4 Iconology as Cultural Symptomatology

Dinosaurs, Clones and the Golden Calf in Mitchell's Image Theory

Krešimir Purgar

To say that the *pictorial turn*, proclaimed by Mitchell in 1994, is actually more about animals than it is about humans would certainly be an exaggeration. However, the role that three types of animal – dinosaur, calf and sheep – have played in Mitchell's understanding and explanation of the development of modern visual culture may prove to be extremely revealing and shed new light on how humans have made sense of images throughout history. Even so, one important clarification has to be made at the outset: the species that Mitchell continually refers to are presented and discussed theoretically in his books primarily as *incarnations in images* of cultural symptoms that go beyond their purely symbolic or iconic meaning.[1] I will start by considering them more like figures of the current state of images and of our relation to them, not as theoretical terms *per se*. Only as their meaning gradually unfolds will it be possible to discern in them some of the (in)disciplinary logic that broadly characterizes Mitchell's image theory. I will accordingly conclude that Mitchell is less concerned with theory that preconceptualizes its objects of inquiry and more with the knowledge that deliberately escapes being shaped into a theory in a strict sense. Using different disciplines in order to arrive at different kinds of insight, the American scholar both de-ideologizes older humanistic epistemologies and, simultaneously, creates a foundation for the general study of visual culture that is now largely known as visual studies.

When Mitchell speaks of dinosaurs, he is neither a paleontologist nor an art historian; when he speaks of the Golden Calf from the *Old Testament*, he is neither a historian nor a theologian; when he speaks of Dolly the Sheep, he is neither a zoologist nor a biochemist. Instead, his hybrid point of view is, first and foremost, that of an iconologist who reads images and puts them in the context of their uses *as* images, in combination with the sensitivity of a cultural historian who never really becomes infatuated by ideological values such as beauty or *connoisseurship*. It is not that Mitchell does not account for ideological considerations – on the contrary, he does so throughout his *oeuvre* – but the way he explains how ideology *creates* the meaning of pictures should be understood more

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as a critique of every sort of disciplinary knowledge, rather than as an instruction for the use of any particular image.[2] He explains that the role an iconologist performs with respect to images is comparable to what a natural historian does with respect to species and specimen:

> while we [iconologists] can recognize beautiful, interesting, or novel specimens [of images], our main job is not to engage in value judgments but to try to explain why things are the way they are, why species appear in the world, what they do and mean, how they change over time.[3]

This interest in visual phenomena as symptoms of the broader historical fabric of visual culture has led Mitchell to a specific deductive method in which analysis of a particular artifact will never exhaust the meaning of it unless an artifact is compared to other image-symptoms in different areas of culture, science and politics. The way in which Mitchell discerns the general meanings of images is paradigmatic not just for his position as a critical iconologist who establishes meaningful connections between seemingly disparate visual phenomena, but for the very visual theory he has worked on over the years. I refer here to concepts such as “metapicture”, “imagetext” or “biopicture”, all of which serve in his visual theory as descriptions of both how the image is structured *and* what it means iconologically – of both form *and* content.[4] His idea is to create a theory of images in which images would somehow explain themselves by themselves and would be neither in desperate need of disciplines of critical theory nor haunted by more visually sensitive ones, like semiotics or art history. Critical iconology in Mitchell’s terms would then consist of what we may call *cultural symptomatology*: elements of culture that are condensed into groups of images that speak for themselves as much as they speak for the rest of the world they are immersed in. Dinosaurs, calves and sheep are among such symptoms inasmuch as they uncover our fascination with images, as well as our fear of them: picturing terror while picturing theory.

The Dinosaur as a Symbolic Animal of the Pictorial Turn

Let us begin with the metapicture of a dinosaur: an extinct animal, a reptile of rather intimidating proportions, which dominated the earth for more than one hundred million years and was wiped off the surface of the planet sixty-five million years ago. In connection with this still enigmatic species, Mitchell remarks that no one has ever seen a dinosaur, and yet everyone knows what they look like.[5] Even though there is a unanimous belief that these creatures actually existed, the image of the dinosaur in our cultural imaginary has not been passed down to our generation by our ancestors, as is the case with most other images that relate to life or to

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things that existed before our era. The paradoxical function of the image is twofold in the case of dinosaurs: on the one hand, we make sense of them on the basis of our imagination, imagery and pictures created by other people, while on the other hand these pictures are mostly artistic approximations based on a relatively small amount of paleontological evidence. The dinosaur is therefore a "constructed image" and the product of the "creative imagination".[6]

