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CONFRONTING IMAGES

QUESTIONING THE ENDS OF A CERTAIN HISTORY OF ART

Translated from
the French by John Goodman

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PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION: THE EXORCIST

Un homme averti en vaut deux, goes the French proverb. (Roughly: “An informed man is worth two others.”) It might seem self-evident, then, that an informed art historian is worth two others . . . the first-mentioned being an art historian who has discovered and knows how to integrate the principles of iconology established by Erwin Panofsky. An informed art historian is worth two others: the latter, in accordance with the teachings of Wölfflin, concerns himself with *forms* and stylistic evolution; the former, in accordance with the teachings of Panofsky, knows that the *content* of figurative works of art (or their “subject,” as we awkwardly say) pertains to a complex universe of “specific themes or concepts manifested in images, stories, and allegories.”¹

Thanks to Panofsky, we now know better just how far allegory and “disguised symbolism” have been able to invest visual representation, if in its most discreet, most trivial elements: sartorial and architectural details, a carafe of water on a table, a rabbit in a landscape, even the famous allegorical mousetraps in the Mérode Altarpiece.² Thanks to Panofsky, we are aware that the very transparency of a window, in the context of an *Annunciation*, can serve as a vehicle for the most resistant of theological mysteries (the Virgin’s hymen, traversed by the divine seed, remaining intact like a pane of glass traversed by a ray of light).

However, the French phrase *être averti* can be understood in two ways. The positive way pertains to *being aware of something*: in this sense, Panofsky definitively made us aware that the great scholarly traditions—notably medieval scholasticism and Renaissance neo-Platonism—were structurally decisive for all ideas of the meaning of images over the *longue durée* of the Christian and humanist West. From this point of view, Panofsky’s teaching—like that of his peers Fritz

Saxl and later Edgar Wind and Rudolf Wittkower—remains admirable, absolutely necessary for the very comprehension of this *longue durée*. By making us aware of signifying complexities that can sometimes be operative in the visual arts, iconology has, so to speak, *de-flowered* the image. How could anyone complain about that?

But *être averti* can also be understood negatively: in the sense of keeping at a distance something of *which one is wary*. In this case, the person in question is one who is well informed—in the history of art, we would say that he is scholarly, erudite—but also one who is alert to a danger that he absolutely must ward off in order to keep intact the very conditions of his knowledge, to make possible the serene exercise of his erudition. From this point of view, Panofsky's work bears the stamp of an emphatic closure, a veritable buffer zone meant to protect the discipline against all imprudence and all impudence: in other words, from all hubris, from all immoderation in the exercise of reason. That is why Panofsky's books often feature a preliminary "warning." The most telling of these is the one in the 1959 edition of *Idea*:

If books were subject to the same laws and regulations as pharmaceutical products, the dust jacket of every copy would have to bear the label "Use with Care"—or as it used to say on old medicine containers: *CAUTIUS*.³

Panofsky knew well that it is the professional brief of the art historian to manipulate the *pharmakon*: the substance of the images that he studies is a powerful substance, attractive but altering. It brings relief, which is to say that it brings to scholars the most magnificent answers, but *CAUTIUS!* It quickly becomes a drug, even a poison for those who imbibe it to excess, who adhere to it to the point of losing themselves in it. Panofsky was a true and profound rationalist: his whole problem was to ward off the danger posed to the pharmacist by his own *pharmakon*. I mean the danger posed by the image to those whose profession it is to know it. How can we know an image if the image is the very thing (Panofsky never forgot his Plato) that imperils—through its power to take hold of us, which is to say its *call to imagine*—the

positive or "objective" exercise of knowledge? If the image is what makes us imagine, and if the (sensible) imagination is an obstacle to (intelligible) knowledge, how then can one *know an image*?

Such is the paradox to be investigated: in order to constitute iconology as an "objective science," it was necessary for Panofsky literally to *exorcise* something inherent in the very powers of the object that he tried to circumvent through such a "science."

