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## THE LAST FORMALIST, OR W. J. T. MITCHELL AS ROMANTIC DINOSAUR"

PRAXIS  
SERIES

▼ The Last  
Formalist, or  
W.J.T. Mitchell  
as Romantic  
Dinosaur



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### [The Last Formalist, or W.J.T. Mitchell as Romantic Dinosaur](#)

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### [The Last Formalist, or W. J. T. Mitchell as Romantic Dinosaur](#)

### [An Interview with Orrin N. C. Wang](#)

**Editor's Note:** Users might be interested in some account of the origin of this project, how the Romantic Circles Praxis Series came to think of and to dilate upon so involved an entity. What follows is an e-mail exchange during the months of January and

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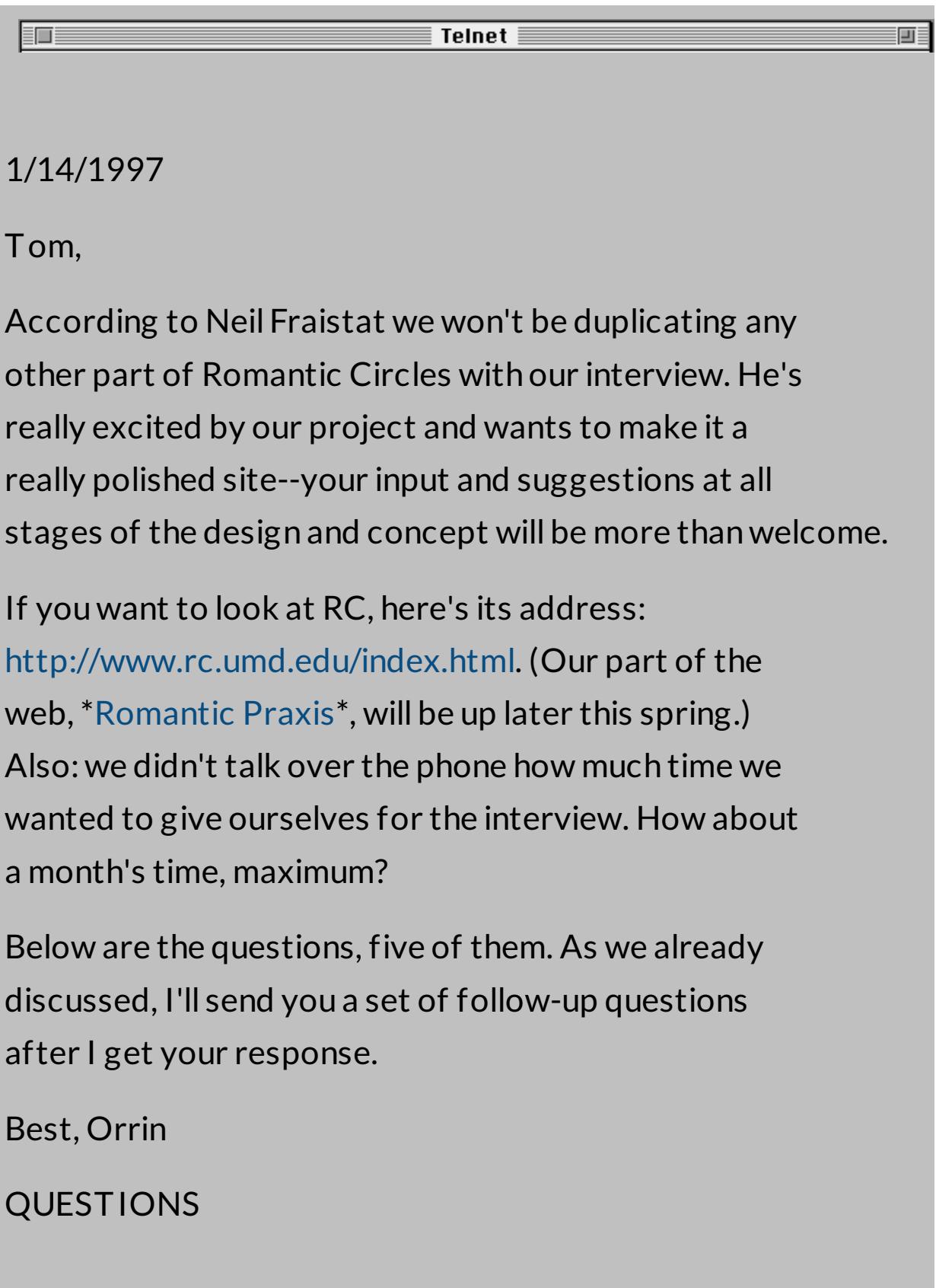
February 1997 between an editor at *Praxis* and W. J. T. Mitchell, Gaylord Donnelly Distinguished Professor of English and Art at the University of Chicago, and editor of *Critical Inquiry*. *Praxis* had initially contacted Mitchell with the idea of doing an electronic volume that would contain a collection of his past work and new commentary by him. Mitchell then suggested an alternate format, in which he would be interviewed over e-mail, responding to a series of initial and follow-up questions about his long-standing interests in Romanticism and pictorial theory. Praxis enthusiastically agreed; as users will soon detect, however, the exchange very soon turned into something else, the implications of which are still yet to be seen. For documentary purposes the e-mails containing the original questions asked of Mitchell precede the two parts of his response. If nothing else, the epistles attest to the good faith with which the (then) somewhat naive editor attempted to discharge his interviewing duties. To help make more sense of what *Praxis* has \*\*unleashed,\*\* a gloss accompanies Mitchell's "answer" to the questions. Unfortunately, that writing also takes on its own life as well, veering away from the main text as much as engaging with it. Indeed, the gloss's mixture of sober commentary and fantasy veers toward the irresponsible. Apparently, Mitchell's prose carries something highly infectious within its form, not the least being the compulsive habit of referring to one's self in the third person.

**Image** For the Blake engraving, Lessing J. Rosenwald  
**Credits:** Collection, Library of Congress. [The William Blake Archive](#).

Special thanks to Scott Krafft and R. Russell Maylone of the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special

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Collections, Northwestern University, for the dinosaur images from Gideon Algernon Mantell's *Wonders of Geology; or, A familiar exposition of geological phenomena*, New Haven, 1839.

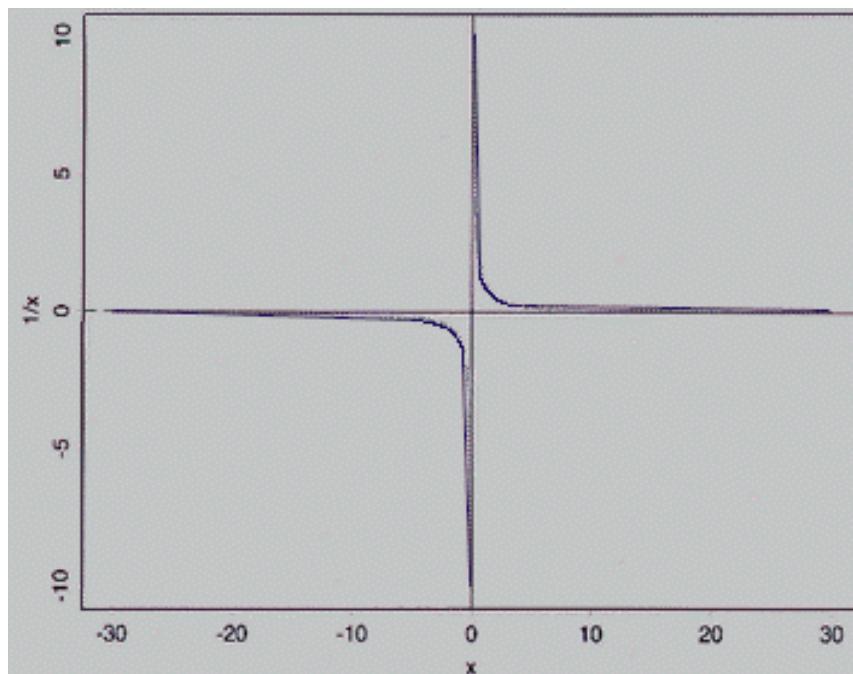


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- 1) You started your career as a Romanticist and a Blake scholar but have now apparently moved on to a more wide-ranging exploration of pictorial theory. Would you agree with that description or is it more complicated than that? How much is your interest in images connected in some fundamental way to issues in Romanticism?
  - 2) Is there anything about images (or theories of images) that strikes you as distinctly NOT Romantic?
  - 3) Could you discuss how your thoughts about images have evolved, changed, or remained the same in terms of your earlier Romanticist work and your present interests?
  - 4) People are now talking about a split in the academy between high theory and cultural practice, or cultural studies. "High Theory" is usually associated with Paul de Man and the past influence of the Yale School. Because of de Man a certain high Romanticism has also been associated with high theory. So, conceivably, one could talk about a split in Romantic studies today, between high Romanticism/high theory and low Romanticism/cultural studies, with "low Romanticism" standing in for writers and ideas not associated with the canon of the big six male poets. Your work, however, seems to complicate this opposition. Do you agree?
  - 5) Your work has always been characterized by a stress on materialist socio-historic analysis. But your present work on images also seems to be a THEORY of history and of its conception. Do you have any thoughts about how

## 1. The Romantic Education of W. J. T. Mitchell

### An Interview with Orrin N. C. Wang

Before Mitchell was a Romanticist, a Blake scholar, or even a literary scholar of any kind, he was a mathematician--admittedly, a rather dull one, so he got out of the field in the nick of time. But one problem that continued to haunt him, and to haunt all his subsequent work with literature and visual art, was the curious relation between geometry and algebra, the strange ability of mathematics to translate words into pictures and back again. This problem



(which so far as he could tell, mathematicians regard as quite uninteresting) was simply the relation

The Sorrows  
of Young  
Wieboldt

A Gloss

Things were  
becoming  
more difficult  
than he had  
anticipated. W  
rubbed his  
eyes. He didn't  
rue coming to  
Ingolstadt,  
seeking out  
Mitchell and  
the man's  
secrets of  
nature,  
knowledge  
that seemed  
possessed at  
once by a  
responsible  
doctor and a  
magus. And it  
wasn't that the  
interview itself

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between linear, sequential strings of symbols or mathematical "sentences" like  $y=1/x$ , and the diagrams in Cartesian coordinates that transform these statements into visual images, in this case, a curve descending from an infinite height along the vertical y-axis, turning right and skating off into an infinite eastern distance along the x-axis. As one came closer and closer to either axis, as the value of one variable approached zero, the other value approached infinity. You could actually see this happening, precisely mapped in a firm, determinate material outline. The convergence of (and gap between) the abstract string of letters and numbers (with their readable, phonetic equivalents) and the silent, wirey bounding lines and forms of geometry struck the impressionable student as traces of a mystic rationality, a logic of the real. In short, he was a bone-headed idealist, a Platonist, and a literalist of the imagination.

was changing right before him into something that was taking on the form of something different altogether. It wasn't that questions weren't being answered, nor that W didn't know what to expect next. No, it was Mitchell's ideas themselves. They haunted him, made sleep difficult; wasn't he supposed to be doing his own work? W once thought he had mastered Mitchell's lessons, understood the

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implications of  
seeing beyond  
Derrida's  
opposition  
between  
speech and  
writing to that  
of image and  
text.

