

**Disintegration and Hope for Salvation  
Erwin Panofsky's concept of artistic reception  
in the early 1930s**

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**Introduction**

Concepts of artistic reception—so runs the thesis of the following lines—can be developed out of immediate contemporary concerns and formulated to cope with them.<sup>1</sup> Looking back on the art historiography of the early 1930s, there is special evidence to prove that a specific concept of *Nachleben* was developed that allowed the slipping of contemporary German culture into the inhuman, to be described and at the same time a hope for salvation to be formulated.

This was preceded in the history of art by the observation that in the high and late Middle Ages an antique language of form was used primarily to depict Christian motifs, while motifs from Greek or Roman antiquity hardly show any references to antique forms. Aby Warburg summarized this observation under the term (*energetic*) *inversion*. And he intended to make the concept of inversion a central aspect of his planned picture atlas (*Mnemosyne*). Erwin Panofsky, on the other hand, introduced—deviating from Warburg's term—the concept of disintegration, and thus gave the phenomenon a negative aftertaste from the outset. If “inversion” implies a creative artistic handling of the phenomena in question, then “disintegration” implies the destructive result of an inability or a suppression. The term may have been inspired (*inter alia*) by Adolph

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<sup>1</sup> The contribution results from a research project carried out by the author at the Ruhr-University Bochum, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). In a larger context, the following considerations are discussed in the author's book on Classical Mythology in the Middle Ages currently in print. I would like to thank Melis Avkiran in particular for the many scientific exchanges on the problems discussed here. Further thanks go to Florian Ebeling and the participants of the London Colloquium.

Goldschmidt's concept of disintegration of form ("Formenspaltung"; first proved in 1931, although published later).<sup>2</sup>

In Panofsky's opinion, the break diagnosed by himself resulted from the inability or unwillingness to realize the supposedly universally valid ideal of beauty that had been formulated in classical antiquity in connection to the representation of the ancient gods. The aforementioned inability or refusal of the Middle Ages is explicitly justified by a lack of humanity and thus of artistic freedom. The establishment of the concept of disintegration thus assumes a standardized failure of the epoch of the Middle Ages, which at best can be broken through by temporally limited "proto-renaissances".

In art historiography, the supposed epochal overcoming of this assumed suppression of the "pagan" by the reunification of ancient formal language with ancient pictorial themes, becomes the main feature of the epochal threshold between the Middle Ages and early modern times and the epitome of the Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> In the place of disfigured revenants, one could put it more pointedly, reborn children step in when the supposed epoch threshold is crossed.

According to Panofsky, this could only be achieved through an intramedial or inter pictorial reception—through a direct link to pictorial representations that have a reference to ancient art. On the other hand, where the pictorial creation of the ancient gods came about solely through intermedial transfer, i.e. from text to image, the connection to the essence of the ancient gods' figures is radically broken—in contrast to Aby Warburg, for whom obviously also textual tradition stores images.

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<sup>2</sup> Adolph Goldschmidt, "Die Bedeutung der Formenspaltung in der Kunstentwicklung" (paper delivered at the Harvard Trecentenary Conference of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge/MA 1937).

<sup>3</sup> Alfred von Martin, *Soziologie der Renaissance*, 3rd ed. (München: Beck, 1974); Konrad Hoffmann, "Panofskys 'Renaissance'", in: *Erwin Panofsky. Beiträge des Symposiums Hamburg 1992*, Schriften des Warburg-Archivs im Kunstgeschichtlichen Seminar der Universität Hamburg, vol. 3, ed. Bruno Reudenbach (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1994), 139–44.

### The Concept of Disintegration

A formulation of the concept of disintegration (later, from 1960 on, called *principle of disjunction*)<sup>4</sup> was first made public in 1933, when the contribution *Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art* appeared in the *Metropolitan Museum Studies*.<sup>5</sup> Fritz Saxl is named as co-author. For both authors, Panofsky and Saxl, it was the first English-language publication, and the time of preparation and publication was, as the year 1933 might suggest, marked by such massive upheavals that these could hardly have had no effect on the form of the text. The development of the theme had fallen into the joint Hamburg time of the two authors.<sup>6</sup> In the year of publication of the joint essay, Panofsky was removed from his professorship, and Fritz Saxl organized the emigration of the Warburg Library to London (and not, as initially planned, to Rome).

