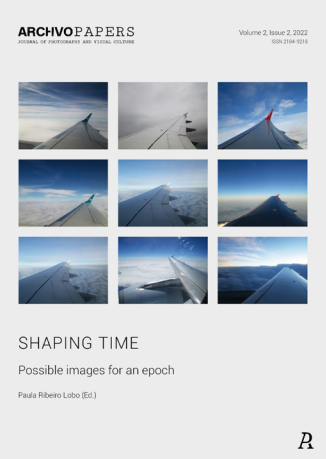


ARCHIVO PRESS

ARCHIVOPAPERS
JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL CULTURE

ISSN (Online) 2184-9218

INTERVIEW: W.J.T. MITCHELL

Paula Ribeiro Lobo

To cite this article:
Paula Ribeiro Lobo (2022) Interview: W.J.T. Mitchell, *Archivo Papers Journal*, 2(2), 13-28.

Published online: 20 October 2022.

Link to this article

Submit your article to this journal

© Archivo Papers Journal / Archivo Press, 2022

Archivo Papers Journal is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International license.

INTERVIEW

W.J.T. MITCHELL

PAULA RIBEIRO LOBO

W.J.T. Mitchell is Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, where he teaches in both the English and the Art History departments. Particularly focussed on the history and theories of media, visual art and literature, from the eighteenth century to the present, his research explores the relations of visual and verbal representations in the culture and iconology. Professor Mitchell edits the interdisciplinary journal *Critical Inquiry*, a quarterly devoted to critical theory in the arts and human sciences, which under his editorship has published special issues on public art, psychoanalysis, pluralism, feminism, the sociology of literature, canons, race and identity, narrative, the politics of interpretation, postcolonial theory, among many other topics. He has lectured at universities and art museums throughout the United States, as well as in Europe, South Africa, New Zealand and the Far East. His awards include the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Berlin Prize Fellowship to the American Academy in Berlin and the Morey Prize in art history given by the Colege Art Association of America. In 2003, he received the University of Chicago's prestigious Faculty Award for Excellence in Graduate Teaching. As an author, his numerous publications include the books *Mental Traveler: A Journey through Schizophrenia* (2020), *Metapictures: A Cloud Atlas of Images* (2020); *Image Science: Iconography, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (2015); *Seeing Through Race* (2012); *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (2011), *What Do Pictures Want? Essays on the Lives and Loves of Images* (2005, awarded James Russell Lowell Prize by Modern Language Association, and Laing Prize by University of Chicago Press); *Picture Theory* (1994, awarded Charles Rufus Morey Prize for art history by College Art Association, and Laing Prize by University of Chicago Press), *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986), and *Blake's Composite Art* (1977). W.J.T. Mitchell is currently finishing a book entitled *Seeing Through Madness*.

Paula Ribeiro Lobo | You have been reflecting upon the subject of time since the 1980s, not looking for an ontological answer to the unanswerable question "what is time?", of course, but focussing on the Bergsonian perspective of how we perceive time and relate to it. When you define the present as a "kind of accordion concept that expands and shrinks"[1], how do you consider that present time(s) can be pictured?

W.J.T. Mitchell | Well, it's a big question. To start with, I follow not only [Henri] Bergson but Saint Augustine, who famously said that as long as I'm not thinking too much about it, I know what time is, I have no problem; the minute I ask the question "what is time?", then, I am stymieing. I think time is a medium in which we live and move and have our being. We can't define it. It's like we are fish in the sea and the sea is time. The sea goes on forever, but the fish, they come and go. So, partly this has to do with, fundamentally, two different ways of thinking about time. One is mathematical or chronological, and numerical, it has to do with counting and it's very much associated with the image of the line, sometimes with the circle, but also with numbers. And the other is qualitative, which I associate with images - by that I mean metaphors, figures of speech, but also visual images with all of their attributes, colours, forms, figures, shapes. One of the first associations I have with images of time is with colour. We talk about Picasso's blue period. In musical time, for instance, there's a genre called the Blues, which is a moment sometimes of melancholy or reflection. So, everywhere you look in human experience you can't avoid the question of time. It's always coming up in one way or another. There is also the question of public and private time, you know? The question of how long have you been around, how long have you lived? I just turned 80...

Ribeiro Lobo | Congratulations!

W.J.T. Mitchell | [laughs] Well, I know congratulations are in order, but I have never expected to live this long! I'm kind of surprised and shocked. Here I still am, and so far as I can tell I still have all my faculties – I can't run as fast as I once did! The idea of private, personal, subjective time is crucial. We all have experiences of that good and bad times, the mood of a time. But then there's also the shared time, which can be with one other person — like right now, we are in this time as we talk about; this is the present, we are here now. So, the accordion metaphor: how long is this time? An hour, more or less? It's flexible. That's why I used the metaphor of the accordion to think about the strange way we talk about the present, whenever we call attention to it, to say what the present is right now. But the minute I finish uttering that sentence, that sentence is already in the past. It's not now.

