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UNKNOWN PREMISES OF ICONOLOGY? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF PANOFSKY'S PROPOSAL FOR A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICITY¹

When Panofsky introduced a three-step scheme of interpretation in his 1932 German essay *On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts*, he posed it against the danger of arbitrariness.² This is why corrective principles of interpretation are named in this scheme. As he put it in a later summary, “our identifications and interpretations will depend on our subjective equipment, and for this very reason will have to be supplemented and corrected by an insight into historical processes the sum total of which may be called tradition.”³ This text, and the ones he later derived from it in exile in America, are seen as the introduction of a method.⁴ However, they can also be read as an answer to a philosophical question. In explaining that the method he suggests is necessary because

the inner vantage point of a contemporary interpreter needs to be adjusted to that of former centuries, he implicitly proposes a solution to the problem of historicity. That is, he answers the question of whether it is possible to approximately overcome the historical difference of mentalities and recover the original meaning of a work of art.⁵ In the following, I will examine this proposal and ask which underlying conditions it is logically dependent on. I will argue that, in order to share Panofsky's conviction that this goal can be reached, two presuppositions must also be shared: Panofsky's attempt is, more or less implicitly, based on the assumption of a non-historical nature both of man and of vision. Therefore I do not aim to criticize his instruction to take historical documents into account: it is not a method (in the sense of a pathway) which is at stake here. Rather, I point to the fact that we need either to share these presuppositions or to conclude that Panofsky's method does not actually lead to the goal his texts had suggested they would. The latter means that we would have to give another account of what an interpretation using Panofsky's methodical tools can aim towards.

THE GOAL OF INTERPRETATION

According to Panofsky, a proper interpretation realizes the meaning the work of art had – be it conscious or unconscious – in the moment of its creation. The task is “to re-create the creations”⁶ as closely as possible. In order to

¹ This essay is a slightly altered version of what I presented at the *Iconologies. Global unity or/and local diversities in art history* conference in Kraków, 23–25 May 2019. Its claims are a condensed version of thoughts I developed in connection with my PhD project, in which I examined the concepts of perception and interpretation in Hans Sedlmayr's methodological writings and checked their relation to Panofsky and historicism. The model of the hermeneutic circle in Panofsky I have presented has benefitted greatly from my discussions with Friedrich Haufe.

² E. PANOFSKY, ‘On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts’, trans. J. Elsner, K. Lorenz, *Critical Inquiry*, 38, 2012, no. 3, pp. 467–482, here p. 480. In German: “Willkür” (idem, ‘Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst’, *Logos*, 21, 1932, pp. 103–119, here p. 117).

³ Idem, ‘Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art’, in idem *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History*, New York, 1955, pp. 26–54, here p. 39.

⁴ A recent book-length account is A. EFAL, *Figural Philology. Panofsky and the Science of Things*, London, 2016 (= Bloomsbury Studies in Continental Philosophy).

⁵ This particular goal of Panofsky's method is described by A. EFAL, *Figural Philology* (as in note 4). However, she does not question the possibility of reaching it.

⁶ E. PANOFSKY, ‘The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline’, in *The Meaning of the Humanities*, ed. T. M. Greene, Princeton, 1938, pp. 91–118, here p. 106.



be a recreation, interpretation has to be performed not from the vantage point of a later century, but from that of the century the work was created in, Panofsky explained in 1932.⁷ In later texts, he called the beholder's vantage point his or her "cultural equipment". The art historian, knowing "that his cultural equipment, such as it is, would not be in harmony with that of people in another land and of a different period [...] tries to make adjustments".⁸ This is what Panofsky's methodical instructions serve to do. It is, in the words Adi Efal uses in her book on Panofsky, "a regressive voyage into [...] mentalities".⁹ If the beholder engages in this process, Panofsky claims using the example of aesthetic perception, their interpretation "will more and more adopt itself to the original 'intention' of the works".¹⁰ If, on the other hand, the beholder does not apply the corrective tools specified by Panofsky, their contemporary cultural equipment will influence their understanding. As Panofsky puts it in his 1938 English essay *The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline*:

