

**E. H. Gombrich, Review of David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 15, 1990, pp.6-9 [Trapp no.1990U.1]**

**The Edge of Delusion**

By Ernst Gombrich

*The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*

by David Freedberg

University of Chicago Press, 534 pp., \$39.95

This learned and heavy volume should be placed on the shelves of every art historical library. It makes accessible, for the first time within the covers of one book, a large range of miscellaneous lore about the role of images in cult, folklore, and culture. As a classical scholar and as a trained historian the author has devoted many years to the study of the religious controversies concerning images, particularly in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. He is an authority on pagan and Christian attitudes to the representation of sacred personages, the miracles attributed to them, and the legends, pilgrimages, and ex votos to which they gave rise.

He deals with the links between religious art and devout meditation, the role of effigies in legal practice and mob violence, and the hostile reaction to images resulting in censorship and vandalism. His text and his notes thus provide an invaluable guide to material frequently neglected by historians of art. This is indeed the purpose of the book, but the subtitle, *Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, also reveals more ambitious aims. He wishes to establish what is specific in the psychological effect of images, and here his range turns out to be more restricted. The response of laughter or of disgust is barely mentioned; nor is the effect of contagion, mentioned by Leonardo da Vinci, as when the sight of a yawning figure in a picture makes us yawn.

Maybe it was Freedberg's second aim that here supervened. In his own words the book has "a polemical edge." He is convinced that "much of our sophisticated talk about art is simply an evasion"—an evasion of our more instinctual reaction. "The kind of evidence," he writes, that he found "to be most germane was exactly that which art historians usually avoid in their concern with more intellectualized forms of response." It is this strong anti-elitist bias that inspires the author to seek for the raw and unrefined attitude to images among the "common people." Once in a while the egalitarian reformer here gets the better of the disinterested scholar and proposes a variety of generalizations that can hardly stand up to criticism.

Freedberg announces at the outset that his process of investigation will be "inductive" and the impressive array of data he has assembled is in tune with this approach. Alas, however, the outcome also confirms the Popperian case against induction: any number of sightings of white swans cannot justify the inference that all swans are white, while a single black swan can refute it.

It so happens that the reviewer's aviary contains at least one such black swan, which weakens the author's case against art historians. Anyone who can consult my book *The Story of Art* will find that the first chapter deals with what is there described as "the power of image making." It is true that this power is exemplified in a discussion of primitive art, but far from confirming Freedberg's charge that the relevance of these observations to our own response is habitually denied, the chapter also says, "Instead of beginning with the Ice Age, let us begin with ourselves," recommending a variety of

experiments that should invite introspection about our response to the mutilation of an image and a drawing of eyeless faces. And if Freedberg in his summing up insists on "the uselessness of the category of art" the book in question argues that case right from its opening lines.

The point at issue is not one of priorities, of who said what first. One merely regrets that Freedberg sometimes spoils a good case by making such strenuous efforts to force open doors. One of the powers of images that must naturally concern him is their capacity to elicit an erotic response. In writing about one of Titian's naked Venuses he admits that he may seem to labor the obvious, but he still makes heavy weather over the question of how to assess the response of a sixteenth-century beholder. Now the period in question was anything but inarticulate, and a number of contemporary texts might have helped here: "If the painter wants to see beauties to fall in love with, he can create them," writes Leonardo, whose lost *Leda* was probably the first of the seductive nudes that became so popular at the courts of Renaissance Europe. And Pietro Aretino recommended the sculptor Sansovino to Federico Gonzaga with the promise that he would "fashion a Venus so truthful and so much alive that she would fill anyone with lust who sees her." Aretino's other friend, Titian, was slightly more discreet when writing to the King of Spain about a mythological painting he was about to deliver:

Because the Danae, which I have already sent to Your Majesty, was visible entirely from in front I have wanted to introduce a variation in the other composition, and make the figure show the other side so that it will make the room in which they are to hang more pleasing to the eyes.

Nor can it be seriously argued that the majority of writers on art failed to take account of that particular power of the image. Thus John Ruskin, pursuing his vendetta against Renaissance architecture, maintained that it was wholly destroyed by pride.