In *The Last Dinosaur Book*, Mitchell is concerned with the dialectical image of the dinosaur as a product of both nature and culture, where culture, dealing in this particular case with an apparently extinct species, takes clear precedence over nature. It is not possible ever to "see nature" in a kind of uncontaminated, primordial state, as it is always bound with the inescapable surplus meaning of language and representation.[7] Mitchell makes his case even more clearly in stating that the reason why he got involved with dinosaurs lies precisely in what we cannot or will not normally see in them – that is, not just in the things themselves, but in their relation to images. He is interested in the seemingly paradoxical popularity of things we know so little about but are so eager to paint and draw, to photograph and collect. Two inextricably connected worlds suddenly appear:

> (1) the world of living things, of which dinosaurs are a particular group or class that happens to be extinct; and (2) the world of images, in which dinosaur images also appear as a particular group or class that is not only not extinct, but proliferating at a remarkable rate.[8]

Mitchell asserts that our creation of the generalized image of a dinosaur largely corresponds to the way we create all images: as representations and visual conventions that may or may not have iconic or indexical similarities to their referents from the "real" world. In so doing he anchors the status of the image in the processes of creative imagination, in human agency and in artifactuality, rather than as a reaction to a physiological visual stimulation or a copy of reality. Drawing on Henry Focillon's *Life of Forms*, Mitchell acknowledges Focillon's idea that the progenitor of an image is always another image, and that all images are interlinked by the agency of form.[9] The first dinosaur picture is an invention that came into being composed of many scientific discoveries, intuitions and representational practices, but the picture itself (let alone the *first* picture of a dinosaur) is an act of imagination, an artistic intervention, a generated material fact.[10]

To explain fully the metapicture of dinosaur in Mitchell's image theory and to put it in the right perspective, it is important to point out that this concept has appeared chronologically right between two of his more widely known works: between *Picture Theory* from 1994, in which the advent of the pictorial turn was announced, and *What Do Pictures*

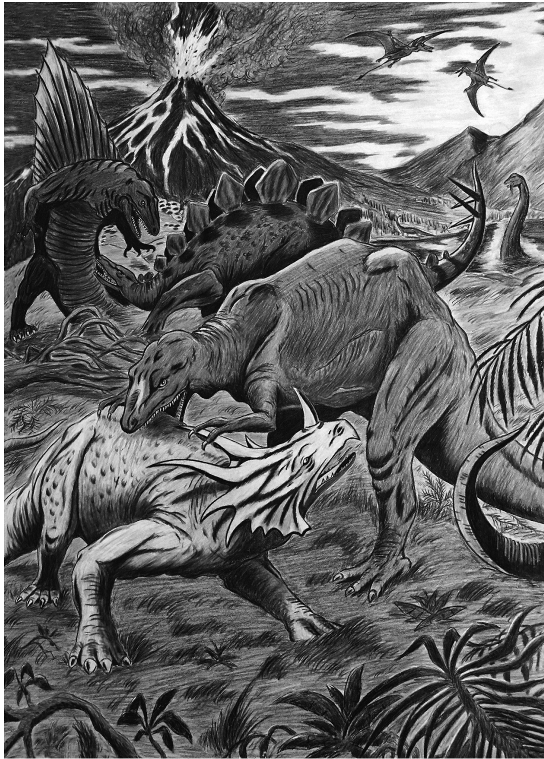

Fig. 4.1. Dinosaurs fighting in prehistoric landscape, © Nico99, Shutterstock

Want? from 2005, in which he introduced the concept of images as desiring subjects. Interestingly enough, while in the dinosaur book there is no single reference to the earlier turn toward images, this is still a profoundly critical-iconological book based on the most important assumptions of the pictorial turn.[11] Even if Mitchell does not mention it specifically, the "dinomania" that took hold in the second half of the twentieth century is for Mitchell an undeniable symptom of the pictorial turn inasmuch as popular culture gets inhabited more and more with images that people created exclusively for purposes of joy and secular (totemic) adoration, as we shall see below. Ten years later, in *What Do Pictures Want?* comes yet another crucial Mitchell thesis connected in many ways to insights by Hans Belting from his *Anthropology of Images*.[12] Both authors theorize and explain images as *living beings*. In Belting's account, images need the human body as a place for their own incarnation: only amalgamated with the human body as a medium can they express their full meaning. In a different but still comparable way, Mitchell attributes life to images: they have desires and wishes of their own; they want something from us, who behold them. But the question that needs to be answered now is what

happened with images in the meantime, in the apparently serene years before the rapid proliferation of computer-generated visuals, before the terror of 9/11 and the hooded man from Abu Ghraib. Did these "interim" images become alive, too? And if they did, who made them alive and who is in control of their desires?

