

Wolfram Pichler und Ralph Ubl, *Bildtheorie zur Einführung*, Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2014, 237 pages, € 15.90, ISBN 978-3-88506-074-1

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Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl's book belongs to the *Zur Einführung* series, created in 1977 to guide readers through fields with which they are not yet familiar – in this case, “Bildtheorie,” a term coined in the mid-1990s, notably after Gottfried Boehm's proclamation of an *iconic turn*, in dialogue with William J. T. Mitchell, Hans Belting, and Horst Bredekamp, and now established enough to define academic programs in various universities. But what is particular in Pichler and Ubl's book is the way they respect a principle of the *Zur Einführung* series: they have a *Standpunkt*, a point of view, according to which they organize the discourse. This distinguishes their book from the numerous anthologies and panoramas published on the issue (e.g., to name just one, published at the very same time: *Bild. Ein Interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, ed. by Stefan Günzel and Dieter Mersch, Stuttgart/Weimer 2014). Paradoxically, this highly personal approach is the work of two searchers, the result of common discussions, even if Wolfram Pichler wrote the first part and Ralph Ubl the second. A foreword, signed by the two authors, establishes immediately the link between the two parts.

The approach chosen is conceptual – the authors are faithful to Lambert Wiesing's distinction between *Kunstwissenschaft*, dealing with precise objects, and *Kunsttheorie*, answering one question: “What is an image?” No induction, but deduction, from postulates. No case study, as in the analytic tradition, no privilege for the counterfactual situation: inscribed in the continental philosophical tradition, a confidence in the capacity to deal with an object by defining its properties. This is what is here a “theory”: a capacity given to the discourse to create a model of the object, here the image, thanks to the exigency of consistency – every notion must be both defined and related to those previously used.

Two major ones, then, will articulate the two parts of the book, given in an economic way by the short titles, which serve not only as titles but, even more, as directions: “Vom Wiedererkennen in Bildern” and “Über Bildformatierungen.” The two notions are new, at least in the way they are used. *Wiedererkennen* is here the fundamental feature according to which, as children would have told the authors, an image is something in which something else is to be seen; Gottfried Boehm gives this notion theoretical legitimacy when speaking about “anders sehen” (seeing another way). Hence the placing of the notion of recognition at the very core of the definition of the image. But the question of ontology becomes very quickly a question of process: how this recognition happens. Hence the reference to a couple of notions that are fundamental here: *Bildvehikel* (henceforth, BV) and *Bildobjekt* (BO). The first notion refers to the use of the English term “vehicle” in Meyer Schapiro's famous “Field and Vehicle” paper. The choice of the term, which is used throughout the text, is legitimized by a series of comparisons to different possibilities: *Bildträger* is disqualified as hinting too much at the materiality of the support; the same goes for *Substrat*, *Bildobjekt*, *Bildgegenstand*, and *Bildinhalt* are similarly subjected to comparison. The choice of the term “vehicle” is based on the abstract quality of the word object, and also on the fact that it does not refer to a symbolic value.

Various types of relationships are defined between BO and BV, on three major levels. The first is the *Koppelungsweise*, the mode of coupling: the BO can be anchored (*verankert*) in the BV, as in the painting, when there is no deformation, or as in the anamorphosis; or, in the case of a moving vehicle, as on a screen, the coupling is nomadic. The second level concerns the dimensions. Here we encounter the notion of space, *Raum*, both inside and outside the representation – hence the reference to David Summers' notion of “real spaces.” The third concerns the conditions of observation (*Beobachtung*). The main issue is the conditions of vision, the various devices of vision, but also, and maybe

even more important, the central issue associated with Richard Wollheim: “twofoldness.” When we see an image, can we or can we not simultaneously see the BO and the BV? Here we are invited to consider the recurrent example of the horseman in the cloud of Andrea Mantegna’s *Saint Sebastian* at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, since this BO in a BO is supposed to serve as a good case study for the various interplays the authors want to articulate, such as the distinction between BO and *Bildgegenstand*, which is close to “motif.” Dealing with the characteristics of knowledge (Chapter 5) is a way to show the articulation between what is there and what is not really there, offering a rather neutral way of dealing with Aby Warburg’s moving cry: “Du lebst und thust mir nichts.” Here the relationship to the image is not only a link but also a distance: the term “negation” (about which Wolfram Pichler has already written an addition to the handbook) is there to stress the fact that there is a constant transformation of something in its contrary, the BV in the BO and vice versa. To know the image is not something fixed, but a process.