The text *Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art* was first produced as a kind of advertising lecture for the Warburg Library in the USA, whose fate was uncertain after the death of Aby Warburg in 1929, and—certainly not least—as a contribution to Panofsky’s self-recommendation.

As can be seen from a letter from Panofsky to Saxl (dated 26/11/1931), Max Warburg had instructed him to arouse interest in the Warburg Library in the

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<sup>4</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960). On the prehistory and methodological premises of this book publication cf.: Melis Avkiran, “Diffusion – Disjunktion – Distanz. Erwin Panofskys kulturmorphologische Grundierung oder Nachdenken über Renaissance and Resuscitations (1944)”, *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 63.2 (2018): 267–84.

<sup>5</sup> Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, “Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art”, *Metropolitan Museum Studies* IV (1932–1933), 228–280; to this section cf. also: Ulrich Rehm, “Herkules und der Löwe des Heiligen Markus. Der mittelalterliche Transfer ‘paganer’ Antike an die Fassade von San Marco in Venedig”, in: *Philopation. Schriften über Byzanz und seine Nachbarn. Festschrift für Arne Effenberger zum 70. Geburtstag*, Monographien des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums 106, ed. Falko Daim and Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2013), 165–82; Ulrich Rehm, “Einleitung”, in: *Mittelalterliche Mythenrezeption. Paradigmen und Paradigmenwechsel*, Sensus. Studien zur mittelalterlichen Kunst 10, ed. Ulrich Rehm (Wien, Köln and Weimar: Böhlau, 2018), 7–26, here 12–4.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding Panofsky’s time in Hamburg cf.: Karen Michels, *Sokrates in Pöselndorf* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2017); cf. also Gerda Panofsky Soergel, *Erwin Panofsky von Zehn bis Dreißig und seine jüdischen Wurzeln*, Veröffentlichungen des Zentralinstituts für Kunstgeschichte 41 (Passau: Dietmar Klinger, 2017). About Saxl’s way of working cf. Karin Hellwig, *Aby Warburg und Fritz Saxl enträtseln Velázquez. Ein spanisches Intermezzo zum Nachleben der Antike* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

USA. Immediately after Aby Warburg's death on 26 October 1929, two days after the Wall Street stock market crash, the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* was in financial distress, even though Aby's brother Felix, who had emigrated to the US in 1894, promised an annual sum of 50,000 dollars.<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of 1931, Panofsky appeared twice in the house of John D. Rockefeller Jr. (on January 12 and 19, 1931), and was finally invited by Charles Rufus Morey to give the lecture on classical mythology on November 30 of the same year in Princeton.<sup>8</sup> In a letter to Saxl, Panofsky draws a very positive balance of this performance.<sup>9</sup>

The cautiously formulated question as to whether Panofsky may publish the text and thus the essential results of Saxl's and Warburg's research in the USA is underlined by the reference to the effectiveness and the moral appeal for service to the Warburg Library. The corresponding effect on Saxl did not fail: On 29 December 1931 he gave his consent, which was marked by humility formulas.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ron Chernow, *Die Warburgs. Odyssee einer Familie* (Berlin: Siedler, 1994), 359.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. letters dating from the 13th and 17th November 1931 and from the 3rd January 1932: Dieter Wuttke, *Erwin Panofsky, Korrespondenz 1910–1936*, Erwin Panofsky, *Korrespondenz 1910 bis 1968. Eine kommentierte Auswahl in fünf Bänden 1* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001), 416–8, 420–2, 454–8.

