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ICONOLOGY'S SHADOW*

For decades now – ever since I began writing Erwin Panofsky's intellectual biography – I have been both enchanted with and bewildered by Panofsky's third level of interpretation, iconology, or, as he first dubbed it, "iconography turned interpretive".¹ The effort to discover "meaning" or intrinsic content has long been the worthy goal of art historians. If a work of art, by Panofsky's characterization, is a "symptom of something else";² what is this something else? Something half-unseen, nearly unspoken has always been lurking round the edges of a work of art as it passes through his three-tiered system of the pre-iconographic, the iconographic, the iconological. Yet hasn't another "something else" (perhaps even hinted at by Panofsky³) been long eclipsed, an interpretive phantom that is now urging the discipline of art history towards frontiers beyond those charted by iconology?

Consider phenomenology, a philosophical discourse running alongside the mid-century practice of iconology but rarely crossing its art historical path. If it crosses it at all, it is as a shade, a shadow cast by another way of knowing or, more precisely, as Georges Didi-Huberman would say, a way of *not-knowing*.⁴ The fascination of late with a number of new critical perspectives such as thing theory, objecthood, new materiality, and animism have

step-by-step led me back to some suggestive writings by mid-twentieth-century phenomenologists who once indirectly mapped the path not taken in the not-quite-century-old history of art, a discipline committed to finding, as Panofsky put it, "meaning in the visual arts". This essay strives to lend a certain shape and substance to this earlier discourse as it shadows the evolution of Panofsky's iconology.

No doubt *iconology* is the faith and foundation upon which the Eurocentric field of art history rests. And in a general sense both iconology and phenomenology offer routes to understanding what is hidden and concealed in works of art, but their perspectives are hardly congruent. What one "method" deliberately omits, the other poetically explores. The hydraulics of this relationship is most intriguing.

When Panofsky was thinking about perspective as a neo-Kantian symbolic form in Hamburg,⁵ Edmund Husserl in Freiberg was calling for a radical rethinking of consciousness. When encountering an object in the world – say a compelling work of art – he suggests a *bracketing* out of all other demands on reflection. *Reach towards, direct attention* to an object in the process of suspending all expectations of what might be there discovered. Perceiving something means extracting it from its surround and dwelling with it in its pure sensuous specificity.⁶ In an account of phenomenology in the stormy year of 1939 (when Panofsky was writing *Studies in Iconology*),⁷ Sartre

* An earlier and smaller version of this argument was published as 'Iconology and the Phenomenological Imagination', in *Iconology at the Crossroads*, ed. M. Vicelja-Matijašić, Rijeka, 2014 (= IKON 7/2014), pp. 7–16.

¹ E. PANOFSKY, 'Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to Renaissance Art', in idem, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York, 1955, p. 32; M.A. HOLLY, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca, 1984.

² E. PANOFSKY, 'Iconography and Iconology', p. 31 (as in note 1).

³ See last endnote here (44).

⁴ G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. J. Goodman, University Park, Pa., 2005, p. xxvi.

⁵ E. PANOFSKY, 'Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form', in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 1924–25*, ed. F. Saxl, Leipzig–Berlin, 1927.

⁶ E. HUSSERL, *Ideas I*, trans. D.O. Dahlstrom, Indianapolis, 2014, p. 12, 4; J.-P. SARTRE, 'Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology', in idem, *Situations I (1947)*, trans. J.P. Fell (*Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, 1970, vol. 1, pp. 4–5).

⁷ E. PANOFSKY, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, New York, 1962 (= Mary Flexner Lectures on the Humanities 7).



colorfully characterizes all philosophy before Husserl as “digestive”: “The spidery mind trap[s] things in its web, cover[s] them with a white spit and slowly swallow[s] them reducing them to its own substance”: an ontology (certainly not an epistemology) in which Sartre would regard things animate or inanimate around us – say, rocks, chestnut trees, iridescent dragonflies, or statues in the park – as all remaining inalienable presences. “If you could enter ‘into’ [an unknown] consciousness”, claims the existentialist phenomenologist, “you would be seized by a whirlwind and thrown back outside”⁸

The basic distinction between iconology and phenomenology, as I see it, comes down to a confrontation between **representation** and **presentation**. How does Martin Heidegger characterize it? In his “The Origin of a Work of Art” of 1950 (Panofsky, during the 1950s, was publishing *Meaning in the Visual Arts, Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, and *Early Netherlandish Painting*),⁹ Heidegger justifiably declares: in “all this busy activity” of recovering art historical origins and contexts, he combatively asks, “do we encounter the work itself?”¹⁰ Stop and direct your attention to the work of art, he pleads, and let it be what it is: a “presencing”, a being-in-the-world for a moment, before you try to do something with it. Art can reveal things to us that we otherwise cannot see. As one phenomenologist today argues, “meaning resides in the things themselves [and not outside them], and my dealings with them are guided by the way the things solicit and give themselves to me”.¹¹ Works of art – poems, paintings, monuments – are forever guiding their attentive spectators to go beyond, between, and behind what they first appear to represent, and in that quiet suggestiveness lies their power over the ordinary and the everyday. “World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone”, according to Heidegger. “The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is they themselves that we encounter there, but they themselves have gone by”.¹² Could any mid-century empiricist art historian ever really acknowledge this melancholic sentiment?

