

## WHAT IS NOT AN IMAGE (ANYMORE)?

### *Iconic Difference, Immersion and Iconic Simultaneity in the Age of Screens*

*One can never learn from an image what one does not know already.*

*Jean-Paul Sartre*

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#### *Introduction: on the concept of image as a difference and (dis)- continuity*

In this essay I intend to examine if it is possible to establish a sustainable notion of image that would encompass, on the one hand, a classic concept of the image as (artistic) tableau – meaning all that we in the widest sense understand as *representation* and image-mediated reality and – on the other hand – depictions of reality itself as a mediated visual *event*, which is *not* representation but still retains some of the traditional characteristics of a tableau like a frame, illusion of space or the reference to known objects and persons. My point of departure is that the notion of *image* or *Bild* is not anymore able to encompass all phenomena within the framework of the technological and cultural construction of the visual field and that contemporary forms of the transfer of visual information became complex “post-semiotic” and “post-linguistic” phenomena that cannot be explained by what W.J.T. Mitchell along

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the lines of deconstruction calls the “metaphysics of pictorial presence”.<sup>1</sup> I would like to extend some insights of philosophers and art historians, who do not consider representation a natural state of the image, but its “additional achievement” (Martin Seel), and who in different formulations maintain that we recognize images and can be aware of their existence only if they possess a special kind of presence, i.e. if we perceive them through *discontinuity* of sorts (Jean-Luc Nancy) or a *difference* (Gottfried Boehm).<sup>2</sup> I would also like to argue that the radical presence of images in the contemporary culture of screens, video surveillance, and the simultaneity of images actually leads to their absence as thus the essential *otherness* of images is lost. Visual aspects of the image, traditionally recognized as photographs, paintings or billboards are now becoming inseparable from reality (or, according to Nancy, the *ground*) and blend with it. At that point we speak of the conversion of images into a coherent, indistinguishable continuum of reality. This new state of images represents some kind of their transitional phase that precedes that which

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1 Mitchell’s concept of pictorial turn is founded on the new reality of image that we cannot understand exclusively through linking images and language. On the other hand, interest for images in the age of pictorial turn displayed by “non-visual disciplines unambiguously show that the meaning of images is now supposed to be sought in a much wider area of philosophy, culture, and technology”. See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, The University Press of Chicago, Chicago 1994, especially chapter *The Pictorial Turn*.

2 Keith Moxey draws our attention to an aspect of images interesting for our discussion as well. It is the shift of the basic interest of visual disciplines from what images mean to what and how they communicate with observers and to the question what kind of mutual interaction subjects and objects of visual communication enter. Important here is also Moxey’s mention of the formerly crucial dichotomy in film studies, which today comes back as a completely new phenomenological fact formulated by Richard Wollheim as being between “seeing-as” and “seeing-in”. Moxey says: “Art history and visual studies in Britain and the United States have tended to approach the image as a representation, a visual construct that betrays the ideological agenda of its makers and whose content is susceptible to manipulation by its receivers. By contrast, the contemporary focus on the presence of the visual object, how it engages with the viewer in ways that stray from the cultural agendas for which it was conceived and which may indeed affect us in a manner that sign systems fail to regulate, asks us to attend to the status of the image as a *presentation*”. This distinction is an equivalent to the opposition between “seeing-as” and “seeing-in” suggested by Richard Wollheim in his book *Art and Its Objects. An Introduction to Aesthetics* from 1971. See Keith Moxey, *Visual Time. The Image in History*, Duke University Press, 2013, p. 55.

Oliver Grau calls *immersion* and cannot be equalized to it. However, we must first examine the nature of *otherness* at hand. Can we at all talk about full immersion into the reality of the image and does in this inability of distinction between reality and illusion the question *what is an image* still make sense?

In the photograph taken on the first of May 2011 at the so-called Situation Room of the White House we see the American President Barack Obama and the closest members of his team attentively watching an event outside of the photo-frame. Two figures in the background are craning their necks to see what is happening, while State Secretary Hilary Clinton covers her mouth with a hand like we usually do when unable to hide mixed feelings of disbelief, surprise, and fear. As the observer of this photograph cannot know what has generated this tense situation, the newspaper information explains that the figures we see watch a live broadcast of the last phase of the operation *Neptune Spear* – the location and execution of Osama Bin Laden.<sup>3</sup> If we leave the political and military consequences of the bespoke event aside and if we try to explain the meaning of this photograph as artifact, we can see that its semantic center remains invisible. We do not know what the concrete cause of the reactions of the present persons is, although the reactions of individual protagonists are that which the photograph actually thematizes or that which iconological analysis would be focused on. On the other hand, many visual theories during the last fifty years – reaching from Barthes's *Mythology* to post-structuralism and more recent insights of visual studies – teach us that the topic of this photography is outside of it and that its real object are the politics of the gaze and scopic regimes at the beginning of the third millennium. This photograph is not the first representation in which mechanisms of looking may seem to us more important than the object of representation or, more precisely, it is not the first one demonstrating that scopic regimes as such (and not a material

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3 We have later learned that the live on-screen broadcast at the Situation Room was enabled by the camera on one of the drones that hovered over Bin Laden's house in Pakistan, but that the very act of liquidation of the terrorist leader was not shown to the spectators in the White House because there was no live broadcast from the cameras on the helmets of the marines in action. The photograph taken by the official photographer of the White House, Pete Souza, does not reveal that detail of "discontinuity", but it suggests simultaneity of the events in the field and the reactions of the viewers at the White House.

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object or an action) can be the topic of an (art)work. Already Caravaggio's *Medusa*, Rembrandt's *Artist in His Atelier* or Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas* have led us to ask questions about the reality outside of the image and the interaction of the visible and the invisible in the scopic field between that which has been exposed to the gaze and denied to it; between representation, the image-as-object and the observer. If I use Thomas Mitchell's terminology, the photograph of the Situation Room is a *metapicture* in itself, in the way that it indivisibly links the image and the reflection on its status as image, i.e. it connects the pictorial and extra-pictorial reality.<sup>4</sup> However, this photograph also speaks of the *impossibility* of representation: on the one hand it thematizes the moment of the *simultaneity* of the rendering (live streaming) and the event (commando action), but on the other it denies both to us, in the capacity of the observers of the photograph, as if suggesting that it cannot show us the *image* that would be the result of the *continuity* of event and its observation, because that would be mere transcribed reality and not an image with all its distinctive characteristics, because, as German philosopher Martin Seel has formulated this, "pictures cannot take the place of the real".