In Mitchell's visual theory, these were the "years of reptiles" when dinosaurs were symbols of a new culture of images in the age shortly before the pictorial turn and in the midst of the disinterested entertainment that shaped the visual and political culture of the 1980s and 1990s.[13] With a little help from scientists and movie producers, he asserts, it was basically ordinary people who made all these dinosaur images come alive in the late twentieth century, and it was ordinary people who were still *in control* of their fate. But why did people do that in the first place? Why would they want to domesticate these presumably frightening creatures (creating an incredible number of pictures of them) when they had already been dead for millions of years? For Mitchell, the answer lies in the totemic character of dinosaur images. The dinosaur is more than just contemporary object of commercially induced desire; it is "the totem animal of modernity".[14] Being contemporary, it differs greatly from traditional totems while its paradoxical dialectics of obsolescence and modernity to a large extent explains why the power over images is soon to be lost:

> The traditional totem was generally a living, actually existing animal that had an immediate, familiar relation to its clan. The dinosaur is a rare, exotic, and extinct animal that has to be "brought back to life" in representations and then domesticated, made harmless and familiar. The traditional totem located power and agency in nature; totem animals and plants bring human beings to life and provide the natural basis for their social classifications. By contrast, the modern totem locates power in human beings: *we* classify the dinosaurs and identify with them; *we* bring the dangerous monsters back to life in order to subdue them.[15]

Here we come to what I would like to call the *transitory* concept of images presented in *The Last Dinosaur Book*: the world that went crazy for dinosaurs from the 1960s onwards, this "greatest epidemic" of big lizard images in the public sphere and media, is an excellent practical example of the pictorial turn in everyday life. By resurrecting extinct animals and transforming them into ubiquitous public figures – proliferating in movies and toy shops, on cereal packets, towels and slippers – people have created huge numbers of images of dinosaurs only in order to retain for as long as possible their soon-to-be-lost control over *all* images. The totemic aspect of dinosaur images is transitory insofar as they represented the extremely ambivalent status of images during the 1980s and 1990s: on the one hand, the power of digital technologies to

breathe life into dead bones and to create images so close to reality was strong enough to create a feeling of total immersion in the prehistory of the earth; on the other hand, the digital technology that made all this possible was not available to the masses. People in those days knew very well that somebody else woulfd have to create for them those spectacular images of cinematic oblivion. Everyday life ran at a slower, analog pace with only sporadic experiences of digital speed and visual extravaganza. In a word, it was the perfect time for totems, objects of adoration neither completely private and intimate (like fetishes), nor absolutely public and divine (like idols).[16] Dinomania is not just the popular-cultural metaphor of the pictorial turn but a last attempt to master the rapidly dissolving visual sphere. Similarly, modern totemism in the guise of dinomania is not just a late-capitalist version of the total commercialization of life but a powerful theoretical tool for contemporary cultural and visual studies.

At one point, Mitchell makes reference to Clement Greenberg and his famous dismissal of popular culture, spectacle and mass consumption, which the American art historian made in the typically high-modernist vein of separation between high and low culture. Without the slightest hint of irony, Mitchell wrote that "one could hardly find a better exemplar of what Clement Greenberg calld 'kitsch' than the dinosaur's linking of commercial vulgarity with juvenile wonder and the imitation of past styles".[17] While it is perfectly clear that dinosaur images irrevocably contaminated the puristic vision of a utopian society with its belief in the power of high culture and enlightenment to change the world, dinomania was, according to Mitchell, a sign of one more important event: a complete change in the way people make sense of images, which was to become painfully evident in the first years of the twenty-first century. Technoscientific discoveries that made possible the resurrection of extinct species, albeit only in Hollywood spectacles and amusement parks, has now become an insidious warning that there is nothing essential to culture, be it high or low; there is only a visual construction of the mediatized continuum of the present we still call reality – or what is left of it.

Dolly the Sheep: From Living Clone to Living Picture

Fragments of reality are scattered all around the visual field in dots and pixels. With the advent of the booming digital revolution, *all* our images became alive, with one fatal side effect being that they got out of our control. With his 2005 book *What Do Pictures Want?*, Mitchell entered his "animistic" phase of theorizing the agency of images in order to understand "motivation, autonomy, aura, fecundity, and other symptoms that make pictures into *vital signs*" by which he meant not just signs *for* living things but signs *as* living things. He presumed that "if the question, what do pictures want? makes any sense at all, it must be because we assume that pictures are something like life-forms, driven by desire and

appetites".[18] As a scholar who does not preconceptualize his theoretical objects, when speaking of the life of images Mitchell expresses reasonable doubt about the possibility that they might not have any power at all, and asks whether it makes more sense to raise the questions of "what is it they lack, what do they not posses, what cannot be attributed to them".[19] What is, then, the crucial process or activity inside or outside of images that breathes life into pictorial artifacts, turning them into scandalous carriers of newly acquired twofold meaning: as uncanny doubles and objects of admiration? How did it happen that by the mid-1990s it was no longer the insidious velociraptor that aroused awe in us (no matter how authentic it looked on the big screen), rather a much smaller and apparently harmless mammal? In *What Do Pictures Want?*, and later on in *Cloning Terror*, Mitchell widens the concept of the pictorial turn to take into consideration the most recent techno- and bioscientific discoveries as well as the fears that they have provoked. What interests him is how it happened that *ovis aries*, a quadruped unlikely to do any anybody any harm, became the epitome of all our fears and insecurities – of other people, of life itself and of the foreseeable future? Who, then, should fear Dolly the Sheep, and why?

