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# THE ICONOLOGY OF ABSTRACTION

## NON-FIGURATIVE IMAGES AND THE MODERN WORLD

Edited by
KREŠIMIR PURGAR

ROUTLEDGE

# The Iconology of Abstraction

This book uncovers how we make meaning of abstraction, both historically and in present times, and examines abstract images as a visual language.

The contributors demonstrate that abstraction is not primarily an artistic phenomenon, but rather arises from human beings' desire to imagine, understand and communicate complex, ineffable concepts in fields ranging from fine art and philosophy to technologies of data visualization, from cartography and medicine to astronomy.

The book will be of interest to scholars working in image studies, visual studies, art history, philosophy and aesthetics.

**Krešimir Purgar** is Associate Professor in the Academy of Arts and Culture at J. J. Strossmayer University, Osijek, Croatia.

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# The Iconology of Abstraction

## Non-figurative Images and the Modern World

**Edited by Krešimir Purgar**

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# Acknowledgments

In the strict disciplinary genealogy of art history, the term *abstraction* refers to a style that corresponds to very precise time coordinates and is most often defined either as an ambivalent end of the historical teleology of figurative art, or as the beginning of the period of modernity that emphatically insisted on the artist's individuality. If we separate both from the notion of historical development that is so close to the basic premises of the history of art, abstract images would be just an incomprehensible cluster of colors and shapes that do not deserve consideration in the context of high values and *connoisseurship* so characteristic of the works of art. Therefore, to be engaged with abstract material in visual communication in general presupposes either a competent art historian who equally appreciates old masters and avant-garde artists or an expert in completely different areas who is able to "read" abstract images as any of us is able to read newspaper articles or traffic signs. In the first case, it is the historians of culture, art and science who have affirmed abstraction as a legitimate, historically constructed visual code, while in the second case it is about astronomers, cartographers, radiologists and all those who are able to decipher modern visual codes incomprehensible to the common people.

In the perspective outlined above, I believe it is extremely rare that a university professor's career can be marked by pursuing exclusively or mostly abstract images *per se*. So, being radically interdisciplinary, this book could not have been an outcome of an individual effort either. *The Iconology of Abstraction* could only have emerged from the contributions of scholars from various fields of science and their focus on the communication aspects of the most diverse kinds of images. While developing the contents of the book, it proved to be a particular challenge to me as its editor to make the convincing connection between the so-called pure or high art on one side and images whose purpose is purely instrumental on the other. Therefore, the purpose of this book should not be sought either in the field of art history, although many articles published in these pages refer specifically to this area, or in the field of technical sciences, although a significant part of this book is devoted to the technical conditions of visibility. This book's "natural" field is image science, a disciplinary branch that required every contributor involved to treat abstraction as a pervasive phenomenon that equally influenced both history and modernity, art and science, daily life and advanced technology. I therefore thank all the authors for always bearing in mind that their contributions, regardless of the particular area of interest, were part of a fascinating phenomenon of the *non-figurative* that equally terrifies and fascinates the human race from the first glimpse to the stars to micro-visualizations of the genetic structure of living beings.

I thank the students of the postgraduate program in literature, film and theater studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb who have attended with great interest my courses in image science, theory of conceptual and abstract art. I am thankful also to the directors of this program, professors Nikica Gilić and Tomislav Brlek, who have included my courses in a program that one does not encounter every day in a department of comparative literature. I thank the staff from the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin who once more provided me with a productive work atmosphere during my study stay at this institution in the summer of 2019 devoted to the editorial work on this publication. Finally, I express my sincere gratitude to Helena Sablić Tomić, Dean of the Academy of Arts and Culture at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek, for providing me with an inspiring place for scholarly work and teaching, for daily meetings with motivated students and colleagues and for giving me so many opportunities to reflect on different aspects of visual material, all of which immensely contributed to the interdisciplinary character of this book.

# Introduction

## Do Abstract Images Need New Iconology?

*Krešimir Purgar*

Although we can find non-figurative representations throughout human history, it was only during modern times that abstract pictures came to the center of theoretical prominence. This shift was prompted by modern art, which disrupted the principle of mimesis that was for more than two thousand years the main principle of visual representation in Western culture. But, for many people, images of abstract art still mean "nothing". At the same time, rather complicated technical diagrams, mathematical and weather forecast graphs, subway maps, cartographic images, medical examination images (CT, MRI), visualizations of outer space, computer-generated blueprints, internet-based digital paraphernalia and other forms of contemporary abstraction are being recognized and comprehended without much effort. This book tries to uncover how we make meaning of abstraction, both historically and in present times.

The human drive for abstraction is certainly not an invention of modern times. According to German art historian Wilhelm Worringer, "the urge to abstraction" arises not because of cultural incompetence at mimesis but out of a psychological need to represent objects in a more spiritual manner. The first radically abstract artists, such as Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky, wrote about abstraction as a way to unleash the supremacy of pure feeling or to make the spiritual visible. They wanted to represent the ineffable, the non-representable, that which resides in the human spirit—is purely conceptual and cannot be shown in the form of something we already knew from nature, history, other pictures, etc. The same is true with the contemporary abstract, both art and non-art images. Why is there more urgency now than ever before to plunge into manifold relations between art, science and technology? It is not only because contemporary art ever more often borrows its visual and technical material from communication technologies, the computer industry and virtual reality devices; it is also because the very nature of art and technology converges in unexpected ways.

*The Iconology of Abstraction* wants to come to terms with this paradox of representation and show how the "urge to abstraction" has permeated fields as different as geography and medicine and visualizations of space and fine art. In order to do that, the book will first explain why people created images that did not resemble anything from their natural experience and why this sort of visual representation became so important at the beginning of the 20th century. The contributions will demonstrate that it was always the same underlying principle and logic pertinent to abstract images: there were always, in all historical periods as there are today, so many things we cannot actually represent but can only conceptualize and imagine—be it the interiority of the soul, one's psychic mood, the expanse of the city, a beating heart or

another galaxy. The book will show that, contrary to common belief, abstraction is not characterized by the absence of *meaning* but the absence of *direct visual information*. For example, a human heart looks much different when observed in its natural state during an autopsy compared to the way it looks when observed during a medical examination with an ultrasound device. Obviously, this is not because medical doctors do not know what the heart really looks like, but because the technology is still not capable of realistically visualizing the interior of a living human body. So, medicine uses different degrees of abstraction to visualize what is otherwise not seeable. The same applies to visualizations of outer space: we can only make approximations about what it looks like based on the available information and the most advanced technologies of visualization. Therefore, the problem of a lack of visual information and the ensuing semiotics and aesthetics is the central topic of this book.