But passion, having some roots and use in healthy nature, and only becoming guilty in excess, did not altogether destroy the art founded upon it. The architecture of Palladio is wholly virtueless and despicable. Not so the Venus of Titian, nor the Antiope of Correggio."[1]

And touching on the very theme of the book under review, John Addington Symonds wrote,

The spirit of Christianity and the spirit of figurative art are opposed, not because such art is immoral, but because it cannot free itself from sensuous associations.[2]

Much nearer our own time Ulrich Middeldorf took Otto Brendel to task for his symbolic interpretation of Titian's *Holkham Venus*:

It is...inconceivable to me that a Venus by Titian should have only a profoundly philosophical meaning, while there is much evidence for the preoccupation of the Renaissance with quite different reactions to the beauty of women.[3]

Freedberg certainly has predecessors.

It is altogether hard to accept the author's diagnosis that art historians habitually "repress" their own response to the arousing power of images. After all, the psychoanalytic term "repression" applies to a denial of feelings which can only survive in the unconscious. But there is a difference between repressing and disregarding. If anyone would be interested in the font in which this review is printed

he might examine the letter forms without paying attention to the text. Without such shifts in attention in what psychologists call "mental set" we could never handle the totality of our visual impressions.

Painting an exact copy of Titian's *Venus* an artist may well disregard the erotic effect of the picture and so may the restorer who examines its state of preservation. What is even more relevant: the art student in the life class may have to disregard his response to the model and to concentrate on getting the shapes and proportions right. Maybe it is this shift of attention that has led to the aesthetic doctrine of disinterested contemplation. This reaction may have occasionally been overemphasized for reasons of prudery, but it is certainly rooted in the very demands of artistic creation. In fact, it may be argued that the discipline of the life class rests precisely on the teaching of such detachment.

If we must have the Freudian term "repression" we would also want to hear that other term, "reality principle"—not to mention the more elusive concept of sublimation, which might have to be included in a psychoanalytic discussion of these issues. Whatever form such a discussion would take, it is sure that the conflicting pulls between instinctive response and our wide-awake reason remain to be analyzed. Aby Warburg, whose interest in the power of images concentrated on the arousal of fear rather than that of desire, jotted down as a motto of his proposed theoretical papers "*Du lebst und tust mir nichts*" ("You are alive but will not hurt me").<sup>[4]</sup> Both of these reactions are equally relevant, for what matters in our response to the image is not only its power but also its lack of power, its inherent inadequacy as a substitute for reality.

The author devotes an important chapter to the realism of the renderings of Christ's Passion, which he rightly links with the religious injunction to visualize these biblical events with maximum intensity. But he nowhere reflects on the difference between such endeavors and the terrible realities to which they refer. Even the attempts of the faithful to picture in their minds the agonies of the Passion must of necessity fall short of a reality that is mercifully unimaginable. But surely the same applies to the highly realistic sixteenth-century calvaries of Northern Italy, which Freedberg describes with such vivid empathy.

Statues and dioramas do not move, nor do they scream or whimper. Hence, perhaps, Leonardo's observation that while pictures can move us to laughter, they cannot move us to tears. Hence also the common experience that the effects of pictorial realism tend to wear off. It is the addition of novel features that is likely to shock and impress. The whole history of Western art can thus be seen as an effort in escalation, the surpassing of expectations by a further approximation to realism.

This, in a way, is the subject of my book, *Art and Illusion*, and it is hard to understand how the author could find in it a denial of the possibility of realism. After all, the formula of "Schema and Correction" on which it is built implies a standard of correctness. Looking back on the recent past of art Vasari describes how the public of Francia and Perugino had come to think that it was impossible to do better, but the works of Leonardo da Vinci convinced them that they had been mistaken.

The last few generations have experienced a similar development in the field of technology. The author nowhere even alludes to our present-day concern with the power of images—the omnipresence of television. Yet it is again from this vantage point that we can observe the effects of increasing realism, from the photograph to the stereoscopic image and the moving picture, the impact of which must have been enormous precisely because it unfroze the "still." Some of us remember a similar thrill when the image ceased to be mute with the coming of the "talkies." The additions of color and of the wide screen were nine-day wonders which soon wore off, and the same would probably be as true of the proverbial "feelies" and "smellies" as it would be of the holographic film. Each of these

techniques will take us to the edge of delusion but leave us dissatisfied. Is this not also inherent in the power of images?

If television is one topic that might have enriched an investigation of the power of images, another might have been toys. Indeed, if the author had considered the evidence of the nursery he might have hesitated to apply the language of semiotics to his problems. He frequently suggests that the power of the image resides in the fusion between the sign and the signified, but this application of Saussurean terminology obscures rather than illuminates the problem. The teddy bear is not a sign signifying a nonexistent species of bears, it is a member of that species, existing in its own right to be hugged, chastised, or thrown into a corner.