<sup>9</sup> "Princeton, 'Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art', 2 geschlagene Stunden! War, soweit ich urteilen kann, ein ziemlicher Erfolg für die B[ibliothek] W[arburg]. [...] Die Jungens klatschten 10 Minuten und Morey erklärte in seiner Bedankemich-Rede, dass er, der doch soviel Mittelalter gearbeitet hätte, einfach erschlagen sei. Auch bot er mir sogleich Veröffentlichung im Art Bulletin an, was ich natürlich mit der Begründung ablehnte, dass das Material Ihres ist und von Ihnen veröffentlicht werden wird. Es sei denn, dass Sie meine (ziemlich dilettantische, aber anscheinend ganz wirksame) englische Zusammenfassung Ihrer und Warburgscher Ergebnisse signieren wollen. [...] Sie sehen also, lieber Freund Saxl, dass ich mir alle Mühe gebe, für die B[ibliothek] W[arburg] diejenige Reklame zu machen, die nötig ist, um die amerikanischen Brüder bei der Stange zu halten.": Erwin Panofsky to Fritz Saxl, 05/12/1931: Panofsky, *Korrespondenz 1910–1936*, 1, 436–9, here 436.

<sup>10</sup> "Ich bin überzeugt, dass in dem Princeton-Vortrag Dinge stehen, von denen sich meine Schulweisheit nichts träumen lässt. Die Art, wie Sie an einem der letzten Nachmittage das Problem der Roman-Illustration des späten Mittelalters angegriffen haben, war so erstaunlich selbständig und kräftig, dass es meinem Denken wirklich einen Schub vorwärts gegeben hat. Dass Ihnen mein mühsam aufgespeichertes Material das Substrat Ihres Denkens liefert, ist mir eine wahre Freude. Wenn der Aufsatz unter unser beider Namen erscheint, bin ich es gewiss zufrieden, weiss nur nicht, ob das der Sachlage nach gerechtfertigt ist.": Letter of Fritz Saxl to Erwin Panofsky, 29/12/1931: Panofsky, *Korrespondenz 1910–1936*, 1, 452–4.

Little is known about the further course of the formulation of the lecture manuscript. In any case, William M. Ivins Jr, the curator of the graphics department of the Metropolitan Museum, once again intervened considerably, as is clear from his letter of 18 August 1932.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Margaret Barr, the wife of the then director of the Museum of Modern Art, was involved in the English formulation.<sup>12</sup>

So what became of the pictorial material in the USA in 1933, mainly compiled by Aby Warburg, but above all by Fritz Saxl, and their considerations on the *Nachleben* of antiquity? Apart from quite radical revaluations with regard to the epochal significance of individual objects compared to Warburg's and Saxl's previous publications, the most serious innovation was that the essay leads to a rule, which, as I mentioned before, he later called *principle of disjunction*.

The process, which has been observed on the basis of so many example cases, is said there to be reproducible in a general formula. Wherever a mythological theme or subject was linked to antiquity by a representational tradition, its types either fell into oblivion or became unrecognizable through assimilation to Romanesque or Gothic forms. During this process, they were replaced by non-classical types that either came from the East or were freely invented on the basis of textual tradition. Then, from the second half of the 15th century onwards, with the imitation of antiquity, the classical types were gradually reintroduced—a process which, at least in Germany, had announced itself in a modest attempt to revive the pseudo-classical Carolingian types.<sup>13</sup> And this,

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<sup>11</sup> “The article for the Museum Studies was so fine in its extraordinary sachliche Inhalt that it seemed a pity not to present it to the public in full dress English. And so I took it upon myself to work over and in part to remake its stylistische Oberhaut, so that it would more closely conform to our shorter syntactical English breath.

Although I have greatly modified the minor tactics of the operation, I have not touched the grand strategy of the Kriegsplan, and hope sincerely that I have lost no meanings or necessary implications. Sentences have had both major and minor operations performed upon them, but the order and the content of the paragraphs stands unchanged.”: William M. Ivins Jr. to Erwin Panofsky, 18/08/1932: Panofsky, *Korrespondenz 1910–1936*, 1, 518s.

<sup>12</sup> According to the first footnote of the article.

<sup>13</sup> “The process we have observed in these many instances can be expressed in a general formula. Wherever a mythological subject was connected with antiquity by a representational tradition, its types either sank into oblivion or, through assimilation to Romanesque and Gothic forms, became unrecognizable. While this went on, they were supplanted by non-classical types, either derived from the East or freely intervened on the basis of the textual tradition. Then, beginning in the second half of

according to Panofsky, lead to the main performance of the Renaissance: the re-integration of form and subject.

