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The curse of anachronism

Interpreting and perceiving pictures from the past

Abstract

In history of art, anachronism is the experience of the contemporary observer being projected onto a picture of the ancient times, it is the memory of one era being introduced into another era, it is the present informing the past. According to Lucien Febvre, anachronism must be avoided like the plague. It is the (art) historian's bogey. Nevertheless, reconstructing the past without appealing to our present seems impossible. But how to avoid it? How could the art historians leave the mental universe of their own era to penetrate that of the period they are analyzing? It seems that we have reached a sort of dead end. I suggest calling this impasse the paradox of anachronism. The planning of the paper is as follows: (i) I will examine the underlying methodology of some critics and art historians in relation to the paradox of anachronism, showing which proposition of the paradox they have rejected in order to overcome the impasse; (ii) I will sketch an alternative solution to those examined, which involves resolving the paradox by focusing strictly on pictures as objects that admit a peculiar visual experience, exploiting some arguments from the so-called "history of vision claim" and depiction theories.

Keywords

Anachronism, Picture perception, Picture interpretation

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1. Introduction

In the 1440s, in the convent of San Marco in Florence, at the base of the *Madonna of the shadows*, Fra Angelico painted curious coloured panels, devoid of figures, in which we can see colour sprinkled from a distance. What is their meaning? Is there a textual source that can explain them? Why had Fra Angelico painted them at the base of that Holy Conversation? How should the art historian deal with these aniconic panels, ignored for centuries by critics, where even the powerful tools of Panofskyan iconology fail?

Art historians, and historians in general, have always faced a difficult obstacle to get around. Their subject of study is chronologically “eccentric” to its own historical present. This is a basic feature of the discipline, though: art historians cannot analyze a picture that has not yet been produced. While operating in their present, they work perpetually turned to the past. Sometimes a near past – i.e., the Surrealism – sometimes a distant past – i.e., the 15th-century Italian painting.

As Georges Didi-Huberman claims:

Always, before the image, we are before time. [...]. Before an image, however old it may be, the present never ceases to reconfigure itself. [...]. Before an image, however recent, however contemporary it may be, the past at the same time never ceases to reconfigure itself, since that image becomes thinkable only in a construction of memory (Didi-Huberman 2007: 11-3, my translation).

According to Didi-Huberman, Fra Angelico’s curious panels attract the modern viewer’s gaze because the way the colour is sprinkled on the painted surface is unexpectedly reminiscent of Jackson Pollock’s dripping technique: thus, here we are faced with anachronism (Didi-Huberman 2007: 22-3).

2. The paradox of anachronism

But what is anachronism? In this case, it is the experience of the contemporary observer being projected onto a picture of the ancient times, it is the memory of one era being introduced into another era, it is the present informing the past.

So, there is an anachronistic approach and a non-anachronistic approach to the past. According to some influential scholars, anachronism must be

avoided like the plague (for example Febvre 1982: 5, 289)¹. It is the (art) historian's bogey. Nevertheless, reconstructing the past without appealing to our present seems impossible. But how to avoid it? How could the art historians leave the mental universe of their own era to penetrate that of the period they are analyzing? It seems that we have reached a sort of dead end. I suggest calling this impasse "the paradox of anachronism", which is the following:

- a) each era develops its own mental universe (or its own visual experience);
- b) in reconstructing the past, anachronism must be avoided;
- c) it is possible to reconstruct the mental universes (or the visual experiences) of the past only through the anachronism.

Since some art historians talk in perceptual terms, and not in the general terms of "mentality of an era", in the formulation of the paradox I have added a reference to visual experiences of the past.

Thus, the planning of the paper is as follows: (1) I will examine the underlying methodology of some critics and art historians in relation to the paradox of anachronism, showing which proposition of the paradox they have rejected in order to overcome the impasse; (2) I will sketch an alternative solution to those examined, which involves resolving the paradox by focusing strictly on pictures as objects that admit a peculiar visual experience, exploiting some arguments from the so-called "history of vision claim" and depiction theories.