"the 'naïve' beholder [...], unconsciously, appraises and interprets the work of art [...] without caring whether his appraisal and interpretation are right or wrong, and without realizing that his own cultural equipment, such as it is, actually contributes to the object of his experience."¹¹

This also means that the less progress is made in the process of approximation, the more does inadequate cultural equipment distort our interpretation, which is then a creative rather than a re-creative act. It is interpretation's goal of getting rid of creative ways of beholding which he emphasizes by quoting Erasmus' Latin: "nos vetera instauramus, nova non prodimus", which means "We are only restoring what is ancient; we are not bringing forward anything new".¹² In order to restore the historical re-

ality of the artwork, he asserts later in the same text that "we have to detach ourselves from the present".¹³

THE MEANS OF REACHING THIS GOAL AND A PROBLEM

Now the question can be specified: does Panofsky provide a means for the interpreter to "grow into"¹⁴ the historical situation? As he explains, the "corrective principle of interpretation"¹⁵ is the "history of tradition"¹⁶, as he put it in 1955 – or, as it is called in a recent translation of the German text from 1932, "the history of transmission" (in German: "Überlieferungsgeschichte"¹⁷). The task is to test the intuitive interpretation that is effectuated by the current cultural equipment, taking into account increasing numbers of artworks and written documents from the historical context of the object of study and thereby getting rid of concepts which belong to the contemporary context of the beholder. It is obvious that theses on the past need to be tested on historical documents. The question here is whether this process reduces the share our contemporary ways of understanding have in the interpretation of the artwork, enabling us instead to understand it from within the historical whole it stems from. A solely re-creative interpretation would require us to take into account only the documents which are part of the same historical processes the artwork is a product of.¹⁸

annotated by P.G. Bietenholz, Toronto–Buffalo–London, 1988, p. 73.) Erasmus uses the first-person plural to talk about himself in defense of his translation of the New Testament. However, in talking about Panofsky's text it seems appropriate to use the "we", for Panofsky himself uses the "we" to address the community of scholars in the humanities. See e.g. E. PANOFSKY, 'The History of Art', pp. 114–116 (as in note 6).

¹³ E. PANOFSKY, 'The History of Art', p. 116 (as in note 6).

¹⁴ The English translation published omits the metaphor "growing into", losing Panofsky's description of the mental process as a movement in which the interpreter virtually adjusts his mind so that it may fit into some kind of 'form' the historical situation prescribes. In the sentence I refer to, Panofsky talks about the necessity of a "Stilerkenntnis, die [...] nur durch ein Hineinwachsen in die historische Situation erworben werden kann" (E. PANOFSKY, 'Zum Problem der Beschreibung', p. 107 [as in note 2]). In English: "an awareness of stylistic form which can only be acquired by a sense of historical situation" (idem, 'On the Problem of Describing', p. 471 [as in note 2]). The published translation's "a sense of historical situation" obviously focusses on the general meaning instead of literally translating the words as "growing into the historical situation".

¹⁵ Idem, 'Iconography and Iconology', p. 41 (as in note 3).

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Idem, 'Zum Problem der Beschreibung', p. 114 (as in note 2).

¹⁸ Compare idem, 'The History of Art', p. 116 (as in note 6). Here he says: "the humanities endeavor to capture the processes in the course of which those records were produced and became what they are."

⁷ His example here is Lukian's description of Zeuxis' painting *A Family of Centaurs* – "he would have to have understood the work of art not from the vantage point of the second century AD but from that of the fifth century BC." (idem, 'On the Problem of Describing', p. 468 [as in note 2]).

⁸ Idem, 'The History of Art', p. 108 (as in note 6).

⁹ A. EFAL, *Figural Philology*, p. 9 (as in note 4).

¹⁰ E. PANOFSKY, 'The History of Art', p. 109 (as in note 6).

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 108.