2. No doubt all this stemmed from a pampered boyhood. Mitchell was raised as a sickly, precocious little prince attended by his mother and two adoring sisters, and nursed into healthy young manhood as the most near-sighted wide receiver in the history of high school football. His family lived just far enough above the poverty line to maintain in him the illusion of a magical destiny, surrounded by the icons of American frontier catholicism, as much at home in the land of Oz as in the Nevada desert of the 1950s. Small wonder that he secretly never gave up his childhood belief in the magical power of images and symbols, and remained an animist when he should have known better. The world, he thought, could be changed, and not just by direct action, but more fundamentally by the making of things whose shape and significance would exert a subtle transformative influence on their

But, like  
Mitchell's own  
references to  
the  
reanimating  
influence of  
[Henri Focillon](#)  
(Fossil?),  
Mitchell's text  
forced W to  
reconsider  
prior  
assumptions,  
to wonder  
about new  
connections.  
W sighed.  
Perhaps it  
might help to  
return to  
Mitchell's initial

beholders. The only question was what to make. Early trials at a "creative" career included novels, poems, plays, films, newspapers, comic books, and sandcastles. Unfortunately, sandcasting was the only artistic medium in which Mitchell showed real talent. Given the limited career opportunities in this area, he resigned himself to trying to explain why some things in the world are astonishing: why they stop us in our tracks, or secretly accompany us on our ways, haunting and unforgettable. For some reason, Mitchell thought the answer to this question would be found by going to graduate school and getting a Ph.D. in English.

It was only a step from all this to Blake, who actually preceded any commitment to Romanticism for Mitchell. Romanticism came third for him; he learned it as a professional necessity "on the job" at Johns Hopkins and Ohio State University, but since he learned it during the most Romantic moment in the late twentieth century, namely the sixties, it made a powerful impression on his far too malleable and mutable character, which was continually being reshaped in this period by utopian political fantasies of imminent revolution and liberal doses of gross and violent stimulants.

image of the asymptote. We remembered looking up the term while reading Fredric Jameson, who used "asymptotic" to describe the relation between the symbolic and the real, and to argue that just because language didn't touch the real, we shouldn't assume that the real didn't exist (*Ideologies*, 104). Conversely, the intersection of x and y would be the phantasm of the imaginary. For Jameson the asymptote

Like most Blake scholars, Mitchell couldn't quite fit Blake into Romanticism, and so he didn't really fit into Romantic studies either. He tried in vain to retrain himself as a Wordsworthian, perhaps as a contrarian exercise. But Wordsworth himself never came into view: only his shadowy mental world, the fair trains of images, memories, and echoes that seemed to flow off from Wordsworth into something like "bourgeois consciousness" itself. Mitchell could never do more with Wordsworth than to cast him as a stereotypical, middle-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male sentimentalist. Since this was a bit too much like looking in the mirror, and Mitchell had plenty of sublime egotism to contend with in his own person, Wordsworth was only useful to him as an image of what he wished to avoid: ambivalence, guilt, anxiety, self-consciousness, vanity, smugness, narcissism. The fact that Wordsworth loved geometry almost as much as poetry, and that a book of Euclid's Elements shows up in the Arab Dream in Book V of *The Prelude*, may also have contributed to Mitchell's ambivalence. Later it would resurface in a strange little essay, an afterthought really, called "Diagrammatology."

stressed the role of the symbolic, the necessity of representation, and, consequently, of a Marxist hermeneutic. For Mitchell, however, the image of the asymptote seemed to hold its own attractions, its own animistic "logic of the real" that insinuated a discussion about images and the imaginary that didn't absolutely depend on the activities of interpretation and sign-making. But what would

that mean?  
When asked  
over e-mail  
Mitchell was  
silent about the  
Jameson  
comparison. It  
seemed at the  
very least that  
for Jameson  
the imaginary  
by implication  
was associated  
with the non-  
substantial--it  
was always  
something that  
then turned out  
to be the gap  
between x and  
y--while for  
Mitchell the  
image was real,  
like the lines of  
the **asymptote**  
diagram  
themselves.

3. (Perhaps,  
thought W,

Thus, Blake--resolutely, rigorously mad,  
committed to his vision, materialist of the

because in an image a gap could be real, whereas in language it couldn't be?) This would seem to mark a basic difference between Mitchell and Lacan, whom Mitchell did cite: the former associated the image with a certain basic (crass, even) materiality while the latter characterized the imago as "illusory, phantasmic, oneiric, hallucinatory" (Rosalind Krauss's

imagination--became Mitchell's ego ideal. Blake (he thought) transcended Romanticism, reaching back to the Biblical prophets, to Chaucer and the Gothic artists, to Dante and Shakespeare, Michaelangelo and Raphael, to Milton and the "Sweet Science" of the Enlightenment. He also reached forward and abroad: to Hegel and Marx and Freud, to the Pre-Raphaelites, the Modernists, the Surrealists, to Joyce, Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, and Pound, and (in the sixties of Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, and Herbert Marcuse) to contemporary poetry and social movements. Unlike the Romantics, Blake was not snared in the narrow, reactive ethos of English culture in the early 19th century, but epitomized a kind of working-class cosmopolitanism. He had not (like Wordsworth) given up on his youthful commitment to revolution, had not abandoned his children or suppressed his debt to (and hatred of) Rousseau with a retreat into Burkean conservatism; he had not turned into a government hireling, a miserable Tory. Blake stayed crazy to the end, wearing the revolutionary cap, singing hymns and painting his visions even on his deathbed. Mitchell decided, accordingly, to persist in his folly until he became wise or got tenure, whichever came first.

As luck would have it, tenure came soon and wisdom never did arrive, or Mitchell might

words, in an essay that accompanied Mitchell's in *October* 77, Summer 1996 [91]). If Mitchell started off as a "bone-headed Platonist," he was a peculiar one, insofar as his intuitions about the reality of images and ideas depended on their materiality. An image of a table would have its own integrity, its own animism. W paused. Had he gotten this right? Would

have run off to start life over as an independent film maker. (His one and only experimental film, *Metaphorsis* (1970), gathers dust among the basement tapes). His dissertation (later his first book), *Blake's Composite Art* (1976), tried to work out the mystical, formal calculus that holds Blake's poetic and pictorial expressions together in the form of the illuminated book. This book required another semi-successful attempt to absorb some new training, this time in art history. Looking back later on his Blake book, Mitchell would find it embarrassingly thin and even old-fashioned. Although begun at Johns Hopkins in 1968 and finished around 1974, it was almost completely innocent of either the structuralist or the post-structuralist revolution (a cautious footnote to Roland Barthes' semiology was the only sign of any textual hipness whatsoever; the Gallic mentors were existentialists and phenomenologists--Sartre and Bachelard). The book opened with an invocation of T. S. Eliot, of all people, and promised a "correction of [the] taste" by which Blake had been mistakenly appreciated. The art historical side was almost equally retrograde. Gombrich, Arnheim, Panofsky, Meyer Schapiro, and Henri Focillon were not exactly the cutting edge of art history in this period, though at least they were significant theorists. On the literary side, it would be fair

Mitchell  
agree? W  
shuffled his  
paper copy,  
quieting such  
thoughts.

It did seem  
that this  
equation  
between  
matter and  
image spoke  
to one of the  
initial  
questions  
that Mitchell  
didn't  
address  
directly, the  
relation  
between his  
materialist  
approach and  
a theory of  
history.

to say that Mitchell had no theory of the text  
of equal weight to what he was learning in the  
visual arts.

4. What he had instead was a practice, learned in the seminars of the great Romanticist (and Neoclassicist)

Wasserman's approach was as rigorous and demanding as that of any botanist examining a specimen. No

Earl Wasserman. This practice was what we used to call "close reading," an obsessive attention to detail in the reading of texts. Wasserman spent a month explicating Shelley's "Mont Blanc," a week on the first line-- "The everlasting universe of things flows through the mind." He showed that every word and letter was in its fit place, and that this fitness had a necessary, demonstrable relation to the paraphrasable content of the poem.

detail was beneath notice. Every feature had to be subjected to the question, "why must it be that way and not some other?" Mitchell's formalist temperament greeted this discipline as the true science of cultural forms, and he determined to link it up with the spirit of the age in which he found himself: "There was music in the cafes at night/ And revolution in the air."

5. The first principle of Wasserman's approach was the autonomy of the text, its freedom from authorial intention, social history, politics, and every day life (though one was expected to know all this in encyclopedic detail so as to be able to demonstrate the de facto as well as de jure autonomy of the text). The second principle was that while a text was an organic whole, a unique individual entity, it inhabited a literary historical biosphere filled with evolving species, genres, and more or less durable "classes," the genotypes within which the textual phenotype achieved its identity. Wasserman would never have taken the

Certainly Mitchell was aware of the association of the imago with the hallucinatory -- his whole study in *Iconology* (1986) of the iconoclastic tendencies in Marx's theory of ideology spoke to that

organic metaphor this far. Mitchell, unable as always to discern the tactful limits of a figure of speech, insisted on literalizing and materializing the trope, making it not only something we say, but something we see and handle like a figure emerging in sand or clay.

