

# The Metapicture of Post-Pandemic

Anastasia J. A. Susanti

## ABSTRACT

Amid the continuing pandemic, depicting a post-pandemic world is a challenging task. There is no theory about time that can exactly predict the future. Almost thirty years ago, W.J.T. Mitchell, a theorist of media and literature, introduced Metapicture as pictures that are capable of picturing a concept, subject, movement, ideal, or event. Metapicture is a realm where pictures can reveal themselves and its surrounding. This research aims to provide the metapicture of the post-pandemic world. This study is interdisciplinary research that involves iconology, critical social theory, and philosophy. The author found two metapictures of the post-pandemic life, i.e, the emergence of new social crises and the establishment of new global solidarity.

**Keywords:** Metapicture, Post-pandemic, W.J.T. Mitchell

**Published Online:** March 25, 2022

**ISSN:** 2736-5522

**DOI:** 10.24018/ejsocial.2022.2.2.199

**Anastasia J. A. Susanti\***

Doctoral School of Philosophy, University of Szeged, Hungary.  
(e-mail: anastasiajessica89@gmail.com)

\*Corresponding Author

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pictures are part of our everyday lives. Almost all the time we encounter pictures that range from social media posts, memes, videos, digital photos, games, icons, illustrations in books, advertising billboards, to virtual reality (VR). We live in a world that is flooded by images.

The development of making-image technology drives, what W.J.T. Mitchell calls, a Pictorial Turn. (Purgar, 2017). The Pictorial turn emphasizes images' role to build and express knowledge. Previously, the linguistic turn believes that there is no knowledge outside of language. In the Pictorial turn, images exist before the concept formation. (Gori, 2017) Images are not only objects or instruments to clarify ideas, but the main thing in concept formation.

Looking for a picture that describes what we are experiencing today is probably easier than predicting the future, which is a post-pandemic world. Bruno Latour (2020) even said that projecting yourself into a post-crisis period might sound a little inappropriate, amid the medical workers' struggle on the front lines, millions of people lost their jobs and their family members. However, an important thing to think further is, we do not want to return to the same production model and regime after this pandemic has passed. (Latour, 2020).

Talking about the picture of the pandemic, we can find it in Martin Luther's phrase that is quoted by Žižek, "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now." (Žižek, 2020). We could have come from different "ships" (ideology, state, and nation), but now we are in the same "boat". At this time, people around the world are facing the same crisis, not only a health crisis (the spread of Covid-19) but also an economic, social, and environmental crisis.

Up to now, the landscape of pandemic world seems grim, in which health crisis could 'become more frequent and devastating', the planet is getting hotter as most countries still using fossil fuels, political conflict in many countries around the world, deglobalization, and 'the fracturing of the world along ideological and normative lines'. (Bobo Lo, 2021). However, amid negative trends in the contemporary world, everything still has the potential to change, for better or worse. In 2020, in the midst of negative trends, some positive indications are shown, such as a new urgency in addressing climate change and multilateral cooperation as problem-solving of post-corona virus problems. (Bobo Lo, 2021). Our task is to "ensure that the twenty-first-century version is less roaring, more transformative, and more constructive". It is a difficult task, but not impossible to be done. (Bobo Lo, 2021).

The post pandemic world landscape is still questionable, whether it will be better or worse. Thus, it is interesting to see the possibilities that arise around this question. This research aims to provide a post-pandemic metapicture. In a simple definition, a metapicture is an image or symbol capable of depicting a subject, movement, or ideal. Pandemic comes from the Greek words "pan" (all, comprehensive) and "demos" (people), which means affect (almost) everyone. The post-pandemic metapicture makes us more aware of the pandemic situation and provides a post-pandemic world picture.

This paper was inspired by W.J.T. Mitchell's paper entitled "Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of the Epoch". In his essay, Mitchell aims to formulate an iconology of time, "the images and metaphors of time", especially regarding current health and social pandemic. I would like to develop Mitchell's

research particularly on providing the post-pandemic metapicture.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This research is interdisciplinary research that involves iconology, critical social theory, and philosophy. In this research, the author puts W.J.T. Mitchell's image theory as the main perspective, especially his two important concepts, namely Pictorial Turn, and Metapicture.