¹² Idem, 'Kunstgeschichte als geisteswissenschaftliche Disziplin [1938]', in idem, *Sinn und Deutung in der bildenden Kunst (Meaning in the Visual Arts)*, Köln, 1996, pp. 7–35, here p. 9. Engl.: E. PANOFSKY, 'The History of Art', p. 94 (as in note 6). The sentence Panofsky quotes is from number 1153 of Erasmus' letters. For the English translation I have used here, see: J. CALVIN, F.L. BATTLES, A.M. HUGO, *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, Leiden, 1969, p. 56. While the translation cited above literally translates the first-person plural of the verb, the translation published in *The Correspondence of Erasmus* reads: "All I do is to restore the old; I put forward nothing new." (*The correspondence of Erasmus. Letters 1122 to 1251. 1520 to 1521*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors,

The problem that arises here is that understanding the artwork only from within its historical context is not possible, because the context is represented by documents which we need to understand as well. As Panofsky himself explains, the source of our interpretation is our cultural equipment. Without it, the objects of our studies would be totally meaningless to us. It follows that documents themselves can't explain the artwork; the interpreter rather needs to invest their contemporary cultural equipment, their ways of understanding gained from the context of their own life. Every word in a text is understood by involving a familiarity with the thing that is denoted by the word. If a description of an artwork mentions an aesthetic property, the reader is dependent on the experience they have made with the aesthetic objects they have found that same aesthetic property in. In order to understand a word's historical meaning, the interpreter might read historical documents showing how the word was used at that time. This might prove helpful, and allow the interpreter to learn more about the past. What will not occur in this process, however, is a mental detachment from the present: the interpreter will not free themselves from contemporary ways of understanding. Rather, in order to understand a second text which helps them to read the first text properly, the interpreter has to involve their knowledge of familiar things, for otherwise they would not understand the explanations wanted from the second text. Instead of switching from a contemporary to a historical vantage point, the interpreter moves to a new vantage point in which knowledge of more and more historical documents is integrated. What should only be a recreation, according to Panofsky, remains necessarily and unavoidably a creative process, over the course of which the meaning of the artwork, rather than being unearthed, changes as well.

CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

In order to work as a purification process in the sense described above, the act of taking into account increasing numbers of historical documents would have to be free from the constantly renewed involvement of contemporary ways of understanding. Under what conditions could that constant involvement of the present be stopped? Are there certain presuppositions which everyone who believes in the possibility of a regressive voyage into past mentalities would have to share? These would have to be conditions which enable the beholder to clearly separate their historically inadequate ways of understanding from the object of study, so that they do not repeatedly contribute to it. My thesis is first that Panofsky's concept of interpretation is dependent on the presupposition of a pure perception that is devoid of all interpretation. He needs, whether consciously or not, a concept of perception according to which everything that is cultural and therefore subject to historical change can be drawn away from what is perceived. Only in this way would it be possible

to think of an artwork whose identity is not altered by the cultural equipment of the beholder. Before I explain the function which the presupposition of a pure perception would have in the process of a regressive voyage into past mentalities (and thereby a re-creative interpretation of the artwork), I would like to explain what I mean by the concept of pure perception. In doing this, I will also try to show that such a concept plays an important – although currently almost unidentified – role in Panofsky's texts on the theory of interpretation.

TRACING PANOFSKY'S CONCEPT OF PURE PERCEPTION

As Panofsky emphasizes in his text from 1932, even the mere recognition of pictorial space or depicted objects, like rocks and people, is an interpretation. Such an identification is dependent on the beholder's concept of how space, rocks and people are usually depicted, and thus might change over time. This is why, according to him, even the simple description of a work of art should not be modeled "on the immediate perception of a given object within a picture" but on knowledge which "only a historical consciousness" could provide.¹⁹ The first level of his three-stratum-scheme of interpretation takes this into account. Georges Didi-Huberman therefore concludes, in his book *Confronting Images*, that Panofsky would hold the opinion that there is no such thing as a primordial, solely natural perception which would only present pure forms.²⁰ Rather, Panofsky would hold that reality is modified, even invented, by symbolizing acts before a viewer perceives it. This means that upper levels of meaning are not built on solid bases of beholding. Instead, they set conditions for the lower levels themselves. However, in my reading of texts published between 1915 and 1955, I came to the conclusion that this is not the case. In fact Panofsky distinguishes between a sensory perception, which is only receptive, and an activity of the mind, which is interpretative. At the same time, this distinction opposes nature and culture, non-historicity and historicity.