Fortunately, this fetishistic obsession with the materiality of the text found its proper object in Blake's illuminated books, which Wasserman professed to find unreadable. The algebraic symbols of Blake's verbal allegory and the geometry of his wirey bounding lines wove together in a tangled web of signs, images, imprints, marks, stains, cuts, blots and blurs--all presented as a magical corpus of material objects whose heterogeneous "aesthetic autonomy" was precisely the condition for them to have agency and impact in the world. Formalism and aestheticism were not antithetical to political commitment, but technologies of utopian revelation. Mitchell spent a decade trying to unravel Blake's web of signs, trying to demonstrate its coherence and its efficacy. He evidently thought that the revolutionary, transformative impact of Blake's books would somehow be, not just revealed by a formal account of their internal necessity and rightness, but actually aided and amplified by this critique. The critical revelation was supposed to unlock

issue. But Mitchell was very good at ideological critique himself. W vividly recalled reading Mitchell's piece on Lessing's *Laocoön*, and realizing the extent to which the social world could be part of a discussion about a piece of art. Indeed, W had always associated Mitchell with the socio-historical analysis that was part of critical thought since the 1980s. Yet Mitchell's response

SENSORY ORGAN SCHEMATIC FORM	EYE circle, orb	EAR spiral, vortex	TONGUE archetype, Semeiotic	NOSE arch, meander, U
LINEAR VARIATIONS				
REPRESENTATIONAL FORMS	sun, moon, shell, wheel, halo, globe, bubble	whirlwind, whirlpool, coil, scroll, spiral staircase, tentacle, serpent	flame, waves, leaves, vines, serpents	cave, altar, arch, gate, cathedral, gravestone, stone tablets
HUMAN FIGURES	crumpled, in fetal position, or expansive, outstretched limbs in radii	dancing, flying, tower above, crouched, twisted	dancing, flying, leaping, climbing, or statuary, static	crumpled, supine, reclining

(in Mitchell's view) been dulled by mystical obscurantism (a result of assuming the magical effects rather than demonstrating them), or crippled by the failure to attend to the dialectical materiality of Blake's visual and verbal compositions. Mitchell thought he had found the key to Blake's graphic style and his repertoire of verbal/visual icons in a set of hieroglyphs of the senses. These hieroglyphs (arch, spiral, circle, and S curve) made Blake's temporal and spatial forms literally congruent with the structure of human perception, what Mitchell would later rediscover under the rubric of Lacan's "scopic" and "vocative" drives, the parallel sensory-semiotic circuits of ear and mouth, eye and hand. The widespread belief that Blake had "anticipated" both Marx and Freud (and Nietzsche and Bataille) increased the sense that very high stakes were involved in the formal justification of his composite art.

indirectly complicated this categorization. If materiality was associated with history it was for Mitchell also associated with form, which was one step away from a formalist discourse that many had consciously opposed to historical thought. W also recalled what Mitchell had said to him over the phone, how Focillon had described images as living creatures, how we then made

stories up about them. So even if form for Mitchell was historically specific (as opposed to the ahistorical form of subversion and containment in New Historicism, as some Marxists might say) it still seemed that, for Mitchell, the form of images in some way conditioned the very options of historical inquiry.

6. W did remember Mitchell mentioning in his response the "political unconscious" to which images referred; still, W felt there was a tendency in Mitchell's prose to flirt at least with the possibility of formal structures that preceded any

historical operation. W did not think this was necessarily a bad thing; Mitchell certainly seemed unbothered by this predicament, almost reveling in it as the title to the interview implied. Taking into account Mitchell's well-known contrary nature--W had first read Rousseau with him--W still felt Mitchell was using the discourse of form to shake up predictable debates over form and history, aesthetics and social use.

Mitchell himself referred to his ideas about images in *Iconology* as constituting a "perfect compromise formation" between theory and practice. W preferred to see it as more of a negative dialectic, which insisted that the best historical work also somehow questioned the ontological certitudes of its own analysis. This certainly seemed to return the conversation to Romantic terrain. W remembered Mitchell's life-long affiliation with Blake, the Romantic poet who complicated any easy division between idealism and materialism, the imagination and history. W idly compared those divisions to the one that people had long used to make sense of Percy Shelley, the opposition between idealism and skepticism that received its own categorical shake-up with the 1980s stress on Percy's language, which did not so much sublate idealism and skepticism as reorient the discussion around a deconstructive figuring of tropes preceding either of those terms. Would it be safe to say that, in contrast, Mitchell through Blake had found a formalism of images that preceded the division between idealism and materialism? But what, then, was the difference between a figure and a form? W caught himself. In contrast to Mitchell's *kunstleroman*, which promised a certain--albeit peripatetic--progression, W felt he was going in the other direction, into more questions,

7. W thought about the other initial question that Mitchell really hadn't answered, which also seemed connected to what W was groping toward. This was the rather convoluted query concerning high Romanticism and low Romanticism, high theory and cultural studies. Rosalind Krauss had argued for the investment of cultural studies

Blake's oeuvre began to seem to Mitchell like a kind of rough meteorite dropped anachronistically into the history of human culture from some outer orbit of the imagination. He began to sober up from this view toward the end of the 1970s, writing a short but decisive essay called "Dangerous Blake," which flirted with retraction by re-opening the question of Blake's sanity and formal coherence. This was followed in the early eighties by a return to Blake under the sign of Derridean "writing" and some troubling doubts about the ambiguity of Blake's political stances, and then in the nineties by "Chaosthetics," (forthcoming in *Huntington Library Quarterly*) which tries (again unsuccessfully) to break on through to the other side, to the Blake of obscenity, incompetence, and incoherence. Unable either to demonstrate Blake's formal mastery on the model of a Joycean demiurge, or to settle on a measured assessment of disaster (Blake as a Bataille or Gulley Jimson) Mitchell resigned himself to a lifetime of ambivalence about his poetic and artistic lord and master. He had thought to take Northrop Frye's advice to let his mind expand within the works of a great genius, and wound up unsure whether he had

in the imago, in terms of subject interpellation and self-identification (85). W took this to mean the commitment in cultural studies to some type of ideological critique and political intervention. One could certainly argue with Krauss's terms (equating Althusser with cultural studies was already problematic); still, W did feel that Mitchell's wide-ranging interest in images did lend itself not only to a

hitched his wagon to an isolated but harmless lunatic (to recall Leigh Hunt's judgment) whose "meanness of culture" (T. S. Eliot's verdict) would make him forever a marginal figure in the history of culture. Romanticism at first seemed like the only way out, and Mitchell began to envision a book -- never written -- entitled *Main Themes in Romantic Painting and Poetry* (a good conservative rubric for grant proposals) that would have taken his rudimentary competence in art history and literary studies into the immediate neighborhood of Blake's contemporaries. A quasi-military notion of expanding frontiers of knowledge, of "control" over disciplinary and historical "fields" haunted Mitchell's thinking in the late seventies, and produced an ever-increasing sense of inadequacy and incompetence. The only traces of this moment were 1) the development of an interest in landscape, at first centered on the Romantics, and later expanded into a fascination with national, imperial, and colonial formations of "natural space" as ideological projections, and 2) a very strange essay called "Metamorphoses of the Vortex: Hogarth, Blake, and Turner," which tried to focus on an abstract formal image that "evolves" across the boundary between Neoclassicism and Romanticism and circulates as both a visual and verbal motif in

materialist, politically motivated approach but also to a cultural ethnography that consciously disturbed the sanctity of simply studying high literature. (Mitchell's pieces on CNN and *Do The Right Thing* would be cases in point.) However, in terms of Romantic subjects (Blake) and themes (the image in imagination), Mitchell seemed to remain very much a high

an astonishing number of writers and artists during this transition. Symbol of dialectical transformation, form of turbulence, icon of revolution, the vortex linked politics to form at the foundations of semiosis. Landscape seemed to constitute a kind of zero degree of the image for Mitchell, a space of blankness, pure background, "nature" unmarked by artifice, a nullity that could then be unveiled as the most fundamental and decisive construction of all -- the very space which had to be provided prior to any mark or sign whatsoever. The vortex, by contrast, seemed to be a figure of unmarking, the primal figure, mark, or trace that, like the "scribble" of a child's first writing or drawing, manifests the birth of form. Derrida's "Scribble," his introduction to Bishop Warburton's eighteenth-century treatise on hieroglyphics, became a master text for Mitchell during this phase.

These essays in speculative iconology had two effects: 1) they encouraged Mitchell to think that maybe Romanticism was not his real field, but that he was suited to something more nebulous and general like "image theory," and its relation to language; 2) the vortex essay served as a job talk to land him the position as senior Romanticist at the University of Chicago. Mitchell celebrated his arrival in Chicago by writing

Romanticist. W  
wasn't sure  
what to make  
of this  
predicament,  
except for his  
own intuition  
that an interest  
in high  
Romanticism  
was more and  
more going to  
be  
accompanied  
by a rationale  
for that  
interest's  
existence--an  
exercise in  
Habermasian  
legitimacy  
that, given  
Romanticism's  
history of  
legitimation  
and  
delegitimation,  
wasn't simply  
good or bad  
but something  
that, for a  
start, had to be

his first "theoretical" essay ("Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory"), a piece that deliberately cut itself loose from any textual interpretation or historical explanation. This essay could not have been written at a worse moment. The academy was reeling with the impact of the theory revolution, when Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, women's studies, African American studies, Neo Marxism, New Historicism, and a host of other innovations were hitting English departments and spreading into the rest of the humanities and social sciences. Mitchell's "Spatial Form" essay tried to deconstruct the time-space opposition in theories of literary form at exactly the moment this distinction was being mobilized (by Fredric Jameson among others) to distinguish modernism from postmodernism. Mitchell's attempt to deperiodize the concept of literary space was hard to distinguish from a utopian Platonism, postulating iconic revelations of temporal structure in literary texts. "Spatial Form" fell into well-deserved oblivion, though the book in which it appeared, *The Language of Images*, did not. The essay did, however, elicit an invitation to join the editorial board of the recently-founded journal, *Critical Inquiry*. This, it must be said, was the luckiest turn of events in Mitchell's life. It freed him from any

recognized as an object requiring reflection in its own right. The other part to these musings was the historical connection between high Romanticism and the high theory of deconstruction and the Yale School, especially Paul de Man. This connection underwrote the tendency, rightly or wrongly, to view the movements of Romantic studies away from high theory and high Romanticism as first, indeed

historical field identity, and allowed him to indulge his inveterate tendency to amateur dabbling and fickle curiosity under the cover of a professional occupation: magazine editor. It allowed him to rekindle his love for another Romantic hero, William Hazlitt, whose credo of "independent" criticism became the hidden agenda of *Critical Inquiry*. *CI*, he thought, would try to emulate the great Romantic periodicals of the 1820s in England. It would pursue the advancement of critical thinking wherever it led, without allegiance to any single party-line, discipline, or profession. It would be a forum for sharp debate and polemic, for daring, passionate experimental writing, and for the most advanced, rigorous forms of speculation, no matter how esoteric or difficult. It would reinvent itself periodically (all puns intended) by drawing on the talents of younger editors and contributors, and assessing new critical movements as they emerged.