With this concrete formulation of the “formula” we are faced with an alleged break-up of subject matter or content on the one hand and tradition of representation or form on the other. Panofsky’s later publications offer some significant deviations in the choice of words here (*Studies in iconology*, 1939; *Renaissance and Renascences*, 1944 and 1960).<sup>14</sup>

### **The Fantasy of Salvation**

The transatlantic perspective on the chosen theme under the conditions of the crisis of the late Weimar Republic and the beginnings of the National Socialist regime in Germany is quite different from the perspective that Aby Warburg had thrown on the question of the *Nachleben* of antiquity under the conditions of the Empire and the earlier Weimar Republic, which was primarily oriented within Europe and towards the transfer between Orient and Occident.

The fact that the Renaissance researcher Panofsky succeeded in the USA as a medievalist seems, according to his reactions in writing, to have almost astounded him a little. As will be shown below, however, the medieval theme

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the quattrocento, imitation of the antique gradually reintroduced the classical types – a process that, in Germany, had been prefigured by modest attempts to revive the pseudo-classical Carolingian types”: Panofsky/Saxl, “Classical Mythology” 1932–1933, 263.

<sup>14</sup> Only six years later, however, Panofsky would take up the basic theses of the essay of 1933 in the introduction to his *Studies in Iconology* (1939) and reformulate them to a not inconsiderable extent: “The Middle Ages were by no means blind to the visual values of classical art, and they were deeply interested in the intellectual and poetic values of classical literature. But it is significant that, just at the height of the mediaeval period (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), classical *motifs* were not used for the representation of classical *themes* while, conversely, classical *themes* were not expressed by classical *motifs*”: Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 18. Here, then, the alleged disjunction is immediately preceded by the assertion that the Middle Ages basically had something like a sense of “classical art”, which here is to say as much as a sense of, or insight into, its supposedly supertemporal aesthetic ideality. Nevertheless—that is to say: against better perception or knowledge—there has been a divergence—a divergence that, in its current formulation, does not concern form and content, but motif and theme. The question of form in the sense of stylistic composition is obviously circumvented here, in 1939.

was particularly suitable for a campaign in favour of the Warburg Library in the USA. It also offered a considerable potential for identification with the current political situation of the time, and finally a historical model could be developed that has a utopian, almost eschatological character.



FIG. 4. HERCULES CARRYING THE CALEDONIAN BOAR  
ANTIQUÉ RELIEF SET IN THE WALL OF  
ST. MARK'S CHURCH, VENICE



FIG. 5. ALLEGORY OF SALVATION  
XIII CENTURY RELIEF SET IN THE WALL OF  
ST. MARK'S CHURCH, VENICE

Figure 1: Erwin Panofsky/Fritz Saxl, *Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art*, in: *Metropolitan Museum Studies* 4, 2 (March 1933), 231, figure 4 and 5.

The underlying theme of the essay is the salvation of manhood and thus the redemption from medievalism through classicism. In this context, it follows that the essay begins with the example of the façade reliefs of San Marco in Venice, with an alleged allegory of salvation (figure 1, right) that is lacking in evidence. For it is hard to see why the almost naked hero in the younger relief should not be recognized as the ancient hero who overcomes the kerynthian deer cow and at the same time defeats the hydra in the shape of a single-headed dragon. And Panofsky makes little effort to substantiate his interpretation—presumably in order not to jeopardize the appearance of its self-evidence for medieval viewers.

Looking at the essay from its end, it becomes clear that Panofsky actually roams the Middle Ages as a classicist under cover. It is no coincidence that

classicism is the word into which the entire text flows: “[...] almost every artistic and cultural crisis has been overcome by that recourse to antiquity which we know as Classicism”.<sup>15</sup> For the author, classicisms are—as the final passage of the essay makes clear—those phases of history in which the “freedom [...] in art and in thought” is able to assert itself against authoritative structures.<sup>16</sup> According to Panofsky, the so-called High Renaissance is the period of ideal harmony, albeit accompanied by tensions, which was shaken by the Counter-Reformation and led with so-called mannerism to a “neomedievalism”, a reorientation towards the Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup> The classicism of the Carracci, according to Panofsky, had led out of the crisis of the Counter-Reformation (i.e. out of Mannerism) and prepared the ground for the Baroque (as a renewed period of classicism).<sup>18</sup> In Panofsky’s own present, characterized as a crisis, at least Picasso’s classicism, according to his concluding remark, gives some hope for salvation.<sup>19</sup>