The eighteen contributions will show that abstraction is not primarily an artistic phenomenon, but is generated from people's urge to have control over and enter into what is uncontrollable and impenetrable. Abstract art wanted to overcome the world of visible things and step into the ineffable world of the human spirit in the same way that the geographical representation of Mercator's projection wanted to present the otherwise unrepresentable sense of space. Although the urge to abstraction was common to all ages of human development, this book focuses on the 20th and 21st centuries, for consistent studies on abstraction only cover little more than the last hundred years. Notwithstanding the importance of the historical approach to pictorial phenomena, one possible iconology of abstraction should be able to make a distinction between conditions of *production* and the changeable *meaning* of forms: for example, cartographic representations of the New World were less a depiction of (or abstraction from) a mathematically conceived physical space but more of a classical, figurative representation of cities, ports and mountains. The reason for that was the technical impossibility to represent what is not directly visible to the eye.

The paradox of general pictorial abstraction is that it developed together with the advancement of the technology that allowed it, while our appreciation of old masters' paintings, for instance, is affected by contemporary conditions of visibility, that is, our own "ways of seeing",[1] and not those historically available in the times of Giotto or Caravaggio. In spite of the fact that it would be completely wrong to say that modern times, compared to past epochs, have less insight into what can be seen directly, it is quite certain that what we cannot see we can still only imagine. Inasmuch as historical abstraction (or perhaps more fittingly, *abstracting*) is not a consequence of the impossibility or the lack of skill to represent something in a figurative manner, avant-garde and contemporary abstract images are not a sort of escapism from the natural world. Exploring abstraction is a different task altogether: to represent what has not yet been presented in a visual form and to show what is not open to view. The specific task of one comprehensive iconology of abstraction is therefore to deal with all those multifarious transactions, from material invisibility (cognition, intentions, feelings) to visible immateriality (digital communication, immersive experiences, virtuality).

The problem of communicating with images that represent "nothing" cannot be solved before we reconcile with the immanent paradox that is associated with (1) the representation of "nothing" (invisible, inaccessible, non-transparent) and (2) the role of language that brings the non-transparent to everyday communication interactions. In other words, it is necessary to put the arbitrary elements of spoken language into the function of the arbitrary elements of pictorial presentation, because it is only through

the interaction of one and the other that we can establish visual re-presentation, that is, the abstract image to be experienced as an independent entity that "lives" on both language and image. But have we not at the same time betrayed both language and image? Robert Steiner offered the term "grammar of abstraction" in which he tried to reconcile the inability of language to express extra-linguistic phenomena, as well as the inability of the image to represent in abstract shapes that which is often present in the imagination and the mind.

It is quite expected that Steiner came to his original position as a philologist and literary theorist, not as an art historian or visual semiologist; in other words, the imaginable and the unimaginable, the real and the fairytale in literary theory, live in much greater harmony than the way in which figuration and abstraction coexist in art history. While philology always necessarily observes that which is "internal" and "external" through the prism of grammatical and syntactic structures as a necessary condition of a literary work (even when they are deliberately omitted in a particular literary language), the discipline of art history is not constituted in such a way that it views works of art as "pure visibility", as a configuration of lines and colors unmediated by language. This is also the main reason why this discipline views contemporary abstract art mostly in the context of the historical avant-gardes, that is, as the constant echo through which reverberates the epoch when art history, armed with its most powerful tool—iconography—could still say something meaningful about the art of its time.

Before devoting ourselves to the time of the emergence of the historical gap between the works of figuration and abstraction, and then the time of the radical cultural separation of artistic from the so-called applied images, it would be useful to look at some aspects of Robert Steiner's "grammar of abstraction". Let us start with this statement first:

> Grammatically speaking, representation is an originary trope signifying the necessity of translating pictorial into verbal phenomena without having to acknowledge either the movement or its complex consequences for the truth content of aesthetic analysis. The problem of representation serves as an arena for the institutional claims of truth content in the discursive treatment of pictorial objects which has a happy and necessary by-product of finding in language a way for the most visually "inaccessible" works to be made readable.[2]

Therefore, there is no such "inaccessible" or incomprehensible abstract image that could not obtain in the language some kind of justification and thus institutional legitimacy. *Mutatis mutandis*, then, there is no reason why abstract art images would not always be recreated and considered original, since in this case the language used to interpret them in critique and theory would always be just a "by-product" and not a real competitor to the abstract art image in the domain of artistic expression. If this book dealt only with artistic images, the problem of the relationship between visual and verbal language and their interrelation, as discussed by Steiner, would not exist at all for our discussion: it is much more important for any visual representation in the artistic domain to be able to "discover" what language cannot, and then present what it discovered in a way that language could never do, than to discover something and just wait until it is translated into the language of criticism and theory of art. Any work of visual arts always starts from the irrefutable fact that the transcendence of

reality through image never produces the same effect as describing reality through critical or scientific text (and vice versa). In other words,

> If "art is not required to understand itself", it is because we are able to analyze works either as they call attention to the debts they owe outside themselves visually or to the debt language owes them; the semantic "ineffability" of a painting is, in this sense, a failure of discourse.[3]

Therefore, if our topic was merely an artistic abstraction, then we would be looking at ways in which the "failures of discourse" in describing abstraction can be exploited by producing a new semantic framework within the disciplinary fields of image studies, much like the way Paul Crowther brilliantly demonstrated in his many philosophical and phenomenological works on this topic and in this book (which will be discussed later).[4] Since we have set ourselves a different task here—to study the status of abstraction independent of the socio-communicative role of this type of image—it is necessary to examine whether, and if so in what way, non-figurative representations can be considered in the context of some general characteristics of visual representations. One of them is certainly the problem of sign and signifying, which involves the need to answer these three key questions: (1) if the abstract image is a sign in semiotic terms, do we necessarily need to know what is it the sign of, (2) if we know what it is a sign of, do we always have to know what such an image means and (3) is its existence as a sign and (non-)meaning directly related to its unique meaning as pictorial representation? For more detailed answers to the semiotic aspects of these questions, we refer to the prolegomena in this book by Winfried Nöth, "Why Pictures Are Signs; The Semiotics of (Non)representational Pictures", in which this author explains, among other things, that "Forms and colors are not determined by their mere quality or the artist's spontaneous intuition, but by a chromatic and geometrical morphology and syntax, whose validity is not only restricted to this particular picture". In this way, an image is not only referencing the external codes by which it is interpreted as an image of something communicable (and by which we most often come to its meaning), but it is also "a sign related by visual laws to the colors and forms that constitute their object".[5]