Ribeiro Lobo | So we need different coordinates to grasp that present time and to picture it...

W.J.T. Mitchell | Yes. And those coordinates are not dictated from up high. Not usually. They are improvised in the moment, then the moment comes and goes. But sometimes the moment lasts for a significant amount of time. Sometimes it's like in Poussin's painting *Dance to the Music of Time* [c.1634-46]. I love the little cupids blowing bubbles, I think of those as the images of the present moment: the blowing of a bubble… and then it bursts.

Ribeiro Lobo | A great image and a very strong one, that leads me to the second question. To discuss the unevenness of time, its breaks and undulations, as well as the suspension of judgement that enables us to see that we're in the "vortex of time", it's very interesting that you have chosen the anachronistic images of Chronos, Kairos and Aion... To refer to the present you are kind of "dragged back" to ancient anachronical images...

W.J.T. Mitchell | Yes, and this has to do with... The image is always present. In some sense, Chronos is still with us. I'm a firm believer in the anachronistic method of criticism. It doesn't mean I'm against history, but every time somebody tells me "okay, well, here is the historical explanation" I always want to answer it, or complicate it, with some anachronistic critical reflection. I think Chronos, Kairos and Aion are very timely images for us - even though they were not invented in our time, they persist, they remain with us. I think they capture three crucial dimensions. Chronos captures the idea of chronology and of numerical clock time; but, more existentially, Chronos is always associated with death, with the cutting, he's the Grim Reaper and carries the scythe. So, as living beings, we know we have limited time. Nobody lives forever, that's part of what a living thing is - something that dies -, and Chronos is a reminder that everybody's timeline is finite and limited. Aion, in a way, is an image of why these ancient figures are still relevant, of why anachronism is unavoidable. Because of the return of the past, the cycle in which Spring comes again, Summer comes again, Fall comes again... Poussin's *Dance to the Music of Time*, as the Four Seasons dancing together, that's the figure of Aion. It's part of our experience that some things return. It's the principle of anachronism, in a way, that the past has come back to haunt us or maybe to teach us something. And Kairos, I think, is the most important right now, because it's about the moment of crisis, the moment of decision, in which an opportunity, a danger, a situation has arisen and that may be unforeseen but demands a response. The moment of climate change, which we are in... I mean, we ask "what is our present?", "what are the dominant temporal markers"? One of them clearly is that the world itself, the Earth, the planet, is changing rapidly as a result of our thoughtless activity in present moments without regard for futures. Kairos is the one that comes and says "no, now you have to make a choice, the moment is upon you and you can't avoid the consequences of your actions". Kairos is, I think, the most relevant, in the sense of "this is the present and the historical present that we're in", and climate is the sort of largest framework of that. There are other crises, as I mentioned, the

idea of the political crises of decay of democracy, and the persistence of endemic conditions like racism. All these terms are useful for helping us clarify the things we want to understand or describe.

Ribeiro Lobo | Which leads us to the concept of epoch, our epoch... In recent years it seems that you have returned more intensively to your concept of metapictures, coined in the 1990s, to readdress it for a new seminar and for an exhibition at the University of Chicago in 2021, where you presented a Warburgian *Builder Atlas* on the role of images in the present. Likewise, the question of sound images (and a few minutes ago you mentioned the Blues), and the relation of sight and sounds is a topic that still interests you. So, as sustained in your famous essay "What do Pictures Want?" (1996), instead of representation, is the Nietzschean metaphor of resonance still a better tool to think upon the production of images in this *epoch*?

W.J.T. Mitchell | I don't know if I would say better, I think we need both *representation* and ***resonance***. I mean, think about the connotations of the word: *representation* is something that stands for something else, and to see what it is that it stands for

Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, c. 1634-1636.
© The Wallace Collection.

is crucial to interpreting, making sense of something. But then there is something beyond that, in addition to that, which I would call the *resonance*. How does it sound again? Does it sound different to us now? The idea that images are to be seen (and seen as standing for something very important), but also that there is something more: the feeling that goes with them. Nietzsche has a famous passage in which he talks about this in relation to idols - that is, the big images, the ideas that make us say "Oh, well, that's super important, that's filled with power". And he says: "strike them!, strike these images to make them sound". And first he says to use a hammer, but not to smash them; don't think that you can destroy an image, that doesn't work. I mean, you might destroy the image, but then the memory of it lives on. The image is immaterial. You can destroy the picture or the statue, but the image is still there in people's minds.

Ribeiro Lobo | And more powerful than before...