A third major notion is added later (Chapter 6): the referent. It may just confirm what we experienced when hearing of BV and BO: that the conceptualization proposed by the authors is not that far removed from a linguistic and semiotic scheme articulating a signifier, a signified, and a referent. Curiously, there is no explicit comparison between the triangle defined by BV, BO, and referent, and the classic triangle defined by signifier, signifiant, and referent. This is a pity, since it does not permit us to situate the particular use of the triangle with the necessary precision. Fortunately, some terms can give us an idea of what is intended: for example, “patron,” both as “pattern” and as “boss.” In this way, the conception of the referent developed here includes a dimension of power. It is, then, no surprise that the “portrait of the king,” as a paradigm of the image and with which Louis Marin has familiarized us, is present here. This idea of model is also conceived of in a way that takes account of the temporal dimension, which leaves the

possibility of a play on the temporality of the image, but also on its anachrony.

This leads to the question of the determinacy (*Bestimmung*) of the image (Chapter 7), and in fact to the relationship to the concept, since in Western culture the image can easily be opposed, as in Hans Jonas’ theory, for example, to the concept, as being indefinite. The relationship between image and concept is especially a question of semantic extension, the image having the tendency to be on the side of the particular. Which, then, is central to the type of relationship that is created: the theory of the label (*Etikett*) in Nelson Goodman’s thought, or the notion of the *Exemplar* developed here? In Chapter 8, the authors propose a complex model of relationship between the representation and the referent, but also between representations: the recognition works from the referent to the BO, but also from one BO to another one, and from a BO to a referent, as in police photos. This means that reality cannot be the only model, and begs the question of fictionality. Here, Kendall Walton’s conception of the work as “make-believe” is used to define, by opposition, a way of dealing with the BV, even in this context where it could be considered as having disappeared (even in a negative way, as “parasites” of the BV).

In this context, the central notion for the definition of the image, resemblance, is only second to recognition. This notion is considered here as the basis of all forms of animation of the image, the big issue of the day, particularly in Germany around Horst Bredekamp’s work. It is approached here with a logic that will be used in other fields: negativity. This means that everything is based on a lack (*Mangel*), the major example being the relief mentioned by Plato in the *Banquet*, which permits us to associate all of the cases in which the *Abbildungsrelevanz* (which may be translated as “the pertinence of representation”) is problematic. Then the authors meet the usual question according to which this pertinence is linked either to the object or to the beholder: the question of the man of the “sehendes Sehen,” to use Max Imdahl’s phrase, a

way of looking that includes its own consciousness of doing so.

This pertinence of representation also meets the question of the referent (Chapter 13). The main issue here is the presence or absence of specific features (the opposition Hans-Georg Gadamer makes between *verweisen* and *verweilen*), which means that a temporal process is involved. Recognition is linked to a system of conventions (here, the authors accept Ernst Gombrich's conventionalism), but the authors must also take into account the various motifs used earlier and, even more importantly, the question of *Raum* – of space – must also be part of the game. From this point of view, a variety of links can be defined, such as inverse recognition (when I know Mrs. Obama first from photographs, well before a hypothetical meeting with her). More generally speaking, the issue is the reference to models (*Mustern*), which lead the identification and are at the origin of iconography as an approach. But how does this work in the case of natural images, such as the images in the mirror and the images we have of our own body, which Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage" has taught us to deal with? When it comes to summing things up (Chapter 21), the main issue appears to be the notion of distance: between BV and BO, and more generally with *Bildinhalt*, the content of the image, in the general frame of aesthetics of reception.

The second part of the book may be less surprising for an art historian, with the exception of the widest notion, *Bildformatierung*, since it is quickly apparent that it does not correspond to what the notion of format would traditionally describe: it is far more the process of giving form to the image, with a big stress on a topological approach to the work, which cannot be a surprise to any reader aware of both authors' interest in this approach. Hence the study of format, but also of planeity (Chapter 3), unity (Chapter 4), the character of palimpsest (Chapter 5), orientation (Chapter 6), location of motifs in the field of the image, space, and perspective (Chapters 9–11), which are all contributions to the BV, making the *Bild* a *Gebilde*, both

a process and its result, always in relationship to a supposed beholder, questioning what is here the most important notion: the field (*Feld*), where the various levels of BV, including the material *Substrat*, and the BO, with the *Bildgegenstände* and the *Bildinhalt*, meet to deal with the referent.