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As much as some of us in the past or today feared the deceitful power of images as a hideout for idols, forbidden divinities or historical proofs (or just because of that), art history, semiotics, feminist and psychoanalytic theory treated the problem of "meaning" mostly from the position of that which images communicate through the evocation of the visual context of an earlier present situation, the component of identification of the extra-pictorial subject with the intra-pictorial object or the evaluation of the aesthetic pleasure in the viewer. There are certainly good reasons for such orientation of the mentioned disciplines, and among the most obvious is that in all of them the image was a conveyance medium for visual information and not an object of theoretical interest as such. The image science and the philosophy of images also show other interests for visibility that do not necessarily include problems like signifying practices or the politics of identity. Along the lines of fundamental relations in the sphere of construction of visible reality today, two positions emerge as both counterposed and paradigmatic, although they do not necessarily collide, because

4 See Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, especially the chapter titled "Metapictures".

they both confirm the contingency of the image both in the material and non-material (virtual) world. The mentioned positions show that the status and the perception of images is today equally influenced by, on the one hand, the image as a distinctive sign, and, on the other hand, the image as a phenomenological fact. The first stream, inspired by art history and semiotic insights insists on that which Gottfried Boehm calls the *iconic difference*, i.e. the fundamental *possibility* of differentiation between images and non-images,<sup>5</sup> while the other is based on the basic *impossibility* of that differentiation, i.e. that which Oliver Grau calls *immersion* that leads to the belief of the observer that what happens in images or visual installations is actually true, so that immersive images create a new dimension of reality in which we see some sense or enjoy it because it has become non-distinctive in relation to its original reality.<sup>6</sup> The iconic difference enables us to esteem artworks and communicate through visual signs, while immersion draws us into virtual reality, i.e. the reality of that which it “depicts”, thus ceasing to be a traditional pictorial phenomenon. Lambert Wiesing’s opinion, however, is that equalization of immersive images with virtual reality too much limits the notion of “immersion” into virtual worlds, because it happens only in a very small number of cases. He says that the notion of immersion is equally used for virtual reality in strict sense, like matrix or cyberspace and for the instances of “virtual reality” that still show distinctive characteristics of images, for example in video-games, where the iconic difference is still present.<sup>7</sup> Wiesing suggests that the concept of immersion should be additionally explained, in order to more precisely define to which kind of virtual reality we refer: immersive virtual reality that causes “assimilation of the perception of the image object to the perception of a real thing” or non-immersive virtual reality that represents the “assimilation of the image object to the imagination”.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Gottfried Boehm, “Die Wiederkehr der Bilder”, in: G. Boehm (ed.) *Was ist ein Bild*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Munich, 1994.

6 Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion*, translated by Gloria Custance, MIT Press, Massachusetts 2003.

7 Lambert Wiesing, *Artificial Presence. Philosophical Studies in Image Theory*, translated by Nils F. Schott, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2010, p. 88.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

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### Image as not-representation-anymore and not-yet-immersion

Marie-José Mondzain explains why the question “what is an image” cannot be asked in a different way, which would not a priori express the immanence of the image, i.e. why any answer that would try to access this question from the perspective “what is *not* an image” is logically unsustainable. The French theorist draws our attention to the fact that even a thus formulated question contains two entirely different questions: *What is | not an image?* and *What is not | an image?* This difference is important insofar as it shows that a depiction makes sense only in the domain of visibility and “presence”: *this is what you see*. An image cannot say or show *this is what you do not see*. Unlike language, which is able to express an opposite assertion, critique or negation, “no image is opposite to another image. The images of Christ have no opposite in the image of no-Christ. So the image does not know any opposition within itself”.<sup>9</sup>

150 James Elkins asserts that the general theory of images is not possible, because each theory should previously solve the implicit categorical unclarity that pertains primarily to the *relation* of the notions of image and theory and only then their individual meanings. When we contemplate this, it is necessary to make a difference between, first, a theory of images, and second, the theory that treats the problem of the very concept of the *image* or particular images in different contexts.<sup>10</sup> And finally, image theory can emerge from the insight that images create their own theory that can be applied either to themselves,

9 Within the five-year program of the Stone Summer Institute, in February of 2008 in Chicago a one-week seminar titled “What Is an Image?” was held. The organizer of a series of seminars, James Elkins, gathered a significant group of art historians, theorists, and philosophers (among them Marie-José Mondzain, Gottfried Boehm, W.J.T. Mitchell, Jacqueline Lichtenstein, Markus Klammer...) in order to discuss the status of the theory of images in the context of ever-faster changes of the media reality of the world and its theoretical reflection, which, by establishing Anglo-American visual studies and German *Bildwissenschaft*, would be capable to approach visual phenomena with increased sensitivity for the image as an object of theory. On the other hand, the book of the same name, which brings the transcript of the seven-day seminar unambiguously shows the difficulties in the attempt of providing an unambiguous answer to the question *what is an image?* See James Elkins (ed.) *What Is an Image*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 2011, p. 26.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 6–7.

so that in a kind of anti-semiotic turn of the image we could dispose of the dictate of the language, or it can point to a phenomenon external to the image, like a social occurrence or a political event.<sup>11</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell has offered examples for both sub-variants of the third model of the theory of images, when visual representations become individual discursive arguments, first within the concept of metapictures and later also in a crucial discussion on the consequences of specific visual tactics and generally on the role of visual culture in the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring.<sup>12</sup> One of the hardest tasks posed before the theory of images is the one, says Elkins, seeking explanation in which way, as this is proposed by Gottfried Boehm, “image and concept meet each other in the image itself”, i.e. can knowledge generated by images be explained by a self-referential model introduced already by conceptual art in order to liberate itself from the hermeneutic history of art canon.