In 1977 Hans-Georg Gadamer issued a phenomenological caveat based upon conclusions in his 1960 *Truth and Method* (when Panofsky was publishing *Renaissance and Renascences*).¹³ To quote him: “Art achieves more than the

mere manifestation of meaning. [...] [The] fact that [a work of art] exists, its facticity, represents an insurmountable resistance against any superior presumption that we can make sense of it at all”.¹⁴ If what a work **represents** or **means** is dismissed by Gadamer as a goal of art historical interpretation, what remains, especially when it comes to the contemplation of historical works of art? Gadamer: “Only in the process of understanding them is the dead trace of meaning transformed back into living meaning”.¹⁵

On first glance, such a claim might well seem to resonate with Panofsky’s in “Art History as a Humanistic Discipline” of 1955 where he states that the humanities, in contradistinction to the sciences, “are not faced by the task of arresting what otherwise would slip away, but of enlivening what otherwise would remain dead. Instead of dealing with temporal phenomena, and causing time to stop, they penetrate into a region where time has stopped of its own accord and try to reactivate it”.¹⁶ Yet for Gadamer a “hermeneutics that regards understanding as reconstructing the original [that is, another goal of the iconography/iconological paradigm] would be no more than handing on of a dead meaning”.¹⁷ It’s a matter of direction. Panofsky, in a consciously retroactive move, begins with the work of art and then transports it back into a world before it existed and masterfully (he would say objectively) reconstructs an iconographic and cultural surround that eventuates in its creation. While Gadamer would never deny the significance of this historical world for the genesis of a work of art, what he wants to draw out is its complex temporality. “While it is doubtless a product of a particular historical era and a particular artist’s life history, we nevertheless encounter even an artwork from long ago as immediately present”.¹⁸ Past works of art, though originating in a long-lost world, continue actively to exist in the present, even to make meanings, perhaps, where none have existed before.

The **experience** of a work of art – and not its **analysis** – is what is of primary importance for phenomenologists, not to mention for its putative spectators. Gadamer insists on the power of a work of art to alter the consciousness of the observer who looks at it. Crucial to this process is his idea of art as play: “The structure of play”, he says, “absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative. [...] The player knows very well what play is, and that what he is doing is ‘only a game’; but he does not know what exactly he ‘knows’ in knowing that”.¹⁹ Could the differences in professional rhetoric between Gadamer and Panofsky be more clearly

⁸ J.-P. Sartre, ‘Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea’, p. 5 (as in note 6).

⁹ E. PANOFSKY, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origin and Character*, vol. 1–2, New York, 1971 (= Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1947–1948); idem, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism: An Inquiry into the Analogy of the Arts, Philosophy, and Religion*, New York, 1957.

¹⁰ M. HEIDEGGER, ‘The Origin of a Work of Art’, in idem, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, New York, 1971, p. 39.

¹¹ J.D. PARRY, M. WRATHALL [introduction to] *Art and Phenomenology*, ed. J.D. Parry, New York, 2011, p. 3.

¹² M. HEIDEGGER, ‘Origin of a Work’, p. 40 (as in note 10).

¹³ H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. rev., trans. J. Weinsheimer, D.G. Marshall, New York, 1990; E. PANOFSKY, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, New York, 1969.

¹⁴ H.-G. GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. R. Bernasconi, trans. N. Walker, Cambridge, 1986, p. 34.

¹⁵ H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 164 (as in note 13).

¹⁶ E. PANOFSKY, ‘The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline’, in idem, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 24 (as in note 1).

¹⁷ H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 167 (as in note 13).

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. xiii.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 102, 105.

delineated? In Gadamer's terms, "the work of art issues a challenge which expects to be met. It requires an answer [and certainly not an iconographic one!] – an answer that can only be given by someone who accepts the challenge. And that answer must be his own, and given actively, [...] [for] the act of playing always requires a 'playing along with.'"²⁰ Such a sentiment would be anathema to Panofsky with his hard-won faith in historical distance, such as when he attests that "to grasp reality we have to detach ourselves from the present. [...] Not only will [the art historian] collect and verify all the available factual information as to medium, condition, age, authorship, destination, etc., but he will also compare the work with others of its class, and will examine such writings as reflect the aesthetic standards of its country and age, in order to achieve a more 'objective' appraisal of its quality."²¹ To be fair, I do want to point out that Panofsky (unlike so many of his disciples) does put the word 'objective', at least, in quotation marks.

