

REVIEW

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## What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images

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**W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, 380 pp.**

The recent issue of W. J. T. Mitchell's reference volume *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* in this excellent Spanish translation by Isabel Mellén as *¿Qué quieren las imágenes? Una crítica de la cultura visual*, provokes one to revisit the author's hypotheses put forth in 2005. What does it mean to have this book translated into Spanish, now? Its theoretical implications (and explications) might gain some renewed momentum, geographically, if not politically, given that Spanish is the second most widely spoken language in the world, after Chinese. Moreover, the sense of perspective gained (one can only hope) during the past 10+ years, should give one pause, as indeed, a great deal has come to pass. If the original subtitle plunged the reader into a world of base materiality, heightened physicality, and unrelenting desire where 'high-culture' and the vernacular were destined to meet, the translation now hints, perhaps unintentionally, to a more insular debate over the once-contested field of visual cultural studies.

Such temporal twists and turns come to characterize the present translation, as the essays that make up Mitchell's book responded then to momentous visual-cultural events such as 9/11 and the cloning of Dolly the sheep. Yet how far we have come! Certainly, Mitchell couldn't have predicted, back in 2005, the exponential growth of the Internet (of both images and things, or *objects* to use his term), even when he wrote of image "reproduction" in the guise of a media biologist, an Anthropocenean naturalist *avant la lettre*. He couldn't have foreseen the steeply ascending curve of daily picture uploads, the rapid fire of social media, a DNA of memes, and that ultimate beast of desire: the *feed*. I post, therefore I am. How could he have imagined the worldwide dispersal of smart phones, drone warfare, big data, augmented reality, face-recognition software (in a world of selfies, whose image will live on?), advanced gaming visualization techniques, 3D pornography... the total submission of the viewer to her senses, the labyrinthine wonders of a Wunderkammer made for and within the digital realm. Boundaries have shifted, territories have changed –Mitchell's Western bias in both examples and theoretical structure feels like an even greater miss. Yet the premise stands since life is found, even here.

Mitchell speaks of desire with desire, contemplating pictures incarnated or imaged (as images) and in their intermediary states, yet all distinctions seem to dissolve in our overbearingly digital space. I think of the photographic, and the shrinking footprint of analogue culture swept under a rising sea of screens. Ripples, reverberations, afterlives. Was anything ever fixed? Translations are known to add to the 'original', often altering its meaning significantly. Translator's note: in Spanish, the word 'image' means both *image* and *picture*, collapsing the two terms. Henceforth the word *picture* is preserved in the original language, English. An image, Mitchell writes, is "any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other". Left intentionally vague. An image requires memory, I would add. It is something particular to images, internal one might say, but it needs context in order to be seen, and to live. Otherwise it gets lost, stays hidden, is kept secret. So, what do images want? Not to be forgotten. Attention please.

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