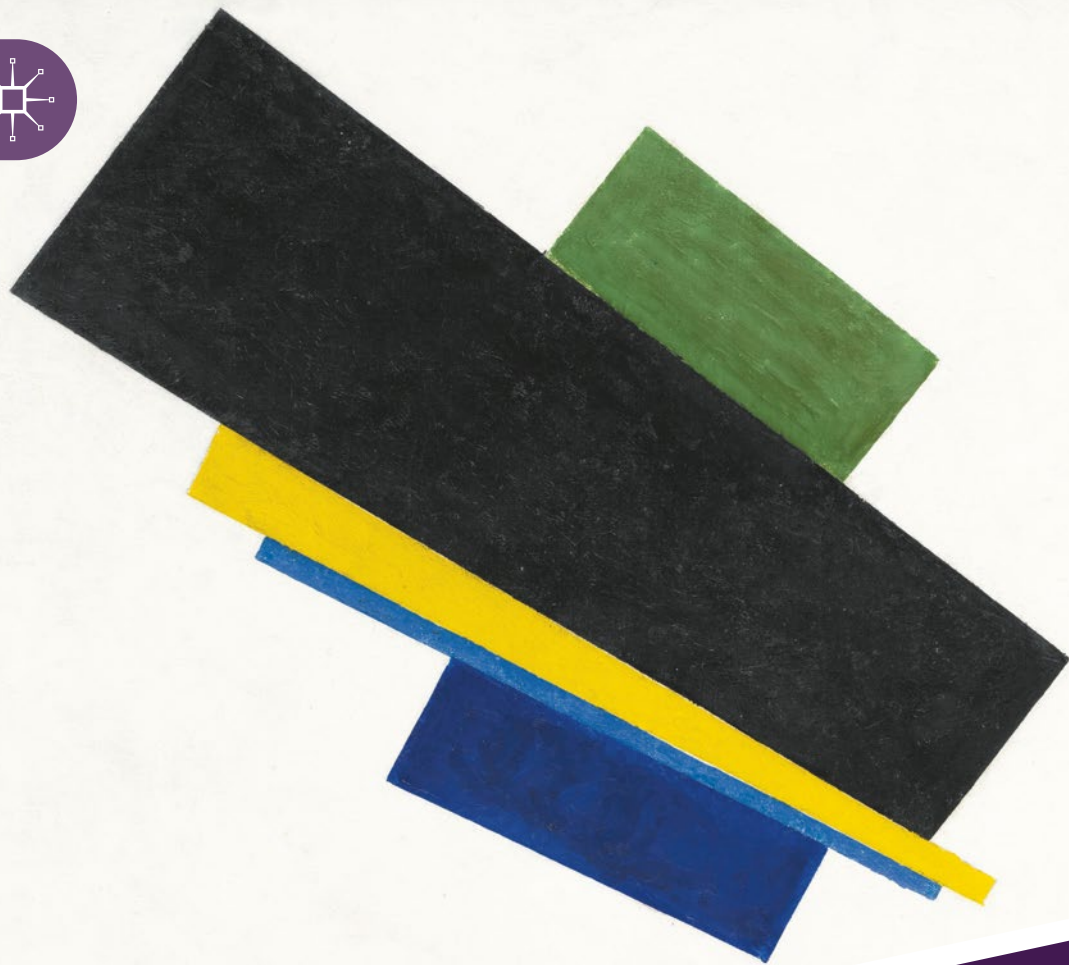




The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies

Edited by
Krešimir Purgar

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The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies

“Krešimir Purgar has assembled a striking collection of essays on Image Studies. I have not been able to stop reading them. They cover a huge range and represent intelligent and well informed opinions containing important topics of interest to all its students. Anyone interested in this relatively recent field of study will find access to some of its essential methods and theories.”

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Krešimir Purgar
Editor

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Introduction: Between the Creation and Disintegration of Images

Krešimir Purgar

Our world is every day more and more permeated with different kinds of images: from the simple and often trivial visualizations present on social networks to complex visual constructions available throughout the realm of the digital universe. While many contemporary visualizations cannot even be considered images any longer, we still don't know what images are and how we should respond to them: should we fear them or embrace them with confidence? This volume wishes to bring together the most current and the most hotly debated topics in studies about images today and to become a reference point for future editorial projects of this kind.

Until recently, art history has been considered a master-discipline for all things visual, from highly esteemed works by the Old Masters to the fugitive productions of popular culture. But after cultural studies were established during the 1970s, their visual “complements”—visual studies or *Bildwissenschaft*—became the next big thing within the humanities. This is probably the first time in history that the practice of image-making has almost instantaneously required its theory proper. The practice itself can no longer be understood without immediate theoretical reflection of that very practice, thus creating a sort of user counter-narrative. On the disciplinary borders of semiotics, art history and phenomenology, a new inter- or trans-discipline has been born that approaches images without any ideological, subjectivist or essentialist agenda of its own. But this only makes things for image studies more complicated: the objects of study are at the same time technologically advanced and philosophically relevant, widely available and culturally important, visually stunning and

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theoretically intricate. No single discipline pertaining to the traditional nomenclature of post-structuralism (let alone those that strictly claimed the field of pictoriality) is capable of grasping the contradictions of the technical, artistic and political aspects of contemporary visual culture. This interdisciplinary book wishes to fill the evermore visible gap.