¹ Here is Lucien Febvre's famous claim against anachronism: "The problem is not (for the historian, at any rate) to catch hold of a man, a writer of the sixteenth century, in isolation from his contemporaries, and [...] to decide that he fits under one of the rubrics we use today for classifying those who do or do not think like us in matters of religion. When dealing with sixteenth-century men and ideas, when dealing with modes of wishing, feeling, thinking, and believing that bear sixteenth-century arms, the problem is to determine what set of precautions to take and what rules to follow in order to avoid the worst of all sins, the sin that cannot be forgiven— anachronism" (Febvre 1982: 5). And again: "As always, anachronism comes into play. For in the end [...] we have to reread the words after taking off our modern eyeglasses, the ones of today; we have to read them with the eyes of another time" (Febvre 1982: 289).

3. Rejecting (b): anachronism should not be avoided

3.1. Georges Didi-Huberman

Didi-Huberman is strongly committed to the idea that anachronism is not the historian's greatest sin, but rather it represents a fruitful resource in understanding pictures from the past. His *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'art et anachronism des images* is the declared manifesto of this methodological approach. The project of the book is ambitious as it envisions a radical change in the classical approach to art history, which is characterized by a narrative essentially based on a Hegelian idea of history (Larsson 2020: 72-7). According to this approach, the history of artistic production follows a chronological progression² – strictly deterministic – where the present always develops out of the past. For Didi-Huberman (2007), it is therefore a matter of working out a new model of conceptualizing time, one that does not follow the classical linear development, but where past and present intersect in an inextricable way³.

Anachronism becomes the perfect tool for Didi-Huberman's purposes⁴. Indeed, from this point of view, images are conceived as compositions of heterogeneous times that overlap and coexist with each other in a constant tension (Chirolla, Mejía Mosquera 2017: 94). Fra Angelico's panels, for example, contain a multitude of different times: the trompe-

² As is well known, according to Hegel, art is where Spirit and nature merge. He identifies three different moments in the history of artistic production: Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic art. If Symbolic art is immature because the spiritual content is inferior to the visible form, in Romantic art the opposite happens, that is, the visible form is no longer suitable to convey the spiritual content. Here we come, then, to the downsizing of the role of art, since in the modern times it can no longer be the highest expression of the Idea, as was the case in Classical art (Hegel 1975: 11, 76-9).

³ A similar idea is already found in Henri Focillon. In his famous *Life of forms in art*, he claims: "History is not unilinear; it is not pure sequence. We may best regard it as the superimposition of very widely spaced present moments. [...]. At the same date, politics, economics and art do not occupy identical positions on their respective graphs. [...]. History is, in general, a conflict among what is precocious, actual or merely delayed" (Focillon 1992: 140).

⁴ About "opening History [...] to new models of temporality" (Didi-Huberman 2007: 171, my translation), Didi-Huberman also considers Carl Einstein's studies on African's sculpture (Einstein 1915, 1921), claiming that Einstein's version of Walter Benjamin's *dialectical image* concerns the invention of new historical objects by means of the collision – i.e. the anachronism – between the present and the past, that is to say, between the Cubism and the African art (Didi-Huberman 2007: 169).

l'œil frame refers to an Albertian conception of perspective, the function of colour recalls 13th- and 14th-century Dominican writings, the fake marble refers to the Byzantine tradition of using multicoloured semi-precious stones for liturgical purposes, until the memory of the modern viewer, who sees similarities with Jackson Pollock's dripping (Didi-Huberman 2007: 18-22). The panels thus become objects "of complex time, of impure time: an extraordinary montage of heterogeneous times that form anachronisms" (Didi-Huberman 2007: 19, my translation)⁵. Didi-Huberman thus strongly rejects (b), arguing that history is only a history of anachronisms and that "the chronological object is conceivable only in its anachronistic counter rhythm" (Didi-Huberman 2007: 41, my translation).

3.2. *Aby Warburg*

With Aby Warburg, art history leaves the purely formalist approach that had marked it until then to take on the dimension of an iconographic, historical, and cultural inquiry around the image. For the purposes of the paper, I will consider the concepts of *Nachleben* and *Pathosformel*, and the atlas *Mnemosyne*.