W.J.T. Mitchell | Yes, exactly. Then Nietzsche changes the metaphor and says "strike them with a tuning fork", which I think is the most subtle of all. I'm not sure what to say about the tuning fork, except I find it a beautiful extension of a way of thinking about what we're doing when we interpret images and we try to make sense of them. It's not just that we make them sound, our own instrument makes a sound.

Ribeiro Lobo | Also in recent years, and also departing from Nietzsche, you have been using the idea of madness to refer to the nature of our epoch, while also considering it as resulting from four "structural viruses", which you refer to as pandemic, endemic, *infodemic* and *ecodemic*[2]. Could you, please, explain how in your perspective this biological approach could help us to better understand and tackle the successive crises we're living through?

W.J.T. Mitchell | Well, I wouldn't want to label it a biological approach. I mean, there are biological metaphors involved: the idea of the virus and viral contamination, the spread of disinformation, for instance — but those are analogies with biology, those are not literal viruses, they're figurative. So, I wouldn't call it strictly biological because it's also psychological. The question of madness has really taken over my thinking for the last ten or twelve years. The question of human psychology... What did nature do when it endowed us with large brains, with big memories, and with the facility for language and image making that produced a kind of species that there's no other species quite like us on the planet. For quite a long time I sort of agreed with the satirist Jonathan Swift on the idea that human species are rational animals, there is absolutely no evidence for that claim! [laughs] Anyone who looked at human history would have to say man is the irrational animal, man is the animal that goes crazy, sometimes for very long times. And when I say crazy I'm not thinking of any particular syndrome, such as paranoia, depression, bipolar

disorder... The legal definition of insanity in the United States (and, I think, in many countries) is "Are you a danger to yourself or others?, a danger of being either a suicide or a murderer"? This is what seems to me endemic to the human species. Clearly, in the era of climate change, we are a danger to ourselves. We have wiped out thousands of species on this planet, and now we're on the endangered species list, too. We are in danger of contaminating our planet so badly that what we think of as civilised human life will not be sustainable. So, I start now from the premise that man is the mad animal, not the rational animal. I'm sceptical about whether there is any cure, like a magical cure... Most mental health providers that I know, therapists, say that with mental illness there's not a pill you can give; it's a talking cure. In that sense I'm a good old-fashioned Freudian, I believe that the language gets us into our madness, but it also has to be part of the way we get out of it by talking ourselves through it. And I also think from the standpoint of collective madness: when groups, parties, nations and *epochs*, as Nietzsche says, when they start to go crazy we have to ask ourselves "how do you manage a mental case"? How do you restrain, confine and treat it?", in a way that is not an utopian cure, but a less ambitious utopia in which you manage the mad. This is why I think the planet Earth probably should be regarded now as our asylum - in which we have to be doctors to ourselves. This is also a political question. It's cycle politics, with a biological metaphor about the extinction of species underlying the whole narrative. One thing I've been very interested in, in relation to the idea of collective madness, is political systems. Clearly one way to produce order... The old answer was always [to] structure like the family, the human family — and so there must be a head of the family, usually the father, the king, the monarch, the absolute authority. There was something to be said for that: it wasn't a cure, it was a way of managing human madness, and in various moments it worked pretty well. I'm reading about ancient Rome, and in Suetonius' history of the Caesars the reign of Augustus was a moment of temporary sanity. After Augustus it was a string of mad men who ruled Rome and brought, of course, the empire to ruin. That's the idea of the central authority, the idea that human beings are like a flock of sheep and they need a shepherd. But democracy was this utopian idea that we could rule ourselves, the idea of the self-governing individual; that I'm responsible for myself, you are responsible for yourself. How could we extrapolate that to a collective level so that people could rule themselves? How could the species govern itself peacefully? And that's led me into the sphere of constitutions and the construction of constitutions. It's kind of amazing. You look at the American Constitution, the product of the Enlightenment, the age of reason... and it turns out that it's a mental health document. It divides the powers of the people into three branches: the legislative, the reasoning law giving; the judging, the judicial; and then the executive, the will, [the] "has to". It's basically reason, judgement and will. And balanced. None of them can be supreme: if the reasoning takes over, then nothing gets done; if the executive takes over, then things are done irrationally... I know it's not a new discovery on my part, but the idea that democratic constitutions are fundamentally mental health documents

makes me respect them more, and think about them as premised on the idea that, as a collective, human beings are crazy. How do you structure a society in order to manage the craziness? You're not going to cure it... It's made me go back with even more respect to the idea of constitutional democracy. So, it isn't a biological framework; it includes biology, and life is one of the conditions, but it's very much psychopolitical. That's the approach I think I'm trying to carve out.