Propelled into the center of theoretical debate in the postmodern era, Mitchell conceived his own grand theoretical project, an iconology or "theory of images" that would answer all the fundamental questions that had plagued his work since the beginning: What is an image? How is it different from a text? Why do these

happening, and, second, as parts of the same historical intellectual formation. W felt that the field was just beginning to learn how to talk about these matters and that Mitchell's case was an interesting one to consider in light of these concerns. Or perhaps he just wanted Mitchell to talk a bit about de Man, whom W had first encountered in Mitchell's class. It was interesting, though not strange, that de Man did not

questions -- and the answers to them -- make a difference, not only to our understanding of literature and the arts, but to the whole fabric of human signification, and the ethical and political cultures that are mediated by it? He plunged into philosophy and aesthetics to find the answer; he read avidly in the "new art history" and in the founding texts of film and photographic theory; he went back to the ancients (Plato and Aristotle on mimesis) and to the more ancient (anthropological discussions of fetishism and image-magic; religious debates over idolatry and iconoclasm). He grappled with the newest, most glamorous image theories (Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and Baudrillard's *Simulations*) and with the old war-horses (Lessing's *Laocoön*; Burke's *Sublime and the Beautiful*). He even went back to Blake, but this time in the context of Romanticism, where the time-honored debates over "imagination" now took on a new resonance, and the problem of the mental or psychological image, of fantasy, memory, dreams, perceptions, and the construction of the senses became (as always) literal, material, and engaged in dialectical relations with language.

really play a part in Mitchell's account of the 1970s and 80s zeitgeist of theory that Mitchell had participated in and helped create as the editor of

*Critical Inquiry.*

Perhaps by formulating the question more directly in the follow-up interview, W would get an answer that would clarify what W was trying to think through; perhaps the question about figure and form might finally make sense.

Unsurprisingly, both Mitchell and de Man led W on a detour. Mitchell, because he didn't answer the follow-up question about de Man, and de Man because he led W to think about the other questions that Mitchell also did not answer. For if de Man, high theory, and high Romanticism formed some type of topoi in dialogue, or perhaps even in contention, with Mitchell's ideas, a large reason for this situation had to be de Man's emphasis on

language instead of images. W thus thought about another question that Mitchell hadn't responded to in the follow-up interview, if that term still held any meaning for the generic mutations which now seemed to direct the concerns of *Praxis*, instead of *visa versa*.

8. All this reading led to a severe case of indigestion. At the end of eight years, Mitchell had nothing to show for his work but a miscellaneous stack of articles on vortices, spatial form in literature, Blake's *écriture*, Wordsworth and Rousseau, and some "trial run" essays on Gombrich, Lessing, Burke, and Nelson Goodman. As

W steadied himself and returned to the question he had been considering, what language wanted and

always, he solved the problem by running away from it, turning to a program of reading in Marx and Marxist thought that would force the issue of the image, representation, media, and visuality to engage with worldly politics, questions of power and value. The result of this was a reinforcement of an intuition that had been growing in the trial essays on specific image theorists. What if there were no "theory of images" in the sense that he had been looking for, no formal architectonic that would settle, once and for all, the general, abstract questions about the relations of the seeable and the sayable? What if the problem that had come to be known as "word and image" (and which, by this time, had its own international professional association) could not be stabilized by any theoretical metalanguage drawn from semiotics, aesthetics, or philosophical studies of language and representation? What if every theory of images was really grounded in a fear of images that was specific to a historical and cultural situation? What if the "word-image difference" was really about social difference--not just the predictable triad of "race, gender, and class" but of age, generation, profession, nationality, and object-choice? Suppose, further, that the difference was not merely to be found "between" visual and verbal media, but

what that might say about the Romantic sublime. Mitchell's excitement over the question of what images wanted had been contagious, and W found it equally provocative. W had gotten from Mitchell's rhetoric of magic and animism the sense that images wanted to be left alone and that they could in fact accomplish this feat; they could, if we let them, be by themselves. This was what W thought

within them, a kind of internal border, a seam or fold that creases the texture of every representation, and makes every medium a mixed medium?

This reformulation of the question allowed Mitchell to stumble forward in his theoretical grail quest even while admitting defeat for the original project. It was a perfect compromise formation between a general, *a priori* claim (the irreducible distinction between word and image, the sayable and seeable, the vocative and the scopic) and a kind of heuristic, methodological "wedge" that could be inserted into any specific text or image in any particular historical situation. It played out a classical Marxist fusion of theory and practice, invoked a Wittgensteinian pragmatism to relax the insistence on metaphysical grounding, and invoked the authority of Foucault and Deleuze on the "strata" of discourse and representation. In fact, it was too good an idea to be true, too simple and reductive. It threatened to turn into a visual/verbal version of the old "appearance and reality" shell game, and to reduce every formal question to a political allegory. Mitchell was attacked on the one side for giving up on theory too quickly, for bypassing semiotics without a proper hearing. On the other side, he was accused of reducing everything to binary

poetry in at least one of its self-representations wanted to ape, a self-animating state that was also the end to figuration and the duplicity of reference. Poetry wanted to annihilate itself as language and become as self-sufficient as an image, inviting desire perhaps, but not worrying about the possibility of its heteronomy, its dependence on human language and human design. That this self-sufficiency might be a fiction

oppositions that reinforce the most familiar stereotypes of gender, race, and class.

mattered less than what images aroused in us and what we thought they could then do. The Romantic sublime might then be that state of animated presence, even if its imagist cross-dressing depended on a first level iconoclasm, a Burkean account of the pain involved in human visuality and its limits.

But then W read Mitchell's essay, "What Do Pictures Really Want," and discovered that the situation was actually much

more complex. In that piece Mitchell actually seemed to stress the want of images in terms of what they lacked, in terms of what made them vulnerable, incomplete, and abject, caught in the gendered gaze of desire.

9. W paused; perhaps his question to Mitchell hadn't really understood the way the latter was coordinating desire with what images did, and what they really were. W then noticed Mitchell's citation of Michael Fried's argument, how the "emergence of modern art [was] precisely to be understood in terms of the negation or renunciation of direct signs of desire" (79). Mitchell then suggested that

Wouldn't such an ambiguity be an extension of Mitchell's description of plate xv from Milton, the construction/deconstruction of Urizen? Perhaps, then, there were images that were not Romantic, Mitchell's cool modern abstractions that he extrapolated from Fried, images of cold self-sufficiency, unaware of any viewer, unaware of the painful lack that

the "end point of this sort of pictorial desire" was the "purism of modernist abstraction"(80). Mitchell went on to note pointedly that this puritanical renunciation of desire was itself a form of desire, and then cited a Barbara Kruger photo that directly commented on this impossible purism. W wondered, however, if Fried's historical model, with its implied trajectory from Romantic abjection to modernist self-sufficiency, actually spoke to a Romantic language that wanted to be like an [image](#), covertly perhaps, instead of stoning it or breaking it like a scorned idol. The Romantic sublime would then be a simultaneous desire for the potent and the abject, the autonomous and the heteronomous, the ambivalent, contradictory projections of what an image was and did. The sublime would desire, as in Bataille's economy, what it renounced and secreted, the object of its

paradoxically informed both the sublime and the desire of images in Mitchell's *October* essay. W shook his head. He assumed his narrative to be too schematic, too uninformed by a variety of sources. He would not even venture where to place the poetry of the modern imagists in his paradigm. He was keenly aware of the examples of twentieth-century iconoclasm that Mitchell could juxtapose alongside the modern abstractions, thus disrupting the putative serenity of their indifferent existence. He imagined that the voyeurism that Mitchell associated with such abstractions could very well have its precursors in earlier examples of art; if so, Mitchell would certainly know. Two apparently unconnected thoughts then entered W's mind. First, that the Kruger photo collage appeared to depict the face of a marble statue, as Mitchell noted, "blank eyes

iconoclastic scorn and pain.

and [a] stony absence of expression [that made it] seem beyond desire" (80); and second, that Fredric Jameson, in his one sustained commentary on Paul de Man, had concluded with the description of the latter as a modernist (*Postmodernism*, 252-59).

10. Being attacked in this way was at least preferable to being ignored, however, and *Iconology* (1986) was, by academic standards, a best-seller. Despite the reservations, it was reviewed quite favorably, and to Mitchell's surprise, it found as many readers in the art world as in the academic study of literature or visual arts.Flushed with success, he plunged into a sequel/companion volume entitled *Picture Theory*. The aim in this book was to gather everything together: the vortex essay and spatial form would finally find a home (they clearly didn't fit in *Iconology*). It would provide a practical application of the "image/text" problematic and would show that it need not be reductive, but could be a sensitive and supple instrument for teasing out

The implication was in part a certain quaintness in de Man's covert aesthetic principles, in light of the postmodern logic of late capitalism. But what W also got out of this description was the claim that de Man was first and foremost something else

precise descriptions of the heterogeneity of representation. And it would show why such descriptions were crucial for grasping the formal uniqueness of works of visual and verbal art, while linking them to previous artistic practices and to the ethical/political issues that they engage.