It is well known that the concepts of *Nachleben* and *Pathosformel* are fundamental to Warburg's thought (see for example Warburg 1999: 553-8). The two terms, however, are difficult to translate into English. *Nachleben* has a broader meaning than "survival", and is closer to the concept of "revival". Warburg, in fact, was interested in the reappearance in the Renaissance art of certain details, such as gestures and expressions, that were derived directly from classical art and were linked to certain emotional and psychological states (Gombrich 1970: 16). He calls these gestures and expressions *Pathosformeln*, which encapsulate and symbolize the deepest human experiences, such as the expression of pain on Laocoon's face or the dangling arm of the deceased Meleager. Warburg was convinced that the *Pathosformeln* persisted immutable through the history of artistic production and that they carried imprinted the traumatic experiences of ancient people (Wood 2019: 287).

According to Christopher Johnson (2012: 18), "Warburg's *Pathosformeln* help us to see backward and forward in time. Didi-Huberman (2007:

⁵ Didi-Huberman borrowed the concept of montage from the language of cinema, repeatedly insisting on it as a cognitive tool to grasp the complex times of the image: see for example Didi-Huberman 2007: 114-22, 2017: 295-332.

90-2) argues something similar about Warburg's entire production: with him, art history becomes a non-linear history of overlaps, rhizomes, sudden returns, and rediscoveries. Thanks to Warburg "thinking about art and thinking about history took a decisive turn" (Didi-Huberman 2017: 12). From this point of view, *Pathosformeln* are understood as anachronistic grafts, whose fusion of content and form, which occurred in the past, lives unchanged in the future.

The tool capable of making all this visible, is the atlas called *Mnemosyne*, that is, Warburg's latest effort: a utopian, unfinished project consisting of 63 wooden boards containing many black-and-white pictures conceptually linked to each other. The atlas "was a nearly wordless attempt to chart the *Nachleben* of the classical *Gebärdensprache* (language of gestures) in Renaissance art and beyond" (Johnson 2012: 9). For example, in the plate 24 of the so-called "Pre-penultimate version", dating from the fall of 1928, one can see, juxtaposed, Dürer's *Sol iustitiae*, a stamp from the Barbados Islands depicting King George V as Neptune and bearing a verse from Virgil, a page from a German fish recipe book, a picture of Mussolini with a lioness, Giotto's *St. Francis preaching to the birds*, Francesco Botticini's *Three archangels with Tobias*, and a picture of a female golf player (Warburg 2020: 156). The number of iconographic and conceptual connections that can be made between the pictures juxtaposed by Warburg is enormous. Here, too, we are moving on the field of anachronism and retroactive projection: Giotto's *St. Francis preaching to the birds* will take on additional meaning when juxtaposed with the picture of Mussolini taming the lioness.

With the practical experiment of *Mnemosyne*, Warburg aims to show that anachronism enriches the reading of pictures, thus rejecting (b).

3.3. Arthur C. Danto

Part of Arthur Danto's theory of art is consistent with his philosophy of history. In this section I will therefore investigate the latter with the aim of highlighting some aspects of the former.

Danto conceives historical thought as a matter of retrospection (Carroll 2022: 143). According to his position, the past takes its shape only in the historian's present (Danto 1966: 577, 2007: 297).

Danto raises two crucial questions: (i) is it possible to have an inside knowledge of past events (i.e., from the point of view of those who experienced

them)?; (ii) is this inside knowledge really useful in reconstructing the past?

Regarding (i), Danto first claims that other epochs “really are other” (Danto 2007: 286) and that a form of life from the past “truly is different from our own” (Danto 2007: 297). He also identifies some reasons why an inside knowledge is impossible. First, the historians who seek to have an inside view of the past should forget the events following the historical period they are studying, to avoid the use of the so-called narrative sentences, which demonstrate a knowledge of the future that insiders cannot have: “Not knowing how it is all going to end is the mark of living through events” (Danto 2007: 294)⁶. Second, there is an unbridgeable difference in language between the historian and the past. Historians may know how words were used in each era, but they cannot use them in the same way. To use words as the members of a particular period did, I would have to fully experience the form of life of that period. The language adopted by a particular form of life in the past “is not my language” (Danto 2007: 296). Finally, according to Danto, the way we organize history is necessarily influenced by the historian’s cultural interests and inclinations (Danto 2007: 33).