Although image studies—as a discipline specifically dedicated to the analysis of images and their functions—is a relatively new phenomenon within the humanities, its firm institutional foundations being not much older than a couple of decades, the incontestable fact remains that people’s interest in pictures is very much older than that. The first organized attempt to understand the world of visual representations was made by art history more than two centuries ago, while individual attempts to understand pictures, their ontological role and communicative function go back to antiquity. Therefore, even though image studies does not strictly follow the methodology of historical sciences, it certainly puts relevant phenomena in a diachronic perspective, as will this handbook. The concept of this book wishes to stress the faculty of images to produce meaning for us *now*, as a multifaceted kind of knowledge influenced by the terms of *production*, the terms of *perception* and the terms of *theorization*—which speaks for images’ *heterochrony*. “Image heterochrony” therefore reflects the changes that occur within image types (or “species”, as contemporary biopolitics of images most often refers to them) and are most easily detected by noticing alterations over time in style, media basis and usage of images. In the same way, the capacity of images always to produce new meanings over time speaks for their *anachronism*. “Anachronism” in the context of image theory draws our attention to the fact that the modern observer does not have to and most often does not want to interpret images in their diachronic development, but interprets them in a kind of radical synchronicity, as if *all* existing images were created for an ever new present.

The most important ensuing consequences that this book brings to the fore are therefore threefold: first, that a possible understanding of images lies in the deconstruction of this paradoxical shifting ontology; second, that images cannot be defined as such, that is, as entities extrapolated from the complex entanglement of materiality, temporality and perception; third, and probably most important insight for the future assignments of image (and visual) studies is that images are neither a reflection nor a product of any kind of “natural consciousness” or metaphysics. They are the outcome of technologies of production and human perception, both of which are historically created and anachronistically used.

The title of this introduction is also the program outline for image studies, which in any real sense has been constituted only at the moment when the objects of its investigation—images—are paradoxically less and less present and are increasingly giving way to technically produced visual phenomena that are no longer images. This insight will at the same time help us to demarcate more precisely several key meta-theoretical concepts that are important for the understanding of the themes covered in this book, their breadth and their kind.

After the definitive swerve of the discipline of art history in the direction of the Hollywood star system, in which the notion of authorship became privileged over the value of the social circulation of works of art, at the border of the extremes marked with the nomenclature of art history on the one hand and by the techno-imagination on the other hand, an interest in pictures and visual phenomena developed that reflected their importance in all areas of life: visual culture, visual studies, image science and image studies. The attentive reader will find in this book a multitude of well-grounded approaches that clearly indicate the divergences and interweavings of these approaches in the domain of images and visual communications. Precisely because this book has, for entirely good reasons, taken on one name—image studies—not as a sort of new master-discipline for the whole area of visibility but because of the need for a clearer definition of the actual concept of the image, in this place nevertheless it is worthwhile explaining by way of preliminary the divergences and intersections of these disciplines.

The concepts of image/picture and visibility are not interchangeable, although they are often used as synonyms. If we follow the interpretation of the American theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, the term *image* denotes mental or all other visual representations that have acquired cultural legitimacy throughout history. Image may be constituted both from imagination and from physical creation. On the other hand, a picture signifies materiality; it is usually the physical witness we invoke when we are interested in the archeology of human knowledge and history. Thus, although the difference in the use of the terms image and picture primarily refers to the specific circumstances in which we operate with them, image is a broader term as it does not presuppose the physical materiality of the object. This will prove to be its key feature in modern times when we often confuse images with other, artificially produced visual phenomena that are no longer images. Although an image can be both a mental representation and a physical object as well as a depiction on a screen, its basic feature is that it *differs* from reality. In other words, an image establishes a visible cut or discontinuity vis-à-vis the observer's visual field.

When we are talking about the image/picture, irrespective of what is seen or identified in it, the observer knows that he or she is looking at a certain pictorial phenomena, for if they thought they were looking at a real thing and not a representation of it, then in a technical sense this would not be a picture but a sheer physical object in the domain of visual reality. For example, when we see a tree, we see just one physical thing with the aid of our visual perception. When we see a tree in a photograph or on a screen, we see and imagine that we are seeing in a simultaneous process—as Kendall Walton once put it—two physical things: first, we see the photograph, that is, the object that prompts the linking of the visual perception of a symbolic tree with a tree as a physical thing, and then we imagine that we see a physical thing that is not just this thing but its media substitute—a photograph or a depiction on a screen.

Pictures naturally do not always stand in for absent objects. For example, the pictures of abstract art are not a perceptual replacement for what we see outside