Mitchell's range of reference (and of incompetence) was growing by leaps and bounds. *Picture Theory* contained essays on American slave narrative (specifically, the problem of memory and visually descriptive "digressions"); on ekphrastic poetry (poems on works of visual art); on modernist abstract painting in the Greenbergian tradition; on postmodern sculpture and visual-verbal "objects" (specifically, the work of Robert Morris); on photographic essays (Barthes, Alloula, Agee and Evans, Said and Mohr); on Nelson Goodman's theory of realism and Gombrich's theory of illusion; on violence and public art, on Oliver Stone's JFK and the power of television news during the Gulf War. It tried to frame these essays inside a reflection on the pragmatic, self-theorizing potential of images seen as "metapictures," or representations that stage for us the self understanding of representation. The theoretical moment was thus seen as immanent to, embedded

than a Romanticist. Why was that important? Well, W seemed to be back to thinking about de Man and Mitchell again. W noted how part II of Mitchell's response had cited Richard Rorty's proclamation of contemporary philosophy getting beyond the "mirror of nature" into a "linguistic turn" as a prime example of the iconoclastic wishful thinking that still dominated critical thought. Mitchell had extended this

in, specific visual/verbal constructions and practices, not as standing outside them in some master theory. Along the way, a niche was found for Blake's theory/practice of écriture , and for a methodological polemic against the comparative method in interarts studies. The vortex and spatial form essays remained homeless.

## Subject: Part II

If *Iconology* was generally received with tolerance and approbation, *Picture Theory* elicited a markedly different reception. The book was denounced on the left for its neglect of semiotics, and for daring to suggest that, with the end of the Cold War, postmodernism might be over. It was reviled on the right for its leftist politics. Even those in the middle who generally liked it probably felt that it was trying to do too many things, and picked out the one or two chapters they could use, ignoring the rest. The only unqualified approval of the book came from the College Art Association, which gave it their 1996 prize for art history in a totally unprecedented act of disciplinary generosity (less than half the essays are about the visual arts in any familiar sense of the phrase). This award allowed Mitchell to feel, if only momentarily, that perhaps his true

problematic to the whole project of trying to understand images through the "science of linguistics," what amounted to a "general theory of the sign and semiosis." What, however, about deconstruction, which had its own linguistic problems with any generalizable theory of the sign? Conversely, even more so than Rorty, de Man's whole project in many ways rested on exposing the inevitable error that we make

profession was art history. Its long range effect was to make him love his fat, ungainly little book even more, in spite of all its blemishes and deformities, and in defiance of all the well-aimed criticisms it received.

The most important criticism of *Picture Theory* appeared within a few days of its publication, in an editorial notice by the *Voice Literary Supplement*. VLS thought the book was "on the money," but that it had the wrong title: it should have been called "What Do Pictures Want?" This observation immediately struck Mitchell with a combination of consternation and elation. Why hadn't he thought of that? How could an anonymous magazine editor who probably spent five minutes with his book have seen what had escaped his notice over a ten year period and compose a better title to boot? On the other hand, there was the elation of feeling that the truth about oneself might actually be coming to light. Of course the question had always already been, always would be, what do pictures want? How could he have missed it? This was the hidden agenda, the animistic sentiment toward objects, images, and texts that Mitchell had never overcome, and which was now offered to him as an (apparently) free gift of insight.

confusing the figurative with the literal, language with the phenomenal world. In contrast, it was Mitchell's very literal mindedness that seemed to found his fascination with images. For de Man, the figural always upended the literal, demonstrating the ubiquity of language. For Mitchell, the figural could always be literalized, showing the power of images.

De Man's "Resistance to Theory" contained an especially vivid

example of the simultaneous absurdity and unavoidability of taking a figure literally, how "no one in his right mind [would] try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word day;" while "it [was] very difficult not to conceive the pattern of one's past and future existence as in accordance with temporal and spatial schemes that belong to fictional narratives and not to the world" (11). (Another connection: until the publication of

*The Aesthetic Ideology*, this discussion of confusing the figural with the literal was considered one of de Man's most emphatic statements about ideology; the iconoclasm of the passage concludes with a reference to *The German Ideology*, Mitchell's own object of study in *Iconology*.) But W felt that there was something in Mitchell that would resist even the obvious absurdity of de Man's first example, of growing grapes with the word

"day."

11. Mitchell seized the gift and immediately began writing a new essay by this title, an essay which has since appeared in the camp of the postmodernists, *October* magazine (Summer 1996, no. 77). There it seems to sit uneasily and equivocally, either on the sidelines or in the midst (the position is not that clear) of a hot debate on the merits of a new academic formation called "visual culture." Mitchell has, it is true, been involved in an attempt to institutionalize something called "studies in visual culture" at the University of Chicago, but because of his characteristic lack of organizational skills, this has come to nothing but a free-standing course that is offered from time to time. Chicago's art history department briefly considered changing its name to include the phrase "visual culture," but (wisely, in my view) declined to jump on the bandwagon.

As for Mitchell, he is probably disappointed with this outcome in his heart of hearts, but you would never guess it to look at him. He continues to think that something called "visual culture" has a future as an area of

W wondered if the sight of someone trying to warm themselves with a cardboard sign saying "day," or better yet, an image of a glowing sun, could only be dismissed derisively. W wondered whether the strangeness of such a scene, of the possible warmth of an image, carried a painful poignancy that spoke to Mitchell's questions about what images wanted, and what we wanted

research and reflection, and he hopes that someday a book entitled *What Do Pictures Want?* will lay down its basic principles. This will be a book that will finally get down to the irreducible core of representation, explain to what extent there can (and cannot) be something like a "linguistics of the visual field." It will connect the fine arts to the ordinary language of images, the media, and the social construction of the visual field. It will show why our visual encounters with images and objects are ultimately grounded in our encounters with other people, and how a phenomenological/psychoanalytic theory of the gaze (as debated by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Lacan) can be elaborated as an intersubjective account of beholders' relations to images. It will explain how desire and violence, love and hate, hope and fear are condensed and aggregated in artificially constructed sensuous forms that have lives and voices of their own, speaking from the political unconscious of the societies in which they are born. It will explain how we must listen to these voices and look upon the faces of the objects from which they emanate, making them "friends and companions," as Blake admonished. It will let us return to those "living educts of the imagination"

from images. W thought about the pathos of the blind beggar in *The Prelude*, how that affect was generated by the juxtaposition of the image of the blind man with the sign around his neck: the sheer oddness of conceiving of that "Shape" as a figurative extension for the written "Story" around his neck, and the equally bizarre sense of literalizing those words as the man on whose neck they hung. Sign and body, figure and form seemed caught in a moment of mutual interdependence

that Coleridge saw in powerful "ideas," and come to terms with the uncanny sense of personhood that attaches to images. It will outline the principles of a "natural history" of images, the forces of "cultural selection" that determine their mysterious origins, evolution, and extinction.

Mitchell, alas, is as usual attacking this challenge by fleeing from it. He is currently writing a book on dinosaurs as cultural icons. If you were to ask him, he would tell you that this is a logical outgrowth of all his previous work, and a step toward the larger project on visual culture. He would say that it provides a perfect laboratory specimen to test hypotheses about the birth, evolution, and (perhaps) death of an image. He would tell you a very long story about the birth of the dinosaur as a cultural icon in the 1840s, and its repeated reconstructions under the pressures of scientific/technical revolutions, political movements and ideological transformations, right down to its present appearance as the most hyper-publicized and universally recognizable animal in global popular culture. He would point out (what you already know) that the dinosaur image migrates across the boundaries of every imaginable medium,

and mutual incompatibility, a second cousin to Mitchell's example of the optical illusion that oscillated between the images of a duck and a rabbit. (We thought how you could also talk about this dialectic in terms of Tennyson's poem and Waterhouse's painting, each a respective "Lady of Shallot"; he had touched upon this issue in terms of a nascent Victorian commodity culture in his response to Jim Chandler's admirable essay on the poem.) But whereas the

appearing in everything from movies to novels to national museums to children's books and television shows; that it perfectly instantiates the ambivalence endemic to imagery as such: the dinosaur is both monumental and trivial, sublime and ridiculous, terrible and cute, alive and dead. He would, finally, try to convince you that the dinosaur image explodes the whole rhetorical/theoretical discourse of fetishism, idolatry, and iconoclasm that we have erected around images, demanding a more supple and ambiguous formulation, which (he will be glad to explain to you) is none other than a complex form of modern totemism.

All these things are promised by Mitchell in his new book, which bears the inauspicious title of *The Last Dinosaur Book*. My own suspicion, however, is that this will be nothing but another thinly disguised Romantic autobiography. We'll see.

Chicago, January 30, 1997

duck/rabbit oscillated between two images, the blind beggar oscillated between form and figure, image and text. That this dynamic entailed making sense of a life, or making a life, made these issues all the more compelling for W, as well as all the more Romantic.

Making a life could be either a figurative or literal act, though of course defining what a life literally meant entailed depending on the figural. Either image or text could be the



material of the figure of biography or autobiography, but, most importantly, that figure always assumed the figure of a successful form or image. De Man called this biographical trope personification, prosopopoeia, literally "giving face" to an inanimate collection of words, transforming them into the features of a human life. In "What Do Pictures Really Want?" Mitchell also talked about how images "present[ed] not

just a surface,  
but a face that  
faces the  
beholder" (72).  
This coincidence  
between  
Mitchell and de  
Man generated  
the reasoning  
behind W's  
follow-up  
question to  
Mitchell about  
de Man and  
Romantic  
autobiography.

2/2/97

Dear Tom,

Whew! As Blake once said, Too Much. Remember me once telling you your reputation among grad students as a "loose cannon" at our orals? All kidding aside, your response bodes well for an auspicious start for PRAXIS.

As we agreed upon, I'm sending you some follow-up questions. But as the first part of our exchange evolved into something besides the interview form, I'll leave it

to you how to respond to this second set: as a follow-up interview to your essay, as a series of suggestions as to ways to expand your essay, or both.

Finally, my e-mail set-up couldn't handle Jay's transmission, so please ask Jay to send your second response as an attachment to Neil Fraistat at nf5@umail.umd.edu.