In 1932, Panofsky explained that what was usually called a formal description (in the sense of Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History*) was dependent on the recognition of depicted objects and space, and thus was de facto not a truly formal description. This does not mean, however, that he believes in the impossibility of a perception of pure color. On the contrary, his wording shows that he conceives perception as directed to "purely formal elements", which are "renegotiated [in German,

¹⁹ Idem, 'On the Problem of Describing', pp. 468–469 (as in note 2).

²⁰ G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Confronting Images*, University Park, Pa., 2005, p. 100. The book was published in 1990 as *Devant l'image*. In the German translation: idem, *Vor einem Bild*, übers. R. Werner, München, 2000, p. 108.

‘umgedeutet’²¹, NJ] into symbols of something depicted’ only in a second step.²² “[D]escription [...] develops from the purely formal sphere into the realm of meaning.”²³ The original German uses the metaphor of “growing upward”, and even better conveys how Panofsky talks about a step from a lower to an upper level.²⁴ The English texts on the three levels of interpretation, which he published in 1939 and 1955, after he had immigrated to the United States, are even more articulate in this regard. By speaking of the “limits” of purely formal perception, which are “overstepped” by entering a “first sphere” of meaning, Panofsky clearly identifies a stratum which is located under the first level of his model of interpretation, functioning as a foundation which is strictly separated from the rest.²⁵ For Panofsky’s well-known description of a man taking his hat off for greeting, Stephen Bann has already identified the notion of an innocent eye here.²⁶

In naming the “general pattern of color, lines and volumes” which we primarily perceive, our “world of vision”²⁷, Panofsky reuses or rather translates a formulation he had coined as early as 1915, in a text on the origin of style in the visual arts. This essay, entitled *Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst*, is interesting as it argues explicitly in favor of a specific notion of perception. Panofsky here identifies a “Welt des Auges”²⁸ – that is, a “world of the eye”, in the sense of visual data being recognized by a perceiving subject: a “world of vision” which is a realm free from historical change. He thus rejects Wölfflin’s claim of vision itself having a history – a history which evolves according to its own immanent laws, influencing style in a way that cannot be read as an expression of an age. Panofsky instead argues that in historical changes of style, spiritual transformations are indeed expressed. In order to do this, he distinguishes between a seeing which only gives, and does not form,²⁹ and the mind or the soul, whose

“intervention”³⁰ is responsible for a historical change in style. What Wölfflin believes to be a relation of vision towards the world is in fact, according to Panofsky, “a relation of the soul towards the world of vision”.³¹

ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MIND AND PERCEPTION

How Panofsky considers this intervention of the mind to operate is important for the function his notion of perception has within his theory of interpretation. In trying to understand the relation between mind and perception, it is helpful to read his 1925 essay on the possibility of determining basic concepts or terms being applicable in descriptions of style.³² In this essay, he describes the relationship between visual data and basic concepts as resembling a chemical reaction. The basic concepts operate similarly to a chemical reagent, which, added to another substance, causes a chemical reaction that allows to determine the identity of the substance to be tested: “their task is [...], to make the phenomenal data of visual perception speak, by functioning as an a priori legitimized reagent.”³³ Confronting the phenomenal data of sense perception with the basic concepts – which Panofsky believes he has found in certain basic formal problems every artist has to solve in creating an artwork – brings about the concepts with which style can be characterized. The basic concepts must be deduced a priori, according to Panofsky, for only then can they function as measures that are valid, independently of changes in history.³⁴ They thus serve as a “fixed Archimedean point”³⁵ from which to attain descriptions of

²¹ E. PANOFSKY, ‘Zum Problem der Beschreibung’, p. 105 (as in note 2).