One might figure this paradox in the form—seemingly arbitrary, in any case typically iconological—of a parable. I draw it not from the manifest world, humanist or Christian, of the works usually studied by this great art historian but from the more latent one of his very ancestry, by which I mean his Central European Jewish culture (his father was a Silesian Jew). Everyone in this culture, traversed from the eighteenth century by the Hassidic movement—and transmitted, in German intellectual circles, by Panofsky's contemporaries Gershom Scholem and, before him, Martin Buber⁴—was quite familiar with the popular story of the dybbuk.

This very simple legend would be to the arcana of the great Jewish mystical culture—in particular the cabala of Isaac Luria, transmitted as far as the shtetls in Poland—what the transparent window is to the mystery of the Incarnation in a painting of the Annunciation. It has many dimensions and I can present only a summary version of it here. It is the story of Khónen, a young male virgin, very much the scholar, very bold in his book-based research: Talmudic Judaism seems to him "too dry" and without life; he prefers the abysses of the cabala, a game all the more fraught with risk because, as Moses Cordovero wrote in his treatise *'Or Ne'erab* (The pleasant light), "It is forbidden to penetrate this science if one has not taken a wife and purified one's thoughts."⁵

Khónen has neither taken a wife nor purified his thoughts, but he is madly in love with Leah, a beautiful young girl who returns his love. They are predestined for each other. Now the father of the young girl has chosen a more advantageous match, and the marriage is about to take place. Khónen is so desperate that he dares to transgress the fixed limits of esoteric knowledge: he invokes the secret

names to thwart destiny. But he lacks the necessary experience and his desire is insufficiently pure. The sparks that he tries to manipulate by requiring the impossible becomes a fire that consumes and destroys him. He screams and falls dead amid his books.

The scheduled day of the wedding arrives. At the moment the bond is about to be pronounced, the young girl, beyond all despair, issues a scream of her own. She is not dead. But when revived she begins to speak, to scream *with the voice of the dead*. The errant, unredeemed soul of the young man has entered her: she is possessed by the dybbuk. The rest of the story is a harrowing description of the exorcism performed on the young girl under the authority of a miraculous zadik, the rabbi Azriel of Meeropol: it is a ritual drama that ends with the dybbuk being anathematized, excommunicated, and extirpated from the body of Leah.

But while the entire community hastens to make preparations to celebrate the marriage once more, the young girl herself breaks the magic circle of the exorcism so as to rejoin, in an improbable place—in some versions she dies, in others she penetrates a wall—her predestined ghost, the young dybbuk eternally hers.

This story was known primarily through a dramatic adaptation in Yiddish by Shalom Ansky (1863–1920), the author of tales and novellas and a remarkable ethnologist of Jewish folklore in Poland and Russia.⁶ The play was first produced in 1917 by a troupe in Vilna in the original Yiddish. But it was the Hebrew version, due to the poet Haim Nachman Bialik, that became known internationally: it was mounted in 1921 in Moscow by Evgenii Vakhtangov, a student of Stanislavsky; beginning in 1926 it toured the entire world with the Habima theater (which became less and less welcome in Stalinist Russia). Finally, it was made into a film in Poland in the 1930s: a kind of expressionist “musical tragedy”—the opposite of what emerged in Hollywood as “musical comedy”—shot in Yiddish by Michal Waszynski in 1937.

It is an oddly static but very moving film, one that makes no effort to hide its roots in popular theater. Today it seems like the ghostly but still animate vestige of a real drama that would carry all the actors in this imaginary drama toward the camps. The scene of exorcism—

which takes up the entire third act of Ansky’s play—is here reduced to a few minutes. The director renounced the subterfuge, which could easily have been managed, of having the young girl speak with a man’s voice; the ceremony (notably the successive calls on the shofar) was greatly simplified. But this sketch suffices for my parable, in which one must imagine Leah as a personification of the History of Art, the “holy assembly” of pious men as the “scientific community” of iconologists . . . and Erwin Panofsky in the role of Azriel, the miraculous rabbi, the sage, the exorcist.