Best, Orrin

## FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- 1) Could you talk a bit more about the relation between the image and the Romantic imagination? I'm thinking partly about our talk over the phone, when you mentioned the [Blake illustration](#) that dramatizes the Romantic ambivalence toward the image.
- 2) Also over the phone you mentioned how Henri Focillon, a central influence in *Blake's Composite Art*, played a major role in your conception of the dinosaur book. Could you expand upon that, how Focillon both ties your earlier and later thoughts on images together, while also demonstrating how they've changed?
- 3) You mention that during the writing of *Iconology* you started to think of the "[word-image](#)" difference as really being about social (race, gender, class) difference. Is there a picture or image that really brought (or brings) that home for you?
- 4) You mention toward the end of your essay your ambivalence toward "[visual culture](#)," both conceptually and institutionally. Could you elaborate your feelings about this issue some more?

5) If images want to be left alone, and don't want to become words, what about words that want to become images? Could that be another name for poetry? And in Romanticism could that desire (somewhat perversely) be associated with the sublime, so that a first-level iconoclasm is actually the hoped-for means by which words attain the animism of images?

6) Your reference to Romantic autobiography made me think of Paul de Man, someone else who tied that genre to images. For de Man the words of Romantic autobiography

are troped as constituting a personification, a face with living presence. So the figure of the image is the means by which language asserts its own animating powers, and biography is the means by which image and linguistic meaning coincide. But, of course, for de Man, the living image always turns out to be a tomb, monument, epitaph, or mask, a dead thing that actually proves the inhuman, non-living, non-meaning of words. Like de Man you also seem to see images as not consolidating the meanings of words. But you start with literal images (as opposed to the figure of the face), and seem to see the non-coincidence of images and words as a way to talk about the animism of images, their status as living, not mortified beings. Would you care to comment on these differences, and perhaps the different ways picture theory and deconstruction consider the question of animation, if not "life" itself?

7) This isn't really a question, but it occurs to me that the visual image of  $y=1/x$  is an **asymptote**, the very figure/image that Jameson uses to denote the relation

between the symbolic and the real. I don't know what to make of this except that it seems striking that Jameson uses this example (and its Lacanian associations) to underwrite his argument about the primacy of (Marxist) interpretation, while you seem to be taking it in an opposite direction toward what images want--or maybe not?

## 12. Part II

The Blakean image that, for Mitchell, always epitomized the Romantic ambivalence toward the image was plate xv of *Milton: A Poem*, showing a sculptor laying his hands on the half-finished statue of a patriarch while a chorus of musicians performs in the background.

Of course, that point of coincidence also marked the point where the two immediately diverged. Mitchell brought up the faces of images because he was interested in the possibility of the "personhood of things," the totemic and fetishistic nature of human life, our incurable



This image, usually read as an illustration of Los creating a body or "Definite Form" for Urizen, is perfectly equivocal, reading equally well as a scene of creation or destruction, icon-making or icon-smashing. Los could be molding the body of Urizen from the clay, or pulling down the idol of patriarchal reason. Mitchell had written at some length about this in an early essay ("Style and Iconography in the Illustrations to Blake's *Milton*," *Blake Studies* VI, Fall, 1973: 47-72), and had always felt that it summarized the uncanny, indecidable status of the image in Romantic thought:

For all the talk of

intuitions about images as living beings. De Man brought up the faces of figures to stress language's crucial role in determining the personhood of persons, of in fact securing the difference between a person and a thing which might simply roll round with rock, and stones, and trees. But what de Man also stressed, of course, was the failure of language to secure that difference. Indeed, for de Man, language actively participated in

"imagination" in theories of Romantic poetry, it seems clear that images, pictures, and visual perception were highly problematic issues for many romantic writers.

"Imagination," for the romantics, is regularly contrasted to rather than being equated with mental imaging: the first lesson we give to students of romanticism is that for Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, "imagination" is a power of consciousness that transcends mere visualization. (*Picture Theory*, 114-15)

There is so much more to say about the Romantic ambivalence toward the image, about iconoclasm, antipictorialism, the sense that we can neither live with nor without images. Romanticism served as a continued resource for Mitchell because it always reminded him of this irreducible dialectic, which then seemed to be rediscovered everywhere-- in Walter Benjamin's doctrine of the "dialectical image," in Plato's critique of representation and mimesis, in religious prohibitions on idolatry, in Marx's obsession with fetishism, in the twists and turns of Freud's attempt to "talk" our way out of image-fixation, and Lacan's obsession with the Imaginary (vs. the Symbolic), the scopic (vs. the vocative)

undoing its own figures of personification, disfiguring the human face by transforming it into an inanimate statue or by reducing it to the lines from an epitaph.

Such de Manian monuments resonated with Benjamin's empty masks of allegory and Kleist's dancing puppets, the animation of the latter actually revealing the non-intentional, non-human state of linguistic drive.

At this point W recalled Kruger's photo and Jameson's

drive, and the Gaze.

Perhaps Mitchell should have been more worried that he was discovering the "same thing" and discovering it "everywhere," and no doubt he should have been more disciplined, more rigorously historicist. In fact, he probably should have stayed at home and written a book about Romantic iconoclasm. But for Mitchell Romanticism always meant the road of excess, going too far. Besides, he was encouraged by the example of such wide-ranging iconologists as Ernst Gombrich, Rudolf Arnheim, Erwin Panofsky; by the persistent reappearance of critical reflection on imagery in every culture and period, and by the recursive appearance of the problem of the image in the very act of critical "reflection" itself.

Richard Rorty's assurance that contemporary philosophy had gone beyond "the mirror of nature" into a "linguistic turn" struck him as wishful thinking, an all-too-familiar symptom of the Romantic effort to smash or "get beyond" the image. He was struck by the (repeatedly frustrated) effort to transfer the science of linguistics to the problem of imagery, to incorporate the image within a general theory of the sign and semiosis.

description of de Man as a modernist. What would it mean, thought W, to connect de Man's putative modernism to Mitchell's modernist abstractions, and, by extension, Kruger's work of art? It might mean relating de Man to what connected the art pieces, the absence of desire on the part of the modern image that Kruger's statue both thematized and parodied. But what would it mean to take this pure absence of

desire literally, much in the same way that Mitchell had literalized Wasserman's organic metaphors for the text? One would be left with, thought W, not so much the lack that structured desire, as the completeness of death.

13. For what did it mean "to seem to be beyond desire" except to be dead? What if in fact there was no desire, just the defense against desire--what was that but death, an

So he wandered over disciplinary, historical, and geographical boundaries in search of an iconology, accompanied, it must be said, by quite a few marvellous students, colleagues, and collaborators. They returned with a mountain of case studies. What they all add up to is difficult to determine. Certainly they do not amount to a "general theory of images," any more than feminist criticism provides a general theory of gender, or Marxism a general theory of

inanimate  
shield with no  
animating  
purpose, no  
life?

De Man was indeed a Romanticist, though of a Romanticism that already anticipated the end point of Fried's aesthetic modernist narrative. The "blank eyes" of Kruger's postmodernist statue recalled not only the deadly narrative drive of a blind Borges (whom de Man had written about in the 60s) but also more relevantly the blank holes of

value. What they do suggest is that the problem of the image, that is, of representation, picturing, mimesis, imagination, figuration, and even of visual perception as such, is an "anthropological universal." It is a problem that plays itself out differently in different cultures and different historical moments, but there is also something that links these problems together, that makes stone-age images, if not intelligible, at least haunting to modern beholders. What Mitchell called "the pictorial turn" in contemporary culture was simply a recognition and intensification of this haunting, an awareness that "we" (advanced theorists and historians of culture, philosophers of representation, critics of media) do not yet, and may never have, a "theory of the image" that could ever approach the systematicity and rigor of linguistics with respect to language. The problem of the image, like that of gender, of value, of power and violence, of thought itself, may be something more like a boundary marking the limits of theory. The image may not be any more formalizable as a total phenomenon than the structure of social, political, or economic reality. Insofar as this was a fundamental intuition of Romanticism, Mitchell remained a die-hard Romantic to the end.

Rousseau's disfigured face in Percy's *The Triumph of Life* and de Man's "Shelley Disfigured."

14. This intuition of the irreducibility of the image was probably what attracted Mitchell to Henri Focillon's classic text, *The Life of Forms in Art*. Focillon's title appealed, of course, to Mitchell's incorrigible formalism and animism. "Living Form" was also a key phrase for Blake, and provided the title of the last chapter of Mitchell's book. Focillon helped make intelligible Blake's remark that he "copied Imagination," tracing in his art, not just the "image," but the very process by which images come into and pass out of existence--the birth and death of images, as



it were ([see Los sculpting/deconstructing Urizen once more](#)). Blake's debt to Michaelangelo, and especially to those late sculptures known as "The Captives," in which the figures have not yet fully emerged from the rock matrix, made

The absence of eyes meant for de Man the absence of human life: the inorganic, written impersonation of life that was bio-graphy, and that the statue carried out. This absence underscored the inanimate state of such an image (figurative or literal) as the instrument by which we knew

abundant sense in Focillon's terms.

The concept of a "life of forms" also had a number of more general connotations: 1) "form" had to be understood, not as static or spatial in contrast to dynamic or temporal processes, but as a figure that unites time and space, motion and structure, style and subject-matter; 2) form had to be studied as if it were indecidably organic and mechanical, natural and artificial, "born" and "designed"; 3) while individual art works are "forms," form itself transcends the individual object, and is capable of migrating, travelling over time and space, crystallized as what Adrian Stokes called the "image in form," a mutable figure (like a vortex, ellipse, a hieroglyphic stick-man, or a dinosaur type) that sails through the ether from one medium to another, crossing the boundaries of word and image, the sayable and the seeable, as much at home in the subjective media of memory or fantasy as in stone, copper, or paper. It is like the genotype or genetic program of the phenotype, the individual living organism, the principle of its "constitution" or articulation and unfolding of its parts and phases. Mitchell found himself, quite unexpectedly, being drawn back to Focillon as he puzzled over the history of the dinosaur as a cultural icon and scientific image. It's not just that the

the dead nature of things: of words and, by extension, our own lives.