But can any abstract image, for example, a computerized tomographic image of the vertebral part of the spine, be constituted by colors and shapes in such a way as to make the depiction of that part of the human body veridical? To someone who is versed neither in radiology nor in the history of artistic styles, such a depiction is no more akin to the actual spine's appearance than Picasso's 1937 portrait of Dora Maar, which is a credible portrayal of the person whose appearance was allegedly painted. Someone who is versed in radiology but not in abstract art is likely to seek to interpret Picasso's image as some kind of code, but will not necessarily know what the code is. One who understands both radiology and analytical cubism will know that both images are credible representations: in the first case, it is the visible appearance of an invisible part of the human body, and in the second it is a visual fact that does not have its objective equivalent. Is it, then, at all possible in practical terms to determine the beginning and end of meaning, what Robert Steiner calls the "meaning of meaning", that is, to define the interspace of meaning so that we always know whether an abstract image, artistic or not, is something beyond itself? Leaving aside terms such as "semiosis", "open work", and "deconstruction", which are not very helpful when

trying to relate divergent concepts such as iconology and ontology (of images), we must first ask: what signs are signs of meaning?[6]

Discussions about abstraction in art began at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and were triggered by the abandonment of the classical paradigm of artistic representation, which was strongly characterized by the ideals of natural form born in antiquity and reinvigorated during the Renaissance period. The first author to join the theorizing of this turn toward non-figuration was Conrad Fiedler with his book *On Judging Works of Visual Art* of 1876, four years after Claude Monet painted his eponymous painting *Impression Sunrise*. In his work, Fiedler strongly advocated art that is not dependent on the visible, natural world but based on its own rules, one of the most important of which was the amalgamation of the visual perception of the observer on the one hand and the pictorial effect of the image itself on the other, which he called "pure visibility" [*Reine Sichtbarkeit*]. In Fiedler, we find traces of Immanuel Kant's ideas from his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, favoring the position of an artist who transforms reality in the process of artistic transcendence, primarily with his mind. Particularly characteristic of this are these two claims of Fiedler:

> [For the artist] the essence of the world which he tries to appropriate mentally and to subjugate to himself consists in the visible and tangible Gestalt formation of its objects. Thus we understand that to the artist perceptual experience can be endless, can have no aim or end fixed beyond itself.[7]

And a little later:

> Technical skill as such has no independent rights in the artistic process; it serves solely the mental process. Only when the mind is not able to govern the creative process does skill attain independent significance, importance, cultivation, and so becomes worthless artistically. From the very outset the mental process of the artist must deal with nothing but that same substance which comes forth into visible appearance in the work of art itself. […] The substance of such a work is nothing else than the Gestalt-formation itself.[8]

Specifically, this author makes no mention of abstraction in art but thoroughly insists on the role of the artist to apply his own conceptual knowledge in the contemplating (or abstract thinking) of the world: "Everyday life puts to the test much more frequently the extent and precision of a person's conceptual knowledge than the completeness of his visual conceptions".[9] From this position, it is clear that Fiedler is still not speaking about the work of ideas in the sense that conceptual art did during the second half of the 20th century, and that insisting on the importance of visual perception in him is primarily a propaedeutic purpose of more strongly incorporating abstract thinking in the judgment of works of the visual arts. On the other hand, he sees the artist as a person who must use his own imagination for "Gestalt-formation" [*Gestaltung*], which refers precisely to the need to produce new forms in the visual arts, rather than those that follow pre-existing ones in nature.[10] Fiedler's work should be credited, first and foremost, with developing Kant's theses and applying them to the visual arts, and then with educating the observer's perception and his intellectual preparation for the emergence of radically new art forms that would come three decades later.

For the contemporary (although still provisional) iconology of abstraction, the theses of another German theorist, Wilhelm Worringer, from his 1908 book *Abstraction and Empathy. A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, are even more important; we could even call them "epochal".[11] In this book, for the first time, abstract forms in cultural history are given the importance of one of two diametrically opposed tendencies in human beings: those toward abstraction and those toward empathy. Worringer takes the notion of "empathy" from the *Aesthetics* of the philosopher Theodore Lipps, who gave it two values—positive and negative. According to Lipps, when we feel pleasure in a work of art, we completely surrender to it and unite with it in "positive empathy"; on the other hand, a sense of dissatisfaction produces the conflicting effect of "negative empathy". Worringer believes that the difference between the two types of experience of works of art is not theoretically relevant and that the positive and negative values of any kind cannot explain the effect of the work of art. In essence, negative empathy is not a product of failed art but a consequence of the need for a completely different kind of expression. Each artistic period carries its own affinities, and it is not always geared toward achieving the same goal. With the help of Alois Riegel's theory of "artistic volition",[12] Worringer argued that the effect of a work of art is the result of two antagonistic instincts in man: the urge to abstraction and the urge to empathy. The will to form is different in all periods and in all peoples, but the underlying impulses of will arise from these two opposing tendencies. In order to understand abstraction in its historical context, it is important to consider that Worringer does not interpret it in relation to some supposed ideal of visual representation; it is not a primitive, underdeveloped or, in any sense, handicapped form of representation, but rather the opposite: an expression of the original creativity of the human spirit versus nature as a given.

The urge to abstraction stems from the psychic state of epochs and nations toward the world, nature and the cosmos:

> Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world.[13]

In Worringer's concept, abstraction is not only a pure creative principle that distinguishes non-figurative forms from organic forms but also a basic human need to influence the natural order, to impose its human specificity on the given order of the universe. It must be admitted, however, that the German philosopher understood, in the notion of abstraction, primarily geometric shapes which, by their ornamental regularity, differed so much from organic forms in nature, rather than the abstraction of Kandinsky. On the other hand, he thought it would be wrong to claim that people aspired to specifically geometric abstraction, "for that would presuppose a spiritual-intellectual penetration of abstract form, would make it appear the product of reflection and calculation".[14] It was about the fact that people, in their earliest stages of cultural development, sought most to imprint on nature their own stamp of humanity; nature was then an unknown area for them to master, and this was only possible by opposing nature and the creation of inorganic forms that legitimized man's "will to form". In Worringer's conception, abstraction in this way became a form of emancipation and culturalization. While he calls the urge to organic forms and nature "[a]

esthetic enjoyment as objectified self-enjoyment", the urge to abstraction is "a self-affirmation, an affirmation of the general will to activity that is in us".[15]

Although it has remained very influential to this day, being the first to detach abstract art from the disciplinary fatalism of art history, for today's intellectual tastes, Worringer's theory insists too much on theoretical universality. In short, he attributes the urge to abstraction to the northern nations, while the urge to empathy is characteristic of southern European Mediterranean cultures. Formally, Worringer's claim is correct, but it does not take into account, for example, the religious circumstances following the spread of the Reformation and, consequently, the decision of the Council of Trent regarding pictorial representation, which significantly influenced the inorganic form of the Protestant Germanic north as well as the organic form of the Catholic south. Another German author, the art historian Erwin Panofsky, with his concepts of *perspective as a symbolic form* and, moreover, *iconology as a coherent science of interpreting works of art*, sought to establish a universal discipline that would study the historical development of art on a scientific basis. Unlike his equally famous predecessor Aby Warburg, who approached the problem of establishing the discipline of art history from the position of cultural history and image science in general, in the production of images Panofsky clearly gave preference to artistic artifacts over other fields of visual culture, and that enabled him to focus on relationships of style, form and meaning.

