Pictorial turn/Iconic turn: verbal, mediatic and perceptual aspects of images

Summary

The pictorial turn, detected in the humanities in the early 1990s, is an increased attention to images, originating from their wide consumption in all spheres of life, caused by media technologies. The everyday meaning of this concept refers to the stream of digital images and the related unfounded belief that the time of written text is being replaced by the epoch of images. However, in a scholarly sense the pictorial turn (and/or iconic turn) does not indicate the turn from language to image, but the extension of the linguistic turn to the sphere of images. It could be qualified as the routine renewal of humanities (art history, philosophy, cultural studies, media studies, literature studies), manifested by the fact that images become objects and tools of research, that is, as a reform analogous to the previous invasion of politicised critical discourses formed in a post-structuralist context. Nonetheless, it also resulted in an interdisciplinary discourse that has been developing for twenty years. Its most noticeable fields are still the English language-based Visual Culture and Visual Studies, originating from the reception of 20th century French philosophy, and at least a few German language-based image sciences (Bildwissenschaften) that question the German tradition of interpretative art history, aesthetics and history of culture.

Interdisciplinary research of images, which interprets and systematizes previous image-related theories, intensified after 2000. In the middle of the last decade its development reached the point of enhanced self-reflection and summing-up of results, and today it applies wide theoretic resources. This resulted in a certain repertory of specific questions, themes, statements and references that recur in research programmes, selected theoretical texts, readers, and in numerous surveys of the discourse. Now it gives us quite a clear image about the visual dimension of culture and its reflection.

The task of this book is to delineate this image, that is, to systematically survey and present the pictorial turn discourse through a progression of...
interpretations of selected texts, to offer a certain example of its order. One of the main goals of this work was to stimulate the needed processes of self-reflection in art history and humanities in Lithuania. One of the incentives to write it is the state of Lithuanian culture which is contradictory and paradoxical towards images.

The technologies of production and diffusion of images, which allowed anyone to become their own producers and everyday consumers, took the Lithuanian society, even less ready and more in need of visual “literacy” than the West, by surprise. The Lithuanian media could rather be classified as iconoclastic and the rare “image wars” testify that the visual symbols are taken seriously. The linguistic turn was only recently discovered in such spheres as public policy, public relations and advertising, which are now enjoying the performative power of language. Political scientists do not treat images as active participants of social interactions and the political scene. Contemporary artists, and not historians, work in the field of video history.

Although the interest in image and visual research (especially written in English), has been growing among the intellectuals, no studies or textbooks on the topic have appeared to this day. The image science is better represented by media studies and semiotics, although traces of the pictorial turn can be found in the philosophy and art history of the last decade. Lithuanian art historians were forced to expand their research object because of the visual heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which clearly did not conform to the modern notion of art, and because of other historical periods that were characterised not by prospering art but by a specific visual culture and policy. The sociologic approach that was entrenched in Lithuanian art history for some time mostly examined the social conditions of the production and diffusion of visual artefacts and avoided choosing the image itself as a point of departure. Nevertheless, the last decade saw a growing interest in their place and functions in the cultural context of a certain period, as well as in the interaction between images and texts.

This book could be used as an introduction to visual research. The “verbal aspects” in its subtitle signify theories, interpretative approaches and scientific disciplines that, according to contemporary conception, constitute an integral part of “visual cultures” and also examine various other aspects of relations between images and words. “Mediatic aspects” point to the mediality and/or materiality, the necessary condition for the
existence of images. "Perceptual aspects" refer to the questions of image perception and impact.

The book consists of nine chapters. In the first chapter the pictorial/iconic turn is presented as a concrete concept, that is, the conceptions of W. J. T. Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm, the theorists who employed it for the first time, are compared. The second chapter has multiple goals. It presents three historical cases heretofore not reflected in Lithuanian scholarship. In all of them images came before words and had to visualise concepts: the modern state in the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, hysteria in Jean-Martin Charcot's *Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, the survival of images (*Nachleben*) in Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. These three different projects of visual theories reveal multiple and specific relations between images and power, violence, fear, body, suffering and memory. They are related by the fact that the image transforms itself from a symbol to a symptom. The three cases also served as a pretext to examine their critical reflection in the works of Horst Bredekamp, Georges Didi-Huberman and other art historians.

