FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Pathology of the Photogram

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Philippe Michaud (2004) *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*

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In an article of the 1970s, 'The Third Meaning', Roland Barthes considers what he calls the 'obtuse' sense that he encounters in certain stills from the films of Eisenstein. The obtuse sense is to be distinguished from the 'obvious' sense (Barthes 1977, 55) which itself is distinct from the purely informative content of the image. If the obvious meaning lies within the field of the symbolic and can be identified according to certain more or less fixed and conventional relations of signifier and signified, the obtuse sense comes as an excess, is like a signifier without a signified, and pertains more to Kristeva's concept of *signifiance*. The obtuse sense 'rounds off' or softens the obvious meaning, rendering it less acute. It disturbs symbolic meaning, without eradicating it. The obtuse meaning is 'derisory' (Barthes 1977, 58), beyond the intention of the director, outside culture. Obtuse meaning, rather than pertaining to the order of signification and symbolism, pertains to the Nietzschean register of emotion or value. Barthes will also link it to Bataillean excess, to useless expenditure (62), specifically to Bataille's *informe*, through reference to Bataille's brief text from the *Documents* journal, 'The Big Toe' (cf. Bataille 1985, 20-23).

What Barthes thus isolates in the photogram is a level of meaning that jars with, but without denying, the symbolic form of the image, the aesthetic composition intended by Eisenstein to symbolise and signify grief in a photogram of a weeping woman, for example. It is a level of meaning which is as if accidental, superimposed

on the symbolic form of the image, or lying aslant it. In the particular example in which he mentions he first encountered the third meaning, Barthes locates the obtuse somewhere in the relation between the low headscarf, the closed eyes and the downturned mouth of the weeping woman. To consider solely these lines in the photogram is to arrive at the 'derisory' figure of the clown's mask, with exaggeratedly downturned mouth and heavily made up 'sad' eyes. Barthes arrives, 'by accident' at an element that has evaded the attention of the author/director, and which undercuts Eisenstein's emphatic aesthetic. He proposes that it is this value, this meaning which cannot yet be named, which first springs out at him from the photogram.

It is significant that it is in the photogram that Barthes locates the Nietzschean *obtuse* meaning. The photogram is the film ostensibly without movement, the film reduced to its frames; it is at this level, Barthes proposes, that the analysis of film should focus, rather than on the film *in movement*. Barthes's approach is thus diametrically opposed to that of Deleuze, in *Cinema I* and *Cinema II*, where the latter insists that the specificity of cinema lies in the image which moves 'in time'. For Barthes, it is at the level of the photogram that the third meaning, beyond any recognisable symbolism, can be located and analysed as such. One might also propose that it is at the level of the photogram that the dynamics of the image are to be located, that the force of movement or the gesture of the image can be encountered. The movement *of* the film masks the movement *in* the photogram.

The great cultural historian Aby Warburg has recently been the object of a critical re-assessment among contemporary theorists of modernity such as Georges Didi-Huberman and Giorgio Agamben (Didi-Huberman 2002; Agamben 1999). Philippe Michaud's book *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, prefaced by Didi-Huberman, provides further evidence of this resurgence of interest, or at least of a different approach to Warburg than that constrained within the disciplinary boundaries of art history. According to Michaud, Warburg, whose legacy lies behind major figures in art history such as Panofksy and Gombrich, has been somewhat obscured by his disciples, and the fundamental elements of his thought misrepresented. Michaud insists on Warburg's subversive impact within neo-Kantian approaches to the Renaissance, in the work of Winckelmann, for example. While the latter insisted on the elements of repose in classical form, Warburg emphasises the Nietzschean dynamism within the image of classical beauty, the elements that relate it to explosive motion and disjunction, Dionysian eruption within Apollonian form. The image holds in a powerful tension the dynamic force of the Dionysian; the image is characterised by the irruption within it of a convulsive force. For Didi-Huberman, in

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his preface, Warburg's work is to be understood as a study (and as itself a practice) of the *movement-image* (Michaud, 10); Didi-Huberman deliberately borrows Deleuze's title, leading to paradoxes and resonances which I consider further on. It is significant, then, that Michaud draws a parallel between Warburg's study of the Renaissance, and of the *pueblo* Indians' snake rituals, and the importance of the photogram in the early history of cinema. If we consider the cinema at the photogrammatic level then a field of analysis opens up, of movement 'within' the (still) image.