In order to demonstrate the insufficiency of the referential role of images in the context of modernism and avant-garde, Gottfried Boehm has established a neo-phenomenological definition of the image of sorts from the position of philosophical art history, terming it as “iconic difference”.<sup>13</sup> He primarily needed a theory that would determine the position of the image after the modernist schism in the politics of representation and also because of the fact that the image increasingly less fulfilled the depictive and more the material function, which in the philosophical sense led to the equalization of Clement Greenberg’s assumption from his famous text “Towards a Newer Laocoon” with Boehm’s insight that at the time of the iconic turn what generally defines images is the conversion of *logos* into *icon*, the textual-symbolic content of the image into a fully pictorial phenomenon. Viewed from the position of criticism of abstract painting, Greenberg aimed at the same problem, maintaining that the disappearance of depth in abstract paintings led to stressing of the picture’s meaning, its surface and plane as an authentic place where the artistic event takes place. He asserted that the surface of the picture was becoming

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11 Ibid.

12 See W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Pictorial Turn* and W.J.T. Mitchell, M. Taussig, and Bernard E. Harcourt, *Occupy. Three Inquiries in Disobedience*, The University Press of Chicago, Chicago 2013.

13 Gottfried Boehm, “The Return of Images”, 2009 (1994).

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shallower by leveling the background to the point when extra-pictorial reality and the illusion of depth in the picture would meet on the framed surface of the canvas.<sup>14</sup> The relation between figuration and abstraction in Greenberg is comparable to the relation of *icon* and *logos* in Boehm. Both concepts refer to the separation of two different systems of meaning production, because the surface of the painting and that which it depicts are ontologically entirely different. Thus the otherness of the image is blurred unless we insist on the contrast that basically defines the image: this is about understanding the difference between linguistic structures and structures that create meanings within images. In other words, “iconic difference has to do with historically and anthropologically transformed differences between a continuum – ground, surface – and what is shown *inside* this continuum. This difference is constituted by elements – signs, objects, figures or figurations – and has to do with contrasts”.<sup>15</sup> Maximally simplified, to make a picture means to create a difference between the physical continuum of the surface and that which we recognize in the picture as a specific presence of the absent object (this refers only to so-called figurative paintings). Therefore we could argue that, if we cannot spot this difference or if there is no difference between that which we can see on the surface of a picture and the absent object, then we no longer speak either of an image or of *pictorial presence*, but of a phenomenon that requires a different theory.

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Jacques Rancière asserts that we can recognize the “alterity” of the image and that which separates it from pure visibility of an event or object if we recognize the author’s intervention in it. In his opinion, the principal difference between, for example, film and a TV-broadcast is not in the technological characteristics of the media (the direction of light, the way an image is screened and conveyed etc.) but in the “alteration of resemblance”. The film serves the artistic transformation of reality, so that images of which it consists can never resemble the images that in some form existed before the lens of the camera. Film images must show a minimal form of the author’s

14 Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon”, in: *Partisan Review*, VII, No. 4/1940, p. 296–310.

15 Gottfried Boehm, in: Elkins, *What Is an Image?*, p. 36–37.



manipulation in order that we can tell them apart from reality: “The image is never a simple reality. Cinematic images are primarily operations, relations between the sayable and the visible, ways of playing with the before and the after, cause and effect”.<sup>16</sup> On the example of Robert Bresson’s discontinuous editing Rancière shows that thinking in images does not mean establishing a connection between that which happened somewhere else (at a film set for example) and that which is happening before our eyes (while we watch a movie), but a concatenation of original visual information established through different forms of manipulation, editing, and “alterations of resemblance”. If we know that pictures of modern and contemporary art generate, as Rancière says, “dissemblance to reality”, can we in that case determine the relation between images and reality only indirectly – through art – or are we capable of ascribing to them some essential property of difference? According to Rancière, one of these characteristics was present in analogue photography as well, because it still showed the element of difference between images and life, but only because it managed to reconcile the double regime of picturality: on the one hand by being a medium of reality and on the other the medium of art.<sup>17</sup> In other words, it was able to maintain a distinctive relation to both.

The possibility of the image as a *non*-distinctive phenomenon, contradictory and unsustainable from the position of representation theory and iconic difference, was offered by Oliver Grau in his book *Virtual Art – From Illusion to Immersion*. Although Grau established his insights on immersion as all-encompassing visual phenomenon in terms of cultural history, which makes his approach related to the ones by Norman Bryson, Martin Jay or Jonathan Crary, Oliver Grau’s basic assumption is that immersion is primarily “mentally

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16 Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*; London: Verso, 2007, p. 6.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 11–17.

absorbing and a process, a change, a passage from one mental state to another.<sup>18</sup> It is characterized by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening”.<sup>19</sup> In spite of the fact that he places immersion into the course of art history, thus linking technical images directly to artistic ones, Grau’s approach to artistic transcendence of the real world is never neo-Kantian modern, but techno-scientifically post-modern. Visual teleology in his case does not anymore serve a possibility of some other kind of the object’s presence as a pictorial object; this is about the presence of man in the image itself, which presupposes not only the inclusion of one’s visual apparatus but also the “adaptation of illusionary information to the psychological disposition of the human senses”.<sup>20</sup> In Grau’s words, although artists – mostly baroque – tried to perfection the painting medium in order to create an immersive illusion of real space, it is the *medium* that has always been the obstacle for “entering” the represented space. Although the techniques of painterly delusion (*trompe l’oeil* fresco painting or oversized “panoramas” from the 19<sup>th</sup> century) were supposed to enable the transition from reality to illusion, they were at the same time an insurmountable barrier between them, an

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18 All three authors problematize that which Martin Jay calls “ocularcentrism“, i.e. the cognition of the world as a primarily visual fact. Each of them approaches that encompassing phenomenon in a different way. For example, in the book *Downcast Eyes. Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (California University Press, 1993) Martin Jay presents the “denigration“ of visuality in French philosophy of the twentieth century, in the tradition opposed to the Cartesian belief in the power of visual cognizance of the world. Along the lines of the “new history of art“, Norman Bryson relocated the interest for the artwork from the discourse on the historical development of styles according to their striving for the differentiation between “vision” and “visuality” (see Bryson, Holly, Moxey (eds.), *Visual Theory. Painting and Interpretation*, Harper Colins, 191; also in Hal Foster (ed.) *Vision and Visuality*, New Press, 1998); while Jonathan Crary in his book *Techniques of the Observer* (MIT Press, 1992) as a “post-Benjaminian” tractate of sorts explains the role of technology in the perception of images he explains why the historical development of dispositives of reproduction is crucial to modern understanding of art and visual perception in general. All three authors are major contributors to understanding of epochal changes in our perception of images, which W.J.T. Mitchell theoretically subsumed under the syntagm *the pictorial turn*.