His iconological method is best known for determining, in the analysis of each object, the unique parameters he calls "objects of interpretation" and "acts of interpretation".[16] Thus, being methodologically similar to Heinrich Wölfflin's method, all works of art are subjected to the same analytical matrix, i.e., the same conditions of comparison. However, while Wölfflin's proto-semiotic method was designed primarily to indicate the differences between Renaissance and Baroque art, Panofsky conceived of his iconology in such a way that it could be applied to all artistic productions of the prehistoric, ancient, medieval and neo-classical epochs. The "object of interpretation" refers to (1) the purely perceptual-formal properties of the work of art as we see it—Panofsky called it "primary or natural subject matter" and by such analysis we come to the first level of the "act of interpretation", that is, a "pre-iconographical description"; (2) at the second level of interpretation, we look at the "secondary or conventional subject matter" in the work of art, discover which stories and allegories it visually represents and thus arrive at an "iconographic interpretation"; and (3) the third level is the "iconological interpretation", by which we aim to notice its "intrinsic meaning or content".[17] This seemingly simple concept (hence its popularity) allowed the history of art to be definitively constituted as a discipline that was equally interested in the "philological" background of art—that is, for all those narrative motifs without which a complete understanding of the meaning of the work of art would not be possible—as well as the study of its formal, stylistic aspects.[18]

However, Panofsky placed one limitation on his method inasmuch as he believed that those works which were not made on the basis of mythological, biblical or other narrative templates could not be applied to his principles of analysis:

> Iconology, then, is a method of interpretation which arises from synthesis rather than analysis. And as the correct identification of motifs is the prerequisite of their correct iconographical analysis, so is the correct analysis of images, stories and allegories the prerequisite of their correct iconological interpretation—unless

> we deal with works of art in which the whole sphere of secondary or conventional subject matter is eliminated and a direct transition from motifs to content is effected, as is the case with European landscape painting, still life and genre, not to mention "non-objective" art.[19]

If Panofsky believed that works of abstract art, as well as all representations lacking a philological background, were not suitable for iconological analysis because they lacked a literary origin, this would mean that what the picture is about must always be visible and demonstrable by something beyond itself. Of course, it was quite clear to him that a very precise iconographic analysis could lead to an erroneous iconological meaning, but this danger is far less if the pre-iconographic (formal-perceptual) level of the work seeks to give an iconological (social-contextual) interpretation directly: "Even our practical experience and our knowledge of literary sources may mislead us if indiscriminately applied to works of art, how much more dangerous would it be to trust our intuition pure and simple!"[20] From an objective assessment of this attitude, it does not result that Panofsky considered contemporary "non-objective" art less valuable, but rather that his scientific method of analyzing art objects could only work if we limited it to works with narratively recognizable themes.

Panofsky's method was a serious and highly detailed system that needed to enable art history to be certified as the master-discipline of all visual representations. Regardless of the reservations that this author had toward the application of iconographic components in pictures that do not offer real literary content, traditional iconology still occupies an important place within the discipline of art history. Contemporary art criticism, though often unaware of it, inscribes into the works of art the alleged intentions of the artist or, in formally non-figurative forms, loads meanings as if they were demonstrable by comparison with some written source. Another way for art historians to misinterpret Panofsky's traditional iconology for the purpose of analyzing contemporary art is to describe the formal aspects of a work as if a minute description of the figurative aspects of the figurative picture (not to mention conceptual practices) can help it to reach its "intrinsic meaning" or iconological content.

Panofsky himself pointed out the potential misunderstandings that could have been caused by the inappropriate use of his method when he made it very clear that the reciprocity of form and content could not be established, even when the narrative sources of the picture seemingly leave no room for doubt. For example, in the right panel of the so-called *Bladelin triptych* by Rogier van der Weyden from 1400, representing the New Testament scene *The Adoration of the Magi*, we see a small baby in a whirlwind of golden rays hovering in the clouds above the three men who are staring up at him. A pre-iconographic analysis would not yet let us know that the baby was the little Jesus and the kings Balthazar, Melchior and Caspar, who had come to worship the newborn Son of God. But even the iconographic analysis of this picture reveals its iconological potential, because the iconographic text on the basis of which van der Weyden created this picture does not conceive the scene in this way; namely, the "official" source of this account, the Gospel of Matthew (2:1–2), says literally this: "[Saying,] Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him".[21] As the New Testament recounts, the birth of Jesus was heralded to the Kings by the appearance of a falling star in the night sky rather than by his own appearance in the image of a young child as portrayed by this Dutch painter. In a strictly iconographic sense, van der Weyden's painting is a semi-abstract collage, for

a key element of one narrative (the Birth) is cut and implemented into another (the Adoration of the Magi).[22] A symbol cannot be equated with meaning, and it is precisely in the interstice between artistic canon and a deviation from the canon that an iconological meaning comes to the fore.

Despite his reluctance to even consider that non-objective art could qualify for iconological analysis, Panofsky was convinced that

> the discovery and interpretation of these "symbolical" values (which are often unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express) is the object of what we may call "iconology" as opposed to "iconography".[23]

Bazon Brock, the contemporary German art theorist, critic and artist, proposed that modernist abstraction may also be viewed from the iconological perspective as it qualifies for all three levels of interpretation. He contends that abstract paintings contain an unspoken and unwritten sequence of sentences that can explain the artist's intentional path to creating a concrete work. In order to understand the work of art, and especially works of radically abstract art like *The Black Square* by Kazimir Malevich, the observer must engage in some sort of allegorical discourse that will help him to interpret it. The following thesis of Brock is particularly interesting:

> A square is not a more abstract figuration than the pictorial representation of a cow. The representation of a square is no less figurative than the photograph, drawing or sculpture of a cow—whoever makes a square can use a figurative template for it as much as the draftsman of a cow. Only the conventional meanings of cow and square are different.[24]

The thread that Brock is following here is mostly in line with the semiotic theory of Nelson Goodman: conventional signs differ according to culturally acquired meanings, but no sign can be naturally or intrinsically referred to any object, meaning that any conventional shape does not correspond to any particular thing.[25] What we negotiate upon is its content, and Brock says it will vary depending on how it is used or evaluated in the iconological examination of the culture of a certain epoch, no matter if we use a particular sign as a work of art or in a scientific illustration, as a commercial good or as furnishing, or otherwise. Following that line of argumentation, for Brock,