The real question is that of knowing of whom the dybbuk himself—simultaneously a *person*, a young man of flesh and blood altered by his desire to know the occult, and a *non-person*, a ghostly variant of the living beings among whom or within whom he continues to wander, even to inhabit—is an allegory. Some fifteen years ago, I attempted—in a book the reader is about to encounter in the attentive translation of John Goodman—to establish a general framework for this question, commencing with a critical examination of the conceptual tools used by Panofsky to exorcise this dybbuk. The magic spells in question came not from the religious tradition but from the philosophical tradition. I saw there, *grosso modo*, a neo-Kantian adaptation of the grand “magic words” of Vasarian academicism: triumphant *rinascità* recast in a certain notion of the history of art as rationalist humanism; the famous *imitazione* recast in a hierarchical table of the relations between figuration and signification; the inevitable *idea* recast in a—typically idealist—use of Kant’s transcendental schematism.

Not that this framework of transformations—a typically sixteenth-century Italian humanism, revisited by the great German eighteenth-century philosopher and adapted, first by Cassirer, then by Panofsky, to the exigencies of a “philological” history standardized in the nineteenth century—wasn’t satisfying to the mind: French structuralism adopted it to counter the musty historicism of “antiquarian” art history. Hence the adhesion, manifested by cultural sociologists (Pierre Bourdieu) and then by semiologists of art (Louis Marin, Hubert Damisch), to the kind of transcendental schematism that Panofsky im-

ported into the realm of images. A *pure reason*, so to speak, was opened to art historians, allowing them to hope for something like a new epistemological foundation for their discipline.

Whether due to chance or to desire, my initial object of investigation, in the field of nascent painting, was an object *resistant* to Panofskian “pure reason.” The tools of the “master of Princeton” did not permit of an understanding of what first seemed an exception, then a *fecund* object on the plane of theory. It was necessary either to renounce understanding altogether or to project iconology toward an epistemological regime that went beyond it: a regime of *over-determination* in which Panofskian *determination* underwent a trial of reasons that are terribly “impure”: amalgamated, contradictory, displaced, anachronistic . . . The reasons for which Freud created a framework of intelligibility under the aegis of the unconscious, the *pharmakon* par excellence of all the human sciences.

It would be quite mistaken—whether blaming him as destroyer or justifying him as “deconstructor”—to understand this detour through Freud as a decidedly post-facto attempt to jettison the whole tradition of *Kunstgeschichte*. Only buzzword mavens and fashion mongers could hold that, in this domain, anything is over: a way of swapping critical memory for a willed oblivion that often resembles a renunciation of one’s own history. To effect a true critique, to propose an alternative future, isn’t it necessary to engage in an *archaeology*, of the kind that Lacan undertook with Freud, Foucault with Binswanger, Deleuze with Bergson, and Derrida with Husserl? So it is to the rhythms of an archaeology of the history of art that the critique of iconology should proceed. More specifically, it was with an eye to Panofsky’s own “master” in Hamburg that the present critique was conceived and then extended. I refer, of course, to Aby Warburg.⁸

Here, then, is our dybbuk. The great interpreter of the humanist sources of Florentine painting.⁹ The revolutionary anthropologist of the rituals of Renaissance portraiture.¹⁰ The genius shadow-founder of iconology.¹¹ But what audacity in his “fundamental questions,” in his research into the “originary words” for figurative expressivity, these *Urworte*, as he dared to say, after the manner of a scholar of the cabala! Because he tried to *understand* images, not just interpret them,

Warburg was a man who, in a sense, tempted the devil and ended up falling mad amid his books before raving for five long years within the walls of psychiatric hospitals in Hamburg, in Jena, and then in the celebrated clinic in Kreuzlinger directed by Ludwig Binswanger, Freud’s great friend. The maker of *Mnemosyne*, that heterodox and disturbing montage of images capable of sounding together in harmonies that elude all historicist demonstration.¹² The poet or prophet of the *Grundbegriffe*, those unpublishable manuscripts of “gushing” thoughts, obsessions, and “idea leakages” mixed together into an exaltation of theoretical reflection itself.¹³ The phantom, the unredeemed soul who still wanders—less and less silently—through the (social) body of Leah, our beautiful discipline called the History of Art.