The genuinely classical themes, especially the mythological ones, play a special role in this historical model: according to Panofsky, they are the only place where the modern mind can locate a vision of unproblematic or unbroken unity or completeness.<sup>20</sup> In “the real world of tensions and suppressed emotions”, the interpretation of genuinely classical themes in painting and poetry is “a visionary enclave of untroubled beauty and vitality”.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to Aby Warburg, Panofsky thus represents a classicism in the sense of a zone of harmony that is as trouble-free as possible. Although he also speaks of “vital emotions”<sup>22</sup> or “passionate vitality”<sup>23</sup> (or simply “vitality”)<sup>24</sup>,

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<sup>15</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 278.

<sup>16</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 276; on the medievalisms of the interwar period cf.: Bastian Schlüter, *Explodierende Altertümlichkeit. Imaginationen vom Mittelalter zwischen den Weltkriegen* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 276.

<sup>18</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 278.

<sup>19</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 278.

<sup>20</sup> “As a result of this the field of the genuine classical subjects, especially the mythological ones, turned out to be the only place in which the modern mind could locate a vision of unproblematic or unbroken completeness, and the interpretation of genuine classical subjects both in painting and in poetry became for the real world of tensions and suppressed emotions a visionary enclave of untroubled beauty and vitality”: Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 277.

<sup>21</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 277.

<sup>22</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 273.

<sup>23</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 274.

<sup>24</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 277.



the longing for “untroubled beauty”<sup>25</sup> seems to have priority. The harmony achieved at least for a few decades, which appeared as a historical “gift”<sup>26</sup> with the “great masters” of the Renaissance (Leonardo, Giorgione and Raphael) is, according to Panofsky’s draft of history, finally lost. His classicism is, as he himself says, more nostalgic or melancholic.<sup>27</sup> The classicisms that followed the “actual” Renaissance are fundamentally characterized by a sweet and melancholic resignation, as he combines them with Poussin’s and Lorrain’s artistic positions; a resignation that results from the awareness that the ideal harmony of the Renaissance is lost once and for all and that all subsequent classicisms have a utopian character.<sup>28</sup>

With these concepts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as well as the *Nachleben* of antiquity, Panofsky, as Georges Didi-Huberman emphasized, entered into a contradiction to Aby Warburg, above all by claiming that the medieval spirit was incapable of grasping the unity of classical form and classical subject matter: “Thus the mediaeval mind, being incapable of realizing, as the modern mind automatically does, the unity of classical form and classical subject matter [...]”.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Warburg, who rarely uses the terms medieval and renaissance without critical restriction, had, for example, asserted, that the “so-called Middle Ages really did not lack the will for material archaeology”.<sup>30</sup>

But at least as serious is another difference, which is, to my opinion, of fundamental interest for any reflections on *Nachleben*: Warburg combined the idea of *Nachleben* with a structural anachronism of historical time. Panofsky,

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<sup>25</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 277.

<sup>26</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 276.

<sup>27</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 278.

<sup>28</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 278.

<sup>29</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 268; cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante. Histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: les Éditions de Minuit, 2002; quoted here: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Das Nachleben der Bilder. Kunstgeschichte und Phantomzeit nach Aby Warburg*, transl. Michael Bischoff (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2010), 110.

<sup>30</sup> “Dem sogenannten Mittelalter fehlte es hier wahrlich nicht an dem Willen zu stofflichgetreuer Archäologie”: Aby Warburg, “Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoia zu Ferrara”, *Atti del X congresso internazionale di storia dell’arte in Roma. L’Italia e l’arte straniera* (Rome: Maglione & Strini, 1922), 179–193, here 182.

on the other hand, linked *Nachleben* with a chronological conception of time that excludes any discontinuity and anachronism *per se*.<sup>31</sup>

Only the concluding lines of the essay of 1933 reveal the personal dimension that the concept of disintegration possessed in the specific situation of the incipient development of power of Nazi socialism in Germany: a European society in which beauty could be exemplified and interpreted solely by the main figures of Christian history gagged, according to Panofsky, the potential of the arts to an authoritative structure or institution.<sup>32</sup> Only on the basis of the figures of classical mythology—at least if they are perceived as detached from their religious, theological and cultic roots—can something like true freedom be realized.<sup>33</sup> Analogously, the contemporary situation in Germany is marked by an (albeit not ecclesiastical) authority that opposes freedom in the sense of Panofsky.

