Pictorial turn and Linguistic turn

Karlheinz Lüdeking

Abstract: When W. J. T. Mitchell published his seminal essay "The Pictorial Turn" in 1992, he was explicitly alluding to Richard Rorty's famous anthology *The Linguistic Turn*, which appeared exactly a quarter century before: in 1967. He thereby suggested that these two "turns" are of the same kind. This suggestion is quite wrong and leads to a severe misunderstanding of new approaches emerging now in the humanities under names such as "visual studies" or (in Swedish) "bildvetenskap."

It is quite an amazing fact that all sorts of "turns" have been turning up around the recent turn of the century that, simultaneously, was also a turn of the millennium. In 1998, for instance, a book of essays by Fredric Jameson was published under the title *The Cultural Turn*, adopting an expression that had gained a certain currency in postmodern discourse where it indicates a heightened interest in the influence of cultural contexts on all sorts of human activities from sex to science. In several branches of the humanities there has also been a rumor of a so-called "spatial turn," an allegedly new way of thinking that relies on categories like "site", "zone" and "enclosure", claiming to replace the outworn temporal paradigms of evolution and revolution. In Germany, and fortunately only in Germany, there has been a big fuss about a freshly invented "performative turn". But the most popular "turn" of all is undoubtedly the "pictorial turn". In Scandinavia, too, such a *pictorial turn* has recently been called for, not only in art history but also in several other disciplines, from anthropology to law, and, consequently, fashionable approaches are gaining ground now in all fields of the humanities under such names as "visual studies".

The inflationary talk of all those "turns" initially creates the impression that all those new alignments of thinking vary only in their respective goals. In each case, a theoretical re-orientation is recommended, just that in one case it is aimed in this direction and in the next case in the other. And since all of these reversals and revulsions are proclaimed under the same fashionable label of a "turn", there are reasons to suspect that the re-organizations of the various disciplines described in this way are likewise only symptoms of fashion. These days, it seems, even academic disciplines have to launch new collections from season to season.

The talk about "turns" was first put into circulation by the Austrian philosopher Gustav Bergmann. While still a student, Bergmann became the youngest member of the Vienna Circle, led by Moritz Schlick. Later, in 1938, he emigrated to the USA and taught for forty years at the University of Iowa. In a short article from 1953, in which he sought to characterize the philosophical school

of Logical Positivism (as well as in other texts from this period), he described those who felt themselves to be members of this school as followers of the "linguistic turn" that was – Bergmann asserted – brought about primarily by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. (In coining this expression Bergmann was, of course, inspired by Schlick's 1930 essay "Die Wende der Philosophie", an English translation of which was later, in 1959, published under the title "The Turning Point in Philosophy".)

In 1967, fourteen years after its first publication, Bergmann's paper was, together with more than thirty other texts, reprinted in a collection of essays edited by a then thirty-six-year-old assistant professor of philosophy at Princeton University. His name was Richard Rorty, and the title he gave to his anthology was "The Linguistic Turn". Anyone coming across this book would immediately have realized that its dust jacket showed a quite remarkable design that was obviously influenced by an aesthetic fashionable with the hippies. It was, to be sure, 1967, the *Summer of Love*, but then again the essays that Rorty had collected were actually a little too dry for that sort of packaging. Nevertheless, one may infer that the *linguistic turn* was, in its time, seen as something pretty groovy. Thus, one might also have read the title of the book as an echo of the title of a long-playing record that had been released two years earlier by *The Byrds*, a then popular band from California: *Turn! Turn! Turn!* In any case, however, a resonance was certainly intended with the famous slogan "Turn on, tune in, drop out!".

Quite appropriate to the progressive presentation of the book, its title "The Linguistic Turn", which, as Rorty has explicitly acknowledged in a later book, he had not invented himself, but taken over from Bergmann, was meant to signify nothing less than a philosophical "revolution". Rorty states this at the very beginning of his introduction with the following words: "The purpose of the present volume is to provide materials for reflection on the most recent philosophical revolution, that of linguistic philosophy. I shall mean by 'linguistic philosophy' the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use."

Irrespective of which of these two variants one might choose, though, the *linguistic turn* in any case amounts to the conviction that philosophical problems are to be solved by an analysis of language. Whether this conviction was well-founded need not be assessed here. For the sake of the argument it is sufficient to note

that the *linguistic turn* was not a turn towards new problems that had to be investigated. To the contrary, it rather was a new way of dealing with old problems: the same old problems and actually, so to speak, the eternal problems of philosophy, with which it had struggled right from the start.