A docile animal created iconological turmoil because, as Mitchell suggests, the quite unremarkable image of it became the epitome of our all-time unconscious fears: for many people it represented physically palpable evidence that the greatest taboo – violation of life's creation – is

Fig. 4.2. A close-up of Dolly in her stuffed form. Photograph by Toni Barros (CC BY-SA 2.0)

actually possible. Besides the fact that replicating things – whole organisms or just partial tissues – comes out of a natural human desire to make things better and always be evolving, the production of exact copies of ourselves fundamentally undermines the singularity of the subject.[20] We need only think of the best-known examples of cloning in popular culture (from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to *The Terminator* and *Transformers*) to recognize how the replication of life – even in our imagination – fills us with fear. Even the mere idea of interfering with the creation of life induces dread, let alone any practical manifestations of playing God.[21] Genetic engineering and biotechnology have wholeheartedly provided us with the means to produce real clones, and we have thereby crossed the line that was separating images and imagination from fearful reality. This has led to a seemingly contradictory understanding of both clones and images: first, that copying living beings is basically the same insignificant operation as copying images; and, second, that bare images might be more frightening than what they represent.

When it comes to the analysis of pictures, the concept and the actual practice of cloning (of which Dolly is the uncontestable metapicture) for Mitchell has an extremely high metaphorical charge. He is perfectly aware of the fact that the visual construction of culture probably depends more on visual tropes than on pictures, more on beliefs than on actuality, more on simulacrum than on physical reality. The problem with the clone is that it has ultimately proved to both *stand for* and *act as* a symptom of what it signifies.[22] The insurmountable physical and metaphysical space dividing divine creation and human intervention is now lost, allowing new biotechnological practices to act as an eerie nexus between the conceivable and (once) inconceivable:

> The clone signifies the potential for the creation of new images in our time – new images that fulfill the ancient dream of creating a "living image" – a replica or copy that is not merely a mechanical duplicate but an organic, biologically viable simulacrum of a living organism. The clone renders the disavowal of living images impossible by turning the concept of animated icon on its head. Now we see that it is not merely a case of some images that seem to come alive, but that living things themselves were always already images in one form or another.[23]

While it is probably only a perverse twist of fate, the fact nevertheless remains that Dolly the Sheep, even before she was born following one of the most successful genetic experiments to date, already had a potential successor: the Twin Towers in New York City. The two clonelike structures, planted in the heart of the planetary financial circulation system and razed to the ground soon after the Al-Qaeda attacks of 2001, were certainly iconic both before and after 9/11. In a matter of minutes,

images of fire, smoke, dust and falling men conquered every screen in the world. But, for Mitchell it was their *anthropomorphized* symbolism that was under attack, as if they were living beings, together with their existence as *living images* of the Western domination that was the thorn in the eye of their destroyers.[24] We can only speculate whether or not the Twin Towers would have been destroyed had only one of the twins been built (if they had not been twins in the first place), and whether images of burning architectural clones are now twice as scary thanks to our likely irrational fear of exact doubles.

The metaphor of life *in* and *as* images of Dolly the Sheep and the Twin Towers helped Mitchell to understand exactly how the shift from reality to representation and back to reality took place. It helped him to formulate the dilemma of whether this mechanism of action/reaction was to be found in beholders as human beings incapable of rationally comprehending what he calls “the surplus value of images”, or images, with all the technology invested in their creation, really took on some substantially new form of animism. In order to provide viable clues to tackle this dilemma, he posed himself some additional questions that uncovered underlying ethical problems concerning image studies as a disciplinary endeavor: what was, to put it simply, the purpose of new epistemologies of the image? Was it pure knowledge that would eventually lead to changes in people’s attitudes and behaviors, or are we required to take immediate action due to the sheer fact that images are alive and that we fear them as much as we love them? Basically, “should we discriminate between true and false, healthy and sick, pure and impure, good and evil images?”.[25]