## III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

### A. Pictorial Turn

Mitchell offers a new perspective that rejects the "linguistify" attempt in the art history study. Mitchell wants to bring back the image, to what Charles Sanders Peirce calls "the firstness of image" (Purgar, 2017). Peirce classifies the elements in reality into firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Firstness is the object's simplest quality, inherent quality, which appears immediately, or the first thing that strikes our senses. These qualities are the source of spontaneity, originality, art, and freedom. For example, leaves' greenness and beauty, or rocks' shape and texture (Smith, 1972; Gori, 2017).

Then, what is a pictorial turn? According to Mitchell, Pictorial Turn is not just mimesis, copy, or correspondence theory (conformity to reality). Pictorial Turn is seen more as a post-linguistic, post-semiotic, image rediscovery, and as the interplay between various fields, such as visuals, artistic expression, media platforms, ideology, and various disciplines (Mitchell, 1994; Purgar, 2017).

Mitchell laid the foundations for his pictorial turn philosophy on Wittgenstein's statement: "A picture held us captive. We could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat itself to us inexorably." (Mitchell, 1994).

In the Pictorial Turn, images' status is, in Thomas Kuhn's terms, "in two paradigms" or as "anomaly". People often see an image as an unsolved problem. We still need an exploration on "what are images, how they relate to language, how images operate on observations and the world, how their history can be understood, and what we should do with or about images". (Mitchell, 1994).

### B. Metapicture

Another Mitchell's original concept is Metapicture. Metapicture is an image that can reveal its pictorial representation process and its nature. (Mitchell, 2005). Metapicture is inspired by metalanguage which is the language that describes language and reflects on the language maker's world.

Metapicture can present in several forms (Mitchell, 2015):

- 1) An image that appears in another image, an image that displays a certain depiction, or a medium that is nested in another medium. For example, a painting on a painting, a film in a film, or a story about the golden calf in a painting.
- 2) Images that reflect on the image's nature. Metapicture is "the second image of the image". For example, Steinberg's picture, *The Spiral* (1964) portrays the image's basic character that breaks the boundaries between the inside and the outside lines and depicts the artist's creative process. (Mitchell, 1994).
- 3) Metaphors that provide a model for a theory. For example, Plato's cave allegory is a knowledge's nature model. Mitchell calls it a "hypericon" or "theoretical image". Another example is the duck-rabbit image that has become a hypericon in various disciplines and knowledge regimes, from entertainment, anthropological studies, psychology, to philosophy (Mitchell, 1994).
- 4) Analogy that portrays the entire discourse or knowledge. For example, Hobbes's *Leviathan* as a political power depiction, or 'political body' as a term which refers to the whole society (Mitchell, 2015).

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Pictorial Turn has affected the way people consume and produce images, including in explaining the current pandemic and its aftermath. This study found two metapictures of post-pandemic, which are the emergence of new social crises and the establishing of new global solidarity. These two metapictures are in contrast to each other. Nevertheless, both are equally possible to happen in the future. Both of these metapictures are in the form of analogies, phrases, and theories that describe the entire post-pandemic discourse.

### A. *The First Metapicture: The Emergence of New Social Crises*

The first metapicture of Post-Pandemic is the emergence of new social crises, which is a multidimensional crisis. After the Pandemic, the crisis is not only a health crisis but also a social crisis. According to Judith Butler, pandemics indicates two different sides, on the one hand, global vulnerability (everyone is connected to the same planet and exposed to the virus), and on the other hand, the emergence of "vulnerable groups" and "less vulnerable groups" in the risk of losing their lives. The vulnerable groups are the poor, homeless, migrants, prisoners, people with disabilities, trans and queer, black and colored people. They struggle for their rights to health care. They are also more susceptible to the virus because their living space does not allow physical distancing. This vulnerable group has a greater potential for death because of the wide social gap. (Butler & Yancy, 2020).

The social crisis also occurs because some governments use the coronavirus as a pretext for speech freedom and other democratic freedoms limitation. Giorgio Agamben (2020) argues that the Italian government's restriction in February 2020, tends to use the 'state of exception' as the normal paradigm for governance. According to him, government restrictions for hygiene and public safety reasons produce real militarization. (Agamben, 2020). For Jean Luc-Nancy, on the pandemic, we need to be careful, do not aim at the wrong targets. Pandemic is biological, scientific, and cultural symptoms. He hopes government did not do maneuver amid the pandemic. (Peters, 2020).