²² Idem, ‘On the Problem of Describing’, p. 469 (as in note 2).

²³ Ibidem, p. 469.

²⁴ “Deskription [...] wächst [...] aus einer rein formalen Sphäre [...] in eine Sinnregion hinauf” (idem, ‘Zum Problem der Beschreibung’, p. 105 [as in note 2]).

²⁵ Idem, ‘Introductory’, in idem, *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, Boulder, 1972 (= Icon editions), pp. 3–31, here p. 3. (The volume was first published in 1939.) E. PANOFSKY, ‘Iconography and Iconology’, p. 26 (as in note 3).

²⁶ S. BANN, ‘Meaning/Interpretation’, in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. R.S. Nelson, R. Shiff, 2nd ed., Chicago, 2003, here p. 129.

²⁷ E. PANOFSKY, ‘Introductory’, p. 3 (as in note 25); idem, ‘Iconography and Iconology’, p. 26 (as in note 3).

²⁸ Idem, ‘Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst’, *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 10, 1915, no. 4, pp. 460–467, here p. 463.

²⁹ In German: “nur gibt, nicht formt” (ibidem, p. 464). This text, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been translated into English.

³⁰ In German: “Eingreifen” (ibidem, p. 463). The whole sentence is: “So gewiß die Wahrnehmungen des Gesichts nur durch ein tätiges Eingreifen des Geistes ihre lineare oder malerische Form gewinnen können, so gewiß ist die ‘optische Einstellung’ streng genommen eine geistige Einstellung zum Optischen, so gewiß ist das ‘Verhältnis des Auges zur Welt’ in Wahrheit ein Verhältnis der Seele zur Welt des Auges.”

³¹ In German: “das ‘Verhältnis des Auges zur Welt’ [ist] in Wahrheit ein Verhältnis der Seele zur Welt des Auges” (ibidem, p. 463).

³² He argues that these basic concepts are to be found in the basic problems which every artist is confronted with in creating an artwork, and which can be deduced a priori. Every artwork deals – according to him – with an antagonism between plenitude and form (idem, ‘Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie: Ein Beitrag zu der Erörterung über die Möglichkeit “kunstwissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe”’, *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 18, 1925, no. 2, pp. 129–161, here p. 131).

³³ In German: “ihre Aufgabe besteht [...] darin, als ein a priori legitimes ‘Reagens’ die Erscheinungen zum Sprechen zu bringen” (ibidem, p. 139).

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 150.

³⁵ Idem, ‘The Concept of Artistic Volition’, *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 1981, no. 1, pp. 17–33, here p. 18.

style that are safe from the “blatant arbitrariness”³⁶ that the consciousness of a contemporary interpreter brings about. This 1925 quotation shows that Panofsky’s urge to defend art history against arbitrariness had existed before 1932. It is therefore not enough to explain it as a reaction to Martin Heidegger and to National Socialism,³⁷ as Panofsky’s comment on Heidegger’s book *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (*Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, published 1929) might suggest.³⁸ It also needs to be discussed with respect to the then-current debate about historicism in the humanities.

However, and this is why I return to the 1925 text, the unhistoric origin of the basic concepts is not the only fixed element in the process described here. There are two more, and naming them helps to clarify the function they have in the theory of historical interpretation. The first of these is relatively explicit, although Panofsky does not state that it necessarily needs to be free from historical change as well, and this is the sensual perception of the visual data of the artwork. Only if the fixed basic concepts are confronted with a visual perception that is not variable but shared by every beholder can this confrontation bring about a characterization of style that is valid, independently of the historical situation of the beholder. The other fixed element can only be deduced implicitly, and the metaphor of a chemical experiment is helpful here: experiments are repeatable because the laws of nature do not change. Similarly, if the confrontation of the basic concepts and the visual data (that is, the reaction of the reagent and the substance being tested) brings about a result that is independent of the interpreter and their historical situation, a medium is required through which they can interact in a way that does not change. Therefore, as the medium in which concepts and perception come together is man, Panofsky implicitly presupposes that the nature of man always remains the same.³⁹ Historical transformations of world-view, mental habits,⁴⁰

cultural equipment, and whatever concepts Panofsky employs to describe a variable relation of the soul towards the world are then only the extrinsic properties of an interpreter. They do not concern their essence as a human being. Indeed, the term ‘cultural equipment’ points to this metaphorically, for it describes our cultural properties as something comparable to physical equipment like a jacket you can put on and take off, or a tool you can use and put away.