The answer Mitchell provides unmistakably shows that critical iconology and cultural history have always been better equipped to grasp recurring patterns of human behavior than the exact sciences that scrutinized pure technological advancements isolated from the fabric of visual culture. The figure of the clone is not for Mitchell just a biotechnological fact, even if his concept of biopictures heavily depends on radical new technologies of producing images and experiencing them as living beings. The metapicture of Dolly the Sheep does not come exclusively from the domain of images, and therefore it is not primarily about pictures at all: it comes from the domain of technology to eventually become part of ideological and social formations. But only then, within the broader pictorial and media context, does the image of a sheep begin metaphorically to reflect its full semantic burden.[26]

We will halt at this point to explore how this process works, as it is fundamental to understanding how Mitchell generally does things with images. It is symptomatic that in the case of cloning, advances in science are in fact being used to initiate what seems to be a retrograde process in biology, whereby a relatively simpler version of an organism is created (as a whole or in part) from a more complex one. Technically,

as *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, the term "clone" refers to "any group of cells or organisms produced asexually from a single sexually produced ancestor".[27] The result is an exact copy of an originally sexually produced specimen, not an improved cell or organism that has naturally evolved into something better. So, the reproduction of living beings, Mitchell suggests, follows exactly the same path as the reproduction of works of art, as explained by Walter Benjamin in his seminal 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", the only difference being the mechanics of reproduction: the shift from photography, cinematography or print to the biological reproduction of life itself.[28]

There is extensive evidence coming from the art world of the postmodern age (and from postmodernist artistic styles) to show that the idea in the decades subsequent to Benjamin's essay of the originality, autonomy and uniqueness of the work of art has been replaced with pastiche, quotations and intertextuality of all kinds. Pop art, appropriation art, trans-avant-garde and many examples of ironic reworkings of past styles all testify to the fact that the myth of originality has now taken a completely different form. While in the contemporary posthuman age the old modernist belief in the autonomy of the *subject* still prevails, it is now the *human body* that is being reshaped and reconceptualized in a variety of ways. The metapicture of Dolly the Sheep ("an image of image-making itself") is thus not just a metaphor of reconceptualization but also an iconic example of yet another level of the pictorial turn whereby the meanings of terms such as representation and signification open the way for a constitution of a new sort of image altogether:

> If an image is an icon, a sign that refers by likeness or similitude, a clone is a "superimage" that is a perfect duplicate, not only of the surface appearance of what it copies, but its deeper essence, the very code that gives it its singular, specific identity.[29]

For Mitchell, to clone an image does not mean just to reproduce it, to make a more or less faithful physical double of it, as was the case with images in the era of mechanical reproduction. Instead, the cloning of images involves capturing the very essence of ("deep copying") the process that makes genetically possible the creation of every single copy. The reproduction of human or animal genomes corresponds to a duplication of digital zeros and ones insofar as in both processes the copy perfectly corresponds to the original or, inversely, the original ceases to exist.

In *Cloning Terror*, Mitchell makes reference to Jean Baudrillard and his admonition that social cloning – the school system, standardized knowledge, mass media and the like – in fact precedes the actual biological

cloning.[30] Seen from this perspective, ideological cloning was a prerequisite for the scientific legitimation of genetic intervention *per se* or, more directly, ideology and standardized knowledge production make "deep copying" possible. Following both Mitchell and Baudrillard's concepts, simulacrum (a copy without the original) would then signify the pictorial version of cloning, and cloning would represent the "corporealization of the simulacrum".[31] In other words, the concept of simulacrum allows for the existence of things without ancestry, memory or history, while cloning enables endless material (digital) proliferation of simulacra. Now, if every single individual, in an effort to keep his or her individuality and subjectivity intact, nurtures an unconscious but perfectly natural fear of his or her exact double, how does this "clonophobia" relate to images, if it does? Mitchell answers this question by linking the fear of clones to the fear of images – *iconophobia*.

The Golden Calf as a Metapicture of Image Theory

In Mitchell's theory, the meaning of iconophobia is somewhat paradoxically constituted or, rather, the paradox itself is generated by the recurring nature of the pictorial turn. If we think that it is really only our own era that has ever suffered from a heightened sensitivity to images – as a result of all the screens we are constantly watching, with surveillance cameras monitoring us from all directions, and an incessant flood of images wherever we turn – then we probably have the wrong perception of what Mitchell originally meant. For him, the emphasis is always more on the *turn* than on the *pictorial*, and therefore this largely explains how it is possible that the pictorial turn can happen in locations and at times where pictorial depictions of any kind were extremely scarce. According to Mitchell, the first ever enactment of the turn toward images is described in the Old Testament in the Book of Exodus where the third (or, chronologically at least, the first) of Mitchell's iconic creatures appears – the Golden Calf:

> When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him". Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me". So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool.[32]