Many commentators had noticed the figure of death in de Man, and the lurid effect its presence had on his corpus. Yet W did not now simply feel this luridness, in large part due to the contrasting orientation of the image in Mitchell's account. For what especially haunted and exhilarated W about Mitchell's

dinosaur is one of those rare images whose birth and origin is quite determinate (first named by Richard Owen in 1842; first depicted in sculptural form in 1854). Focillon, Mitchell realized, had been something like a "Darwinist of form." He believed that the "life of forms" was not simply something that goes on within art as an analogy with what happens in nature, but that life itself--organic, biological nature--has to be understood as a diachronic process of formal engendering, transmission, proliferation, differentiation, and (presumably) extinction.

alchemic  
blend--a  
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Romantic as  
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-was the  
stress on  
animism, the  
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of animation  
and anima that  
reactivated  
Hegel's Spirit,  
an identity  
which was  
given a  
startling new  
range of form  
and motion  
because of  
Mitchell's  
materialist,  
literalist bent,  
much like the  
Lacanian child  
who discovers  
its body for  
the first time  
through the  
mirror stage.  
If de Man

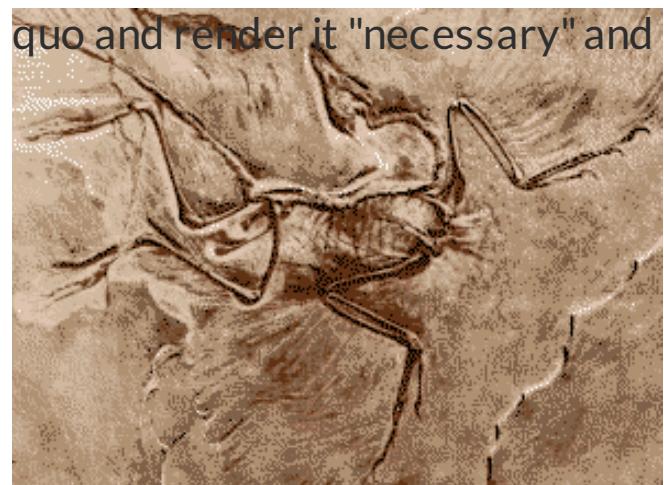
taught us that persons were dead objects, Mitchell proposed to revisit Marx's commodity form and to reconsider the full story of objects reanimated as persons.

15. As Mitchell argued, "the subjectivized object in some form or other is an incurable symptom, and ... Marx and Freud are better treated as guides to the understanding of this symptom, and perhaps to some transformation of it into less pathological damaging forms. In

Suddenly another vast abyss opened beneath Mitchell's feet. Michaelangelo's captives emerging from Carrarra marble is one thing; the fossil remains of T-Rex, not to say behemoth and Leviathan, excavated from the stony matrix is quite another. Besides, like everyone else in literary and cultural studies, Mitchell had been trained to distrust "nature." Cultural constructivism and critical theory had exposed all appeals to nature as mere ideology, attempts to mystify the status

short, we are stuck with our magical, premodern attitudes toward objects, especially pictures, and our task is not to overcome these attitudes but to understand them" ("Pictures," 72).

The fetish might be a symptom, but it might also be an opportunity. And, like the dinosaur, this subjectivization of the object was both premodern and contemporary, if not postmodern: Mitchell's museum would not only be populated by de Manian tombs, epitaphs, and monuments of inorganic death but also by Donna Haraway's cyborg, Bruno Latour's Aramis, the



quo and render it "necessary" and unchangeable. Blake's contempt of Wordsworth and natural religion, natural philosophy, and nature itself had imprinted Mitchell early. Hadn't Marx shown that Darwin's theory was nothing but a projection of English bourgeois values onto nature? And wasn't the spectre haunting Europe and the rest of the world in the late twentieth century, not that of Marx or communism, but that of sociobiology, genetic engineering, cloning and cyborg production, ecocide, viral "breakout," plague, and new, virulent forms of social darwinism?

proposed Parisian metro system fighting for its own rights, and the toons in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, who receive at the film's end their own copyright independence (a highly ironic vision of citizenship, to be sure).

16. This last question pulled Mitchell up short. Well, of course, he thought: Derrida's spectre of Marx is now poised for a confrontation with the spectre of Darwin. It hardly seems like a fair fight, given the disastrous record of the academic left during the "culture wars" of the late eighties. Even more ominous is the effort to re-stage these wars on the terrain of what C. P. Snow called the "two culture" split, to set scientists against humanists, and to discredit the emerging field of cultural studies of science. Books like *Higher Superstition* (Paul Gross and Norman Leavitt; Hopkins, 1994) set the stage for the "Sokal controversy" in *Social*

At least that was W's version of Mitchell's museum, one that admittedly diverged from the fossilized "Paleo-art" that comprised the actual "conclusion" of Mitchell's vision. At any rate,

*Text*, publicly exposing humanists as incompetent and servile, unable to detect a transparently fraudulent exercise in pseudo-science, and overawed by the authority of a professional physicist willing to perpetrate such a hoax.

All these developments were in Mitchell's peripheral vision, as it were, while he plodded along with his cultural history of the dinosaur image. He read *Higher Superstition*'s catalogue of humanistic incomprehension of science with alarm and nausea, increasingly convinced of his own incompetence in the history of dinosaurology. What was he doing dabbling in a field where vertebrate paleontologists and historians of science commanded a body of knowledge that had taken a lifetime of professional training to accrue and pass on? What did he know about biology, especially about the principles of animal taxonomy and their development from the static Linnaean system to the evolutionary model (born along with Romanticism) to the current, nominalistic science of "cladistics"? Not nearly enough, he was told, and repeatedly, by his scientific advisors. Still, it was too late to back out of the project. An advance had been paid, a sabbatical had been granted, and he had a track record of chutzpah to defend. Besides, a few of his

associating the de Manian figure of death with a lurid tone seemed to W its own false, personified image, especially when juxtaposed with Mitchell's circuit of living forms. Instead, W felt that he had stumbled into some rabbit hole of deep ecology, where the Nietzschean challenge to value rested not on the zone between good and evil but on the even more volatile space between animate and inanimate

new scientific friends--some of them even qualified paleontologists--were encouraging. They thought he might be on to something.



What he hoped he was on to, ultimately, was not just an interesting and true account of the evolution of the dinosaur image, and the forces of "cultural selection" that had influenced its changes over a century and a half, but something that might bring him back to Focillon's intuition about the "life of forms," not only in art, but in nature. Suppose iconology, and the problem of the image, was not just an "anthropological universal," but an issue that reached right down into the subhuman, even suborganic slime? Well, that was a speculation that would have to wait for a twenty first century Marxian-Darwinian iconologist, one who began with the invention of the computer and the discovery of the gene as taken-for-granted "discourse networks" (to echo Friedrich

existence. Perhaps, thought W, that was the difference between de Man's figure and Mitchell's form: the matter of, or between, life and death itself.

This seemed to W quite a profound insight, until he went back and reread the second part of Mitchell's response. Not unexpectedly, Mitchell appeared to have anticipated much of this topic in his discussion of Focillon's "life of forms" as

Kittler's phrase). Mitchell felt himself to be growing old in a time that Walter Benjamin might have named "the age of biocybernetic reproduction." He was rapidly becoming a dinosaur himself, incapable of "surfing the net," and repelled by what seemed to him the banality and sensuous poverty of cyberspace. The new synthetic world-picture of the contemporary age would have to be worked out by one of the "New Ones," as Italo Calvino called them in his marvelous short story, "The Dinosaurs."

"life itself-- organic, biological nature-- [which] has to be understood as a diachronic process of formal engendering, transmission, proliferation, differentiation, and (presumably) extinction."

Indeed, Mitchell's foray into paleontology and the philosophy--or tropology--of science seemed largely predicated on the question of whether "iconology, and the problem of the image, was ... an issue that

reached right down into the subhuman, even suborganic slime."

17. W wondered, however, if Mitchell could push his question even further. De Man's notion of figure might presume, for example, a synchronic alternative to Mitchell's diachronic process of "organic biological nature," one in which life was always already extinct, always already non-living matter that was the larger genus housing the species, and values, of organic material. Conversely, the inorganic would loom large, no longer a mere supplement to the organic but a portion of the real that could participate in what had up to now been the property of human life: agency, subjectivity, affect, value,

Wasn't that the point, thought W, of the subatomic world, how at some level the division between the biological and nonbiological no longer grounded one's inquiry into reality? That might also be the point where de Man's reading of Romantic biography met Kittler's gene as discursive network.

W paused, painfully aware that he was even less equipped than Mitchell to consider the relationship between the sciences and the humanities. Nevertheless, he could not help pondering his memories of the Discovery channel, the picture of a spiraling DNA strand, the genetic "code"

rights. The difference between form and figure would be this dialectic, structure as the liminal state between life and death.

18. In the meantime, Mitchell could reflect on his own dinosaurian character, and perhaps insert the dinosaur image as a kind of Trojan Horse into the nasty war between humanists and scientists that was being provoked by the Sokal controversy and the caricature of the academic left as professing nothing more than "higher superstitions." The dinosaur,



after all, was a highly equivocal object. Every serious scientist was ready to concede that it somehow exceeded the bounds of scientific inquiry, that it had become (and indeed had always been) an object of popular fascination and mass appeal, a strange obsession known as "dinomania." And yet there is no doubt that these creatures really existed, that T-Rex stalked the earth. There was also no doubt that, in the form of hybrid "imagetexts" (movies, toys, models, sitcoms, games, CD-Roms, novels, cartoons, and paleontological restorations) there were

for human life.

There you had the dialectic between form and figure that preceded the categories of the material, the ideal, the theological, the skeptical, the instrumental, and the purposeful. There you had, literally, Focillon's, Blake's, and Mitchell's living form,

more dinosaurs on earth in the late twentieth century than at any time during the 170 million years of their actual existence. If one counted the figurative dinosaurs--the commodities, technologies, and novelties (most notably automobiles and computers) whose accelerated cycles of obsolescence made each generation an endangered species--then there were more dinosaurs in the twentieth century than there had ever been on earth.

the formal pattern of life. But there you also had de Man's carbon-based machine of language, sheer figural drive without prior motivation or blessing. At that moment the human world deadened while the world itself sprang to life; personhood conceivably extended to the vegetable, mineral, and the non-human animal.