Once the potential opens up around the question of the dynamic tensions within the image, a series of parallels, resonances and disjunctive associations may be supposed. Didi-Huberman, in his preface, seeks to radicalise Warburg's methodology through an insistence on the 'symptomatic' (12) nature of what Warburg proposes with the term *Pathosformel*. He insists on the *excess* of Warburg's notion of the image and of Warburg's thought itself, on the *vertige* Warburg locates as the force of the image, and of its cross-disciplinary movement (13). Didi-Huberman emphasises that Warburg's insistence on the dynamism of the image is destined towards the loss of self (13). He links, finally, Warburg's *pathosformel* to the pathological, and to the dimension of the symptom as the incidence of a violent, convulsive body (16). The image, in Renaissance art, would thus be internally sundered by a pathological dynamism of a Nietzschean and Bataillean character. Significantly, Didi-Huberman had first drawn the parallel between Bataille's exploration of the *informe* in *Documents* and Warburg's nearly contemporary studies at the end of his book *La Ressemblance informe: le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*.

Much in the same way that Warburg detects the repetition of gestural motifs across historically and culturally distinct forms, one may trace the incidence of this emphasis on convulsive form between Warburg, Bataille and Barthes. One might thus see parallels between Warburg's analysis of Botticelli's frescoes, Bataille's account of the excessive degradation of form in Elie Lotar's photograph of the big toe, and Barthes's semiotic analysis of the Eisenstein still. In these three instances the form of the image is traversed by a force which is either convulsive, strikes it aslant, or deforms the image in a tendency towards the absence of form (*l'informe*). The common reference may be to Nietzsche, and the inevitable distinction nevertheless to be drawn may lie, unexpectedly, between Warburg and Bataille on the one hand and Barthes on the other, for reasons I will try to justify.

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One can draw fairly evident parallels between Barthes's encounter with the obtuse meaning and Warburg's emphasis on the dynamic qualities of the image, as inflected by Michaud and Didi-Huberman. The third meaning is of a dynamic quality, in contrast to a static series of signifier-signified relations. Barthes characterises it as a 'useless expenditure', opening up an infinity of sense in a similar way to the *vertige* and the excess Michaud and Didi-Huberman detect in Warburg. However, there is a significant distinction to be drawn between the different contexts involved here, and thus the different theoretical claims being made. Barthes is writing after structuralism; as at the beginning of *S/Z*, he is proposing a dimension beyond that which can be analysed using orthodox semiological method. He writes after structuralism both in the sense that he is writing after its triumphant period of the early to mid-1960s, and after it in the sense of outside it, on the remainder, that which does not figure in its repertoire. But it does not necessarily follow that this 'after' or 'beyond' of structuralism marks a return to intentionality, or to a 'nature' outside the field of culture. In this particular instance, it does not follow that Barthes is claiming for the third meaning an essential or expressionistic quality, or that it figures or expresses a fundamental nature or energy. The third meaning seems rather to be linked, as I underlined, to a Nietzschean sense of value. It is of the order, for Barthes, of the 'that' or the 'this'- *this* moment which I affirm again and again in the mode of Nietzsche's eternal return. Barthes writes in *The Pleasure of the Text*:

> the text (the same is true of the singing voice) can wring from me only this judgement, in no way adjectival: *that's it!* And further still: *that's it for me!* This 'for me' is neither subjective nor existential, but Nietzschean...' (Barthes 1975, 13).

The third meaning is what strikes me in the image as 'for me', without being reducible to 'what I like'. It is of the order of the *punctum* in Barthes' later memoir on photography: it is *what wounds*. Like the *punctum*, moreover, the third meaning or the obtuse sense bears a specific relation to the symbolic meaning of the image. It 'undoes' it, but without denying it. It is a non-negating derision. The obtuse meaning comes askance, rounds off, softens or 'foams' the symbolic meaning. From this we might deduce that the force of the obtuse meaning does not derive from any essential quality, but from its *structural* position, or rather its position in relation to structure: coming after it, on top of it, aslant it, as an indifferent and accidental mark which destabilises, for a moment, the structure it relates to. Didi-Huberman's reading of the dynamism of movement as pathological symptom in Warburg, and, in all probability, Warburg's own sense of the *origin* of the 'pathos' of the image seem to

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posit a more expressionistic philosophy of the image. What survives 'in' the Renaissance image, or in the image as such, is an *archaic* expression of the relation man has with the Gods, or with elemental forces: the symbolic contains the surviving trace of the ritual or dance whereby humanity represents its own negotiation with these forces. In Didi-Huberman's account, this archaic remainder erupts within the modern form as pathological symptom. Didi-Huberman writes: 'Warburg's thought sets art history in motion because the movement it opens up comprises things that are *at once* archaeological (fossils, survivals) and current (gestures, experiences)' (16). In Barthes's reading of the third sense the archaic and the historiographic are not at issue. Barthes's reading is structural (but dynamic, attuned to the *process* of meaning); Warburg's is historical, historiographic. With the notion of the *symptom*, however, Didi-Huberman seems to propose a link between the two methods: the medical and psychoanalytic term *symptom*, used with reference to the historical dimension, proposes that the archaeology of the self and the body can be historically mapped. This is a more complex historical psychoanalysis than one which would simply equate the primitive with the unconscious; Warburg's notion of survival or 'afterlife' (*Nachleben*) proposes that the archaic lives on within the modern and may erupt within it as pathology. But is there a homology between the obtuse meaning and the symptom? If the obtuse is derisory, without signified, does the symptom exist as a signifier of the same nature? What kind of sign is the symptom?