As described in the narrative of the Old Testament, the decision Aaron made to fulfill the desire of his people and make them a new God that

they could actually see is, strictly speaking, not an instance of image production: it is a story about idolatry and about the possible dangers of losing supreme power over people's beliefs. This old story is actually an admonition warning that images and clones as visible things have the means to take power away from the invisible deity – to become both visible and alive. So, the pictoriality of this ancient turn toward images is performed as *possibility* and *discourse*, not in the form of any particular image or group of images. In order to understand the pictorial turn as *both* a synchronic and diachronic notion, it does not matter, Mitchell asserts, whether images are actually present or to what extent; what matters is that moments of believing in images and their power "seem to be a perennial cultural phenomenon, one that could be found throughout history, from the taboo on image-making expressed in the second commandment, right down to the contemporary debate about cloning".[33]

The taboo on image-making is expressed very vividly in Exodus in the episode in which Moses is warned by God that the Israelites have made themselves an idol to worship. Moses then descends from Mount Sinai, smashes the two tablets of his ten commandments and burns the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:19–20). David Freedberg describes the breaking of the tablets onto which the words of God had been inscribed as the breaking of "verbal icons of the divine word". It is to be understood as the birth of a specific tension that will from that moment on exist between words and images.[34] Iconoclasm cannot be represented in image other than as a violation of what it fundamentally forbids, and therefore iconoclasm cannot be represented at all except as a verbal icon or text that somehow transcends its form in writing. Freedberg makes reference to Nicolas Poussin's painting *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, produced around 1634, and explains the picture's excessive narrativization in terms of its impossible task: to show what should not be seen. Of course, there is, as he puts it, "a deep irony in all this. We admire … a picture which has as its subject the epitome of the negative consequences of looking, admiring and adoring".[35] What is most important for the theorization of the pictorial turn is that with Poussin's painting (and others on the same theme) an ancient image of an iconoclastic gesture has taken the form of a picture – the actual painterly object – as yet another form of the pictorial turn.

One of the most intriguing aspects (or readings) of the story of the Golden Calf and of the pictorial turn altogether is that *fear* of images might at the same time be a perfectly clear sign of the *importance* of images; that is, iconoclastic and iconophobic gestures paradoxically reinforce the power of what they are profoundly against. In his "Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science", Mitchell uncovers several layers of meaning in this biblical story, put into perspective with its physical incarnation as presented in Poussin's painting. The iconoclastic nature of this story is revealed in full only when it takes the shape of visual

Fig. 4.3. Nicolas Poussin, *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*; oil on canvas, 1634

narration, that is, when the written text of the Old Testament takes the form of its forbidden pictorial incarnation. But the process goes in the reverse direction as well: only after the image has been created (Poussin's *Golden Calf*, in this case) are we able to fully understand the *power of the word* from which everything started. So, the pictorial turn, in its basic and probably most fundamental form, invokes the turn from words to images, from literate to illiterate, from elite to popular, regardless of the time frame in which we observe the phenomenon.[36]

In addition to revealing its underlying political agenda, the biblical motif of Aaron's sculpting of a false God at the request of his fellow Israelites also reveals that the power of images resides in their abstract nature. Images can exist even if nobody can see them; they can be fearsome even if no one can touch them; they can come into existence by the mere act of evocation. Drawing on Panofsky's concept of "motif", Mitchell contends that images as representational entities are like texts telling stories and naming things, allowing for both *cognition* of their visual aspects and *recognition* of what they speak about. He calls this the "paradoxical absent presence" of images,[37] making us ultimately understand that iconoclasm is not about the fear of any type or group of pictures, as they are proscribed by the Law of the Word, but about the fear of the word *turned into* image. It is the fear of the immense power of images, of which the potency is paradoxically activated by word.

To explain this more in detail, we would need to go deeper into the typology of images that Mitchell presented in his 1986 book *Iconology*, the first extensive theoretical treatment of images and their relation to literary texts. He makes a clear distinction between images based not on what they semiotically represent or the media form they might take but on instances in which they make themselves visible to an individual subject.[38] Bearing his typology in mind, we might say that the biblical story of the Golden Calf could have existed only as a *mental* image – one that is formed and exists in people's minds – because otherwise it would betray the very nature of iconoclasm, which is not to show that which should not appear, either in flesh and blood or in representation. Once it *has* appeared in optical or graphical form in paintings or drawings, the Golden Calf has become an idol once more, now as the idol of history, art and Western culture at large. But are we absolutely sure that its significance today as a picture is that different from what it might have represented as a trope in the times of the Old Testament?