In his curriculum vitae of Panofsky, published in 1969, William Heckscher felt obliged to emphasize this feature:

[Panofsky] disliked “unreliable” people. Of William Blake he said, “I can’t stand him. I don’t mind if a man is really mad, like Hölderlin. True madness may yield poetical flowers. But I don’t like mad geniuses walking all the time on the brink of an abyss.”¹⁴

It is probable that, like the exorcist in *The Dybbuk*, Panofsky was just as uncomfortable with the “knowledge without a name” on which Aby Warburg insisted as he was determined in his attempt to exorcise its “unreliable” tenor. He was in Hamburg the very year that the “mad genius,” in a famous seminar on the history of art, evoked the abysses that the historian-“seismograph,” the historian of temporal tremors and faults, had to skirt.¹⁵ But Panofsky, wanting to warn us about this “unreliability” and the accompanying dizziness, acted as if the abysses did not exist. As if those who are “unreliable,” those “suffering from vertigo,” were inevitably wrong from the point of view of historical reason.

Now it was not so much the altered person—Warburg himself—that Panofsky wanted to exorcise from his own iconology. The dybbuk that he exorcised was the alteration itself: *the alteration effected by images themselves on historical knowledge built on images*. Two things

characterize this dybbuk. The first is its ghostly power to *rise again*, to effect a psychic haunting and to defy all chronological laws of before and after, of old and new: it is after being dead that the dybbuk begins to speak fully, to live its thought, its youth, even to “be born” for good in its substantial unity with Leah.

The second characteristic of a dybbuk is *adhesion*, in accordance with a like defiance of all topological laws of inside and outside, of near and far: it is because he has been separated from Leah by death that the dybbuk merges so completely with the body, voice, and soul of the young girl. Furthermore, the Hebrew root of the word “dybbuk” is *daleth-beth-kof*, which connotes, precisely, adhesion; it is used in Deuteronomy, among other books of the Bible, to signify a union with God.¹⁶ This same linguistic root shaped the word and concept of *devekut*, whose destiny, from the cabalistic tradition (where it designates the most elevated degree of prophecy, the voice of God speaking through the prophet’s own mouth), to the Hassidism in which it plays an omnipresent role, has been recounted so magnificently by Gershom Scholem: a contemplative fusion, a mystical empathy detached from all elitist or eschatological value.¹⁷ The dybbuk of our story is only the fall or demonic reversal of a mystical process of *devekut* gone wrong. But its structure is identical.

Why recall these philological details? Because the history of art invented by Aby Warburg combines, in its fundamental concept—*Nachleben*: “afterlife” or “survival”—precisely the powers to *adhere* and to *haunt* that inhere in all images. By contrast with phenomena of “rebirth” and the simple transmission through “influence,” as we say, a *surviving image* is an image that, having lost its original use value and meaning, nonetheless comes back, like a ghost, at a particular historical moment: a moment of “crisis,” a moment when it demonstrates its latency, its tenacity, its vivacity, and its “anthropological adhesion,” so to speak.