19 Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art*, p. 13.

20 Ibid., p. 14.

impenetrable screen of increasingly sophisticated models of representation.<sup>21</sup> Virtual reality is not based on the perfection of illusion. i.e. on reducing the gap between reality and fantasy, but on the development of technologies that consider the possibility of immersion immanent to *both* man and technology. From this we can conclude that immersion in virtual reality is not founded on pictorial, but on palpable-perceptive experience; it goes even further than simulation (which can still be an image) in order to abandon representation and instead of presence-in-the-sign stage presence-in-the-event. However, for our discussion it is essential that both in the theoretical and practical sense there is a huge space of presence between representation and immersion, the one close to real visual experience as not-any-more-representation but still not-yet-immersion.

Along the lines of what I consider a new kind of pictorial presence, I would mention Martin Seel's insight, who rightly remarks that a constituent part of an image is not that it makes visible something which is not there,<sup>22</sup> but that something becomes image through the *function of relation* of one situation with another situation.<sup>23</sup> As extremely important I recognize Seel's proposal that we would encounter least obstacles if penetrating the ontology of the image from two opposite directions: from the direction of materiality and essence of abstract painting and the direction of reality external to the image, actually life itself. Thus in further course I shall try to show that the iconic difference is the central point of the discussion about images as historical constructs and that contemporary media images require an extension of the iconic difference theory or even a new terminological distinction that would define them as individual visual phenomena with the key quality that I shall call *iconic simultaneity*.

In his book *The Aesthetics of Appearing*, Martin Seel brings "thirteen statements on the picture" with whose aid he tries to establish a plausible theory of images from the position of hybrid semiotic-phenomenological analysis, i.e. determine the specific characteristics of iconic representation in

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21 Ibid., p. 16.

22 Martin Seel, *The Aesthetics of Appearing*, translated by John Farrell, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2010, p. 170.

23 Ibid., p. 164.

relation to the experience of the material aspect of the image as object. Seel puts forward a seemingly trivial, but for this discussion crucial assumption that “the space of a picture is not part of the real space of its appearance; it emerges solely from the difference between pictorial object and pictorial presentation”.<sup>24</sup> The basic problem of the image is its relation to reality or, more precisely, to the experience of the viewer’s reality, who at the point of looking constitutes his own understanding of the image surface as the relation between presence and absence in pictorial representation, as a kind of presence of an absent object, immanent only to the image. Seel gives a paradigmatic example of the transformation of representation theory into art discourse in conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Umbrellas* in which the artist shows ontological separation of representation and perception, as well as between the semiotic and phenomenological theory of depictions through images. Kosuth’s work is a visual and philosophical tractate along the lines of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s insights and Magritte’s painting *This Is Not a Pipe*, but in the spirit of a sort of pictorial-analytical philosophy of language which during the period of conceptual art was the key motif of mutual approaching of the visual and the textual.

As we know, Kosuth’s three-part installation consists of a real umbrella, a photograph of that same umbrella and the textual explanation of the meaning of the word umbrella. Thus the work consists of the image, pattern, and concept of the same thing, so “if we recognized what distinguishes and connects these three, we would recognize how pictorial objects are in the space of a linguistically disclosed world”. In other words, “every theory of the picture has to explain on the one hand how the pictorial *object* relates to the pictorial *presentation* and on the other how *pictorial* presentation relates to other (for instance, linguistic) representations”.<sup>25</sup> However, the notion of representation at any case complicates what the image *as such* is, because it is evident that representation is primarily the relation between the presence of what is depicted and its absent object of reference. For this reason, speaking of non-figurative pictures, Seel asserts that the so-called abstract painting

24 Ibid., p. 162.

25 Ibid., p. 163.

“proves to be the most concrete and therefore the paradigmatic case of the picture”.<sup>26</sup>

### **The essence of the image between abstraction and representation**

If we accept the postulate that by every form of iconic and symbolic connections evoked by the image we come further away from the set aim of determining the difference between an image and non-image, Boehm's concept of iconic difference, explained in the view of Greenberg's theory of the painterly surface in abstract painting will maybe enable us a clearer distinction. For Clement Greenberg the fundamental characteristic of painting in its entire history until modernism was its subjection to a “literary” principle, a lasting attempt to use an essentially visual medium for different forms of narration. The modernist turnover of this historical principle set in at the moment when the avant-garde started to perceive art as a *method* and not anymore as an effect.<sup>27</sup> His crucial insight was the understanding of a picture as a distinctive surface and abstract painting as a practice that enabled its medium to become its own narrative. In his seminal essay *Modernist Painting*, this American theorist asserts that the only thing that can preserve art from becoming equal to all other forms of experience is to show in which way a particular artistic genre offers its *specific* forms of experience. Avant-garde painting and music have indicated the fundamental self-referential nature of modernism with their possibilities of showing “non-literary” competences, thus also pointing to the possibility of self-referential understanding of the image.<sup>28</sup> According to Greenberg's interpretation, realist and illusionist art saw their own medium as a limitation in the attempt of visual narrativization of textual patterns.

The painting techniques of Old Masters and their virtuosity in the use of color were supposed to *conceal* the fact that canvas is just a non-transparent surface, a plane of limited dimensions and not a simulacrum of reality. Their interventions on canvas were founded on a “dialectical tension” between

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26 Ibid., p. 161.