When we stand in front of Poussin's painting in the National Gallery in London or wherever it happens to be showed, worshipping its beauty and adoring both what it *is* and what it *symbolizes*, do we not at the same time believe in its magical power as a physically pulsating object? If we fear anything in this image today, it is certainly not related to the story depicted in it or the words that it evokes, but it has everything to do with the picture itself as the real idol of our contemporary cultural universe. While for Mitchell the dinosaur is the totem animal of modernity, the Golden Calf is the idol of our secular cult of spectacle and consumption; while Dolly the Sheep was the metapicture of the fear of dissolving subjectivities, the Golden Calf is the metapicture of both our infatuation with images and our fear of their power.

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The final argument brings us to an attempt to answer the question of exactly what kind of iconology or image science there is in the guise of these three animals. As stated at the beginning, if they are not theoretical terms in the same sense that the pictorial turn, biopictures or metapictures *are*, then what kind of agency can we attribute to them in the construction of Mitchell's image theory? Are they mere metaphors, figures of speech, or perhaps some kind of narrative prosthesis of language, whose function is to make abstract arguments more figurative? Or, are the dinosaurs, the sheep and the calf the very *subjects* of iconological analysis that are not meant to be or become anything other than topics and themes? The sense that I make of these animals and how they are made operational in several of Mitchell's books is that they represent one possible way in which visual studies as a discipline can be translated into visual theory, which is composed of different sets of working methodologies.

In other words, the three animals are neither just theoretical terms nor just subjects of analysis; or, more precisely, they are an example of how "living images" with their "loves" and "wishes" have succeeded (with the help of the living person) in creating for themselves a new kind of *living theory*. While every visual studies scholar knows that this discipline draws upon numerous concepts and tools coming from various knowledge systems, it is essentially the restructuring of a particular disciplinary knowledge that can be called a visual studies methodology. In Mitchell's books, the three animals are explained as recurring patterns of life and, consequently, their evolution from simple nonhumans to theoretical objects was a result of their paradigmatic character across different eras of visual culture.

Are the dinosaurs, the sheep and the calf used as theoretical notions that are in any way comparable to the semiotic structuring of knowledge? Or, to put it differently, are they not perhaps just a fashionable triadic tool designed to embrace all instances of contemporary image production? Are they to be used as signs, phenomenal experiences or, maybe, "just" symptoms? If we used them as signs in a semiotic sense, it would presume that everything that happens in the sphere of images is somehow related to the pictorial turn, to simulacrum or iconophobia. This would not make much sense because, as important as they are, there are problems in image theory that do not concern any of the concepts mentioned. On the other hand, treating the three as phenomenal experiences would make even less sense because there is no way in which we can connect a generalized image of a dinosaur as a symbolic animal, for instance, with the personal experience of that symbol internalized in every human being. But, if we understand them as *symptoms* of particular events that appear and reappear in history, then we have custom-made tools for any occasion to describe this particular recurring pattern. We can call this "cultural symptomatology" or "living theory" inasmuch as these symptoms create their own ad hoc theoretical tools using the very objects they deal with. The concept of living theory, then, may indicate a fundamental argument waiting to be made: that the object of study is never disciplinarily preconceptualized or epistemologically framed in any way other than that created by the object itself for itself.

The following objection may be made to this argument: what if the triadic structure composed of *living images*, *living beings* and *living theory* is not so self-explanatory and logically constructed? In other words, has Mitchell used living beings to explain the concept of living images, or is it the other way round? Have living images – being (metaphorically) *already* alive or *made* alive by the power of theoretical argumentation – somehow imposed on us the way in which they actually wanted to be treated? I would like to propose an argument, certainly one that needs to be discussed in greater depth on another occasion, that Mitchell's *iconic*

creatures are his way of going beyond the disciplinary borders that exist between different approaches and interests pertaining to the arts, humanities, biology and natural history, in order for him to come to terms with specific agencies of images. The dinosaurs, the sheep and the calf are therefore theoretical tools for understanding our rapidly changing world *and* objects of this world that for various reasons (some of which have been discussed here) have become theoretically relevant. Whether this can be seen as a new path for conceiving of image theory beyond open concepts of visual studies and critical iconology will largely depend on how much we believe in either of them.

Notes

1 I am referring here to the understanding of images that we get to when making reference to Charles Sanders Peirce's traditional semiotic theory, for instance. The problem with semiotics, which Mitchell is continually trying to overcome, is that it deals with signs as material facts or, in other words, with pictures as material entities, leaving the whole realm of "verbal" and "mental" images outside of its frame of reference. For Mitchell the problem grows in scale, as we shall see below, as he posits one of the incarnations of the pictorial turn precisely in the realm of mental images – in the process by which words evoke images that exist only in the mind. See W.J.T. Mitchell, "Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science", in D. Birnbaum and I. Graw (eds.), *Under Pressure* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2008), 16–19.