Rorty himself refers to this continuity in his 1979 book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where, on page 263, he comments upon the familiar model of the history of philosophy, according to which there have been three different epochs: From antiquity to the baroque, it was believed that one could deal directly with the things that exist, and philosophers thus undertook wholly innocent speculation on the peculiarities of the various entities (from ordinary things up to the ideas and to God). From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century that is, in the era in which, according to Foucault, the "classical episteme" predominated philosophers turned critically to the mental categories and procedures about which one should obtain clarity *a priori* of all further knowledge, since the human mind must always already make use of these when it seeks to make anything comprehensible at all. Finally, in the twentieth century, philosophers realized that even the mind's effort to recognize its own mechanisms will lead to highly speculative results, so that their focus shifted towards the public and generally accessible realm of language in which our understanding of the physical and metaphysical world is laid down.

Linguistic philosophy thus is the successor of ontology and epistemology and it inherits their legacy. All of the problems that were already addressed by its predecessors are reformulated by linguistic philosophy as problems of language in order to solve those same old problems and not new and different problems. This can be seen very clearly by considering an example from the field of aesthetics. Something that has occupied thinkers in this field since time immemorial is the question – presently becoming urgent again – of what beauty is. The answer to this question was initially sought by investigating the peculiarities of beautiful things; later, it was examined what sensations are caused in a person perceiving something beautiful; finally, it was sought to solve the riddle by analyzing the content and the validity of linguistically codified judgments of beauty.

From this example alone, anyone willing to think about it for five minutes will realize how absurd it would now be to demand yet another turn and to assert that the question of what beauty really is can only be answered by an analysis of pictures. And presumably it would be still far more absurd to try to solve all

the other great questions of philosophy as well – the question of moral rules, for instance – by examining pictures. It is therefore impossible that the analysis of pictures could have the same status in philosophy as the analysis of language.

The analysis of language was a universal means by which, in principle, *any* philosophical problem could be approached. By means of an analysis of pictures, by contrast, such problems cannot even be formulated, let alone solved. Ask, for example, what a picture is by means of pictures, or try to answer it with pictures. It doesn't work. Even when one only uses pictures to illustrate philosophical concepts that have already been formulated in language – as was done, for example, in a German book that won an Italian graphic design prize, the *dtv-Atlas Philosophie* – a certain touch of the tragicomic can hardly be avoided. From these observations, however, it cannot be concluded that pictures have no cognitive content at all or that they do not merit close attention. No, it is rather the case that we, especially if we love pictures and cannot imagine ever being able to exist without them, should treat pictures like we treat the persons we love: We should not demand too much from them, and certainly not something that is completely impossible.

As a matter of fact, though, no one has ever demanded that pictures be made the central or exclusive means of philosophical reflection anyway. There are, of course, a lot of amiable people in this field who keep telling us that our attitudes and experiences are not only formed by language but also by our "imagination" and our various "world pictures". Isn't it obvious, they ask, that our "relationship to the world" is not only "imparted" by language but also by images? In a certain sense this is undeniable since no one will dispute that our conceptions of the world are often mediated by pictures in the form of paintings, photographs, images on the screens of television sets or computer monitors. The influence of such pictures on what we know and what we desire cannot be overlooked by anyone. A problem arises only when we are no longer talking about material pictures but rather about mental images, because then the danger arises of falling back into a speculative exploration of the *Geist*, from which the protagonists of the *linguistic turn* sought, with good reason, to turn away. The trouble is that a "world picture" that is said to dominate a person or a whole era can never be recognized by direct inspection, but only through an investigation of its concrete manifestations: of what is actually said and done. It is only from these manifestations (including, among other things, the ways in

which material pictures are designed and employed) that one can reconstruct a certain conception of the world that had a spell on us. It is not unusual to say (just like Wittgenstein does in , §115 of his *Philosophical Investigations*) that in such a case "a picture held us captive". But here the term "picture" degenerates into a mere metaphor that could just as well be replaced by expressions like "presupposition", "attitude" or "way of thinking".