Ribeiro Lobo | In this "vitalist" approach of yours, as Jacques Rancière called it[3], which methodologies do you propose to critically question the images of the present, their circulation in the public and cybernetic space, and the relation between esthetics and politics? How can we address these crazy times of ours, this epoch, the problems that we're facing, and critically question the images that are being produced?

W.J.T. Mitchell | I suppose Rancière is right to say it's vital in some sense... I'm not sure I go all the way with vitalism! I mean, I feel I have a much more humble philosophy. I'm an iconologist. I look at images and words in visual graphic representation, the images across the media, and I try to ask myself what is the meaning of them? How are they functioning? How do they affect our thinking? For instance, the idea of a constitution, the image of that as an image of a balanced psyche: we don't think of that immediately, it's buried as a metaphor in the thinking of constitutional law. So, I'm an image scientist. I very much believe in the power of metaphor, the power of icons to shape human thought and behaviour. And that, of course, is why the arts to me are the scene of testing, [of] mobilisation and experimentation with all of the images that pass through our minds, pass through our language. I come out of the fundamental humanist tradition of literature, visual arts, and even music, the three great registers of the arts (image, music and words), and I'm trying to look at those in order to connect their various dimensions which they cross over into. For instance, with Shakespeare. He was a dramatist, he wrote plays, but he also created worlds in those plays that are still with us, still feel timely and present. Or the worlds of the novelists with social forces. I've just been immersed for the last six months in pleasure reading Victorian novels, particularly the novels of Anthony Trollope. In a way, it's my escape from the present because it takes you back to Victorian England, and his novels describe worlds of domestic upheaval, which is sometimes called "tempest in a teacup". In a small provincial town in England, why do you care that the marriage of some pair of newlyweds is not going well? He has become insanely jealous and she can't seem to comfort him — and she's an honest woman, she's not betraying him! The title of the novel is *He Knew He Was Right*[4]. [laughs] And it's one of the most terrifying novels about how a person can fall into paranoia and jealousy; to their own self-destruction, not just their marriage, it destroys everything that was possible for them. These are very private worlds in Trollope's novels, [but] they're connected also to changes in history that were occurring at the time. So, I feel literature, the visual arts and

music are the sphere — let's call it the aesthetic — where politics, psychology, even science, and history as a process that is partly out of control... One thing Trollop is registering is that women don't feel about their lives the same way their mothers did. The mothers are saying "how can you say that?, a woman can't work". And the daughter is saying "but I want to do something besides sit at home and raise children! I want to work". This was a revolutionary moment, but for Trollope it's all in the teacup, the intimate details of a historical transformation.

Ribeiro Lobo | A good methodological approach to make things resonate and give us back the image in the mirror...

W.J.T. Mitchell | Yes, and it's nothing new. I mean, I call it *Iconology* but it's basically the humanistic study of the arts as a place for holding up a mirror to humanity. They show us what we are, and hope we can learn something from it.

Ribeiro Lobo | Amidst progressive and regressive tensions, many disruptive elements are shaping our time(s) — including the affirmation of past-rooted imperialism, such as the one behind the invasion of Ukraine and the consequences of a war that is changing the international order. Despite the present-day desire to "see it all" — the "Argus Complex" as you called it[5] —, we ended up in a "ship of fools" sailing the troubled waters of weakened democracies, authoritarian regimes and planetary problems from social and economic inequalities to climate change, as you've mentioned. Is there still time and place for aesthetic utopias?

W.J.T. Mitchell | Absolutely, there is. But also, don't forget aesthetic dystopias! Utopia is just one genre of what literature and visual arts can do projecting an ideal world. But I think dystopias are equally important. [George Orwell's] *1984* is one of the greatest novels of the 20th century about a society of total control and surveillance, and total spectacle. The figure of the telescreen is the figure of political power both over the imagination, where the telescreens present spectacles to rouse the masses, and at the same time the telescreen is watching the masses to keep them under control, to watch out for dissidents. A dystopia like that, holding up a mirror to the potential for a disastrous outcome for the species... Those [dystopias] are really crucial. I also like science fiction novels, particularly novels that involve aliens, as encountering other intelligences that are watching us. The newest, of course, is a film called *Nope*, by one of our great African-American film directors[6], in which the aliens have come because they find us delicious! [laughs] They want to eat us, they think we're very tasty and really don't care about communicating with us or anything! But my favourite films are the older ones, where the aliens come and say "listen, we came to warn you, you're on a path to destruction and we've come to help you out". And usually the earthlings' response is "you can't tell us what to do!", and they try to kill them! *The Day the Earth Stood Still*[7] was one of my

favourites. So, yes, definitely we need more utopias, more dystopias, both kinds. And then, in between, the world of realism, of Anthony Trollope or contemporary realists.