THE IMPLICIT FUNCTION OF PURE PERCEPTION WITHIN A REGRESSIVE VOYAGE INTO MENTALITIES

Analogously to the foregoing, I want to argue that Panofsky’s notion of a regressive voyage into past mentalities is dependent on the presupposition of non-historical natures of man and perception alike. As explained beforehand, during this regressive voyage, the interpreter – according to Panofsky’s theory – slowly gets rid of their contemporary cultural equipment which is inadequate for understanding the historical meaning of the artwork, and exchanges it for cultural equipment that is historically adequate. However, in order to work as a purification process of that kind, the act of taking more and more historical documents into account would have to be free of the constantly renewed involvement of contemporary ways of understanding. Below, I will try to show at which points such a process would be dependent on a non-historical perception and human nature. As explicated above, for Panofsky the artwork is interpreted by the use of the cultural equipment, but equipment and interpretation need to be corrected by taking into account the “history of tradition”. As he himself explains, in the end it is the hermeneutic circle between the whole and its parts that is at stake here, where every understanding of a part is dependent on the understanding of the whole, and vice versa.⁴¹ The goal is, according to Panofsky, to understand the work of art from within the historical situation in which it was created. However, as this situation must be recovered first, the whole actually consists of a prevalent conception of what the historical context was like. The corrective process of that circle is kept running by adding more documents from within the historical context, or by interpreting known ones anew. Any discovery made that way “will either ‘fit in’ with the prevalent general conception, [...] or else it will entail a subtle, or even a fundamental change [...], and thereby throw new light on all that has been known before.”⁴² In other words, a new part will

³⁶ In German: “bare Willkür” (idem, ‘Über das Verhältnis’, p. 150 [as in note 32]).

³⁷ This is the framing of R. DONANDT, ‘Erwin Panofsky – Ikonologie und Anwalt der Vernunft’, in *Das Hauptgebäude der Universität Hamburg als Gedächtnisort. Mit sieben Porträts in der NS-Zeit vertriebener Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler*, ed. R. Nicolaysen, Hamburg, 2011, pp. 113–140, here p. 133.

³⁸ E. PANOFSKY, ‘Zum Problem der Beschreibung’, pp. 113–114 (as in note 2).

³⁹ With respect to Panofsky’s essay *Perspective as “Symbolic Form”*, Christopher Wood has already stated that Panofsky shares “the neo-Kantian faith in the unity and immutability of human nature and reason”. Wood does not, however, ask whether this faith has a systematic role in Panofsky’s interpretation theory. C.S. WOOD, ‘Introduction’, in idem, *The Vienna School Reader. Politics and Art Historical Methods in the 1930s*, New York, 2000, here p. 17.

⁴⁰ For his use of the term “mental habit”, see E. PANOFSKY, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, 3rd ed., Latrobe, 1956, p. 21. For an examination of the historical origin of the concept of habitus and its potential use in art history, grounded in Panofsky’s use of the

term, see A. EFAL-LAUTENSCHLÄGER, *Habitus as Method. Revisiting a Scholastic Theory of Art*, Leuven, 2017 (= Studies in Iconology, 9).

⁴¹ E.g.: “the individual monuments [...] can only be [...] interpreted [...] in the light of a general historical concept”.