The two following chapters are devoted to the most important domains of the pictorial turn. The third chapter deals with the transformation of *Visual Culture* to *Visual Studies* and the fourth chapter analyses the German *Bildwissenschaften* (Klaus Sachs-Hombach's Allgemeine Bildwissenschaft-project, Hans Belting's *Bild-Anthropologie* and the *Kulturen des Bildes*-project that he initiated, as well as the Swiss national research program *Bildkritik*). The three chapters that follow analyse the image questions in philosophy, art history and media studies, that is, the existing context which enabled the pictorial turn. The chapter titled "The Definitions of the Image" presents the main philosophical image theories and the definitions of the concept (Plato's *mimesis*, the semiotic *sign*, the phenomenological *visual object*). It is emphasised that not only the antique but also any definition is not sufficient (the alternative allowing to avoid it would be a pragmatic approach) and that a "common" theory is applicable to only a part of images. The quarrel between semiotics and phenomenologists, dealing with the *icons*' right to exist, is also emphasised. The chapter on art history summarizes the most important methods of the interpretation of a work of art and the crucial questions that are important for the development of art history as a scholarly discipline in general and in Lithuania: the critique of the purely optical in the 1980s in the USA, the issues of the historicity and anachronism of images in the
European art history (by comparing Belting and Didi-Huberman's texts) and the manifestations of the pictorial turn in Lithuanian art history of the 21st century.

The chapter "Media" explores the use and significance of the concept of "visual media", often used in image theories (because, according to Mitchell, purely "visual media" do not exist in reality). To achieve this goal, it analyses the relationship between such concepts as "image" and "media" (or their equivalents) and their functioning in the main media theories (Benjamin, McLuhan, Flusser etc.) as well as the difference between "media" and "visual medium". An important characteristic of media is their self-reflection, self-reference or intermediality. Art history noticed this quality in painting, which, by demonstrating its "opaqueness", also possibly shows a way out from the a priori of media. The issue of a painting's "opaqueness" is presented as the self-reflection and self-critique of the classical Western painting. On the other hand, photography, the mechanical "visual media", purer than the others, is more interesting because of its "transparency", therefore its discourse of "referential realism" is discussed. The theme of visual bodies is continued by an account of historical cases in which the material visual medium acquired a special function and represented a real body, that is, of three-dimensional visual artefacts that revived the theories of "embodiment", the uncanny (das Unheimliche), the survival and of the uncanny fetishist passions directed to the artefact by romantics and surrealists. In the last chapter two aspects of gaze are discussed, that of an observer, cultivated by various gaze techniques and optical media, and that of the world which is looking back, discovered by the French philosophers in the middle of the 20th century.

It is not the goal of this book to glue together the sequence of themes and issues of the landscape of the pictorial turn in order to obtain some "general" visual theory. Most theorists agree that this discourse is heterogenic and made up of basic theories (that provide common knowledge on what is an image and how to understand it), visual theories crafted in different scholarly disciplines (devoted to certain kinds of images) and histories of groups of images (mostly the precursors of the new media images) and, probably the most important part, interpretation of separate images. From the very beginning, the theorists of the pictorial turn understood that a science similar to general linguistics, that would systematically analyse the common features and functions of all the images that humankind produces and consumes, is impossible because of their variety.
There are two basic statements or working hypotheses of the pictorial turn discourse – the “ontological” (the belief in the image) and the “epistemological”. The first one states that in the consciousness of the consumers the image exceeds the status of a sign or its medium and acquires a different one, that of another subject or bodily presence. The image consuming practices are not limited to the search of meaning; the image is something between the signs and the reality, in the domains of perception, existence, interpersonal relations and social interactions. According to the second statement, the image can have a specific epistemological value and be an indispensable approach or method to analyse various phenomena. It not only transfers, but also forms knowledge, a different one and in a different way than words, so it can expand the notion of reality and disclose the areas that are hardly reachable by verbal language.