For both Warburg and Bataille, the image is expressive of an affective force, which communicates something of the relation between the human and the divine. In his preface and in the book (as yet untranslated) *L'image survivante*, Didi-Huberman argues that Warburg opens up, within the study of images, a concern with the symptoms of pathetic force; thus the term *pathosformel*. In a parallel sense, Bataille looks to the photographs of Lotar, for example, for a tendency towards deformation which communicates an exposure to the sacred, for Bataille equivalent to the base, to the animal. For both Warburg and Bataille, there is a relation at stake in images to archaic forces, whether this archaism is historical, or psychological, or physiological, relating to the surviving animality in man. Form is convulsed, deformed or informed, if such a neologism be permitted, in its very contours, under the pressure of the repression of the base.

In Barthes's analysis, the deformation of the image is located less in its specific characteristics and more in the attitude of the subject towards it. Obvious and obtuse are characteristics of reception, not objective elements of the work itself. *Camera Lucida* retrospectively brings out this aspect of the earlier photogrammatic

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studies: Barthes is attending to the modalities of reception, the attitude of the subject in their singular, affective, response to the image. Barthes makes no objective, historical claims about the Eisenstein stills which generalise their aesthetic qualities beyond their reception; they express a certain affective content at the expense of their semiotic content, which strikes, wounds, the subject in their body, that is, in that part of them which is singular to them. Perhaps, in this light, one might re-assess Warburg (and Bataille), and I think this is the thrust of Michaud's book. It seems to draw Warburg away from academic art history and emphasise the affective currents that traverse Warburg's writings, the pathetic motifs which recur, rather like lightning across a sky. Thus the wind-blown dress of the nymph communicates with the movement of the butterfly; the Renaissance *Intermedi* are reproduced among the Hopi Indians. But the elements of continuity are not explained by historical causalities, nor by the formal patterns or nature, but in terms of the singularities of their reception, in Warburg's singular pathology. Perhaps what concerns Warburg is the charge that passes from image to image, via the subject, rather in the same way that Bataille is interested, fascinated, by the affectivity that passes between open beings in an atmosphere of storm; the charge or discharge of the image also communicates with the affective discharge of the pathological body which receives it. The element of the image which Warburg, Barthes and Bataille attend to is thus formal, structural, but also affective. It is a tension in the image which exceeds its structural contour, but nevertheless remains structural; it is the excess that structure requires in order to constitute itself as structure. The structural fault-line is also affective, expressed by the term *symptom*. The symptom is a specific kind of sign which does not result from an expressive intention, but, in Freudian terms, from a structural relation between instinctual impulse and repression; it is also the index of an energetic discharge. Michaud's reading of Warburg privileges this transversal element, the tendency to relate the image to its affective reception, the recording of this charge, rather than to its objective historical features. Thus Michaud places much emphasis on the lecture Warburg gave in 1923, in the Kreuzlingen clinic where he was interned in 1918, seemingly intended for the ears of his doctor Ludwig Binswanger, in order to convince him that he was capable of intellectual thought. The lecture recounts aspects of Warburg's journey to New Mexico and Arizona in 1895-6, and, Michaud proposes, establishes this journey and the experience as the 'fundamental wellspring' of his thought (25). Warburg's observation, and possible participation, in the snake ritual is then used by Michaud as a formal motif of his own text. The sinuosity of the snake passes its charge to the strip of film, as Michaud

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ends one of the lectures appended to the book, citing Warburg: '"To attribute motion to a figure that is not moving, it is necessary to reawaken in oneself a series of experienced images following one from the other" not a single image: a loss of calm contemplation. A series of images following one from the other, a strip of film, a snake' (273). The composition of Michaud's text thus follows Warburgian principles, or at least Warburgian principles as far as they are construed by Michaud, of the recurrence of gestural and pathetic motifs which traverse normally distinct contexts. The least descriptive parts of Michaud's books are those where he draws parallels between Warburg's studies and the early history of cinematography, or between the monumentally beautiful *montage* titled *Mnemosyne* which Warburg properly began in 1928, five years prior to his death, and Jean-Luc Godard's practice in the *Histoire(s) du Cinema* video project (289). The element of continuity is *montage*, but this is a *montage* practised between photogrammatic images, still images which remain stills however much they contain of dynamism. Thus, as I proposed above, the associations belong to the pre-history of cinema, if we consider with Deleuze the specificity of the latter to lie in the movement of the image in time, in the time-image. If, as Deleuze argues, what cinema immediately gives us is 'a movement image – a section which is mobile, not an immobile section + abstract movement' (2), we must consider the dynamism of the image explored by Warburg, Bataille, and Barthes to be of a fundamentally different order than that of cinema, properly speaking.

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