> every painting—the black square by Malevich as well as the cows in the pasture by Rubens—not only can but must be viewed in terms of Panofsky's distinction in terms of both primary and secondary as well as intrinsic meaning.[26]

Still, every art history student will tend to link iconology to the study of the narrative plot of classical art in the West, and it is certainly unusual that one theorist, an expert in English literature by disciplinary vocation, entitled his first programmatic book on the effects of *all* images, not only classic and not only artistic—*Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. I am referring here to W.J.T. Mitchell, a long time professor at the University of Chicago whose intellectual bio-bibliography alone testifies to the fact that neither is iconology any longer the sanctified territory of art historians nor should the agency of images be divided by categories such as art, non-art, popular, political,

high or low. Should we wish to understand the interrelation of visual artifacts that make our everyday communication possible and meaningful (in spheres as diverse as art and political struggles), we need to approach them in a completely different way, notwithstanding the fact that art and politics, for instance, may never actually come close to one another. It is also interesting that in this book, first published in 1986, Mitchell refers only casually to the founder of iconology as a scientific discipline. In the first lines, he says:

> If Panofsky separated iconology from iconography by differentiating the interpretation of the total symbolic horizon of an image from the cataloguing of particular symbolic motifs, my aim here is to further generalize the interpretive ambitions of iconology by asking it to consider the idea of the image as such.[27]

When Mitchell speaks of critical iconology in his numerous works, he refers mainly to the need to dispel the ideological-conventionalist criteria in art and in the visual sphere; hence, the attention paid to the famous Panofskyan apologue of a passerby who greets an acquaintance by removing his hat.[28] Greeting by lifting the hat from the head is not only an indicator of an event that actually happened in time and space, nor is it only a sign of respect for another person, but it is also a symptom of social norms, both of the individual and of society as a whole. Mitchell is interested in the mechanisms of visual culture and the way(s) in which they condition the formation, use and interpretation of images as cultural symptoms. However, in speaking of "critical iconology", he never takes or invokes the Panofskyan iconological method, since he does not recognize in any particular method or in any disciplinary theory a universal, critical position sufficient to the analysis of images; in this perspective, he feels closer to the deconstructionist "anti-method" of Jacques Derrida as the philosophy of the perpetual incompleteness of the work.

I believe that Mitchell's institution of iconology as a "cultural symptomatology" is one of his most significant contributions to understanding the world of images. Although this is a term he never used himself (I applied it for the first time in the book *W.J.T. Mitchell's Image Theory: Living Pictures*), I think it is a key method and an original way of analyzing images.[29] First of all, since he never determines his own disciplinary theoretical position, Mitchell does not see critical iconology—or *visual studies* as it is most often referred to—as a discipline that starts from the predefined settings of existing disciplinary practices, but rather as an "in-discipline", as a Derridian deconstruction of foreseeable meanings. However, this does not mean that there is no method in Mitchell, but only that it should be sought outside the disciplinary nomenclature of the humanities. Thus, he does not start from the theoretical model and then apply it to the object of analysis; on the contrary, he starts from the object or phenomenon or, in other words, he first tries to identify the given phenomenon through individual media, works of art, films, natural or cultural events, political speeches, ideological prerequisites, etc. In the second stage, he connects these phenomena in apparently disparate but symptomatic groups of images or concepts, in which they often appear together in their characteristic contexts. The most important thing for this method is that the key theoretical terms are "produced" (anticipated and applied) *during* the analytical practice itself, which is diametrically opposed to the procedures of disciplines such as semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, gender studies or Panofskyian iconology.

I will not claim here that Mitchell's iconology alone may resolve the problem of understanding abstract images, but rather that it came closest to creating a specific atmosphere of in-disciplinarity in contemporary humanities that was desperately needed in order for images of our time to be understood as images of precisely *our* time, and not some other, long-gone epochs. His method is characterized by what traditional iconology feared the most: individual interpretation as opposed to the taxonomical grid, an interdisciplinary mindset as opposed to powerful, pre-determined tools. This position is equally influenced by cultural and visual studies on the one hand and by natural sciences, mostly biology and paleontology, on the other. Both streams of his thinking, cultural and biological, will prove theoretically crucial for our discussion, as they naturally go along well with loose ends of meaning so typical of non-figurative images. In the third book of what he calls his "iconological series", *What Do Pictures Want?* from 2005, Mitchell states that

> The task of an iconologist with respect to images and pictures is rather like that of a natural historian with respect to species and specimens. […] While we can recognize beautiful, interesting, or novel specimens, 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.[30]

I propose that we understand this "biological metaphor" not as a methodologically, let alone historically, proven tool but as a kind of systemic disruption in our relation to images—as if they are able to direct our opinions, make us change our minds, create and dismantle beliefs. They are like living organisms that you see every day and interact with, which either let you do or prohibit you from doing things with them, while you still may not know anything substantially relevant to how these images work or in what way they affect you.

Just to give one example, one of Mitchell's better known iconological insights is not to establish universal rules of interpretation but to compare specific cultural symptoms with common biological models. This American scholar believes that "there is a way in which we can speak of the value of images as evolutionary or at least coevolutionary entities, quasi life-forms (like viruses) that depend on a host organism (ourselves), and cannot reproduce themselves without human participation".[31] Drawing on his own distinction between images and pictures, where the former are referred to as mental and cultural visualizations while the latter are concrete objects, images may be compared to species and pictures to specimens; their relation is thus defined in a sort of reversed trans-substantiation, whereby biological entities (pictures) are transformed into cultural symbols (images). As we have shown, Panofsky's iconology, together with traditional art history in a general sense, goes in the opposite direction: they are constituted on the basis of always already legitimized cultural symbols (historical artifacts) that only need to be taxonomically described as pictorial entities. In a very insightful text on Mitchell's iconology, Norman MacLeod remarks that "the taxonomist's problem has always been how to describe and explain the variation *within* species, while at the same time describing and explaining the gaps in variations *between* species".[32] That is the reason why Panofsky could establish a viable system "within species" in a three-level analysis—pre-iconographic, iconographic and iconological—but could not implement it "between species" in pictures without narrative text behind them, like landscapes, portraits and abstract pictures.

As a paleontologist and a scholar of natural history, MacLeod readily accepts Mitchell's biological metaphor, drawing on his distinction between picture and image, but gives it a slightly different accentuation. Although they might both be imbued with a personification of life, in the sense that pictures are individual organisms with concrete physical expressions while images correspond to a more general set of rules, MacLeod says that pictures are alive only to the extent of their actual importance as physical objects.[33] Pictures would thus be more like fossils that have preserved the traces of some previous life and eventually regain life only if people understand them as pictures and not just as any other kind of visual information. For our discussion it is very significant that fossils, like many pictures of modern art, are incomprehensible for most people (art historians included), while abstract representations in synoptical charts, medical examinations and cartography are understood (at least by experts) almost as a mother tongue.