Ribeiro Lobo | On the one hand, in a dialectical dialog with Benjamin's writings on mechanical reproduction, you sustained that "a new temporality, characterised by an erosion of the event and a deepening the relevant past, produces a peculiar sense of 'accelerated stasis' in our sense of history"[8]. On the other hand, I find it very interesting that instead of the *Angel of History* you seem to prefer the image of Giuseppe Crespi's peasant riding saddleback (*Cacasenno Riding Backwards*, from 1705-15)... Again, it's a very interesting image, a very powerful metaphor of this condition that we are living in 2022.

W.J.T. Mitchell | [laughs] Yes, it just came to me when I was rereading *Don Quixote*. Cacasenno is the witness figure, he's not the central character, he's the squire to Don Quixote. Maybe for historians — and not just me, but anybody who contemplates history, and particularly history as a story of a mad animal, our own species…— *Don Quixote* is one of the great narratives about madness. And I want to be clear: madness is not necessarily bad, *Don Quixote*'s madness is filled with idealism and fantasy and imagination, which are also crucial aspects of the human animal. So, there's something amazing and wonderful about *Don Quixote*. At the same time, we feel like... [laughs] "oh... he's completely lost touch with reality"! And Cacasenno has not, he doesn't control anything but he observes and he tries to manage. He's a pragmatist. And that's my philosophical orientation: pragmatism, particularly as elaborated by American philosophers and the great Wittgenstein — his approach to metaphysics and ontology was a great cure for Philosophy's urge to know everything, to understand everything without the intervention of images or metaphors. Wittgenstein welcomes the metaphors and says [that] we can't think without them. So, Cacasenno is my *Angel of History*. I often ask my students, though, "try to figure out who your angel of history is", "how do you regard your own position in respect to the past"? If you are a historian, you're looking back at the past from some point of view. What's that point of view? Don't just look at the past, but ask yourself where you stand — or sit, or ride — in relation to it.

Ribeiro Lobo | And try to look both ways with the widest possible perspective..

W.J.T. Mitchell | Right. Of course it's all related to Walter Benjamin's *Angel of History*, with the wings spread, and the storm… His is a much more violent image and, I think, deeply pessimistic. It's apocalyptic. Mine is not so apocalyptic, it's more: OK, we're dragged forward into a future we can't control, but what can we do? How can we hold on and not be thrown off of our mule, even though we're riding backwards?

Giuseppe Maria Crespi
Plate 19: Cacasenno riding a horse backwards, from "Bertolo Bertoldino, and Cacasenno", c. 1705-15.
© The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1953

Ribeiro Lobo | To a certain extent, madness can also be interpreted as a way of bringing us back to the present and trying to figure out what's happening around us; it's kind of being in the eye of the hurricane, as you've mentioned in one of your lectures[9], and that can give a privileged perspective...

W.J.T. Mitchell | Yes. And you quoted the idea of the *accelerated stasis*... The idea that a new sense of temporality has emerged, rather different from Walter

Benjamin's — which was in the 1930s, poised on the knife edge between communism and fascism, and the onset of a World War, the worst war in human history, and along with it the genocide, the Holocaust, a terrifying moment. In some sense I feel like Cacasenno is sort of about that *accelerated stasis*, he can't make his mule speed up. For Walter Benjamin time was going too fast, it was out of control. And I think ours is not yet out of control. In other words, this is not as bad. It's pretty bad! [laughs] The idea of *accelerated stasis* was also, I think, confirmed by people's experience during the pandemic - which now feels like it's fading, but there was this moment of great uncertainty: how long will this last? And what does it do to you? Basically, what a pandemic does, what plagues have always done, is to shut the society down. Suddenly nobody can move, nobody can act, nobody can do anything. How do you capture that? The quality of that time when *accelerated stasis* would be one way, but having to stay there feeling like the temperature's rising. There's an intensity. It's also connected with climate change, you know? What kind of event is climate change? When Walter Benjamin is writing the Spanish Civil War is going on, fascism is rising all over Europe, they're falling into a global war, so, the crisis is occurring on everyday news. But climate change is a different kind of crisis. Today it's a beautiful day in Chicago, but I hear that in Southern California, where my daughter lives, they're now in the fifth or sixth day of a heat dome, temperatures are rising to 110° [Fahrenheit][10] and people can't go outside, it feels dangerous. This is a different kind of event than war. It has a different temporality, it's slower, it's sort of displaced. So, what kind of images do we use to capture our sense of this temporality, as distinguished from Walter Benjamin's crisis events? This is also a crisis, but qualitatively different.

Ribeiro Lobo | Which leads me to the next question. To shift the discourse from Western conceptions of time, you have been using the beautiful and metaphorical images of Father Time and Mother Earth. Is this a way, considering present-day debates, of being more inclusive than divisive, to bring some kind of dialectical possibility to think again about our common future on planet Earth?