Defined in such a way, the character of an image – the *Bildlichkeit des Bildes* – appears to get new features, thanks to the choice of an approach privileging consistency and clarity, in which notions are always associated with clear examples. It is definitely a great step forward in the analysis of images. But the risks taken to achieve this task are numerous, and a series of problems appear that I would like to address, as an homage to the depth of thought displayed in the book.

First, the centrality of the notion of otherness (*etwas anderes*): the image is something in which you see something else. This means that, in the description of a process of seeing, one takes as first, as primary in a logical sense, as primordial in a rhetorical one, the grasping of the gap between something and "something else." The efficiency of this way of dealing with the image is to instaurate the taking into account of the BV before anything else as well as a path to the BO. But this must be considered a certain type of relationship to the image, not the only one. It may correspond to dealing with the "image of": a man, a train, and so forth. But can we say that the properties of the BV are then taken into account? And, even if that is not the case, that a gap, a difference between the image and the referent, is experienced, at least immediately? It might be afterwards that such a discrepancy is felt. This has two consequences: first, we have to include in the description of our relationship to image the temporality of the process, which may or may not lead to that sort of taking into account of the difference. Second, we have to question ourselves concerning what might be a bias linked to our position as scholars: looking for a description of what really is. In my opinion, that creates a new field for Werner Heisenberg's principle: defining the image disrupts the apprehension of the image. Such, here, as

the BV: but we have, in my opinion, a fundamental phenomenon I call “neutralization,” the fact that certain features of a work are, because of habits, conventions, habitus, and the like, deprived of meaning (the limits of the upper surface of a pedestal of a statue, say, are not supposed to determine a zone in which the figure is imprisoned). It may be the same for the bidimensional representations that are mostly used here. Feeling the otherness might be, on the contrary, considered the definition of a representation that is not an image (a work of art, for example), the image being the representation in which the characteristic of the medium has no importance (a representation of the Palazzo Vecchio, thanks to photography, tapestry, wood carving, and so forth, is an image of it). We may say it is just a question of definition, but the existence of a use opposite to the one defined here must at least be discussed, since it leads to, say, a version of mastery of an object, the image, which might take the place of what is, at the very least, difficult to define. And this is why the absence of discussion here, as part of the theory of the image, the textual image, and especially the metaphor, might be a lack: not to reconstitute, as William J. T. Mitchell has done, a scheme of circulation from one type of image to another, but to deal with the fact that all these types of images are ways to attain something that cannot be dealt with directly.

The difference between the image as defined here and what we think about can be summed up by the distinction between “image of” and “image.” Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl have accomplished an important task in building a consistent series of notions around the “image of,” defining and measuring the relations between the three main terms: BO, BV and referent. But a “theory of the image” may also have to deal with the fact that the image can be without object as such; that it imposes itself without referent. The authors have not dealt with what is nowadays called the “mental image” (for centuries, *fantasma* and *idea*): what one sees in his/her own head. It would not have been necessary to stress the fact that these notions may

not correspond to an actual image; but it matters here because there is, at the very heart of the problem of the image, a question of “comprehension,” of the variety of meanings. And dealing with the Lockean or Humean “idea” might be a way to understand how the intentional object the authors call “image” may have to do with what is not an object, which might also be intentional (e.g., the use of a mental image for a project) and might not (e.g., when something imposes itself in the mind). It might be a way to better understand certain features of the image, as something having to do with the tension between the image as built – the pun associating *Bild* and *bauen* (13) – and the image as offered, as appearing without origin.

Even if we stay within the aim of the book, the definition of image as “image of,” another point must be stressed: the question of unity. Ralph Ubl is absolutely right, in my opinion, to stress the fact that people have to deal with an *image* (“ein Bild”), but also with *an* image (“ein Bild,” 154), emphasizing the issue of unity. Then, referring to *Gegenstand* might be a way to deal with some sort of an equivalent of “motif,” or the smallest identifiable unity of identification; whereas the *Bildinhalt* creates a link to a whole reflection about meaning. The BO, then, can be situated between the two. But it might be interesting to deal with what can be associated with the two extreme forms of the BO, since it permits us to see the limits of such a definition of it. But this cannot be done without questioning the use of the portrait as a paradigm of the image. Of course, it corresponds to the importance given to recognition; but it has heavy consequences. It means that a major feature of the image, the plurality of characteristics (motifs, plays on formal features such as color or lines), is secondary, whereas this question of the multiplicity of motifs immediately creates new problems, such as the problem of attention: why focus on this or that motif? And even in the case of an isolated motif, there is always the dimension of what cannot be reduced to a relation in terms of identification, called *punctum* in Roland Barthes’ thought.