At least in philosophy, therefore, a *pictorial turn* cannot have the same status as the *linguistic turn*, which has long been rightly honored in the field. But there is more at stake than just philosophy. Admittedly, that is where the attention-grabbing slogan "linguistic turn" was created and introduced, but soon thereafter it began to circulate in ever wider orbits around the sphere of its origin. Thereby it acquired a distinctive aura of particular intellectual dignity, on which, after all, W. J. T. Mitchell could rely when, exactly a quarter century after the appearance of Rorty's anthology, he wrote an essay for the journal *Artforum* that was published in the March 1992 issue where it was placed between articles on new Chinese films and works by the sculptor Jana Sterbak and adorned with a whole series of illustrations, all showing (mostly three-dimensional) works of art not mentioned in the text at all. The title of Mitchell's essay was "The Pictorial Turn".

Since the programmatic title of this essay is without a doubt a thousand times better known than its content, it is worthwhile first to sketch briefly what Mitchell actually says. He starts by quoting the passage that was already paraphrased above, the passage in which Rorty presents the history of philosophy as a sequence of two great conversions: first from ontology to epistemology and then further to philosophy of language. However, as soon as the third stage was reached in the twentieth century, Mitchell adds immediately, language was not only interpreted as a "model" within philosophy, but elsewhere as well. Thus society, for example, has been understood as a text and nature as a discourse. Who ever might have espoused these views is not specified, however, since Mitchell, as he openly admits, is not completely familiar with these matters: "What these shifts in intellectual and academic discourse have to do with each other, much less with everyday life and ordinary language, is not especially self-evident. But it does seem clear that another shift is occurring in what philosophers talk about, and that once again a complexly related transformation is occurring in the production and understanding of culture. I want to call this shift "the pictorial turn.""

According to these sentences, then, philosophy is still the leading discipline that has to establish the direction in which the other disciplines will march. And the reason why Mitchell feels entitled to affirm a new turn in philosophy in 1992 is simply that he had observed "a shift in what philosophers talk about". Yet not only in philosophy, but also in many other academic disciplines and even in daily life, everyone is talking more and more about the same thing: pictures. This gives Mitchell license to proclaim that a mighty, new and radical "turn" is underway, one that, as the rhetorical opening of his essay suggests, has just as fundamental and far-reaching consequences as the two great re-orientations of philosophy mentioned by Rorty.

As it is actually described by Mitchell, the *pictorial turn*, however, is nothing but a turn to a certain topic of discourse. And in itself this topic was not even new at the start of the 1990s; new was only the intensity with which this topic came to be debated in philosophy, in various academic disciplines, and in the general cultural public. Yet in spite of this, the way in which Mitchell presents his case has the effect of suggesting that the *pictorial turn* is a much more radical change of the same scope as the previously so successful *linguistic turn*.

It has been shown already that this is not the case, at least as far as philosophy is concerned. Now Mitchell is not really a philosopher but rather a scholar active in several other disciplines, mostly the history of literature and art. Nevertheless it obviously seems very important to him to prove that the *pictorial turn* he has identified had its origin in philosophy. In order to demonstrate this, he drops the names of numerous philosophers, all of whom – as he puts it in the sentence quoted above – "talk" about pictures. Among those he names are Peirce, Goodman, Derrida, and even Wittgenstein. These thinkers are not, of course, the best witnesses for his case, since their work on picture theory was in each case unmistakably inspired by the methods of linguistic analysis, or at least semiotics. Even Mitchell himself can in the end no longer overlook the fact that his chosen supporters would certainly not intervene unconditionally in favor of his position, and thus he seeks refuge in the adventurous thesis that the attempt to investigate pictures from the perspective of language analysis is itself a symptom of fear of the power and magic of pictures, and this unease must, in turn, be seen as "a sure sign that a pictorial turn is taking place".

After these declarations, which are hardly convincing, Mitchell provides some further examples for the increased interest in pic-

tures in various academic disciplines. Here he mentions, among other things, Debord's criticism of the "society of the spectacle" and Foucault's investigations of the institutions and practices of surveillance (which are actually not so much concerned with pictures, but with the gaze). In addition, Mitchell describes insistently how pictures are becoming increasingly important in daily life, which he attributes above all to the growing influence of television. With the latter assertion most of us would certainly agree, and evidently a lot of other phenomena may also be cited from which we can read the rising levels of the ever-swelling floods of images in our contemporary culture. Also, hardly anyone would doubt the observation that pictures are increasingly interesting and important matters for investigation in various academic disciplines.