In the end, the author describes his own time in an analogous way as a crisis, as he does for the period of Mannerism,<sup>34</sup> implicitly characterizing it as a neo-medievalist epoch, as a time of disharmony and irrationality. In other words, Panofsky sees himself confronted with a time of crisis in which he must embark on a search for an undisturbed space, an enclave.<sup>35</sup> He, as a representative of the modern spirit and an avowed classicist, will thus have to carry the ideals of classicism through dark times, just as the poets and artists of the Middle Ages did more badly than right with the figures of classical mythology, albeit in supposed disguises and distortions. Even more so, however, is the analogy of Panofsky with the “pagan” gods themselves: He is, like them, the bearer of the classical heritage *in persona*, who faces a time of crisis in which this heritage will not be understood and misinterpreted.

From the point of view of the addressees of the original lecture in the USA in 1931, i.e. from the point of view of a European East Coast culture in North

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<sup>31</sup> “What Panofsky and Saxl invert or abandon is the structural or synchronic content of the theory: all that is nonchronological or anachronistic in the polarization, the double rhythm, of classical survival und classical resurrection.” (Georges Didi-Huberman, “Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time”, *Common Knowledge* 9, 2 (Spring 2003): 273–85, here 278).

<sup>32</sup> “[A]uthoritative postulates of the Christian religion”: Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 276.

<sup>33</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 277.

<sup>34</sup> Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 278.

<sup>35</sup> “[E]nclave of untroubled beauty and vitality”: Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology”, 277.

America, the view of the Middle Ages is a view of one's own European roots before the time of Columbus. In this context, Panofsky can be regarded as a mediator between the highly idealized European antiquity and the early modern to modern history of North America in the role of the European medievalist.

### **Border Police Bias**

The 1933 essay postulates a transcultural aesthetic ideal that is located in the classical antiquity and that was newly realized in the Renaissance and its following classicisms. The Middle Ages are generally judged as a period of the unclassical or the irrational. Nevertheless, it is claimed that even in the Middle Ages one possessed a sense for or an insight into the aesthetic values of the classical antiquity. This means that the Middle Ages are assumed to have suppressed a supposedly universal ideal of artistic beauty against better feelings or knowledge.

With a view to the discussion of the façade reliefs of San Marco in Venice, further problems can be identified in this context: The question of how ancient artefacts (*spolia*) can be reused remains completely unreflected. The reuse of the ancient Hercules relief on San Marco (figure 1, left) suggests that the coincidence of ancient formal language and “pagan” content did not meet with the greatest resistance in the 13th century: The antique Hercules was simply integrated into the medieval pictorial programme. In addition, the text limits the problem of transfer as far as possible to the transfer of motifs. Neither the question of what role images as such play in the tradition of “pagan” antiquity is posed, nor are these images examined in their broader visual context of effect. Surprisingly, however, the intermedial context of image and text is barely seriously introduced into the argumentation. Rather, textual and pictorial traditions are largely discussed separately. The medieval images appear as a kind of supplementary element in a textual tradition that follows its own laws and runs throughout. This even applies to examples of book illumination.

One may understand the ramble through the Middle Ages, as the essay does, as a consistent continuation and expansion of Warburg's works, as Ernst Gombrich did—analogous to the argumentation of Warburg's essay on the

Palazzo Schifanoia.<sup>36</sup> The differences, however, are considerable. As a rule, Warburg is concerned with analyzing a certain art historical phenomenon in its complexity and thus also in its diachronic and cross-cultural aspects. Although the knowledge of a certain epoch is to be contoured in an exemplary manner, Warburg's epoch characterizations are locked against generalizations. Warburg's attempt to assess the question of continuity and discontinuity in a differentiated way is particularly striking where the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance is usually determined: Francesco Sassetti's own words, also in the life-oriented main content of his last will and testament, Warburg says, do not reveal the "man of the new age" without further ado; on the contrary, the "Middle Ages"—if one understands by it an old-fashioned consideration contrary to the egocentric superhumanity of the Renaissance draped in antiquity—seem not only to live on in the religious emotional habits of his "vita contemplativa" but also to decisively influence the style of his outer "vita activa".<sup>37</sup>