Second, it might be healthy to stress the fact that there is a shift from the dominant model of, in Peircean terms, symbol or icon to index. According to this principle, images are mostly tracks from the BV, tracks of something that was there earlier, as in photography, which then becomes a paradigm; the big issue, in fact, is the issue of the implicit paradigm that informs the discourse. Georges Didi-Huberman's work, in this perspective, cannot be underestimated as a model, since he stresses this type of relationship even more than the obvious major figure behind the work here, Gottfried Boehm, does. This corresponds to a whole trend in rhetoric in which the 20th century was about the art of metonymy instead of metaphor, the latter considered to be linked to metaphysics, the principle of hierarchy between mind and body, and all sorts of transcendence that many people no longer wanted to hear about after the slaughters of the World Wars; the principle was broadened even further in the context of globalization, where everything associated with the idea of metaphysics is considered narrowly Western. The next step is the present "material turn." Like all shifts in a discipline, it has the advantage of bringing new features to the game: first of all, questioning the condemnable oblivion of the material dimension of the work and the interaction that can be defined here thanks to the plays between the BV and the BO. But it brings with it a certain "poetics," if I can use the term not only to designate a way of creating effects, here visual effects, but also to refer to the various senses. It may be important to stress this dimension of what is privileged here: that we have to deal with the fact that a given feature of the BV – say, the play of light created by the use of glaze, or simply movement in moving images – can be used or not used, and, even more, stressed or not stressed.

This means, in my opinion, that the big step forward made by the authors, thanks to their basic definition, might have been even more heuristically efficient if they had taken into account the question of the modality of the production of effect; if, instead of speaking about "anders sehen,"

to recognize something else, they had added, "to offer the possibility of recognizing something else." The big issue here is the fact that the phenomenological model, which is behind what is said here, has its advantages and its limits. There is, in the *epoche*, the possibility to aim, through description, at the diverse aspects of the object – the BO, thanks to the study of the BV, is what stays under the eyes. But the problem is that this does not take into account the interplay of values held by the author and the beholder, which gives neither meaning nor visibility to a given feature. Here I want to stress in "visibility" not so much the etymon as the suffix: "-ibility" refers to modalization, to a modalized relationship to the work, here on the register of potentiality, but there are others: virtuality, or various plays on temporality.

Another consequence of the use of the portrait as a paradigm of the image is that the articulation between the motif (as the aim of a process of identification) and that on which it is singularized (traditionally called the ground) is not developed. Yet there are so many ways to deal with this opposition that it would be interesting to know how the authors deal with it. This is partially covered in the second part, but the book could have dealt with the notion of ground not only in its topographical meaning, but also its causal one: what is behind, what stays, what imposes an obviousness of presence before and beyond any causality, what makes the "evidence" of the image. The tension between causal and visual meanings of the word is the same in English, German, and French, and also corresponds to a modal logic of "availability," which is the most common way to deal with an image (*Verfügbarkeit*): the image waiting for the gaze.

This brings us back to the big issue of all this for an art historian: What does this book, written by two art historians, have to do with art history? We may say that it is no longer the issue, since the authors place themselves in the new field of *Bildwissenschaft*, which may or may not be translated as "visual studies"; but there remains a question of the limits between the work of art and the im-

age. Because it stresses the *BV* so much, the definition of *Bild* given here makes the opposite definition of “image” – a representation the materiality of which does not count, the feature opposing it to the work of art – disappear. So what is at stake here is the fact that there is no remaining criteria to make the difference, especially if the image – say, a painting – is not only an “image of,” as a work is not only a “painting of,” but a painting and an image. Which means that the resistance to definition is part of the game. Wolfram Pichler and Ralph

Ubl’s definition – or definitions – might then be failures from the start. But thanks to them it is a collective failure, and a community is introduced (*eingeführt*) to what is more than images of the image: words about the image and practices of a theory of images. This brings up the sensitive fact that, as in every theoretical discourse, it is never clear whether the theory is descriptive or prescriptive; but surely it is prospective, and enduring.

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