27 Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laokoon”.

28 Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting”, in: *Art & Literature*, No. 4, summer 1960, p. 193–201.

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retaining “the integrity of the picture plane” and as spectacular as possible “illusion of three-dimensional space”. On the other hand, modernist painters have noticed a fundamental difference between the picture plane and its two-dimensionality as a specific feature of art, characteristic only of the limited area of the picture plane. In spite of the fact that they have not solved this contradiction, they “reversed its terms”: “[in modernist painting] one is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains. Whereas one tends to see what is *in* an Old Master before seeing it as a picture, one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first. This is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture”.<sup>29</sup>

Although I do not limit this discussion only to artworks, I think that we have no reason to believe that the essential feature of any kind of painting would be different from the essential feature of the art painting under the condition that we, for now, presume that the limiting criterion is *materiality* or *objectness* of the painting itself. I shall return to this criterion a bit later. Now I would like to define the connection between Boehm’s universalist concept of iconic difference and Greenberg’s concept of two-dimensionality. In his essay *After Abstract Expressionism*, this American critic says that practice has shown that most characteristics considered typical of modernism are

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29 Ibid. Unlike Greenberg in his radically formalist approach to the phenomenon of surface, contemporary revisions of his theories on modernist painting shift the problem area of ‘two-dimensionality’ and ‘depth’ from the formalist into the psychological or *gestalt* discourse, which is able to connect the discussion on the foundations of modernism to post-modernist conversion of the surface into a screen and spectacle. One such approach is demonstrated by David Joselit: “in my view the ‘flatness’ of modernism is not merely an optical event: the emergence of the flat painting marks a transformation in spectatorship in which mimetic identification with the picture is displaced by the private kinesthetic experience of the viewer. The event, as it were, moves from the conscious to the unconscious. To put it schematically, abstraction functions as a machine for recording psychological responses of the artist in order to produce (perhaps dramatically different) psychological responses in the viewer. (...) There is a great deal at stake in acknowledging that the flatness or depthlessness we experience in our globalized world is more than an optical effect. I will argue that flatness may serve as a powerful metaphor for the price we pay in transforming ourselves into images – a compulsory self-spectacularization which is the necessary condition of entering the public sphere in the world of late capitalism”. (David Joselit, “Notes on Surface: towards a genealogy of flatness”; *Art History*, Vol. 23, No. 1/2000, p. 20.

actually “non-essential”, apart from two “constitutive conventions or norms”, namely “flatness” and “delimitation of flatness”. For him just perceiving these two norms is “sufficient to experience an object as a picture”.<sup>30</sup> This very inclusive definition has made some room for different theories of pictorial representation, as well as countless philosophical speculations on the nature of visual experience and the relations of this experience to the phenomenon of the image. It is especially interesting that Gottfried Boehm’s art historical and phenomenological analysis on the basic nature of the iconic does not essentially differ from Greenberg’s when minimal conditions necessary for a visual effect to be considered an image are taken into account. Commenting on the theoretical achievements of the iconic difference, Martin Seel has put forward the assumption that this is a concept able to reconcile two different paradigms. He actually permits that they dialectically complement each other, because “there is no real conflict between the phenomenological and the semiotic theory of the picture. Pictures are surveyable surfaces that make something visible; both sides could agree on this basic formula”.<sup>31</sup> As we have already found out, the essence of Boehm’s theory is based on the relatively simple concept that an image can be all that which can be found “between a surveyable total surface”. We can discern this surface in a visual contrast to everything *outside* the measurable total surface. Seel acknowledges the phenomenological foundation of this assertion, but adds that the iconic difference means that the image is always a priori a sign, if of nothing else then of itself as a *sign of difference*. When a picture is displayed, that which appears in the field of the image surface is always displayed simultaneously to the surface itself: “the picture not only *contains* certain appearances (of color and form), it *refers* to its own internal references. It is through this reference to its appearing that it first becomes a picture”.<sup>32</sup>

I would now like to focus a little bit more on the hypothesis that the difference between image and non-image is maybe more of phenomenological than of semiotic nature. I shall use the function of two kinds of images within

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30 Clement Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism”, in: *Art International*, October 1962, p. 131.

31 Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, p. 177.

32 *Ibid.*, 178.

the fictional narrative context of the TV series *Homeland*. Closer watchers of the series would be able to spot two pictorial ontologies which, although within the world of the series they constitute parts of the same plot and lead to the same resolution, belong to incomparable visual worlds of which one maybe heralds a paradoxical future of total visuality in a world without images. The first visual world consists of traditional photographs, maps, newspaper clippings, drawings... in other words, pictorial representations, material objects, and artifacts. The main character in the series, Carrie Mathison, a CIA agent, keeps them pinned to the wall of her apartment. We occasionally find her standing before this spectacle of analogous images, trying to connect them into a whole that would make some sense and enable her to locate and organize a possible execution of Bin Laden's successor – Abu Nazir. The scene in which photographs and newspaper clippings hang on the wall is known to us from a large number of thrillers where photographs serve as a proof that some act has caused a material consequence, leaving palpable evidence or that an image medium is a direct consequence of an act that preceded the picture. *All* visual artifacts in front of which Carrie Mathison is standing have two common features: first, they are all images in the sense envisaged by the iconic difference and, second, they had all come to exist *before* Carrie put them on the wall or could attach them to it.