If Freedberg had considered this evidence he might also have been more lenient toward the opinion of Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz that "the 'stronger' the belief in...the identity of the picture depicted, the less important is the nature of that image." Loving aunts have often been disappointed to find a highly naturalistic doll complete with real eyelashes rejected in favor of a crude rag doll.

What these authors and the authorities on whom they relied claimed was that the more emotions have been invested in an image the fewer demands are generally made on its surface qualities. This inverse relation between faith and realism has long been observed. We find it in *Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics*:

Any poor figure is adequate provided only it reminds one of the subject it is intended to signify. For this reason piety is also satisfied with poor images and will always worship Christ, Mary or any Saint in the merest daub.[5]

Hegel's observations have a considerable bearing on the problem in hand, because for all its wealth of material the author's treatment of the role of images in religion is still somewhat selective. After all, devotion not only attaches to the representation of holy personages but equally to pictures of the Sacred Heart or of the monogram of Christ. The author follows present trends in avoiding the notion of magic for the effect he describes, but even he cannot avoid the term "talismanic." How could he? To give an example not mentioned by him, at the feast of the *Volto Santo* in Lucca (celebrating a venerable crucifix) couples line up at the entrance of the shrine to place a bracelet or other trinket on a platter (together with a coin) for the priest briefly to touch the image with it, presumably to endow the objects with talismanic power.

More extreme is another case not mentioned by the author: during the solemn display of relics in Germany mirrors were held up by the crowd to catch the image of the sacred objects, a custom which is memorable because Gutenberg, the inventor of printing, is first encountered as a maker of such amulet mirrors. Could the idea of duplication inherent in printing be somehow connected with these beginnings? The earliest printed texts in the East were sacred texts to be duplicated as talismans. There is no line one could ever draw between sacred images, words, or signs. In the Austrian Alps doors are marked annually with the sign C+M+B, the initials of the three magi, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. They serve as well as any holy image.

One of the most interesting sections of Freedberg's book is devoted to the problem of "aniconic cult images" in classical antiquity, but in his chapter "The Myth of Aniconism" the author insists that the need for images is universal; and he returns to this conviction in his chapter on pilgrimages, where he writes that "at every step the image is indispensable." Yet, is it? To the best of my belief, the sacred

Shinto shrines of Ise in Japan, which have been ritually renewed for many centuries, enclose no image but are still experienced as numinous by the many pilgrims who flock there.

The first chapter of the book offers another case in point: Freedberg gives examples of the widespread belief that the child in the womb will be influenced by the sights seen by the mother, and gives as an instance a passage from Saint Augustine that tells of the effect of such an image on a pregnant woman. But surely what gave this belief biblical sanction was a story in Genesis 30 which has nothing to do with images: having agreed with Laban that of the herds he tended the cattle or goats that were speckled would belong to him, Jacob employed a ruse to breed spotted animals: he peeled the bark off poplar, hazel, and chestnut twigs to produce white stripes. "And...whensoever the stronger cattle did conceive, Jacob laid the rods before the eyes of the cattle,...and when the cattle were feeble he put them not in: so the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's." Certainly these stories are a testimony to the belief in the power of visual impressions but not exclusively of images.

The author's reluctance to consider inconvenient facts becomes systematic in a passage where he cites an account by Richard Gombrich of the consecration of a Buddha statue in present-day Sri Lanka. He refuses to accept the report of the eyewitness that the monks and most laymen considered the ceremony as nonsense. Their "apparent indifference," he retorts, "does not diminish its psychological import; if anything, the more explicit the dismissal, the less convincing is the denial." Heads I win, tails you lose. How could indifference ever be established?

The problem of method raised by this passage may indeed be crucial: it concerns the relation between social and individual psychology, between public behavior and private response. In the first days of November visitors to England are frequently accosted by children demanding "a penny for the guy." The reference is to Guy Fawkes, whose images are annually burned on November 5 in commemoration of the thwarted Gunpowder Plot of 1605. The custom is not mentioned in Freedberg's highly informative chapter on punishments but it is relevant here since few of the youngsters will have more than the haziest idea of the origin of the celebration, let alone of the person of the historical Guy Fawkes. They join in the ritual much as nonreligious families will celebrate the communal festivals of their society—because it is done and because not to do so would somehow separate them from their surroundings. It is certainly a difficulty for the historian that he has infinitely more evidence of such overt acts than of private responses, but he can only spoil the problem by substituting the one for the other.