On the one hand, Tylor’s ethnology of “survivals,” Darwin’s model of “heterochronies” or *missing links*, Burckhardt’s theory of “vital residues,” and Nietzsche’s philosophy of the eternal return would have aided Warburg in his revolutionary formulation of a history of art conceived as “ghost stories for grownups.”¹⁸ On the other

hand, the aesthetic of tragic *pathos* in the late Romantics, Goethe’s commentary on the *Laocoön*, Robert Vischer’s notion of *Einfühlung*, and Freud and Binswanger’s symptomatic understanding of images would have aided Warburg in his revolutionary formulation of anthropological—and psychic—“adhesion” of the primitive in the historical present of images.¹⁹

It is all of this that Panofsky wanted to exclude from his own models of intelligibility: where Warburg deconstructed the whole of nineteenth-century historicism by showing that the *Geschichte der Kunst* is a (*hi*)story of ghosts that stick to our skin, Panofsky wanted to reconstruct his *Kunstgeschichte* as a *history of exorcisms*, of safety measures and reasonable distancings. To be sure, Panofsky usefully warned us against the dangers of romantic vitalism in the history of art; but by the same token he exorcised all thoughts of *Leben* and *Nachleben*—the very paradoxical, very specific “life” of images that haunt time—in favor of a historical model that is essentially deductive, therefore less attentive to the rhizomes of over-determination and to the *dynamic* aspects of cultural phenomena. He usefully warned us against the aesthetic vagueness of nonhistoricized approaches to art; but he likewise exorcised the anachronisms and liabilities specific to the world of images. He looked only for signifying values where Warburg—close to Freud here—looked for symptomatic values.²⁰ Panofsky reduced exceptions to the *unity of the symbols* that structurally encompass them—in accordance with the “unity of the symbolic function” dear to Cassirer—where Warburg had smashed the unity of symbols by means of the *split of symptoms* and the sovereignty of accidents.

That is why Panofsky brought his work to a close with a return to an iconography ever more attentive to the *identification of motifs* (isolated as entities), whereas Warburg never ceased subverting iconography through his analysis of the *contamination of motifs* (amalgamated into networks). There where Panofsky kneaded together the modesty of the humanist scholar and the *conquest of knowledge*, Warburg made the effacement of the philologist rhyme with a true tragedy of knowledge: a Kantian victory of the (axiomatic) schematism versus a Nietzschean pain of (heuristic) erraticism. Panofsky usefully warned us

against the subjectivist sufficiency of nondocumented interpretations, but he rather quickly became authoritative, explanatory, satisfied with his well-constructed answers. Warburg, for his part, remained an artist, uneasy, implicative, ever in search of questions that his extraordinary erudition never appeased. When Panofsky *explained* an image, it was a signification given beyond all expressive values; when Warburg *understood* an image, it was, he said, a way of liberating an “expressive value” transcending, in anthropological terms, all signification. But it is *dangerous*, of course, to want to situate an analysis beyond the principle of signification (that is, at the core of a metaphysical conception of symptoms): a special kind of *tact* is required to manipulate the *pharmakon* of images.

There are specific philosophical and historical reasons for Panofsky’s exorcism. The perpetual warnings, the many cries of *CAUTIUS!* emitted by the great legislator, the great Talmudist of iconology, always come down to the same thing: the source of all evil is *unreason*. It is as “pure unreason” that Panofsky, a man of the Enlightenment, experienced in particular the rise of Nazism—to which some thirty members of his family fell victim—and his dismissal from the University of Hamburg in 1933. When one has read the extraordinary book by the philologist Victor Klemperer about the way the Nazi regime confiscated the German language, even its most prestigious philosophical vocabulary,²¹ one can understand how Panofsky never cited Martin Heidegger after the war as he still did in 1932.²²

But it is with a whole world of thought—that of the three first decades of the century in Germany: that of Heidegger and Jung, but also of Nietzsche and Freud, of Benjamin and Ernst Bloch—that Panofsky ultimately broke. Significant in this regard was his extraordinary and complete assumption of the English language and his symmetrical rejection of his mother tongue: he agreed to return to Germany only in 1967, one year before his death, and it was in English that he chose to give his lecture there.²³ He acknowledged, writes William Heckscher,

the momentous impact that the English language had had on the very foundations of his thinking and on his manner of

presenting ideas in a lucid and organic, euphonious as well as logical way—so very different from the “woolen curtain” that so many Continental scholars, above all German and Dutch, interposed between themselves and their readers.²⁴