Regarding (ii), Danto invites us to imagine the existence of an Ideal Chronicler, who can instantly transcribe everything that happens when it happens. Danto calls the document produced by the Ideal Chronicler the “Ideal Chronicle”. The limitation of this formidable document, however, lies in the fact that it lacks an entire category of descriptions: the truth concerning an event E_1 that occurred at time t_1 , in fact, can only be known after the conclusion of E_1 itself. And this kind of description can only be made by a historian at time t_2 (with $t_2 > t_1$), who can retrospectively observe events after E_1 (Danto 2007: 149-51). By this Danto wants to show that an internal understanding of the past is actually a limitation for a historical account, since it could only provide a list of unrelated events: for what concerns the developments of a historical event “the Ideal Witness is blind” (Danto 2007: 152).

⁶ The truth of a narrative sentences implies that at least two chronologically separated events happened. “In the 20th century there were two world wars” implies at least two events, namely a World War I and a World War II. In order to have an internal understanding of 1919 we should therefore be able to utter only “In the 20th century there was a world war” (Danto 2007: 293) completely forgetting the second event and all that followed, but this is clearly impossible.

For Danto, history is a narrative and not a mere chronicle⁷. The events of the past acquire meaning when the historian of the future connects the dots. If a historian living at time t_3 wants to narrate an event E_1 that occurred at time t_1 (where $t_3 > t_1$), and does it by linking E_1 to an event E_2 that occurred at time t_2 (where $t_1 < t_2 < t_3$), then in this way E_1 acquires historical relevance at time t_3 that it did not have for the people at time t_1 ⁸.

This retrospective reading of history sheds a light on section IV of Danto's famous article *The artworld* (Danto 1964). Danto asks us to imagine that a pair of opposite predicates, F and non-F, have to do with the K class of artworks. It might happen that, for long periods of time, every work of art is non-F. But as long as no object is both a work of art and F, it may never occur that non-F becomes an artistically relevant predicate. Conversely, all works up to a given point in time may be G, and it may never happen up to that point that something may be both a work of art and non-G. Suppose an artist decides that the H will henceforth be artistically relevant to his works. Then both H and its opposite non-H will become artistically relevant to the entire history of artistic production. Thus, if a painting is the first ever to be characterized by the predicate H, every other existing painting will be characterized by the predicate non-H. According to Danto, in this way the whole community of paintings will be enriched. Each new work, in fact, can be characterized by a new double possibility: being H or non-H. Even ancient painting, in doing so, will be enriched with new predicates. And it will obviously be a retroactive enrichment. To give an example, if the predicate by virtue of which the *Brillo Box* entered the art world is H, then everything that came before the *Brillo Box* can also be described with the new predicate non-H (Danto 1964: 582-4).

Danto, too, albeit with different ways and tools than Warburg and Didi-Huberman, therefore rejects (b). It is the retrospective reading of history

⁷ Danto also distinguishes between narrative and chronicle in art history. With Warhol, art history as progressive narrative ends, since after the *Brillo Box* the task of defining the nature of art is left to philosophers. Instead, the chronicle of art facts, which implies no narrative development, can continue. On this point see Carroll 1998: 18-20.

⁸ In archaeology, a similar kind of retrospective operation is carried out, for example, by Paul Zanker: when he begins his examination of the role of the representation of the intellectual within a given society, he starts with some modern statues, such as Jean-Antoine Houdon's *Voltaire* (1781) or Max Klinger's *Beethoven* (1902), and then moves on to a fifth century BCE portrait of Homer. This sudden time gap would obviously be impossible for a person who lived in the fifth century BCE, who could in no way make such comparisons (Zanker 1995: 3-22).

that gives broader meaning to individual events of the past. Similarly, the predicates with which we describe the artistic production of the present retroactively enrich the description of artworks of the past.