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With this assertion I not only lean towards the validity of Boehm's theory, but I have also added another differentiating element to it – the one of the temporal condition of each representation. First, visual representation always *precedes* visual perception and second, visual representation can never be *simultaneous* to the event it represents.<sup>33</sup> This phenomenologically precise positioning of visual representation is important for the understanding of the other image ontology in *Homeland*: a lot before the former CIA's computer expert and military counterintelligence officer Edward Snowden

33 Even in the case of taking a digital photograph, that which appears as a photo on the camera screen (i.e. representation) always follows *after* the photographed situation took place before the lens, even if the shortest technically possible exposition is used. In accordance with that which I am arguing in this text, what we see in the eyepiece of the camera before the moment of shooting, simultaneously to the event we are photographing, cannot be considered representation.



exposed the global surveillance system conducted by the American National Security Agency, this series discovered the surveillance methodologies for potential terrorists (and as a consequence of all those who by CIA's design or accidentally come into the non-discriminating view field of satellite cameras). Shall we continue to call these methods *images* only because we are not yet ready to face the new visual reality of the world? At the CIA headquarters or in secret locations that can be outside of Langley in Virginia, in the Near East or anywhere else on the planet, there are surveillance hubs equipped with many monitors that in real time broadcast the footage from a large number of satellites, which are strategically placed in the orbit, so that they can cover all the points of a respective surveillance area. Carrie Mathison, Saul Berenson and other operatives of the American intelligence agency can choose not only which one of the simultaneous screenings they would see, but they also have the possibility of influencing events taking place thousands of kilometers away, as if they were in immediate interaction with field operatives, because they hear and see everything others can see and hear.

During the third season of the series we have seen what multiple simultaneity directed by the Langley crew looks like, realized with a little help from drones and geo-stationary satellites. In order to retaliate for al-Qaeda's largest terrorist action after 9/11, the demolition of Langley headquarters, CIA agents conduct the action of simultaneous liquidation of several terrorists in different parts of the world. They observe the ongoing events on screens, zoom in frames to see details, redirect drones in dependence of the situation development, give orders to field operatives... We could infer that thanks to images Carrie and Saul are entirely immersed into real events; as if they belonged to them in a special, but not less credible way; as if they participated in the "presence of the absent object"; as if they looked at "surveyable surfaces that make something visible"; as if they looked at images, somewhat different and more real, but anyhow – images. But are we sure that these are still images and what tells us that they are maybe not?

Before I am ready to offer an answer to this question, I shall take some crucial aspects of the phenomenological nature of the image into consideration in order to show in which way we perceive images outside of the semiotic signifying theory, aside from the seemingly unavoidable connection between

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the signifier and the referent. In his introductory essay to the book *Au fond des Images*, Jean-Luc Nancy proposes an interesting concept regarding the connection of the image and the notion of the *sacred*. For Nancy sacred is not what we usually understand in the sense of religious (on the contrary, for him the religious and the sacred are counterposed), but he means detachment and severance, separation and loss of connection. In order to additionally stress the loss of contact with things man cannot establish contact with anymore and which always stay away from him, Nancy links a notion directly connected with the image to the notion of the sacred; it is *le distinct* – the distinct. Difference can be established either through the lack of connection or the lack of identity relation. That is, says Nancy, the characteristic of the image: “it does not touch” and “it is dissimilar”. The image “must be detached, placed outside and before one’s eyes... and it must be different from the thing. The image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially”.<sup>34</sup> What makes an image distinctive is its detachment, but this detachment at the same time points to the difference between the image and the thing. Although it is founded on detachment, the image influences the observer, but more in the sense of *relation (rapport)* than *conveyance (transport)*. Unlike the image as discontinuity between it and the thing, *continuity* is established where there are no images that could introduce elements of severance into the experience of the whole: continuity is established in the “homogeneous space of things and of the operations that bind them together”. On the other hand, “the distinct is always the heterogeneous, that is, the unbound – the unbindable”.<sup>35</sup>

The semiotic theory suggests that images contribute to closeness to things, that they establish a special sort of existence of that which actually does not exist, in the sense of replacement or simulacral presence as referentiality, signs and their relations. Contrary to that, Martin Seel’s theory and also Nancy’s, as we shall see, says that images are sign events which are not just objects *about* the world, which is presumed by the semiotic theory of representation, but they are also perceived as independent objects *in* the world. “The picture *refers*

34 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Image – the Distinct*, translated by Jeff Fort, Fordham University Press, New York 2005, p. 2.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

not just to something; it is in a special way *present*”.<sup>36</sup> The perception of abstract pictures as objects in the world does not follow a mechanism that would be different from figurative pictures. We cannot say that abstract pictures limit the status of the picture, but we can say that figurative pictures expand that status: “They present *their* appearing in order to refer to *other* appearances. By *virtue of* the phenomenal features they possess, figurative pictures refer to objects or imaginative projections outside the picture.”<sup>37</sup> Representation or imitation in realistic depictions are therefore not immanent to pictures as such, but must be understood as “additional achievement”. In Nancy this “additional achievement” (or referentiality) robs the picture of the element of difference. The French philosopher quotes a well-known theoretical problem evoked by Magritte’s painting *This Is Not a Pipe*. He says that with this sentence written on canvas Magritte simply states a banal “paradox of representation as imitation”. However, the truth of this picture is not in the fact that the depicted pipe is not a real pipe, which the sentence implies, but in the fact that “a thing presents itself only inasmuch as it resembles itself and says (mutely) of itself: I am this thing”. But the image of “this thing” as sameness with the thing itself is, says Nancy, “an other sameness than that of language and the concept, a sameness that does not belong to identification or signification (that of a ‘pipe’, for example), but that is supported only by itself in the image and as an image”.<sup>38</sup> With such explanation Nancy concurs with Mitchell’s interpretation of Magritte’s work as a metapicture, because, as suggested by the American theorist, because of the meta-fictional use of *both* image and text within the integral realm of the artwork like in a closed circle, the pictorial constantly points to the textual and vice versa. Lastly and somewhat paradoxically, it is not at all necessary to talk about metapictures, because they do it for us. This is especially true of pictures which in themselves, through a specific interplay of the textual and the visual, comment on their status (like Magritte’s work).