W.J.T. Mitchell | Yes, of course those images I took are the traditional images: Father Time, Chronos, is a patriarch, and Mother Earth, Gaia, the Earth mother. But I was very interested in the way contemporary African-American artist Betye Saar mobilised these two figures around a child's doll suitcase[11]. The two wings of the suitcase open out, and one has a clock on top of it, the other one has the planet, the globe. And inside there are doll like figures: one is a male whose chest has been carved with the images of slave ships, this is the time of slavery; and, on the other side, crockery, jars. These two dolls, Father Time and Mother Earth, are considered as something we carry like in a doll suitcase. It is a very distinctive African-American rendering of what is the past? What is our past? Because when we talk about history, it's not just about human history; it's about the history of nations, epochs, peoples, communities... Every family has a family history. And

this one struck me as a very revelatory African-American perspective on the time of endurance and carrying along your ancestors, taking them with you, not forgetting them. Not forgetting the past, but also not being shackled by it. You're not enchained by it, you can carry it with you like a doll suitcase. I think it's a great work of art, very moving. Father Time and Mother Earth, well, they've been around since the Greeks but now they're reborn, in a kind of sculptural assemblage by an African-American artist that wants to carry it forward. The idea that it's a doll suitcase is crucial to the kind of emotional temperature of the work.

Ribeiro Lobo | I would now like to ask you about the notion of the *photographic* — which has been challenged during the last decades, particularly since the emergence of digital technologies, the Internet, social media networks and Instagram's curated sharing, as well as of images generated by AI or by powerful devices and telescopes used for outer space exploration... From the perspective of the Visual Culture Studies, how could the photographic image-object be envisaged, given the ever more complex spatial and temporal dimensions? We are now dealing with a lot of intersecting and multilayered dimensions, both at spatial and temporal levels, so, can we still think about the photographic in the same way?

W.J.T. Mitchell | No, I think the idea of the photographic has evolved radically since the invention of the digital photograph. The quantitative explosion, you know, it's an exponential increase in the number of images... But I think it is part of a history that begins in the 19th century with the invention of photography, and the assemblage of photo archives — a record of history that is unprecedented in human history. Before, say 1870, there were no archives of everyday life — and here I'm thinking not just of the photos of big events (presidential inaugurations, coronations, wars and so forth), but of everyday life. One of my dear friends and colleagues at the University of Southern California, Vanessa Schwartz, is engaged in writing what she calls a visual history, which looks at these great archives of photos. It really starts in 1870, and I don't know if anybody in the world has looked at as many photographs as Vanessa has, and she's interested in them not necessarily as works of art; these are very humble images, many of them, but they provide a record... No historian has really tried to say "what does all this mean, that we can now see photographic evidence of everything that human beings were doing, with this long period"? And it begins at a specific time. Now we're in the moment of the digital, which has exploded and made it possible to recover it in new ways, and archive it, catalogue it in new ways. Visual Culture Studies is, I think, centrally constituted by this archive. I don't claim to have any real knowledge of this, it feels like a newly discovered continent of History that Vanessa is exploring for us. But the photograph itself is always going to be a special kind of temporal icon because it is a relic of the past, an index of a past moment. It's present to us. It brings that past into the present. The question of photographs in the future, I think, is a really interesting one. I don't have an answer to it right offhand, but the idea that we

would be able to see the future in a photograph doesn't strike me as technically impossible. In fact, artists are often trying to do this... The utopian artist. But does photography have a role in that? How could you photograph the future? I want to just leave that as a question for us to think about, and I'll let you know when I have an answer. [laughs]