3.4. *Problems with the rejection of (b)*

The classic argument against this position is famously due to Quentin Skinner (1969). According to Skinner, when the historian is more interested in the retrospective significance of a historical event than in the meaning that event had for the agents who experienced it, then we are faced with a fallacy he calls the “mythology of prolepsis”. The mythology of prolepsis overlaps the significance that an observer assigns to a given action with the meaning of the action itself (Skinner 1969: 22-3). This produces the effect of describing event E, which happened at time t_1 , with concepts available at time t_2 (where $t_2 > t_1$) but not available at t_1 . For example, if a historian of literature claims that with Petrarch’s ascent of Mount Ventoux the Renaissance began, she is blatantly describing a past action by means of a concept – that of “Renaissance” – that did not yet exist at that time. According to Skinner (1969), this exposes the historians to a “mythology of parochialism”, which involves understanding an “alien” culture by inevitably applying the historians’ criteria of classification. There are two risks in doing so: (i) the historians may highlight relationships of familiarity and influence between authors of the past that never actually took place; (ii) the historians may translate topics totally extraneous to their own culture into more familiar terms (Skinner 1969: 24-7). Finally, Skinner (1969) defends a contextualist account: anachronistic reconstructions insert past authors into debates or comparisons that were not present when those same authors produced their works (Bevir 2011: 29); the only remedy to the myths of anachronism is the rigorous recovery of historical context⁹. Taking Skinner’s point of view, and considering the prescription attributed to Leopold von Ranke that the past must be narrated *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (the way it really was), the “anachronistic” operations of Didi-Huberman, Warburg, and Danto would have nothing to do with the purpose of historical writing. In Hacking’s (1995) words, such operations are not only retrospective, but retroactive (see also Haddock 2002: 4): they modify the past to the extent that some descriptions of intentional actions may be true of the past (from the historian’s future point

⁹ For a critique of Skinner’s methodological constraints, see Haddock 2002.

of view) but not in the past (Hacking 1995: 244). As an example, let us consider $E = \text{"Titian made an intentional action in painting the } \textit{Flaying of Marsyas} \text{ in a non-abstract way"}$. After Kandinsky's first abstract watercolour (1910), it is certainly plausible to say that E is true, but no one could have said that in the 1570s.

4. *Rejecting (c): anachronism can be avoided*

In this section I will analyze the proposals of Erwin Panofsky and Michael Baxandall. Panofsky's methodology appears more ambitious, while Baxandall's represents a softer compromise about the denial of anachronism. Baxandall, moreover, has the merit of considering a field more congenial to pictures, namely the visual-perceptual one.

4.1. *Erwin Panofsky*

According to Panofsky (1939, 1955), as is well known, the interpretation of a work of art passes through three different layers of meaning¹⁰, by means of which the interpreter works in a circular rather than a sequential manner (Holly 1984: 182):

(i) the pre-iconographic level is based on the interpreter's experiential background, through which she apprehends the primary subject matter of a work of art by identifying in pure forms (such as colours, lines, and volumes) representations of human beings, plants, and objects. The correctness of pre-iconographical description is ensured by the knowledge of the history of artistic styles.

(ii) the iconographic level requires the interpreter to apprehend the secondary subject matter by developing familiarity with specific themes or concepts inferred from literary sources. The correctness of the iconographic analysis, however, is ensured by the investigation of the history of types, that is, the way in which, in different eras, themes and concepts have been represented by specific objects.

(iii) the iconological level requires the interpreter to apprehend the intrinsic meaning by identifying "those underlying principles which reveal

¹⁰ The three levels of meaning make their appearance in a 1932 essay. Here they are defined as: (i) the phenomenal meaning; (ii) the meaning dependent on content; (iii) the intrinsic meaning (Panofsky 2012).

the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – qualified by one personality and condensed into one work” (Panofsky 1955: 30).