Interesting is the way in which Nancy describes the materiality of the picture, insisting on the “ground” from which the picture is “detached”, but it

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36 Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, p. 175.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

38 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Image – the Distinct*, p. 8–9.

is at the same time “cut out” of it. We detach the picture from the ground by pulling it away and clipping it: “the pulling away raises it and brings it forward: makes it a ‘fore’, a separate frontal surface; (...) the cutout or clipping creates edges in which the image is framed”.<sup>39</sup> It is indicative for our discussion that the French philosopher thinks that images, if they possess the necessary difference/distinctiveness do not lead us into immersion; we do not perceive them as “networks” or “screens”. Actually the double detachment of images (pulling away and clipping out of the ground) serve as a kind of protection from total immersion and drowning in the non-distinctive reality of images which we would not recognize as pictures anymore.<sup>40</sup> We could say that what in Nancy is clipped from the ground and has margins that constitute the frame of the picture resembles Boehm’s “surveyable total surface”, while the *distinctive* (*le distinct*) is conceptually similar to that which in Boehm makes a visual contrast – the *iconic difference*. For both authors the picture does not exist there where we are unable to spot discontinuity in the levels of visual perception anymore, no matter what an image represents and what is its possible status as sign and meaning. This equally applies to maximally illusionist images and the ones that do not represent “anything”; the image remains phenomenologically present no matter what we see in it as long as we can ontologically “pull it away” or “clip” from the continuity of some imagined ground.

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### ***Iconic simultaneity: between signs of difference and the phenomenon of immersion***

Now we are already able to more clearly see the path we need to take in the attempt to theoretically define the difference between an image-tableau on the one hand and a visual event on the other, i.e. between *iconic difference* and *iconic simultaneity*. Along the lines of the previously described theories, we could come to the general conclusion that a picture is characterized by the notion of difference, distinctiveness and separation. This difference is actually not equally reflected in the semiotic and phenomenological sense: in semiotic respect it

39 Ibid., p. 7.

40 Ibid., p.13.

is established as a difference in relation to other pictures as signs, while in the phenomenological sense we speak of a difference towards any object we do not perceive as a picture. Jan-Luc Nancy maintains that we cannot recognize a picture there where we spot continuity between things and occurrences, where the image and the event are connected into one whole. As opposed to this, a picture exists there where this whole is dissipated and where the depiction and the event show discontinuity; one has been or has happened before and the other after. Let us remind ourselves that also Rancière mentions film as a paradigmatic picture, because in film (especially in editing interventions) it is possible to clearly distinguish the stage of production and the stage of execution – the “alterity” of the film image is built-in into the medium itself, while this is not the case with TV simultaneity.<sup>41</sup> I would propose that the other, “continuous” kind of images is the one watched as a satellite streaming by Carrie Mathison, Saul Berenson and other CIA operatives, simultaneous to events (actions of field troops, drone bombing, executions of Islamists etc.) at the moment when they actually take place in different parts of the world. This is an example from the *Homeland* TV series, but it illustrates the principle of *iconic simultaneity* present on the screens at any surveillance center of shopping-malls, public institutions, business buildings etc. The screens conveying events in real time are not pictures in traditional sense anymore not because of sophisticated technological solutions that enable immersion into real events and active form of communication i.e. influence on real events, but because they for the first time make us lose the awareness of the medium as a conveyor of information.<sup>42</sup> If we are not yet ready to completely renounce the picture – because the observer and the event can be thousands of kilometers apart, so that we could consider that Peirce’s semiotic principle of iconic-indexical connection was still valid – maybe we would be ready to renounce the iconic difference, because, as we have seen, there is no more discontinuity in the perception of the visible world.

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41 Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 3–8.

42 If screens could be large enough and if they could concavely encompass the field of vision before the observer (which is technically already possible), the frame that divides the continuum of reality from the image surface, the “metaphysical” element in the presence of the picture would be gone, because it would turn into real physical presence in the observed event.

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The model of phenomenological differentiation of two reality levels presents itself at this moment as superimposed to the semiotic one, although this is more about intertwining in which the priority of the bodily and perceptive aspects constantly interchange with sign-related and iconic aspects. When we stand before a screen that can simulate the actual size of objects and when by zooming the image we can come closer or away from the object like we would do with our physical movements, the question of iconic difference becomes the question of the *perception* of difference. Because we *know* that we are standing before a screen as a fundamentally visual fact and that we are not threatened by immediate physical danger from what we see on it, what we at that moment perceive as an interrelation of difference and immersion I call *iconic simultaneity*. If we use the phenomenological concept of the image by Jean-Paul Sartre from his book *L'Imaginaire*, we can say that in iconic simultaneity primarily disappears the “illusion of immanence” – that which crucially defines the possibility of differentiation of different ontological levels in visual cognizance. Sartre asserted that the illusion of immanence worked by making a connection between the act of perception and objects we perceive in the picture natural i.e. that the picture initially comes about in accordance with the model of perception in the way that through different automatic mechanisms of knowledge and convention perception is turned into images. In that way a “picturized object” would be first constructed in the world of things and only then would it be pulled away from that world. However, in Sartre’s opinion this postulate does not correspond to actual phenomenological facts: “if perception and image are not by nature distinct, if their objects are not given to consciousness as *sui generis*, there will not remain any means for us to distinguish these two ways in which objects are given”. By its inner nature, a picture must have an “element of radical distinction”.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, says Sartre, the illusion of immanence is based on psychological models that abolish the difference, i.e. radical heterogeneity between awareness and images so that we could think in images and with the help of images. The illusion of immanence is necessary in a communication system where awareness operates

43 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary. A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, Routledge, London 2004 (1940), p. 12.

on a different level than the one of physical objects, even when these objects are in a certain way built into awareness and make a continuum with it. The illusion of immanence enables the continuum not to disclose itself in some kind of a metapictorial turn, because in that case awareness would cease to be transparent in itself and its integrity would be destroyed by a multitude of opaque screens that would assume a place between awareness and the world.<sup>44</sup>

Commenting on the importance of Sartre's theses for the understanding of the relation between old and new media, John Lechte draws our attention to the fact that in Sartre's theory an image is never a thing in itself but always only a "means of contact" with that which is depicted. Because for Sartre a picture is just a means of making that which it shows present, at the moment when we recognize the picture as a (material) object, for example in a painted portrait, then it ceases to be a picture. How is that possible? Sartre makes a distinction between two kinds of existence of the pictorial in our awareness: the first is, as already stated, the illusion of immanence, which with the help of *reflective* consciousness connects inner (mental) images with real objects. The other is the *evocation* that functions as *imagining* consciousness and enables us to understand that the image consists of signs someone has created for us and addressed them to us through the image. A visual sign is in principle evocation.<sup>45</sup> Interpreted in this way, none of the two models of generating images in our mind is not more real than the other. The material aspect of the image object does not emerge here as crucial. The question "does a picture primarily exist as an object in the world or does its primary incarnation happen in the consciousness" becomes irrelevant. John Lechte draws a parallel with new media theorists like Lev Manovich and Friedrich Kittler of whom he asserts that they insist on the concept of digital image as the illusion of immanence, because they believe that the image used to be real and possessed the quality of a phenomenological artifact, but today it has turned into something non-material and virtual, into a pure information. Lechte asserts that for Sartre the image has *never* been real, so that with the help of the French

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44 Ibid., p. 6.