Why is it that abstract pictures are so notoriously difficult to grasp? One explanation would be that we cannot see anything in them because there is nothing to be seen except that which we see; the ensuing statement is that art pictures, abstract ones especially, serve to establish new "rules of visibility", as Stefan Majetschak pointed out.[34] We do not believe what we see, but we see what we believe. Scientific imaging is a good example of that: radiological scans of the human body and visualizations of the universe are only technical approximations of things that exist but are not open to view. What these "things" really look like is much different from how we see them in pictures provided by a family physician or a NASA public relations department. People normally do not care whether these pictures need to be "taken" outside or inside of a visible spectrum, although for them this makes the difference between conjecture and certainty. The abstract pictures of Jackson Pollock are in a physical sense more realistic than fabulous visualizations of real planets photographed and processed by machines during unmanned interplanetary missions. In a museum, Pollock's artwork is not just exhibited directly in front of us; it is a palpable object, a canvas, with which we have a connection thanks to the portion of the electromagnetic spectrum that is visible to the human eye.

When the English newspaper *The Independent* published photographs of Jupiter on June 7, 1997, in a caption it was remarked that "it looks like a Turner painting". Martin Kemp contends that all images of the Galileo and Magellan missions are based on a commitment to display styles that originate in a history of European painting. In order to represent those impressive panoramic landscapes, such as the images of Venus made during the Magellan mission, sent by the spacecraft, it was necessary to derive the data while making a whole series of choices regarding all aspects of representation, which resulted in the demonstration of a clear affinity for painting—from the decision to make maps based on orthodox criteria of perspective to the decision regarding false colors, as well as modifications that needed to be made because of distance.[35] The visibility of these images is constituted through the function of their use. Not only that, Majetschak stresses, they would not exist in this form if they did not seek to represent unknown areas within known image models.[36]

It is therefore even more surprising that art history has managed to surmount the obstacles of traditional iconology by using other means, like stylistic analysis, archeology and historiography—not just iconography—but it did not succeed in dealing either with abstract pictures produced after the historical avant-gardes or with pictures outside the consecrated realm of art. The reasons for this failure go well beyond

Panofskyan iconology and have to do more with a self-imposed sense of teleological finitude present in art history, in spite of the brilliant examples of disciplinary openness and thematic inclusiveness offered by Alois Riegl and Aby Warburg more than a century ago. Mitchell is aware of the fact that the idea of images, let alone artworks, having not just a life of their own but a life of a lesser kind of living creatures, like parasites who live on other creatures' vital energy, must be very disturbing for image experts and common people alike:

> If images are like species, or (more generally) like coevolutionary life-forms on the order of viruses, then the artist or image-maker is merely a host carrying around a crowd of parasites that are merrily reproducing themselves, and occasionally manifesting themselves in those notable specimens we call "works of art".[37]

For him, the biological metaphor is much more than just a new trope or merely a polite way to deconstruct a rock-solid edifice of art history: it is the experiment of engaging with artworks and their seemingly unshakeable value in a broader social context, contesting their social immobility and constantly forcing us to change our acquired beliefs.[38]

It is our desire that this book be read and interpreted as a step toward establishing an interdisciplinary iconology that will be able to address all pictorial phenomena. After two epochal steps in this direction—first by Erwin Panofsky, who established the analytical, transhistorical method applied to artistic artifacts, and then by W.J.T. Mitchell, who loosened disciplinary constraints and proposed new terminology in constant change—here we seek to apply the principles of general image science to non-figurative or abstract images in art, science and technology equally. This book is intended to be read in the order in which the individual texts are arranged so that the reader can fully understand its underlying logic and connect in the most constructive way of scientific scrutiny with an open field of meaning, for we believe that methodological approaches to abstraction in art (rarely in other fields) are often considered to be counterintuitive and pose an insurmountable obstacle to the observation and interpretation of abstract visualizations.

This book is divided into four parts and also, uncommonly for edited collections of this kind, has a prolegomena and coda that we believe provide some kind of intellectual encouragement to move into a scientific analysis of the open field of non-figurativeness; we felt that these introductory and concluding messages were, in different ways, necessary to convey at the very beginning and at the very end of the book. Winfried Nöth explains in the prolegomena why every pictorial visualization should be approached as a semiotic sign, since images not only serve us to signify known things and concepts, but are a basic condition of humanity because they contribute to the cognitive role of the human intellect. Following Charles Sanders Peirce, he reminds us that a pure icon is a borderline case of iconicity, which means that a sign, in order to be a sign of something, must differ from what it refers to. So, the problem with hyperrealistic pictures is basically the same as with abstract ones: while the former are too similar to their referent to be a sign of it, the latter may be signs of anything that is conventionally agreed upon and not just self-referential signs of themselves.

In the first part of the book, through the approaches of five authors, we seek to outline the contours of iconological hermeneutics in a historical and theoretical context. Anselm Treichler gives an exhaustive account of one of the first proponents of

abstraction in the arts—Wilhelm Worringer—systematically explaining why abstract representations were crucial for the development of the modern understanding of art, image and creativity. Marie Gasper-Hulvat builds thematically and historically on previous insights on Kazimir Malevich, offering her original interpretation of the relationship between the sacred and the profane in the founder of modern artistic abstraction. The following three chapters explain how it is possible to discuss the fundamental aporias of abstract art and why non-figurativeness is one of the fundamental aspects of representation theory. Blaženka Perica offers new insights into the theoretical approach to Minimal Art, arguing that some of Michael Fried's constitutive theses of the era of high modernism, referring specifically to that style, need to be reconsidered, primarily by counteracting the extremely precisely articulated intentions of the proponents of that movement themselves. Regina-Nino Mion defends the view that abstract pictures can be representational and therefore have specific content or subject matter. She contends that what they are about is abstracted from some previously visible figurative content, that they are spiritual and therefore derived from previously invisible content or that their subject matter is produced exclusively for the picture and made visible only on its surface.