Žižek categorizes three crises that we are experiencing: health, economic and psychological crisis. (Žižek, 2020). The health crisis is marked by the Coronavirus spreading, the economic crisis by economic stagnation or decline, and the psychological crisis due to fake news, conspiracy theory, paranoia, racism, and xenophobia explosion. (Žižek, 2020). In particular, there are "three storms" that have emerged simultaneously in Europe: The Coronavirus physical consequences (quarantine, suffering, death), economic effects, and refugee waves due to international political conflicts and proxy war (Žižek, 2020).

Nikolaj Schultz finds the collective reaction of the Covid-19 is a double-edged sword, which is fear and relief. We can understand these two social reactions by connecting the pandemic with another 'civilizational tragedy' called climate change. The actions against the virus have been taken without a doubt necessary. The direct action against the virus is different compared with the case of climate change. Climate change does not accumulate effect and action because it is considered abstract, while the danger of the virus is concrete. The spreading of the virus indeed creates a collective panic. However, it also makes people relieved because knowing that the ecological transition (such as production, consumption, and mobility) that at first seems impossible, now fast and suddenly change. The concrete crisis-the pandemic teaches people that the abstract crisis-climate change might not be unavoidable. (Schultz, 2021).

In his online lecture "Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of Time", W.J.T. Mitchell, identifies four structural viruses that we are facing today, which are pandemic, endemic, infodemic, and ecodemic. 1) Pandemics (pan + demos) produce a period/epoch which is a defining time, it can be a postponement, a break, a moment, which "happens once in a century". For example, Flu 1918 and COVID 19. 2) Endemic (en + demos) is a pathology that occurs in a cultural context or a particular population (regardless of the period). For example, racism, class hierarchy, greed, and sexism. 3) Infodemic is an endemic that is increasing due to social media postings. For example, disinformation, gas-lighting, bullying, fake news, conspiracy theories, paranoia in cyberspace. 4) Ecodemic relates to the environmental crisis, which are major changes in our planet, climate change, microbes, and viruses versus people. (Mitchell, 2020).

The first metapicture emphasizes the harmful character of the multidimensional crisis, especially for those most disadvantaged people. The multidimensional crisis is including health, economic, social, environmental, and cybernetic crises. Health crisis is related to the ongoing pandemic, spreading of the virus, and the emergence of new viruses. The economic crisis is marked by economic stagnation or decline, and the inability to fulfill basic needs. Social crisis deals with racism, xenophobia, social gap, and repression of speech freedom. The environmental crisis is related to climate change and humans' struggle against viruses. The cybernetic crisis happens due to fake news, conspiracy theories, gas-lighting, and bullying in cyberspace.

### B. *The Second Metapicture: The Establishment of New Global Solidarity*

The second metapicture of Post-Pandemic is the establishment of new global solidarity. Judith Butler in "The Crucial Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence" offers "grief" as a global political obligation source. According to Butler, the loss of capacity to feel others' sorrow means the loss of life meaning. People need this capacity to resist violence. In a pandemic situation, we learn to mourn a mass death which means the death of someone whose name we do not know, whose language is not spoken by us, and who lives very far away from us. Others feel their own suffering, but we (those who are strange to them) can also feel it (Butler & Yancy, 2020).

For Latour, this pandemic is an opportunity for revolutionary change. If before the pandemic the call to change production models and lifestyles to be more environmentally friendly was not very effective, after

the pandemic happened, all production modes and private vehicles used had to stop (Latour, 2020). We do not only need protective measures against viruses such as wearing masks but also protection against any element of old production mode (non-environmentally friendly) from coming back. In the new production model, justice is not only about redistributing the production fruits, but about how to make our planet "fruitful" too. Latour considers every segment in nature as an irreversible system.

Latour sees that the intervention of the virus is a dress rehearsal to the next crisis, which is an ecological crisis. The current health crisis prepares us for facing climate change. For Latour, the state not only needs to protect citizens from the virus but also the ecological crisis. Even, the demand to protect people for their own good and from death in the ecological crisis is more justified than in the case of the health crisis, because the ecological crisis affects not only thousands of people but everyone. (Latour, 2021).