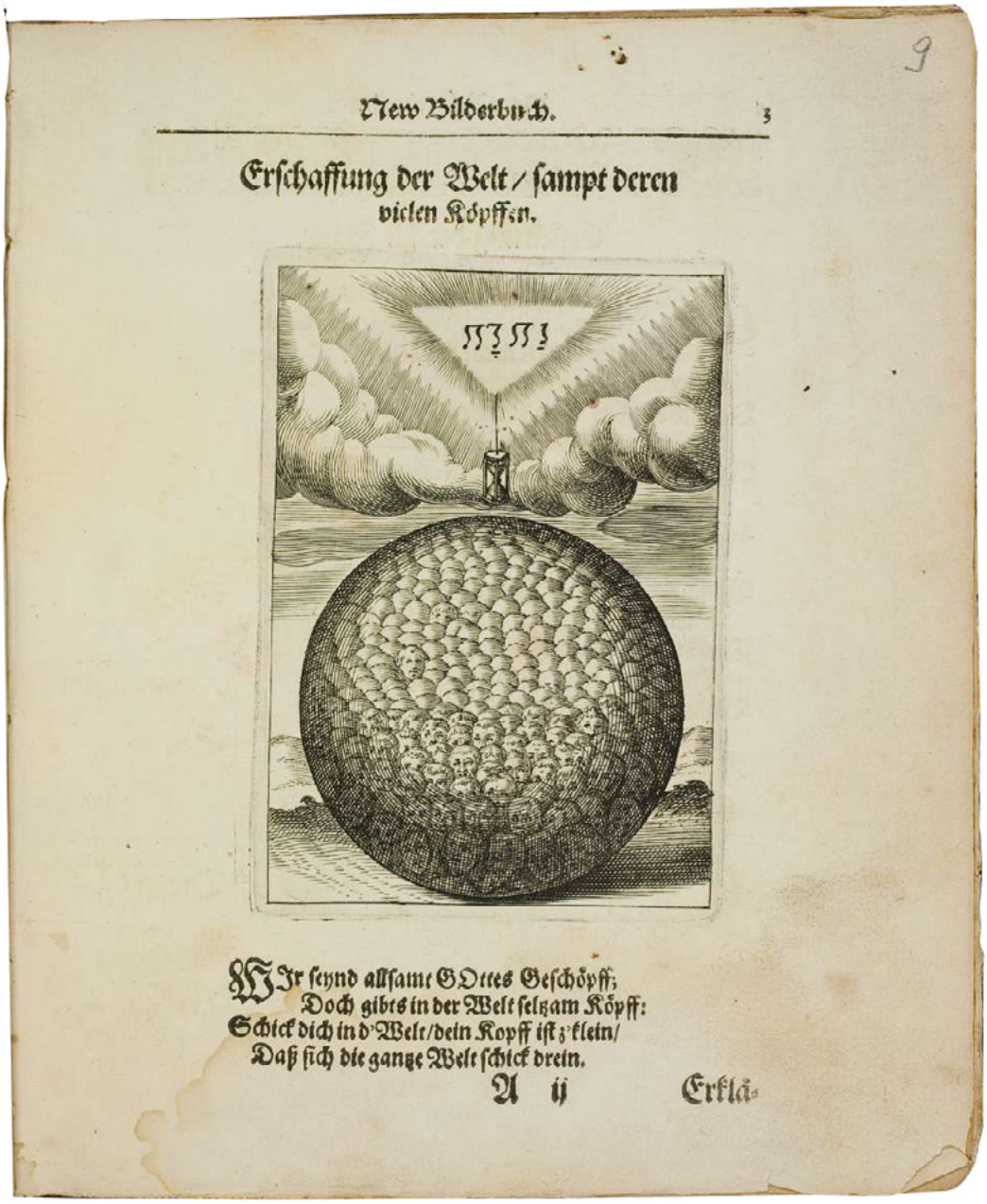
Ribeiro Lobo | From the loosening of its ties to indexicality to the connection of vision to other timescales — including astrological and cosmic levels, as you were referring —, how do you see the contribution of photography to the "visual literacy" of contemporaneity?

W.J.T. Mitchell | Well, I think it's absolutely central. And I hope that it's producing or contributing to a kind of visual literacy about both the past and the present. I think this is the real project of Visual Culture Studies: to teach people how to see. And thinking of the study of culture in the humanities as teaching people how to read and interpret is very important, not discounting that, but teaching them to see as well. One thing in your question I would want to resist a little bit is the idea of it loosening its ties to indexicality. In principle the ties to indexicality — that is: cause and effect, the idea that something is not just a representation but a relic of something... — that's stronger than ever. At the beginning of digital photography there was the sense that it wouldn't be as real. That it would somehow be disconnected from the real. Of course, you can manipulate a digital photograph much more easily, so in one sense it was true. But, in another sense, it was not. And that's in the way that digital photography not only registered a visual impression, it also, at the same time, inscribed metadata along with the visual impression that was never available in chemical-based photographs. The only people who did that were professionals, who wrote down in a notebook "I took this picture this day, with this setting, with this camera", and so forth. All that is automatic now. So, the indexicality of the photograph with the rise of the digital was both put into question by the ease of manipulation, but it was also deepened, strengthened by temporal indices. The film *Standard Operating Procedure* [2008], by Errol Morris, is one of my favourites. It's a film about the photographs that were made at the American prison in Iraq, Abu Ghraib Prison, during the invasion of Iraq. When these photographs came out they were a scandal, because they revealed that the U.S. was engaged in a torture regime in Iraq. They were abusing the inmates in all sorts of ways. And one photograph emerged as iconic, called the *Hooded Man*. That's often the way images work: there'll be many of them, but then one will come into stand for everything. What Morris showed in his film was that those photographs had an indexical relation to real events in time. And you could pinpoint, the iconic photograph was right at the centre: it was on Halloween night, October 31st 2003, when these terrible events were taking place. You could put the photographs on a timeline, and none of that could have been done if they had chemical-based photographs. I thought that, as a film, it was a revelation about the new forms, the new significance and capacity of photographs could be.