What is open to doubt, however, is another assertion that Mitchell advances right at the beginning of his essay in connection with his already mentioned remark that, in the wake of the *linguistic turn*, many different academic disciplines began to see language as a model for a better understanding of their respective objects of investigation. The same role, Mitchell would now like to persuade us, has recently been increasingly assumed by pictures: "The picture now has a status somewhere between what Thomas Kuhn called a 'paradigm' and an 'anomaly,' emerging as a central topic of discussion in the human sciences in the way that language did: that is, as a kind of model or figure for other things (including figuration itself), and as an unsolved problem, perhaps even the object of its own 'science,' what Erwin Panofsky called an 'iconology.'"

In this passage Mitchell mingles two aspects of the *pictorial turn* that, for the sake of clarity, should be clearly distinguished. On the one hand, he observes that pictures present academics in various disciplines with a growing number of puzzles. If this is so, pictures function, as was repeatedly pointed out before, simply as objects of investigation that one would like to explore more thoroughly. On the other hand, Mitchell claims that many scholars also seek to make progress in the research of any possible objects of their investigation by conceiving these as pictures.

Unfortunately, though, Mitchell does not give even one example for this method, and indeed it is very doubtful whether he could. It is clear that one can understand many objects of theoretical curiosity – the mechanisms of fashion or the structure of the deoxyribonucleic acid molecule, for example – by viewing them as phenomena that have the structure and the function of

a language or, put another way, of a code. And it is just as clear that Mitchell, to make plausible the analogy he suggests between the *pictorial turn* and the *linguistic turn*, must assert that the picture, too, can assume the role of such a paradigm for the understanding of all sorts of other phenomena. Such an assertion, to be sure, goes far beyond the simple claim that actual research into such phenomena will, among other things, have to make use of pictures. Pictures have always been used by cultural theorists in their research of the periodic turns and changes of fashion, and biologists presumably would not have achieved very much in their analysis of the genome had they not been able to rely on a number of methods of "image processing". Evidently, then, the *pictorial turn* does not amount to recommending a broader or more intensive use of such methods. No one would demand, for example, that we do away with Geiger counters so as to work only with the images of visible traces in cloud chambers. The *pictorial turn* is not about propagating a more extensive use of pictures in research or in the presentation of research results. It is instead about paying more attention to the various ways in which pictures are used in nearly all scientific disciplines anyway. Mitchell's thesis may therefore not be reduced to the unproblematic observation that various disciplines pursue their investigation of their respective phenomena by using pictures; his thesis aims, rather, at the assertion that those phenomena are themselves understood *as* pictures. Only if this were the case would the *pictorial turn* really bring about a re-orientation as fundamental as Mitchell would like to suggest.

It seems doubtful, however, that this is really so. And it seems just as doubtful whether anything would really be gained if it were so. Does one really understand the mechanisms of fashion or the functioning of the DNA better by portraying these phenomena as pictures or sequences of pictures? Is our thinking effectively "turned on" in this way? Certainly not. It is simply not true that the problems of philosophy or sociology or human genetics or psychology or computer science can be solved by letting ourselves be governed in all these disciplines by the paradigm of picture analysis. On the contrary, it is precisely the other way round. The problems of the analysis of pictures are solved when one uses all the specialized and specific methods from all those other disciplines. The picture is thus – as opposed to language – not a model that will allow us a better or even a different understanding of all possible phenomena. Pictures themselves are the phenomena we wish to understand better. And only because pic-

KARLHEINZ LÜDEKING

tures are not the *means* of our efforts at understanding, but rather the *ends* of such efforts, is it possible to call for the establishment of a new science of pictures to be developed: an "iconology" or a "bildvetenskap".

It is well known that a general science of language already exists, and it is worth pointing out that the inauguration of this discipline was not the result of the *linguistic turn*. The *linguistic turn*, to emphasize it one last time, was in no way an effort to open up and establish a new field of research, but instead an attempt to introduce a method that could be used in all possible fields of research. The *pictorial turn*, by contrast, actually comes down to a recommendation to focus on a certain range of phenomena that should be studied more carefully and thoroughly. It is concerned with the question of *what* is to be investigated. The *linguistic turn*, on the contrary, propagated a certain method of exploring any range of phenomena whatsoever. It was concerned with the totally different question of *how* something is to be investigated. This is – in all brevity – the difference between the *pictorial turn* and the *linguistic turn*.