Here, the third level is the most interesting one. According to Panofsky “when we try to understand [*The last supper*] as a document of Leonardo’s personality, or of the civilization of the Italian High Renaissance, or of a peculiar religious attitude, we deal with the work of art as a symptom of something else” (Panofsky 1955: 31). To grasp this “something else”, and thus reach the iconological interpretation, requires, in neo-Kantian terms, a “synthetic intuition” into those essential principles which underlie the choice of artistic motifs, as well as the production of pictures. This synthetic intuition is inevitably conditioned by the psychology and by the *Weltanschauung* of the interpreter. The art historian, however, can grasp the *Weltanschauung* hidden in the work of art by means of the history of cultural symptoms, that is, the study of the way in which, in various periods, specific themes or concepts have expressed the essential tendencies of the human spirit (Panofsky 1955: 38-9). The “history of tradition” is the objective corrective that regulates the subjective elements of interpretation, that is, the cognitive faculties and knowledge of the interpreter (Panofsky 2012: 477). At all three levels, the interpreted artwork (O_1) is confronted with the horizon of tradition (T), which includes the history of styles, the history of types, and the history of cultural symptoms (or symbols). And all three levels of synthesis must work synchronously to ensure iconological understanding (Efal 2016: 93). Thus, the interpretation of an artwork O must be plausible against the background of T, which is in turn generated by the interpretations of the various O_1, O_2, O_3, O_4 , etc.

Panofsky is aware that the interpretation of the image starts from the worldview of the interpreter, but his methodology involves the rejection of (c). The art historian gains the *Weltanschauung* of a past era by identifying the entire set of symbolic values through (i) a meticulous study of the general cultural-historical context; (ii) a synthetic intuition.

4.2. Michael Baxandall

The second chapter of *Painting and experience in fifteenth century Italy* (Baxandall 1988), is devoted to what Baxandall calls the “period eye”. According to Baxandall, a distinction must be made between the image of an object formed on the retina of the human eye and the subsequent processing that takes place in the brain. If the ocular datum is the same for everyone, the brain’s interpretation of this datum depends on the individual cognitive style, which varies according to social environment and historical era (Baxandall 1988: 29-32). Baxandall’s entire work is marked by a desire to address two fundamental problems: (i) the relationship between words and pictures, (ii) the relationship between art and society. In an attempt to bring these seemingly incommensurable worlds (language and pictures, works of art and social life) closer together, Baxandall proposes to modify one of the two terms involved so that it can be compared with the other one. Social experience is thus transformed into a useful “cultural” tool for interpreting paintings (Thomas 2012: 169-70).

Let’s take an example. It was much easier for a person of the fifteenth century to distinguish certain details – or certain aesthetic properties (Sedivy 2018) – in a coeval painting, because the fifteenth-century eye was equipped with certain visual skills that had been formed from the social life of the time¹¹. A fifteenth-century person usually attended many sermons in public squares. One of the most famous preachers of the fifteenth century was Fra Roberto Caracciolo. He travelled around the cities of Italy delivering sermons and interpreting the Gospels. According to Fra Roberto, during the Annunciation the Virgin goes through five distinct stages, corresponding to five different states of mind. When the Angel Gabriel greets the Virgin, she is in the condition of *Conturbatio* (the first

¹¹ Baxandall is not the only art historian to embrace the idea that the perception of the world changes with time and that this is also reflected in artistic production. For example, Alois Riegl, in controversy with Gottfried Semper (2004), was convinced that the stylistic variations found throughout art history do not depend exclusively on technical variations, but rather on what he calls *Kunstwollen* (art-will). Riegl never provided a clear definition of this concept, first introduced in *Stilfragen* (Riegl 1992) and later taken up in *Late Roman art industry* (Riegl 1985). However, *Kunstwollen* can be defined as a kind of creative impulse that underlies all artistic manifestations of a given civilization in a given era. This art-will, which “regulates the relation between man and objects as we perceive them with our sense [...] is always determined by what may be termed the conception of the world at a given time (*Weltanschauung*)” (Riegl 1985: 231). The *Kunstwollen*, in essence, always depends on the *Weltanschauung* and acts on the perception and creation of artistic objects.

of the five stages), that is, the extreme astonishment at being greeted by an angel (Baxandall 1988: 48-51). So, a fifteenth-century person who had heard a sermon by Fra Roberto Caracciolo had no difficulty in recognizing the *Conturbatio* in Filippo Lippi's so-called *Martelli Annunciation*: "The preachers coached the public in the painters' repertory, and the painters responded within the current emotional categorization of the event" (Baxandall 1988: 55). This is how an element of a fifteenth-century person's social life is "culturalized" and converted into a visual skill employable in the reading of a painting.