It is not so simple as a choice between historical explanation and aesthetic understanding, two different conceptions of both time and history. As Gadamer puts it, "the riddle that the problem of art sets us is precisely that of contemporaneity of past and present. [...] we have to ask ourselves what it is that maintains the continuity of art and in what sense art represents an overcoming of time."²² Does the work originate back there in the past or here now before me? If every work is an encounter, an "increase in being", that profoundly affects those who are ensnared by it, does its origin, as Heidegger might ask, not lie in the **now**? If so, what happens to the contemporary viewer's sense of tradition, of what has come before? Phenomenologists would no doubt answer that "historical consciousness and the new self-conscious reflection arising from it combine with a claim that we cannot renounce: Namely, the fact that everything we see stands before us and addresses us directly as if it showed us ourselves."²³

Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote more about visual art and its effect on an *embodied spectator* than the other four phenomenologists I have so far noted. His own hero was Paul Cézanne, whose art he regarded as creating the world anew. How did the painter accomplish this act of legerdemain? "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings."²⁴ To witness this act of transubstantiation, he claims, "we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an

intertwining of vision and movement."²⁵ Phenomenology, as the art of "radical reflection", he says, offers both a "promise" and a "problem."²⁶ In Merleau-Ponty's "Eye and Mind" of 1960 (four years before Panofsky wrote his last book, *Tomb Sculpture*), the very first sentence sets the terms of the argument: "Science manipulates things and gives up living in them."²⁷ Descartes, with his split between mind and body, had gotten it backwards. Having a "thought" about everything denies the experience of the body, immersed as it is in the world.

"After all, the world is around me, not in front of me", a premise that challenged both Cartesians and iconologists.²⁸ *Embodied experience*, or entanglement, offers the key to unlocking connectedness to other selves and things in our perceived world. "In short, my body is not merely one object among all others, not a complex of sensible qualities among others. It is an object sensitive to all others, which resonates for all sounds and vibrates for all colors."²⁹ As an embodied subject, I am "geared into" and "plunged"³⁰ deeply into the texture of a natural and phenomenal world that does not need me but nevertheless gives me something in return.

Crossovers abound, between seeing and seen, between object and subject, between mind and body, between objectivity and emotion, between visibility and the invisible. Our bodies pirouette in dazzling circles, if only we have the wit to pay attention to the dance. The world of things in which we are immersed is made of the same "flesh" (a kind of "voluminosity")³¹ as we ourselves. According to Merleau-Ponty, we are as enveloped in it as we are in the air we breathe:

The eye lives in this texture as a man in his house. [...] Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself.³²

The human world and its objects never reveal all there is to know, else the world would be one decidedly devoid of wonder: "When I see an object", Merleau-Ponty declares, "I always feel that there is still some being beyond what I currently see, and not merely more visible being. [...] there is always a horizon of unseen or even invisible things around my present vision."³³ To adopt a phenomenological attitude, I need question just what it is at which

²⁰ H.-G. GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp. 26, 23 (as in note 14).

²¹ E. PANOFSKY, 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline', pp. 17, 24 (as in note 16).

²² H.-G. GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 46 (as in note 14).

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²⁴ M. MERLEAU-PONTY, 'Eye and Mind', in *idem, The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. G.A. Johnson, Evanston, Illinois, 1993, p. 123.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

²⁶ *Idem, Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D.A. Landes, London, 2012, p. xxi.

²⁷ *Idem, 'Eye and Mind'*, p. 121 (as in note 24).

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

²⁹ *Idem, Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 245 (as in note 26).

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. xlv, 211.

³¹ *Idem, 'Eye and Mind'*, p. 127, 145 (as in note 24).

³² *Ibidem*, p. 127, 125.

³³ *Idem, Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 224–225 (as in note 26).

I am looking. “We must ‘look’ in order to ‘see.’”³⁴ “The hallmark of the visible is to have a lining of invisibility in the strict sense, which it makes present as a certain absence”. The act of unveiling, of course, is reminiscent of Heidegger’s desire for “unconcealedness”. The artist gently encourages objects to un-hide themselves. How? By letting them be; by “becoming conscious of them *poetically*”,³⁵ a deliberate act that abjures any objective or iconological point of view. “My dealings with them are guided by the way the things solicit and give themselves to me”.³⁶ And the objects of which the world is populated seem to vibrate in the artistic imagination, causing many painters to say “that things look at them”.³⁷

