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Divided Attention: On Iconic Difference

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The question, what is an image, which has been under discussion time and again for about two decades, was not common in the older tradition. It marks a historical caesura that is referred to by expressions such as iconic turn or iconic paradigm, and was followed by a whole flood of publications and research. Nevertheless, a satisfactory answer, which certainly belongs to the great intellectual challenges, is still to come.

This lecture will outline the state of this debate and sketch paths toward a solution that employs the theorem of iconic difference. It will thereby become clear that iconic criticism and visual studies pursue different epistemic goals. We will begin by analyzing the methodological difficulties, which is necessary because the discourse of the image has interdisciplinary roots in—among other disciplines—art history, philosophy, linguistics, and psychology, without being at home in any one of them. This makes consistent argumentation all the more important. Our reflections on shared attention will connect observations on the structure of images with their corporeal realization. In the course of these reflections, we will treat the difference between saying and showing, the specific temporality of static images, the meaning of opaque materiality, and the corporeality of perception.

Since it belongs to the concept of iconic criticism to derive its arguments from the phenomena, examples will play an important role in this lecture. They will come not only from the sphere of art (in particular from modern art) but also from science and everyday life.