2 Mitchell's reticence toward ideological uses of disciplinary knowledge is easily grasped in two brief sentences that he wrote, referencing Paul Fayereband's *Against Method*: "humanistic knowledge … [is] best fostered by speculative experimentation and rigorous questioning of received ideas and procedures. … I want to prolong the indisciplinary moment of visual studies as long as possible" (in James Elkins, Gustav Frank and Sunil Mangani (eds.), *Farewell to Visual Studies* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), chapter 4.

3 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 85.

4 This principle of twofoldness where the meaning of a theoretical term is derived from what it refers to and from what it is meant to explain is encountered in Mitchell's famous yet perplexing discussion on the name that the new discipline of visual studies should take. While he was rightfully claiming that visual culture was the object of study and visual studies was the discipline or field, he nevertheless allowed the possibility that the field and the things covered by the field could bear the same name – visual culture. In this case, the "context would clarify the meaning" (W.J.T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture", in Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (eds.), *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies* (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2002), 232.

5 W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 48.

6 Ibid., 50–51.

7 Ibid., 58.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 54.

10 As Mitchell reports, the first "resurrection" of a dinosaur in the age of men took place in 1854 as the fruit of a collaboration between the paleontologist Richard Owen and the artist Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins. They created a sculptural model of an Iguanodon, bringing the extinct back to life in the form of a visual reproduction – a living image (Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 95–97).

11 In addition to the various explanations of the meaning of the pictorial turn that Mitchell has provided us with over the years – from its first theorization in *Picture Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994) to the condensed and very comprehensive explanation in his "Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science" – there is one key insight that connects them all. It is the understanding that our sense of the world is made through visual representations, as both "mental" and "verbal" images (metaphors and ekphrastic utterances) on the one hand as well as through physical, representational, "proper" images on the other. In other words, it is our discernment of "images" in apparently nonvisual media, like literature, that replaces the earlier poststructuralist insistence on "texts" in eminently visual media, like abstract painting.

12 Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014 [2001]).

13 *The Age of Reptiles* happens to be the name of one of the largest authentic fresco wall paintings in the world. It was painted during World War II by Rudolph Zallinger for the Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven, CT. The impressive fresco is a painstakingly realistic, thirty-four-meter long depiction of the era of the dinosaurs, conceived as a continuous landscape panorama spanning 170 million years of geological time. The dinosaurs' second "resurrection" was to come more than three decades later: they were to return in the digital blockbuster movie *Jurassic Park* (1993), directed by Steven Spielberg, and finally entered the popular culture mainstream of the postmodern era.

14 Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 77.

15 Ibid., 79.

16 Ibid., 78. In Mitchell's image theory the notions of fetish, totem and idol have a very prominent role. He does not refer to them as objects with stable, essential characteristics, let alone precise meanings. He thinks we should understand them more like "object relations" which we use to describe our relations to different things in different circumstances. An image may for a particular person have a very private, "fetishistic" character, related to that individual's personal history (a single visit to the museum, for instance). On other occasions, the same image may represent overwhelming concepts of culture: "Thus, when the calf is seen as a miraculous image of God, it is an idol; when it is seen as a self-consciously produced image of the tribe or nation … it is a totem; when its materiality is stressed, and it is seen as a molten conglomerate of private "part-objects", the earrings and gold jewelry that the Israelites brought out of Egypt, it becomes a collective fetish" (Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 188–189). The same constantly shifting meaning also applies to images whose power, or lack thereof, can be described as *relational*, always in need of a specific context to be fully understood.

17 Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book*, 62.

18 Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 6.

19 Ibid., 10.

20 Ibid., 25.

21 Ibid., 16.
22 Ibid., 15.
23 Ibid., 12–13.
24 Ibid., 15.
25 Ibid., 32.
26 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 25–29.
27 Ibid., 27.
28 Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 318.
29 Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, 29.
30 Ibid., 31. See also: Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 25.
31 Ibid.
32 Exodus 32:1–4, Holy Bible, New International Version. Available at www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2032&version=NIV, accessed October 2, 2014.
33 Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, 69.
34 David Friedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 397.
35 Ibid., 384.
36 Mitchell, "Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science", 17.
37 Ibid., 19.
38 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 9–11. According to the division he made, graphic and optical pictures are the images that art history and semiotics are mostly preoccupied with. They are the images that we see printed on paper, painted on canvas or transmitted on screens. On the other end of the spectrum there are physically "invisible" – mental – images that exist only in our minds, like dreams, memories and ideas; and verbal images, like metaphors and ekphrastic utterances. Between visible and invisible images there are perceptual images – "phantasmatic sensual data" – occupying a border region between physical and physiological perception (see Mitchell, *Iconology*, 9–14).

PROOF