To get out of the pandemic, Žižek suggests 'new communism', not in the sense of authoritarian rule, but as unconditional solidarity. In this kind of communism, the old worldview that excluded the old, weak, and sick was no longer valid. (Žižek, 2020). In the new communism, the state has the responsibility to provide basic needs to its citizens. So far, the responsibility to fulfill necessities has been placed on the individual, not on the overall social and economic system changes. (Žižek, 2020). For example, in the environmental crisis, the media focuses too much on individual responsibilities such as the use of waste recycling or other behavioral issues, not on the social structural changes. The struggle against the virus also requires a common struggle, as well as the changes in the socio-economic system. It is also part of the ecological struggle. (Žižek, 2020).

For Žižek, the danger of losing bare life--the normal conditions of life and social relationships, is not separate people, but unite them. To maintain a corporeal distance is to show respect to others, in order to keep them from virus spreading because I may also be a virus bearer. (Žižek, 2021).

The second Metapicture asserts the Post-pandemic life that led to the establishment of new global solidarity based on collective awareness, new political systems, new production models, and a new worldview that is more environmental-friendly.

## V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study attempts to construct the metapicture of post-pandemic. Metapicture is an image, symbol, or metaphor that can describe the nature of things or events. This research shows the metapicture of the post-pandemic in the form of analogies, phrases, and theories that describe the whole discourse of the post-pandemic world. The researcher found two metapictures of post-pandemic life. The first metapicture of the post-pandemic is the emergence of new social crises as well as a more serious vulnerability for those most disadvantaged. We can trace this picture in Judith Butler's notion of the emergence of "vulnerable groups" and "less vulnerable groups" in the risk of losing their lives; Giorgio Agamben's argument about the coronavirus as a pretext for democratic freedoms limitation; and W.J.T. Mitchell's four structural viruses. The second metapicture is the establishment of new global solidarity, the abandonment of old political systems and production models, and the changing of worldview. We can find the second picture in Bruno Latour's argument of the pandemic as an opportunity for revolutionary change related to the ecological crisis, and Žižek's 'new communism' that is based on unconditional solidarity.

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (2020, February). *The State Of Exception Provoked By An Unmotivated Emergency*. <http://positions-politics.org/giorgio-agamben-the-state-of-exception-provoked-by-an-unmotivated-emergency/>
- Bobo Lo. (2021). Masters of Our Fate. *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, 18, 108-125. <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2021-issue-no-18/masters-of-our-fate>
- Butler, J. & George Y. (2020). Interview: Mourning Is a Political Act Amid the Pandemic and Its Disparities (Republication). *Bioethical Inquiry*, 17(4), 483-487. DOI: 10.1007/s11673-020-10043-6
- Gori, F. (2017). What is an Image? W.J.T. Mitchell's Picturing Theory. In Krešimir Purgar, *W.J.T. Mitchell's Image Theory, Living Pictures* (pp. 40-60). Routledge.
- Latour, B. (2020, March). What protective measures can you think of so we don't go back to the pre-crisis production model? *AOC* on 29th March 2020, [http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/P-202-AOC-ENGLISH\\_1.pdf](http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/P-202-AOC-ENGLISH_1.pdf)
- Latour, B. (2021). Is this a Dress Rehearsal? *Critical Inquiry*, 47 (2), 25-27 (Supplement).
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (1994). *Picture Theory*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (2005). *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (2015). *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (2020). *Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of Time - W.J.T. Mitchell*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z\\_Juh7R20eA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_Juh7R20eA)
- Peters, M.A. (2020). Philosophy and Pandemic in the Postdigital Era: Foucault, Agamben, Žižek. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, 556-561. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00117-4>
- Purgar, K. (2017). *W.J.T. Mitchell's Image Theory, Living Pictures*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Schultz, N. (2021). The Climatic Virus in an Age of Paralysis. *Critical Inquiry*, 47 (2), 9-11 (Supplement).
- Smith, C. M. (1972). The Aesthetics of Charles S. Peirce. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 31 (1), 21-29.
- Žižek, S. (2020). *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*. New York and London: OR book.
- Žižek, S. (2021). Is Barbarism with a Human Face Our Fate? *Critical Inquiry*, 47 (2) 4-8 (Supplement).