Panofsky, on the other hand, is concerned with idealizing the Renaissance as such and the classicisms and heroizing them as powers of salvation. To this end, the medieval pictorial material is presented as broadly as possible and subjected to an attempt to establish general laws on it, which ultimately—albeit with a high claim to differentiation—are intended to confirm the image of an epoch of aesthetic aberration. Panofsky thus embodies, so to speak, that "grenzpolizeiliche Befangenheit" (border police bias) against which Warburg had massively opposed and against which he wished to regard antiquity, the Middle Ages and modern times as a coherent epoch.<sup>38</sup> The decisive question for Warburg's work is what consequences the expressive values of ancient art had on the "artistic culture" of the Renaissance and how these consequences came about.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, review on Panofsky/Saxl, *Classical Mythology, 1932–1933*, in: *Bibliography of the Survival of the Classics, Warburg Institute*, vol. 2, London 1938, 100s.; Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An intellectual Biography. With a Memoir on the History of the Library by Fritz Saxl*, London 1970, 310.

<sup>37</sup> Aby Warburg, "Francesco Sassetti's letztwillige Verfügung" (1907), *Aby Warburg, Werke in einem Band*, ed. Martin Treml, Sigrid Weigel and Perdita Ladwig (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 234–80, here 258.

<sup>38</sup> "Antike, Mittelalter und Neuzeit als zusammenhängende Epoche anzusehen": Warburg, "Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie", 179–93, cited here: Warburg, *Werke*, 373–400, here 396.

<sup>39</sup> Warburg, *Werke*, 373.

Presumably, both Panofsky and Warburg were concerned with creating an efficacy for an image of man that would express humanity in its greatest possible breadth, diversity and vitality. Panofsky continued to adhere to his concept of *Nachleben* until the 1960s and thus probably to an idea of salvation through classicism—far beyond the point in time when it had to be clear that the mere appearance of European classicisms was neither an indication nor a guarantor of humanity; at least not if one includes the classicisms practiced under the Nazi regime, as they have shown themselves most succinctly in the design and use of Königsplatz in Munich.<sup>40</sup>

Unless, for example, it is to be understood as a long-term triumph of Classicism that the former administrative building of the NSDAP in Munich at this very spot in Munich became the cultural institution of the Central Institute for Art History, where Panofsky was admitted to the *Ordre pour le Mérite* in 1967.<sup>41</sup> But this would probably seem too cynical. And we must not forget that Panofsky is primarily concerned with the figures of classical mythology, who in his view—at least when they appear detached from ideological interests—are the only perfect model of integral humanity.

Panofsky represents a concept of *Nachleben* based on a cyclic historical model. Classicist phases alternate with medievalist ones. In the latter, the feeling or consciousness for the ideal of beauty once achieved in classical antiquity is not completely lost, but suppressed. Thus even the worst historical phases of disintegration contain a glimmer of hope for salvation through a new classicism.

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<sup>40</sup> Iris Lauterbach, Julian Rosefeldt and Piero Steinle, ed., *Bürokratie und Kult. Das Parteizentrum der NSDAP am Königsplatz in München. Geschichte und Rezeption*, Veröffentlichungen des Zentralinstituts für Kunstgeschichte X (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Christopher S. Wood, “Panofsky in Munich, 1967”, *Modern Language Notes* 131 (2016), 1236–57; Laudatio of the Chancellor of the Order Percy Ernst Schramm: [http://www.orden-pourlemerite.de/sites/default/files/laudatio/panofsky1892\\_laudatio.pdf](http://www.orden-pourlemerite.de/sites/default/files/laudatio/panofsky1892_laudatio.pdf) (final call: 06/02/2019; acceptance speech of Erwin Panofsky: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQ02xIAMB\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQ02xIAMB_k) (final call: 06/02/2019).