⁴² E. PANOFSKY, ‘The History of Art’, pp. 100–101 (as in note 6). In German: idem, ‘Kunstgeschichte als geisteswissenschaftliche’, p. 15 (as in note 12).

cause a change to the whole, that is, a new “historical synopsis”⁴³ of the parts. Or, as Panofsky puts it, a new “system that makes sense”⁴⁴

As explained above, however, every interpretation of a new document will involve understandings derived from the life of the interpreter, and thus foil the detachment from the present that Panofsky’s interpretation theory demands. In order truly to function as a corrective process in the sense discussed here, the hermeneutic circle would have to be conceived as operating like an objective circle in front of the interpreter.⁴⁵ In this “objective” circle, the cultural equipment of the beholder would not be brought in again at every point in the process. Rather, we must consider it to be involved only once, then left to be corrected. This means that it would have to be possible to have the documents interpreted simply by integrating them into the historical synopsis. All this cannot work, however, without the following preconditions: it must be possible to behold the work of art and the documents as objects that are unaltered by the beholder. This means that it must be possible to withdraw the cultural equipment from the act of beholding. Panofsky’s concept of a visual perception that is primary and purely receptive, and only interpreted by the soul in a second step, at this point turns out to have an essential function in his theory of interpretation. Only this concept allows us to think that it is possible to separate the data of perception from the understanding that he called cultural equipment, and to get back primary data through this separation. In addition, only the presupposition of a pure perception allows us to consider an uninterpreted work of art or document as having properties that can withstand a simple integration into the prevalent historical conception and are thus able to cause a change in the historical synopsis.

FURTHER CONCLUSIONS: PRESUPPOSITIONS ON THE NATURE OF MAN AND THE POSSIBILITY OF RE-CREATION

One problem remains: how could the confrontation of the prevalent conception of the historical whole and a new part result in a new synopsis that is not dependent on the specific ways of combining that a contemporary interpreter might have? The historical synopsis would have

⁴³ Idem, ‘The History of Art’, p. 110 (as in note 6). In German: idem, ‘Kunstgeschichte als geisteswissenschaftliche’, p. 22 (as in note 12).

⁴⁴ Idem, ‘The History of Art’, p. 110 (as in note 6). In German: idem, ‘Kunstgeschichte als geisteswissenschaftliche’, p. 22 (as in note 12); compare: *ibidem*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Georg Bertram shows how different models describe the hermeneutic circle as either objective or subjective. G.W. BERTRAM, *Hermeneutik und Dekonstruktion. Konturen einer Auseinandersetzung der Gegenwartsphilosophie*, München, 2002, pp. 25–56, especially p. 41f.

to be built in a way that does not change throughout the course of history. Obviously, only the presupposition of a non-historical nature of man can guarantee this. This implicit presupposition conforms to what Wilhelm Dilthey declared to be a precondition of understanding: only if the historical differences between the personalities of the interpreter and the creator of the text or artwork have evolved from the foundation of a universal human nature can these differences be reduced or approximately eliminated during the process of interpretation.⁴⁶ Because Dilthey holds the opinion that man is historical through and through,⁴⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer concluded that Dilthey contradicts himself at this crucial point in his theory of historical understanding.⁴⁸ We must, I think, draw the same conclusion with regard to Panofsky. When he elaborates upon his idea of how the Renaissance, after the Middle Ages had split up themes of antiquity and the motifs with which these were depicted, reintegrated that kind of form and content, Panofsky writes:

it is self-evident that this reintegration could not be a simple reversion to the classical past. The intervening period had changed the minds of men, so that they could not turn into pagans again; and it had changed their tastes and productive tendencies, so that their art could not simply renew the art of the Greeks and Romans.⁴⁹

However, the art historian in the Panofskyan sense is bound to the task of a virtual reversion to past mentalities, and of re-creating the artwork without “bringing forward anything new”.⁵⁰ If he were consistent in his opinion that historical changes in people’s minds make it impossible to repeat the way artworks were created in former