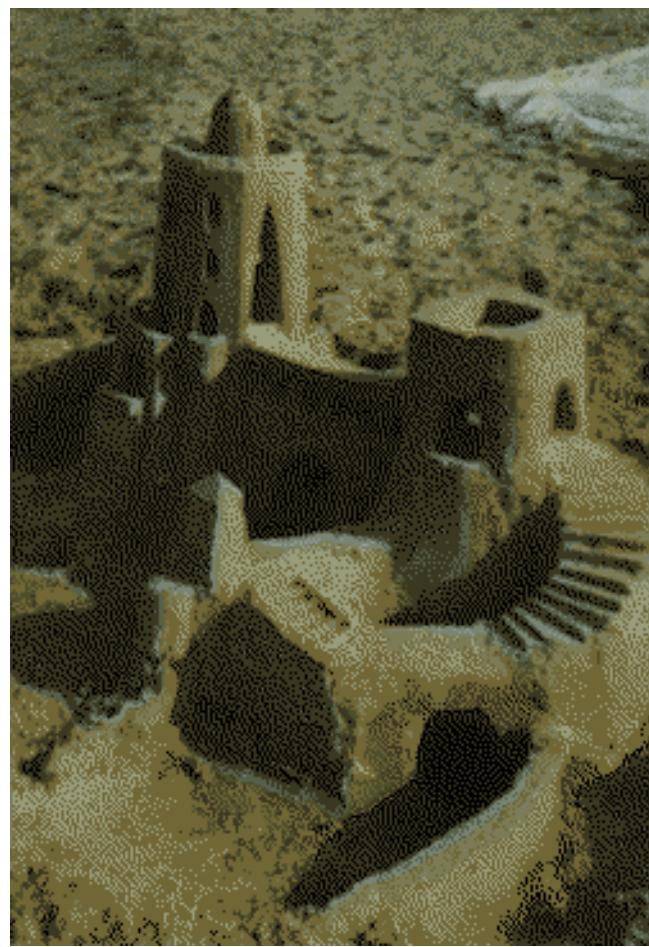
19. Blake might not have liked this postmodern recuperation of Vala, but it seemed to W that such events spoke to the renewed interest in Romantic studies in such staid, ideologically fetishized terms as "Nature." Mitchell had through the dinosaur connected the world of the prehistoric to that of the posthistoric or postmodern.
- Postmodernism, the era of biocybernetic reproduction, might better be named, then, the "age of the dinosaur." It was, by all accounts, a time of "slackening" (Lyotard), of historical amnesia (Jameson), of simulation (Baudrillard), spectacle (Debord), a time of nostalgia for the present, of Prozac and Haldol, brain chemistry, schizophrenia, and manic depression. It was the era of a commodification so intense and pervasive that the Marxian model of fetishism no longer seemed adequate, and a kind of "commodity totemism" seemed to be emerging. Unlike the fetish, with its overtones of obsessive repetition, fixation, and dismemberment, the commodity totem could be picked up and thrown away, used for a transitional identity theme (Nike sneakers, McDonald's french fries, Barney the Dinosaur) to be cast aside "without mourning and without forgetting" (D. W. Winnicott's phrase for the abandoned security blanket). A kind of blank, comprehensive Borgesian memory of everything seemed now in sight, as the storage capacity of the world's computers increased exponentially. A new museum was being built somewhere in the world every day, and the spaces outside museums were rapidly taking on the look of the museum as

He had also, however, returned to a world where the existence of dinosaurs was not yet known. Process, stillness, life, death: these were some of the Romantically large obsessions that grounded the burgeoning sub-field of Romanticism and ecology in Romantic studies.

Considering how much these terms circulated around Mitchell's interest in the relation well, in the form of post-industrial ruins, half-finished construction sites, toxic waste dumps and junkyards, protected environments, and architectural pastiches of classical styles. The deepest prophecy of postmodernism was turning out to be, not Warhol's art commodity factory, or Frank Stella's trademark productions, but Robert Smithson's Non-sites, the "nowheresville" of Passaic, New Jersey treated as an archaeological or paleontological dig. "Paleoart" treated the present as a site of fossilization. Dinosaurian earth-movers create the massive geological art-trace of The Spiral Jetty (in Smithson's film about the project) and then turn to rust, leaving the jetty to sink beneath the waves of Great Salt Lake, and the documentation to be studied in the archives and exhibition halls of museums and universities. Perhaps, Mitchell thought, there was hope for a career in sand-castles after all.

between images and "suborganic slime," it seemed that Mitchell had remained a Romanticist-- and, perhaps, a Romantic-- all along. How odd, thought W, that there was a time when no one thought about discussing Romanticism and dinosaurs together.

What was "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" but a proleptic meditation on the present as paleontology, Lucy as a fossil, as



living bones?

W shifted in his seat uneasily. Mitchell's mode of visionary thought was definitely habit-forming, perhaps not the best model of intellectual inquiry for a young responsible scholar, especially one given to bouts of idle speculation.

20. Still, outside events had overtaken whatever W had hoped to control, and so his thoughts turned to *Jurassic Park*

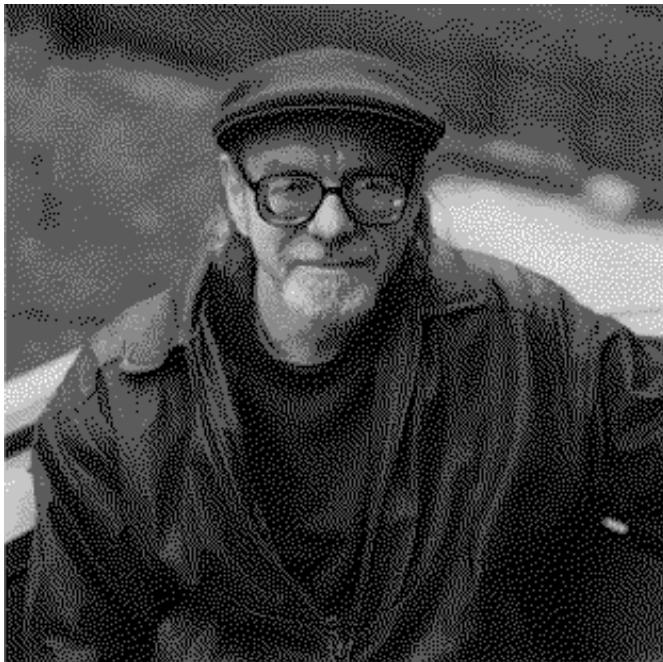
The social, ethical, and legal forms of cloning, however, were another matter. (Was the economic body already determined?) Foreseeing such

and the question of how the film created its dinosaurs. Certainly, through the technology of image reproduction, of the animation of simulacra; but, also within the film's own diegesis, dinosaurs were truly the outcome of the era of biocybernetic reproduction: they had been cloned from DNA. W sat back and wondered about the symbolic intersections of a T Rex and a sheep named Dolly. Cloning, the figure par excellence for postmodern simulation, had during the time of the Mitchell interview been literalized, been given its own actual institutional, material, and disciplinary form. Generated by a spark of electricity that was similar to the galvanism that Mary Shelley discussed with Percy and Byron, cloning had been

debates, would science occupy the territory of the literal, the actual form of cloning, and would the humanities espouse the authority of the figural, their expertise in the figure of simulation? W remembered seeing two experts debate Dolly's arrival on Nightline, and then changing to another channel a bit later and seeing their doubles, no acknowledged sign of their previous talking heads existence in sight. W rubbed his eyes: cloning as the figure for the postmodern spectacle of replication; cloning as the literal science of genetic research into disease, agriculture, and animal husbandry: was this opposition too simple? Certainly, at least in the sense that the social form of cloning would find its genealogy through the hybridity of such stark identities, rather than originating in any one pure affiliation, if such a thing ever existed in the first place. Perhaps, also, the association of the sciences with one tendency and the humanities with the other was equally simplistic.

given the body of an  
Edinburgh sheep.

21.



Mitchell's cheerful combination of literal-mindedness and openness to the magic of images appeared to promise such a complication. W recalled his earlier sense of Mitchell's knowledge as jaywalking between responsible Wissenschaft and more ancient spells. Complication, then, was certainly an appropriate term for at least the feeling of combined

dread and exhilaration that W felt in reviewing what the missives from Mitchell had communicated, and what W had tried to gloss from the exchange.

**22. Editor's Note:** At this point Mitchell's manuscript breaks off inextricably. When pressed to come up with a coda to his response Mitchell politely declined, citing an e-mail from a friend expressing doubts about the costs and value of a full theoretical demonstration of his claims, and the fact that he was leaving for Utah and Colorado to lecture and to dig at

Dread, if for no other reasons than an uncertainty as to what form the volume might evolve into next and a sense that W's thoughts would be occupied with a number of Mitchell's ideas for some time. Exhilaration for the very same reasons. W sighed and wondered, should the editor of an electronic Website be more committed to form, or more to figure? As had been the case with this entire enterprize, no immediate answer was forthcoming. (There was, however, Mitchell's suggestive phrase about the "sensuous poverty of cyberspace" ...) W stretched and reminded himself

the Dinosaur National Monument. He did add one more rather gnomic phrase to another query: "Yes, Romanticism and theory (especially Marx and Freud) are all dinosaurs in this new age, both more dead and more alive than ever."

about the one last duty that he had to perform. He needed to solicit from Mitchell two snapshots for the volume: one of Mitchell himself, and one of a sand-castle that Mitchell had actually built. W wanted *Praxis* users to know that the sand-castles were not airy mental inventions on Mitchell's part, but real things. They were in fact impressive objects, massive and ornate, fine pieces of fearful symmetry. They were, of course, also made of sand. Yet they existed; W knew that for a fact. He had seen the photos--what other proof was there?

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## A U T H O R

Wang, Orrin Nan Chung  
Mitchell, W. J. T. (William John Thomas)

## P U B L I S H E D @ R C

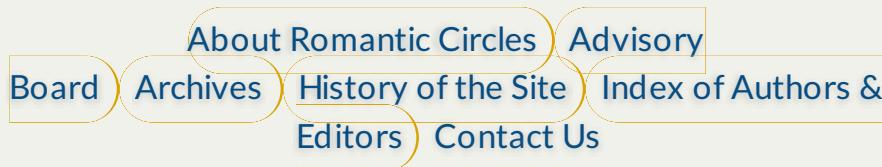
August 1997

## P E R S O N

W.J.T. Mitchell Erwin Panofsky Rudolf Arnheim Fredric Jameson Henri Focillon Neil Fraistat Ernst Gombrich

## C I T Y

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