In a text of 1953 entitled “Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European,” Panofsky clearly articulated his retrospective distaste for the German theoretical vocabulary (he was horrified, for example, by the fact that the word *taktisch* can mean both “tactical” and “tactile”).²⁵

As a man alert to the dangers of unreason—which he saw even in the double meanings of ordinary words—Panofsky wanted to exorcise it from the very landscape in which his thought operated, the history of images. To exorcise means to separate, to disentangle at all costs: to disentangle expressive adhesions (the pathos of empathy) exterior to the sphere of meanings; to disentangle the obscure, impure survivals exterior to Renaissance clarities and ideals; to disentangle symptomatic returns (the pathos of the unconscious) exterior to the world of symbols.

But one cannot disentangle “pure reason” from “pure unreason” (and thus from the *Kritik der reinen Unvernunft* that Warburg pretended, on his side, to confront)²⁶ except by disincarnating the intrinsic power of images. Heir to Kant, the Enlightenment, and the teleology of the symbol invented by Cassirer, Panofsky did not understand that the image—like everything pertaining to the human psyche—requires of us a rationalism not of the Enlightenment but, so to speak, of the *Clair-Obscur*: a tragic rationalism expressed by Warburg in the face of what he called the “dialectic of the monster,” and by Freud in the face of what he called the “discontents of civilization.” But Panofsky, supported in this by the Anglo-Saxon context, wanted the unconscious to be nothing but a mistake: which entailed exorcising all of the dark—but efficacious and anthropologically crucial—parts of images. Such, doubtless, is the principal limit of the knowledge that he bequeathed to us. This is not, to be sure, a reason to exorcise Panofsky himself, only an incitement to read him and reread him—but critically, as true admiration requires.

Thanks to Panofsky's warnings, we know better just how the historian of art engages, at every instant, his reason and his "scientific" desire for verification: we know better just how we need not be afraid of *knowledge*. But despite Panofsky's exorcisms—and thanks to the risks taken before him by Aby Warburg—we also know how we needn't be afraid of *not knowing*. We must, in this history, have the courage to confront both parties, both "pictures": both the exorcist and the dybbuk itself. Both the veil that makes thought possible and the rend that makes thought impossible.

Georges Didi-Huberman

Question Posed

Often, when we pose our gaze to an art image,* we have a forthright sensation of paradox. What reaches us immediately and straightaway is marked with trouble, like a self-evidence that is somehow obscure.† Whereas what initially seemed clear and distinct is, we soon realize, the result of a long detour—a mediation, a usage of words. Perfectly banal, in the end, this paradox. We can embrace it, let ourselves be carried away by it; we can even experience a kind of *jouissance* upon feeling ourselves alternately enslaved and liberated by this braid of knowledge and not-knowledge, of universality and singularity, of things that elicit naming and things that leave us gaping. . . . All this on one and the same surface of a picture or sculpture, where nothing has been hidden, where everything before us has been, simply, *presented*.

We can, conversely, feel dissatisfied with such a paradox. Want not to let things lie, want to know more, want to *represent to ourselves* in a more intelligible way what the image before us still seemed to hide within it. We might then turn toward the discourse that proclaims itself a knowledge about art, an archeology of things forgotten or unnoticed in works of art since their creation, however old or however recent they might be. This discipline, whose status thus can be summed up as offering *specific knowledge* of the art object, this discipline is as we know called the history of art. Its invention was quite recent, by comparison with the invention of its object: we might say, taking Lascaux as our reference point, that it postdates art itself by roughly one hundred sixty-five centuries, of which ten or so were filled with intense artistic activity solely within the framework of the

**quand nous posons notre regard sur une image de l'art.*

†*comme une évidence qui serait obscur.*