have made the claim plausible that the theoretical concepts we put up for discussion are useful when one is concerned with making a hypothesis about what someone means when they use such an ambiguous word like *image* in the context of sophisticated statements without having explained their meaning more precisely. Perhaps one can be additionally convinced that these concepts could help to present a relatively large field of image phenomena comprehensively, to discuss them in a differentiated way, and to recognize them in their diverse historical specificity. *(Translated by Anthony Mahler)*

1 This and the four following paragraphs partially correspond to passages from Wolfram Pichler's essay "Vehikel, Inhalt, Referent: Grundbegriffe einer Bildtheorie", which will appear in a conference anthology edited by Anke Graneß, Sergej Seitz, and Georg Stenger on the topic of *Kraft, Macht und Gewalt der Bilder in interkultureller Perspektive*.

2 We articulated this with reference to, not least, David Summers and his concept of format. See David Summers, *Real spaces: World art history and the rise of Western modernism*, London/New York 2003.

3 What is meant with this term should be differentiated from iconographic meanings, as will become clear later.

4 We borrow the term "contraindicated" from Nelson Goodman's theory of metaphor. See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of art: An approach to a theory of symbols*, Indianapolis [2]1976, 69.

5 Meyer Schapiro, On some problems in the semiotics of visual art: Field and vehicle in image-signs [1969], in: idem, *Theory and philosophy of art: Style, artist, and society* (Selected Papers, vol. 4), New York 1994, 1 – 32.

6 Since Jollet recounts our terminology incorrectly, we would like to refer here to the reason why we think it is a good idea to use *image content* as the general concept that encompasses what can be recognized in an image vehicle: image objects but also, in other circumstances, image spaces or other things that we would rather not call objects such as actions and processes, atmospheres and moods, something falling or standing, or a redness or a darkness that is to be differentiated from the color or brightness of the image vehicle. Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl, *Bildtheorie zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2014, 23 – 25.

7 On this, see, for example, Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, Monde riant, in: *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 114/115, 2010/2011, 14 – 31.

8 Regine Prange, *Das ikonoklastische Bild: Piet Mondrian und die Selbstkritik der Kunst*, Munich 2006.

9 Michael Podro, *Depiction*, New Haven/London 1998, 24 – 26.

10 Leo Steinberg, Jasper Johns: The first seven years of his art, in: idem, *Other criteria: Confrontations with twentieth-century art*, London/Oxford/New York 1972, 17 – 54, here 42.

11 It is no coincidence that we have borrowed the term *contraindicated* from Goodman's theory of metaphor (see note 4). This borrowing alludes to a systematic connection between image theory and metaphor theory, which Franz Josef Czernin drew our attention to.

12 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, Oxford [5]1977. Also, see idem, *The uses of images: Studies in the social function of art and visual communication*, London 1999, ch. 5.

13 René Magritte, *Écrits complets*, ed. by André Blavier, Paris 1979; W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images*, Chicago 2005.

14 On this conception and its justification on the basis of a descriptive metaphysics, see, for example, Peter Frederick Strawson, *Individuals*, London 1959.

15 See Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the end of impressionism: A study of the theory, technique, and critical evaluation of art*, Chicago 1984, especially 3 – 54; Gottfried Boehm, Mnemosyne: Zur Kategorie des erinnernden Sehens, in: Gottfried Boehm, Karlheinz Stierle, and Gundolf Winter (eds.), *Modernität und Tradition: Festschrift für Max Imdahl zum 60. Geburtstag*, Munich 1985, 37 – 57, especially 48.