In the development of interdisciplinary science of images, the question of the epistemological value of an image is ever more often identified with the functioning of the image and with the recognition of this functioning through image’s relation with written texts. The methodologically unproductive attitude that images cannot be translated to words is replaced by a close mutual interaction of images and words, the object and the method of research and probably the best way to encourage visual “literacy” as well. Instead of attributing external meanings to images (for example, transforming them into political adversaries), it was started to analyse more thoroughly how various meanings are attributed to them, why images are included in meaningful discourses and also with what kind of texts they are “stuffed” in advance. The functional model of scientific or technical image – the image as visualisation of concepts – is partially applicable to numerous other images. The approach of “horizontal” relations between images and words is useful in analysing, for example, contemporary art, which is not only totally permeated by texts but also surrounded by them so that its observer is forced to be an avid reader as well. Nonetheless, this model of image recognition is not appropriate in cases where the image shows something that is not unequivocally defined or contradictory, something that cannot be recognized as a fact of reality or a conceptual dimension, something that rather just causes a good or a bad feeling. It is then logical that the truth of the image is to be searched not beyond it – it is shown in its surface and it has to be seen, but to see means to “read” after enduring its optical effect. Scholars can describe this experience of encountering the image in an ad hoc invented language, only then they
have to know who they are – purely individual interpreters or the ones who try to represent other spectators in some way.

The image as an epistemological instrument is probably most suited to analyse the images themselves – its cognitive value is best testified by its self-reflection or self-critique, that is the ability to be a meta-instance. Attempts to prove the specific cognitive value of images that surpass the possibilities offered by the language of words led to almost opposite results: the understanding itself of the image was put into question, the uncertainty in its presence was justified or at least the value of the initial uncertainty was perceived – it is the incentive to look for time in the image, the condition of writing its history.

The belief in images, the recognition of their existential value or their move from the dimension of sign to the sphere of life, the metaphorical status change from object to subject are expressed in contemporary theories by such concepts as the surplus value of image, animation, iconic energy, metapicture, participation in social interactions, showing (instead of seeing), and others. The images are turned live by their consumers in the first place, but their imagination is not the only source of this pretended life. The effigy, a sort of image that encompasses paintings and amateur photos, is granted a full life also by their referent. The paradigm of representation or representing the object through signs, which was enforced both by Christian theology and rational Western thought, has never been fully separated from the previous conception of the magical presence in the image, the belief that the effigy possesses some characteristics of the object and is causally related to it. However, it is also impossible to clearly separate the effigy from the supposedly opposite visual model described in such historical categories as idol, “fantastic” mimesis, accretion of reality or simulacrum. The images of art or new media that do not have a clear referent or do not want to have a lesser status than it, seem to be living their own life because they survive, repeat themselves unexpectedly, haunt their producers, “remember” their mediatic paradigms or even unknown traumatic events of the past. The life of images was also supported by the aesthetics of the late 19th – early 20th centuries, but in the contemporary theories the image is rather not alive in the sense of the Bergsonian vitalism but in the sense of Warburg's Nachleben, related to the cultural memory.

The “rhizomic” time of culture allows the images (forms, types, motives and visual structures) to become alive unexpectedly while visual artefacts
(intended for cult or entertainment) were being animated by various methods in order to make them appear more powerful in the consciousness of the consumers. Modern Western culture cleverly exploited the fact that something lifeless brought to life is much more alive and powerful than the one who lives, in the same way as an artificial monster is more dreadful than any natural monstrous being. The images of optical media, apparently, simply had to create an impression of movement and the naturally “alive” images of camera obscura were overshadowed by an artificial life, which bore the “machine of passions”, an entertainment industry with streams of products that it needed and that offered the possibility of reproduction and survival to all kinds of images. Nevertheless, spectators are able to revive even frozen and static images. Usually we see something in them that, strictly speaking, is not there (because in such case all paintings would be more similar between themselves than any one of them to some other object of reality). The theorists still cannot well explain how the image can be here and not here in the same time, how looking at lines and colours we manage to see something that does not exist there. The agreement has only more or less been reached that the image is something that “exists” (also in the sense of stereoscopic vision or an optical hallucination) between the visual artefact and the viewer, a live other of the viewer, enduring the gaze and often affecting or even ordering to act. The images are also alive because they surprise the viewer, what is more, they “reveal” themselves, because their producers, no matter who they are, painters or the staff of image production machines, only allow the potential of a possibility of a vision.

Survival is not only the object of contemporary visual studies but also the method and the characteristic of the theories. Ideas and conceptions of the past survive and suddenly become alive in the pictorial turn discourse, but it has no one-directed gaze or reliably controlled production of images. The aesthetic distance is forgotten and one speaks about the effect of images, their effectiveness, activity and participation in the private and public life of people. Questions of images here turn into questions of life and death.