Ribeiro Lobo | If, in some sense, images are always *timely* and *timeless*, as you've also sustained in a talk on the "Iconology of Time"[12], in your opinion which would be the images that might better resonate our present for the future generations?

W.J.T. Mitchell | There are so many it would be difficult to pick anything out!... There's an object that appeared during the pandemic, when the whole world was wearing masks: a mask which had on it the written words "I can't breathe". It's not like a monumental image, but an image of everyday life. What it did, though, was to connect the pandemic to the endemic condition of racism, which had been dramatized in the U.S. and abroad by the murder of one African-American individual. African-American men are getting killed by police every day in this country. Why did this one, in the midst of the pandemic, suddenly, go viral and become global? George Floyd's last words, "I can't breathe", were laminated to this mask. This is one kind of image which you might call at the lower end, the everyday life end, and

© Bastian Oldhouse, "426 altior potentia", oil on canvas / transponder, 2018. Email: art@bastian-oldhouse.ch



Andreas Friedrich
Emblemata Nova, 1617
© Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel
<http://diglib.hab.de/inkunabeln/14-astron/start.htm>

that reveals something about this moment. Because it was just two and a half months after the onset of the pandemic — which was in March 2020, this happened in late May —, people were not gathering in crowds, people were isolated, and all of a sudden huge crowds gathered around this image. And the image itself was a time-based image, it was a nine-minute video showing a man being strangled, stifled under the knee of a police officer. Deleuze would have called it a "time-image". In the time-image, as opposed to the motion-images in cinema, there's motion. But what happens when there's no motion? When an image is going on in time but there's nothing to see changing? That George Floyd video became iconic and was, of course, connected to the mask of the surrounding situation, of the plague — that time of *accelerated stasis*, where we couldn't move and suddenly everybody felt like we have to move, something has to change here. There are so many others [images resonating our time] I think of... In my essay I reproduced a

very weird painting by the Swiss painter Bastian Oldhouse[13], showing old Chronus, Father Time, surfing on a clock. He's using the clock face as a surfboard, and he is holding in his hands our planet, he's biting the planet Earth. That's the apocalyptic, monumental vision of the present. But while writing this essay I came across, almost by accident, with a 17th century emblem book, *Emblemata Nova* [1617], by Andreas Friedrich, which is an emblem book about the planet. If we asked what is the difference in our sense of time now, I'd say it's becoming planetary. We feel like the relevant time for societies is not just the nation, not just our country, but the world. We can talk about globalisation, which is a different thing, but I think planetary consciousness is rather different than globalisation — which was "oh, onward and upward, let's develop the planet, let's build and build more and more". The planetary pushes in the opposite direction, suggests "slowdown, re-consider". You can see this everywhere in environmental movements, the sense of time, you know, "slow time down, we're going too fast" or "we're heading toward the precipice". We need to slow down. That's — again — why Cacasenno is not going fast anywhere. He's saying "let's just slow down and think". Neither optimistic or pessimistic. But I'm hopeful. And observing, paying attention.

---

1 W. J. T. Mitchell in "Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of Time", digital Lecture in the context of the "Thinkers Programme", Royal Flemisch Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts, 21 October 2020 – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_Juh7R20eA

2 W. J. T. Mitchell in "Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of Time", digital lecture.

3 W. J. T. Mitchell in "The Future of the Image: Regarding Rancière", conference in the context of MFA Art Criticism and Writing Program, School of Visual Arts, 12 November 2008 - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrxJD_1D1as

4 Published in 1869.

5 See Federico Fastelli, "The 'Argus Complex'. Interview with WJT Mitchell", in LEA – Lingue e Letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente, vol. 8, 2019, 301-311 – DOI: https://doi.org/10.13128/lea-1824-484x-10996

6 *Nope* (2022), directed by Jordan Peele.

7 *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), directed by Robert Wise. The homonymous remake directed by Scott Derrison premiered in 2008.

8 W. J. T. Mitchell, in "What do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images", Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 319.

9 W. J. T. Mitchell in "Present Tense 2020: An iconology of Time", digital lecture.

10 Over 43° Celsius.

11 Betye Saar, "Searching for a Vision of Truth", 2016 (mixed media assemblage).

12 W. J. T. Mitchell in "Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of Time", digital lecture.

13 Bastian Oldhouse, "426 Altior Potentia", 2018 (painting).