⁴⁶ “Die Möglichkeit der allgemeingültigen Interpretation kann aus der Natur des Verstehens abgeleitet werden. In diesem stehen sich die Individualität des Auslegers und die seines Autors nicht als zwei unvergleichbare Tatsachen gegenüber: auf der Grundlage der allgemeinen Menschennatur haben sich beide gebildet, und hierdurch wird die Gemeinschaftlichkeit der Menschen untereinander für Rede und Verständnis ermöglicht.” (W. DILTHEY, ‘Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik (1900)’, in *Die geistige Welt. Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens. Erste Hälfte. Abhandlungen zur Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. G. Misch, 2nd ed., Stuttgart, 1957 [= *Gesammelte Schriften* V], 317–338, here p. 329). According to Dilthey, the differences between the souls are gradual. The interpreter reduces them by putting themselves into the historical situation. *Ibidem*, pp. 329–330. It is useful to compare Panofsky’s concept of growing into the historical situation with Dilthey here.

⁴⁷ Idem, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. M. Riedel, 5th ed., Frankfurt a. M., 1997, pp. 346–347.

⁴⁸ H.-G. GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 7th ed., Tübingen, 2010 (= *Gesammelte Werke*, 1: Hermeneutik I), pp. 222–246, esp. pp. 222 and 234–246.

⁴⁹ E. PANOFSKY, ‘Iconography and Iconology’, p. 54 (as in note 3).

⁵⁰ See the references to Panofsky’s Latin Erasmus quotation and the translation above.

times, Panofsky could not demand that the art historian re-create the objects of their studies in the sense described above. Instead, he might have concluded that every historical interpretation necessarily contributes to the object of its study and develops its meaning, not as an addition to the re-creative process, but as integral to it.

If Panofsky's method does not achieve its goal of a voyage into past mentalities and to approximately recreate the artwork with its historical meaning, without bringing forward anything new, this does not mean that we are condemned to sticking to whatever prejudices we have at the moment. It does not mean that interpretation is left to arbitrariness, as Panofsky feared.⁵¹ It also does not mean that we should not engage in the process of studying artworks and historical documents. Rather, it leads to the question of what else actually happens in this process. This question has already been asked by the philosophical hermeneutics of the 20th century, which I believe is worth reconsideration within the self-reflection of the discipline of art history.⁵²

SUMMARY

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UNKNOWN PREMISES OF ICONOLOGY? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF PANOFSKY'S PROPOSAL FOR A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICITY

Erwin Panofsky's iconographic-iconological method aims to enable the interpreter to get rid of an involuntary contemporary bias in interpretation by applying certain corrective principles. Panofsky implicitly answers the philosophical question of whether and why it might be possible to overcome historical distance and approximate an original historical meaning. The paper argues that his answer is dependent on two presuppositions that have not been identified as such so far. These presuppositions are the concepts of a non-historical nature of man and of perception. This essay explores the function they necessarily, if implicitly, fulfill in Panofsky's model of interpretation. Moreover, it shows how Panofsky uses a concept of pure perception in his texts from 1915 to 1955. Having found a self-contradiction in Panofsky's model, the essay concludes that the definition of the possible goal of interpretation should be rethought.

⁵¹ On the role of prejudices in the process, see e.g. G.W. BERTRAM, *Hermeneutik*, p. 56 (as in note 45).

⁵² For a commentary on the reception history of philosophical hermeneutics in art history, see C. VOLKENANDT, 'Hermeneutik', in *Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft. Ideen, Methoden, Begriffe*, ed. U. Pfisterer, 2nd ed., Stuttgart, 2011, pp. 167–170. The classical account is O. BÄTSCHMANN, *Einführung in die kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik*, 5th ed., Darmstadt, 2001, which was originally published in 1984. For a review see H.R. JAUSS, 'Rezension zu, Oskar Bätschmann, Einführung in die kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik', in *Ästhetische Erfahrung heute*, ed. J. Stöhr, Köln, 1996, pp. 52–58. See also O. BÄTSCHMANN, 'Beiträge zu einem Übergang von der Ikonologie zu kunstgeschichtlicher Hermeneutik', in *Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem 1. Ikonographie und Ikonologie. Theorien, Entwicklung, Probleme*, ed. E. Kaemmerling, 6th ed., Köln, 1994, pp. 460–484.