In the second part, we move away from concrete theoretical-historiographical problems and try to bring the phenomenon of abstraction closer to a more general position of non-objecthood in art and philosophy. Diarmuid Costello wishes to explain how it is possible that in the philosophy of photography there still prevails the common impression that there is something inherently problematic about the very idea of abstraction in photography, namely, how it is possible for documentary art par excellence to be abstract. In order to answer these questions, he first poses three more fundamental ones: what is photography, what is abstraction and what is abstraction in photography? Paul Crowther shows how the phenomenon of optical illusion on a pictorial surface enables the construction of a general theory of meaning for abstraction as opposed to a common belief that abstraction is not able to provide meaning in a strict sense. In order to do that, he focuses on the relation between allusive meaning and the concept of "transperceptual space". This is followed by a conceptually related thesis by Claude Cernuschi, who demonstrates how formal simplicity and systemic consequentiality in Barnett Newman have produced a very precise idea of time and temporality. Cernuschi's proposal may be understood in a way that some abstract pictures, presented as a coherent system of thought, are able to convey complex notions that are extremely important to all humanity. Bruno Lessard illuminates the multifaceted relationship between French philosophy and painting by adding to the list of important French intellectuals who showed a philosophical interest in painting the names of two neglected philosophers who published extensively on abstraction in art: Michel Henry and Henri Maldiney. Lessard examines how their phenomenological approaches could be used to reconceptualize the discourse on abstract art in both modern art history and 20th-century French philosophy.

In the third part, five authors deal with different aspects of the interrelation between analog and digital abstraction in traditional media such as painting and drawing on the one hand and new media, such as multimedia art installations and the internet, on the other. Michael Betancourt, pointing to the continuities between early abstract art (such as painting or the visual music film), the productions of the mid-20th century film avant-garde and the contemporary abstractions generated

by digital processes, tries to uncover the predilections to abstraction in the modern human history. This is followed by a highly original account of a classic modernist abstraction in which Linn Burchert argues that atmospheric and climatic phenomena such as temperature, light and humidity were of interest not only to the impressionists and the neo-impressionists but also to artists making non-figurative images such as Robert Delaunay and Yves Klein in France, or Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Johannes Itten at the German Bauhaus school. Birgit Mersmann in her chapter asks fundamental questions—for example, how do the experiences of real "lived" abstraction and the virtual reality experience of data abstraction relate to each other and how does contemporary software abstraction work its way from complexity to abstraction, and vice versa, in a transcoding loop, from abstraction to complexity—in order to trace new interrelations of digitally mediated art and information visualization. Clemens Finkelstein turns our attention to the Japanese multimedia artist Ryoji Ikeda, whose entry into the space of particle physics and physical cosmology, particularly in his digitally produced installation *micro | macro*, sheds new light on the conceptualizations and technologies of contemporary abstraction. The chapter explains new methods of non-figurativeness on the border between pure art and advanced technology, dealing predominantly with newly raised questions of perception on the border between reality and virtuality. Dario Vuger then delineates the contours of digital landscapes of the internet, presenting new or reactualized phenomena of glitch art and vaporwave in a broader context of cyberculture. These abstract or semi-abstract forms of aesthetic experience and illusion are a kind of ammunition for the argument that we are entering a stage in our history that can be described as post-internet, meaning that the internet itself has become fully integrated and fully realized in the modern way of life.

In the fourth part, we deal with visualizations that can only be conditionally called abstract, but which actually represent the link between the materially existing and the materially invisible. A particular challenge to the iconology of abstraction are the realities inaccessible to the view in which approximation is often equated with abstraction. Silvia Casini engages the reader with some of the key historical and conceptual milestones in the passage from the logic of a linear, single-point perspectival space to brain imaging techniques and modelling, like MRI. She argues that this shift is enabled by the Cartesian coordinate system, which is, simultaneously, a drawing device and the setting for experiments to take place. Michael Reinsborough deals with the parallels between the functioning of neural networks in the human brain and the possibility of visualizing them beyond the usual real-abstract contradictions. His neuroscientific approach uncovers many similarities between the visualizing functions of the human brain and abstract representations in a stricter sense, for instance, laws or descriptions of how images in the sciences represent or attempt to represent their object. Ana Peraica shows that what we often consider to be challenges for modern technology already existed in the artistic visions of earlier times. In a specific case study of the relationship between aerial shots in early experimental films by László Moholy-Nagy and the contemporary technology of Google Earth, the author argues that the problem of abstraction is the result of complex interactions between history, culture and strategies of visibility.

The book ends with a kind of paradox, one which clearly outlines the contours of one possible iconology of abstraction. In a coda, Yanai Toister argues that the way the images of the Messier 87 Galaxy were created—that is, using computer-generated

visualizations of the black hole fifty-five million light-years from Earth—clearly demonstrates our urge to abstraction. Just like Wilhelm Worringer stated more than a hundred years ago, this author also thinks that when people are interested in picturing that which they do not see, but which is present nevertheless, and when they strive to represent the invisible nature of the human race or the universe, there are always smaller or bigger parts of the unknown that need to be imagined, and therefore constructed based on calculation, approximation and abstraction.

It is obvious that the fate of abstraction from the viewpoint of our own moment in time can be observed in different ways, depending on whether we are interested in abstraction as a creative tool or as an anthropological fact. Let's start with the latter: Wilhelm Worringer was the first to consider anthropology of abstraction as a relevant force in the development of the human race, and the case that Toister brought up with images of the Messier 87 Galaxy is precisely aimed at showing that abstraction is not the result of the desire for simplification or the saturation with "realism" but the need for the information we possess to be used to discover what we do not have insight into. So, as we said at the beginning, exploring abstraction is a different task altogether—to represent what is not yet presented in a visual form and to show what is not open to view. That would be "synthetic iconology" in the true sense of the word but not in a way Panofsky meant by that, i.e., by gathering relevant image data, but *producing* data to finally see what we don't normally see, in neuroscience, psychology, astronomy and elsewhere. But that is only one side of this problem, and it would be a mistake to reduce the whole of contemporary art and visual communication to just one anthropological urge, however powerful. When we talk about abstraction as part of "cultural symptomatology", which arises from the direct and deliberate influence of humans on their own natural, urban and social environment, then we need something more substantial that would explain how humans interact with the environment and each other.

From the perspective of today, it seems that the phenomena of abstraction in the visual arts and sciences can only be interpreted by the interplay of techno-imagination and cultural-anthropological conditions. Both of these forces act independently but are inextricably intertwined without the possibility of human control. So the question arises: do abstract images need some new iconology? If we put man against technology, then the answer is positive. *Techno-abstraction* explains to us the procedures for producing abstract images based on data gathered from the functioning of the human brain, natural phenomena, space explorations and the like; the emphasis here is on the notion of *production*. On the other hand, *bio-abstraction* refers to the direct attempt of those many individuals, mostly artists, who seek to creatively materialize our human nature, emotions, desires and fears using all possible technical and personal means. In any case, it is an attempt to visualize both real objects and mental constructions that are not accessible to view. Technology has contributed to the creation of abstract images as much as pure "urge to abstraction" throughout art history. I think we can no longer look at technological abstraction separately from biological abstraction which was born of pure necessity, as Worringer teaches us. Artists like Ryoji Ikeda and synthetic visualizations like the image of Messier 87 Galaxy, but also brave new interpretations of paintings by classic modern artists, are breaking the boundaries between techno-abstraction and bio-abstraction, demanding a completely new iconology.