45 John Lechte, "Some Fallacies and Truths Concerning the Image in Old and New Media", in: *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2011, p. 357–358.

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philosopher's postulates it would be maybe easier to access the concept of fully virtual images of our time than this seems to be the case.<sup>46</sup>

Now the fundamental question is if we can speak of pictures as something that is not real, because virtual space is maybe not real in relation to physical aspects of "human" space, but it is real in relation to images appearing in virtual space. If we assume that virtual space consists of virtual nature, virtual people, and everything else virtual, are then all relations within such space virtually *real*? I think that this question is also crucial for the understanding of iconic simultaneity, because in my opinion the notion of simultaneity of the image and the event can equally explain two most important problems of the image theory today: on the one hand the continuity of the presented and *represented* image in virtual space and on the other the traditional concept of the picture as "discontinuity" and difference between the "ground" and "surveyable total surface". The notion of iconic difference should be extended by the temporal dimension of simultaneity so that we could better understand contemporary versions of image planes/screens, whose representations surround us in real life. In order to declare an event simultaneous in iconic terms, it is necessary to observe five distinctive iconic and phenomenological levels in it:

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1) A picture representing an event is a surveyable surface with a perceptible frame. The event cannot be visually unlimited and the consciousness of the difference between *here* and *there* must be retained.

2) Although the events we see in the picture/on-screen are real, we do not attend an event but an image, i.e. we witness pictorial presence. Digital photography is *not* a phenomenon of iconic simultaneity, because although it draws the event and the picture maximally close together, it finally produces an effect of discontinuity/difference.

3) With the help of telecommunication connections our presence at the event is active and we can influence the events in the picture. i.e. we can influence the real event (abort the action, redefine its aims or re-direct its focus).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 362.



4) Although active, simultaneous experience of the picture is not *interactive*. If it were interactive, we could no more speak of the experience of the image, because that image, strictly speaking, does not enable a tactile experience. For example, tactile effects in IMAX 4D are not (only) pictorial.

5) Considering the simultaneity of that which we see on-screen and the real event and considering the possibility of active intervention, the observer assumes a special kind of ethic responsibility for his own view and the consequences of his actions.

### **Conclusion: towards the image as a spatial continuum**

In my concept of iconic simultaneity, as a point of departure I take the assumption that the notions of difference and immersion define the status of pictoriality through two extreme instances – pure visibility and pure *invisibility*. However, the technological development of the systems of depiction and manipulation has established a new pragmatics of pictorial presence. If we do not want to abandon the notion of image in general, we have to consider the possibility of existence of an “interstice of presence” and the development of new tools for the perception of the difference between particular pictorial phenomena. As such, images as televisual facts under direct control of the observer do not anymore have traditional distinctive characteristics that even some all-encompassing image science could cope with for the simple reason that every interpretation of an image is based on the difference between a sign and a phenomenon. In accordance with that, in the case of full immersion the difference vanishes and for that reason there can be no image anymore (in that case we witness a visual continuum of virtual reality). In his *Aesthetics of Appearing* Martin Seel disputes Lambert Wiesing’s argument that there is a logical development sequence from figurative paintings on canvas to video-

clips and cyber-space.<sup>47</sup> Seel thinks that the image is a phenomenon of surface that cannot be turned into (real or imaginable) spatial relations or in other words that an image cannot overcome its own ontological givens defined by a radical cut. In virtual space of simulation this cut does not take place anymore: in cyber-space the medium becomes invisible for the first time, because it becomes equal in categorical terms to that which it is supposed to (re)present. “Here the medium is a program and an apparatus that together produce independent sensuous appearances. The iconic difference disappears.”<sup>48</sup> The German philosopher thinks that the so-called “flood of images” in the contemporary society of spectacle is actually not a flood of *images* but of pure visual information, which we do not experience as signs of something else in semiotic sense anymore: “Without the difference between external occurrences and their imaginative comprehension, there would be no pictorial occurrence there. We are ‘in the picture’ only if we believe we are not in the picture.”<sup>49</sup> The problem of the perception of difference thus becomes a first-rate political question: is it still possible to retain the awareness about the fundamental discontinuity of image and reality? If we cannot do this through *difference* anymore, we must accept that the perception of pictorial phenomena (as this was already noticed by Sartre) always already has its object – which is not perception as such, but the object of the image in itself – and that the otherness of the image in the age of screen culture is necessarily recognized in the maybe paradoxical and for the traditional notion of the image untypical *temporal* continuum between presentation and representation. The mentioned five theses on *iconic simultaneity* are not opposed to the extremes of difference and immersion. They just try to make visible the vast area of impact of images formed in the interstices, in an increasingly dramatic manner and with unforeseeable consequences.

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47 In his book *Artificial Presence* Wiesing speaks of four phases in the development of image media: 1) the fixed image object of the easel picture; 2) the moving, yet determined, image object of film; 3) the freely manipulable image object of animation and 4) the interactive image object of simulation. However, Wiesing explicitly says that the course of this development is not perfecting or progress: “An animation is not a better film, and a simulation is not a better easel picture. (...) Immersion is a property that can appear in all four kinds of pictorial visibility” (Wiesing, *Ibid.*, p. 100). I think that therefore Wiesing’s chronology cannot be considered causal and historical like Seel does, opposing the continuity of medial image development, but comparative and analytical, which, instead of history, stresses the *methods* of pictorial presence.

48 Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, p. 181.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 184.