A provocative paradox ensues. “Unconcealing” or unveiling an object in the world metamorphoses into the mysteries of invisibility. When one fixes one’s gaze upon it, this beckoning thing (especially a work of art) issues a double, even duplicitous, invitation: to see it first in its “brute” material existence, its “carnal” essence, and then be seduced into looking beyond it, past its defining edges, and imagining what yet lies farther beyond or behind. Merleau-Ponty recognizes this as “two inseparable aspects of transcendence”: the work of art’s “irrecusable presence and the perpetual absence into which it withdraws”.³⁸ Alas, this is only a momentary process, a hiccup in the lived experience of the perceptual world, for the object, like a wild animal, will suddenly “pull back toward a certain place in the world, and [be] absorbed into the world just as ghosts return through the fissures of the earth from which they came when day breaks”.³⁹ A poetics of the phenomenological imagination with slight resonances to Panofsky’s pre-iconographic level? Perhaps, for as Merleau-Ponty describes the advantages of reflective judgment, the viewer takes in the strangeness of the object before him and regards it as though he had no idea what it is, or what it represents.

Let artists such as Cézanne guide us into the wonders of the unknown. Ordinary mortals can only follow. The painter performs like a tuning fork, registering vibrations from the world *around* (not in front of) us. Not everyone, of course, is nearly as attuned to the thickness, texture, and presence of his or her surround as the artist. Why not? Perhaps because we, unlike Cézanne “ruminating” on Mont Sainte-Victoire, do not tarry long enough to heed the questions posed to us by the visible world:

It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze. What exactly does he ask of it? To

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 241.

³⁵ S. BAKEWELL, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails*, New York, 2016, p. 185.

³⁶ J.D. PARRY, M. WRATHALL [introduction to] *Art and Phenomenology*, p. 3 (as in note 11).

³⁷ M. MERLEAU-PONTY, ‘Eye and Mind’, p. 129 (as in note 24).

³⁸ Idem, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 242 (as in note 26).

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 242.

unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which it makes itself mountain before our eyes. Light, lighting, shadows, reflections, color [are all] objects of his quest.⁴⁰

And where are we, the spectators, in this process? As Paul Crowther, a contemporary philosopher, puts it: “we somehow feel that an aesthetic object is important, and, as it were, trying to tell us something, even if we cannot put it into words”.⁴¹ To be more precise, it is not the artist, but the art that engages us in this magical quest. Certain works, be they visual or verbal, Renaissance or modern, representational or abstract, mesmerize. In the process they “liberate the phantoms captive” within that arise to hold us in their grip.⁴² Showing rather than saying. Unconcealing rather than arguing.

A thought experiment by way of a conclusion: here’s Gadamer in a court of interpretation summarily challenging Panofsky. The phenomenologist would combatively assert [and I quote him here] that it is “an objectivist prejudice of astonishing naïveté for our first question to be, ‘what does this picture represent?’”⁴³ Panofsky, humorously proud because he was born with one far-sighted and one near-sighted eye, counters with his oft-quoted rejoinder: “archaeological research is blind and empty without aesthetic recreation, and aesthetic re-creation is irrational and often misguided without archaeological [i.e., iconological] research”.⁴⁴ The result? A hung jury that ends with a riddle: has phenomenology been shadowing iconology all along OR has phenomenology’s shadow actually been iconology throughout the twentieth century? Certain telling initiatives in twenty-first critical art history – such as those that address issues concerning the agency, animism, and affect of images – it seems to me, have issued something of a verdict, at least for the time being.

⁴⁰ Idem, ‘Eye and Mind’, p. 128 (as in note 24).

⁴¹ P. CROWTHER, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (even the frame)*, Stanford, 2009, p. 31.

⁴² M. MERLEAU-PONTY, ‘Eye and Mind’, p. 128 (as in note 24).

⁴³ H.-G. GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 38 (as in note 14).

⁴⁴ E. PANOFSKY, ‘The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline’, p. 19 (as in note 16). To be fair, Panofsky was sensitive to the tug of phenomenology (“Only he who simply and wholly abandons himself to the object of his perception will experience it aesthetically”, p. 11), but his interest and critical methods lay elsewhere. See idem, ‘On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of Visual Art’, trans. J. Elsner, K. Lorenz, *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Spring 2012).

SUMMARY

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This essay discusses two concurrent intellectual initiatives in the mid-twentieth century. Well-known in European and American art history is **iconology** – the study of ‘meaning’ in works of art – and in particular the work of Panofsky and his legacy. At around the same time, especially in literature and philosophy in Germany and France, **phenomenology** appeared on the scene. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, among others, encouraged a focus on ‘poetic entanglement’ or ‘embodied experience’. The experience of a work of art and not its analysis is what of primary importance for these thinkers. Contrasting these two systems of thought can be revealing not only in terms of twentieth-century intellectual history but as combative precursors to trends in early twenty-first ‘object theory’ or ‘affect studies’ in the evolution of the history of art. What one ‘method’ deliberately omits, the other provocatively explores. It often comes down to a distinction between *representation* and *presentation*.