## Notes

1 Here I am using John Berger's phrase, succinctly coined in his eponymous book from the early seventies (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: Penguin Books, 1972).
2 Robert Steiner, *Toward a Grammar of Abstraction: Modernity, Wittgenstein, and the Paintings of Jackson Pollock*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 1992, pp. 13–14.
3 Ibid., p. 14.
4 Cf., for instance, Paul Crowther, "The Logic and Phenomenology of Abstract Art", in Paul Crowther (ed.), *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (Even the Frame)*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 99–119; Paul Crowther, *The Phenomenology of Modern Art: Exploding Deleuze, Illuminating Style*, London: Continuum, 2012 or Paul Crowther, *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision: A Post-Analytic Turn*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
5 Cf. Winfried Nöth, "Why Pictures Are Signs; The Semiotics of (Non)representational Pictures", this volume.
6 Steiner, *Toward a Grammar of Abstraction*, p. 50.
7 Conrad Fiedler, *On Judging Works of Visual Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957 [*Über die Beurteilung von Werken der Bildenden Kunst*, 1876], p. 43.
8 Ibid., p. 56.
9 Ibid., p. 36.
10 The translator and editor of the American edition of Fiedler's book, Henry Schaefer-Simmern, cites an indicative reason why, in the second edition of 1957, Fiedler's term *Gestaltung* was translated as "Gestalt-formation": "In the early and middle eighteenth century, *Gestaltung* was used by German philosophical writers (Herder, Goethe) in their qualitative descriptions of works of art as self-sustained unities of form in which all parts receive their artistic meaning only by their interfunctional relationship to the whole" (ibid., p. vii).
11 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, New York: Elephant, 1997. The book was first published in 1908 in Germany as *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* by Piper Verlag, Munich. It was first published in English in the United States in 1953.
12 Worringer interprets Riegl's concept as follows: "Riegl was the first to introduce into the method of art historical investigation the concept of 'artistic volition'. By 'absolute artistic volition' is to be understood that latent inner demand which exists per se, entirely independent of the object and of the mode of creation, and behaves as will to form. It is the primary factor in all artistic creation and, in its innermost essence, every work of art is simply an objectification of this a priori existent absolute artistic volition" (ibid., p. 9).
13 Ibid., p. 15.
14 Ibid., p. 19.
15 Ibid., p. 24.
16 Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York: Anchor Books, 1955, pp. 39–40. The chapter referred to here, "Iconography and Iconology. An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art", was originally published in the volume *Studies in Iconology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939.
17 Ibid.
18 The immense popularity of Panofsky's method has largely deterred art historians from following what Aby Warburg suggested in his work earlier, which is "history of art as history of images". In short, Warburg's writings did not, on the one hand, offer a similar formulaic typology, and, on the other, and more importantly, Warburg's proposal for the cultural history of paintings could be interpreted as degrading the special status of the work of art (cf. Horst Bredekamp, "A Neglected Tradition? Art History as 'Bildwissenschaft'", *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2003), pp. 418–428).
19 Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 32.
20 Ibid., p. 38.
21 Ibid., pp. 33–34.
22 The French art historian Louis Marin pointed out a similar problem in his book *Opacité de la peinture: Essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento*, Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2006. At interest here is the painting *Annunciation* by Benedetto Bonfigli of 1460 in which we see this New Testament scene with the angel on

the left hand side and the Virgin on the right, just being touched by the divine ray of the Holy Spirit. The presence of other angels in the top left hand corner of the picture and the bearded figure who most likely represents God is not any kind of a surprise in this iconographic unit. Nor does the figure of St Luke, the narrator of this scene, placed between the angel and Mary, surprise us at all. What is untypical for this kind of depiction, says Marin, is the combination of functions that have devolved upon Luke—first of all within the reality of the image, then as the author of his own Gospel, and then as the figure of a saint. For Luke is not just the author of the Gospel, from which Bonfigli has appropriated a scene, he is also the patron saint of painters and artists. However, Luke is present in the painting as the person who is yet to record the story that follows (i.e., the Annunciation), like an actor on a film set ready to perform a scene for which the screenplay has yet to be written. We are informed of this by the empty book into which Luke will write what is about to happen and what is actually going on in the paradoxical simultaneity of the time of event and the time of representation. In this scene, Luke is at once the author and leading man of the tale; he belongs at once to contemporary (Renaissance) and New Testament time; he is at once the writer of the Gospel and a representative of those who in the following centuries were to visualize it in various ways; the whole composition of the painting of Benedetto Bonfigli is a highly complex metapictorial commentary on the relationship of text, image, event and interpretation (Louis Marin, *Opacità della pittura. Sulla rappresentazione nel Quattrocento*, translated by Elisabetta Gigante, Florence: La Casa Usher, 2012, pp. 17–18).

23 Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 31.
24 Bazon Brock, "Zur Ikonographie der gegenstandslosen Kunst", in Bazon Brock and Achim Preiß (eds.), *Ikonographia. Anleitung zum Lesen von Bildern*, Munich: Klinkhardt u. Biermann Verlag, 1990, pp. 314–316.
25 Cf. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976.
26 Ibid.
27 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 2.
28 Mitchell refers to a passage from Panofsky's essay "Iconography and Iconology" (as published in *Studies in Iconology*) and describes this apologue as "a primal scene of Panofskyan iconological science" (cf. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays in Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 25).
29 On these and other aspects of Mitchell's iconology, see Krešimir Purgar (ed.), *W.J.T. Mitchell's Image Theory: Living Pictures*, New York and London: Routledge, 2017, and Krešimir Purgar, *Iconologia e cultura visuale. W.J.T. Mitchell, storia e metodo dei visual studies*, Rome: Carocci, 2019.
30 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 86.
31 Ibid., p. 87.
32 Norman MacLeod, "Images, Totems, Types and Memes: Perspectives on an Iconological Mimetics", in Neal Curtis (ed.), *The Pictorial Turn*, New York and London: Routledge, 2010, p. 94.
33 Ibid., p. 92.
34 Cf. Stefan Majetschak, "Sichtvermerke. Über Unterschiede zwischen Kunst- und Gebrauchsbildern", in Stefan Majetschak (ed.), *Bild-Zeichen. Perspektiven einer Wissenschaft vom Bild*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005.
35 Ibid., pp. 114–117. Cf. Martin Kemp, *Visualizations: The Nature Book of Art and Science*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
36 Cf. Majetschak, "Sichtvermerke".
37 Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*, p. 89.
38 Ibid., p. 92.