However, there is one type of human behavior that seems to be so universal that we are surely entitled to regard it as an index of a psychological reaction, and it is precisely this which the author refuses to consider. He writes:

That, we cannot, even for a moment, entertain any notion of an impulse "simply to decorate" is, of course, one of the main claims and prejudices of this book.

This is a curious remark for an author who wants to lead the response to art back to our elementary reactions. For how can he account for the urge to surround the seats of power—sacred or secular—with gold and glitter if these had never been a source of visual delight? Beauty is defined by Saint Thomas as "what pleases the eye," but searching the index of the book for this key word one meets time and again with the author's suspicion of aesthetic reactions. "We continue to shift that which troubles us into the neater and safer categories of art and beautiful or successful form." Has he never assembled flowers for a bouquet or even chosen a tie? It is refreshing to discover at last that

Freedberg does not "deny for a moment that some works are inexplicably more beautiful than others," yet as a committed "leveler" he is ill at ease with any such "ranking." But is not ranking (finding one image more beautiful than another) also an elementary response?

Only the need to take cognizance of abstract art leads the author to the concession that there are indeed responses outside the realm of the image, as when we see "jagged edges, spikes, texture, flakiness," but while criticism, he claims, "often implicitly acknowledges such sensations, it never explicitly articulates it." Never? Did not Adrian Stokes write a book entitled *Smooth and Rough* and did not Goethe devote the most viable section of his *Theory of Colours* to what he called their "sensuous-moral" effects?

Freedberg's rejection of traditional aesthetics as a form of evasion must have blinded him to the fact that the theory of art took its starting point from the study of effects, in other words from that of psychological response. In the ancient world to be sure, it was rhetoric rather than painting that was the exemplary art. There was but a step from the spell woven by the magician to the spell cast by the mighty orator, just as a link was perceived between an "incantation" and the "enchantment" of music. It is well known, incidentally, that the role of music in religious settings aroused the same kind of controversy as did the role of images investigated by Freedberg. It is in connection with the doctrine of effects, also, that the rivalry of the sense modalities was regularly discussed. The dictum of Horace that the ears are more slowly impressed than the eyes belongs to this tradition. He was referring to the stage rather than to images, but what mattered to him was that sight is instantaneous, while listening to speech takes time. Even so, he insisted on the kinship between poetry and painting, since both enjoyed the license to invent, both are concerned with "fiction." If there is any power of images that is central to Freedberg's problem it is their independence of reality, their capacity to create what Plato called "dreams for those who are awake."

Freedberg follows Freud in quoting David Hume for the insight that

there is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious.

But while he sees the bearing these remarks have on the perception of images, he does not follow up their more general import. It is not only images that we tend to conceive as beings like ourselves; we also endow the sights and sounds of nature and the ordinary artifacts of culture with a physiognomy and an inherent meaning. Call it "animism" or "empathy," "projection" or "the pathetic fallacy," none of these terms can quite do justice to the universality of the phenomenon that plays its part in games no less than in religious cults, in art no less than in social ritual. It may well be that our minds could not serve us to adapt to reality without this tendency initially to react to our environment by a provisional hypothesis, to be modified and controlled if the need is felt to arise. Coleridge's beautiful formula of the "willing suspension of disbelief" should probably be amended to read "the unwilling suspension of belief."

David Freedberg is certainly right in reminding us of the fact that this suspension can rarely be complete, and can never be effortless. He has sunk a shaft into the subsoil beneath the image in the museum and explored its depths. It is to be hoped that in his next book he will also map the subterranean passages that lead from there to many other regions of our multilayered minds.

When the barge with the coffin of Winston Churchill traveled up the river Thames the cranes on either side of the embankment lowered their long necks as if in homage to the war leader. These cranes were not images, let alone representations, but for a fleeting moment the imagination turned them into monsters of steel who joined in the universal emotion. Everyday language is hardly suited to the description of this kind of experience, but maybe the author of this challenging book would agree that the power of images is ultimately nothing else but the power of the imagination.

#### Notes

[1] *Modern Painters*, Vol. III, part 4, chapter 5.

[2] *The Renaissance in Italy*, Vol. III, pp. 17–18.

[3] *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. xxix, p. 67. Freedberg certainly has predecessors.

[4] See my *Aby Warburg*, p. 71.

[5] Part III, section 2, chapter 2.