However, how to recover the "period eye" of a past era? How to understand what visual skills fifteenth-century people employed in looking at pictures?

About the understanding of cultures chronologically distant from our own, Baxandall distinguishes the point of view of the participant from the point of view of the observer. The participant is one who, immersed in her culture, has an immediate and spontaneous relationship with it and acts on it without possessing a rational awareness of the norms and parameters that govern it. The observer, on the other hand, must distinguish and define those norms and parameters with the help of meagre and rigid schematizations. However, she has a perspective view, by means of which she can make comparisons that are impossible for the participant (Baxandall 1985: 109-10). Here Baxandall seems in line with Danto's "retroactive account", emphasizing the radical diversity of the past: "it is to be supposed that both Piero [della Francesca] and his customers perceived pictures and thought about pictures differently from us, in that their cultures equipped them with different visual experience and skill and different conceptual structures" (Baxandall 1985: 106). However, while at various times Baxandall shows some scepticism toward the possibility of fully gaining the participants' point of view (Baxandall 1980: 143), he proposes a way to recover at least some of their visual skills. Through the principles of the so-called inferential criticism – by which Baxandall describes the work of art, or any other historical artifact, as a finished and concrete solution to a problem (Baxandall 1985: 14-5) – the historian can grasp some aspects of the perception of a past era through the texts and written sources that belong to the artist's time and that testify about the social and cultural context of that era. Language, according to Baxandall, is the only living element that allows us to approach a culture so distant from our own (Baxandall 1985: 113-6). Baxandall proposes a less strong methodology of approaching the past than that of Panofsky. He is convinced that the art historian cannot reconstruct the personal intentions of a painter like Piero

della Francesca. What the inferential critic can do is reconstruct the “Brief” that led the artist to deliver the artwork as we see it today. There are constraints in the artists’ brief that must be met, and if they want to be understood and appreciated by their audience and patrons, they must be sure to meet the symbolic, pictorial, and cultural criteria of their own era and social group. In order to deceive the barriers of time and acquire the “period eye” of the fifteenth century, that is, to understand what experiences of a fifteenth-century person’s social life enter into the vision of a painting, Baxandall proposes a textual solution. With his “compromise account”, less ambitious than the Panofskyan one, Baxandall thus rejects (c): ancient words allow privileged access to at least one aspect of the past.

4.3. *Problems with the rejection of (c)*

Baxandall has not the presumption to describe the past in a better way than a participant. And in fact, he claims that the observer’s restitution is always partial and schematic. Moreover, reminding us how the purpose of inferential criticism is not about reconstructing the author’s intentions (despite the fact that the title of his book, *Patterns of intention*, might suggest otherwise), he seeks to avoid what has been famously called the “intentional fallacy”, that is, the (debated) belief that in order to interpret works of art, the very intentions of the artist must be deemed essential (Wimsatt, Beardsley 1946). Baxandall clearly claims his naïve position with respect to this debate (Baxandall 1985: vii), further claiming that “intention here is referred to pictures rather more than to painters. [...] it will be a construct descriptive of a relationship between a picture and its circumstances” (Baxandall 1985: 42). In this regard, Panofsky takes the opposite position, going even further. He is convinced that the art historian can bring to light not only what the artist consciously expressed, but also those symbolic values that the artist was often unaware of putting into pictures (Panofsky 1955: 31).

Despite all caution on the possibility of recovering the artist’s intentions and gaining the participant’s point of view, Baxandall’s solution does not consider the following: if there is a conceptual scheme – i.e., a period eye – that shapes the mental universe of an entire era, it will permeate not only the paintings, but also the coeval texts that testify about the social and cultural life of that era. Put this way, even the texts would therefore not provide privileged access to the past, since even these texts themselves would

in turn need an external access code (on these points, see also Di Monte 2005: 11-2). Similarly acts Panofsky. If the interpreter's synthetic intuition is tainted by his or her own *Weltanschauung*, how can historical sources from the past be the corrective for iconological interpretation? They too are shaped by a specific *Weltanschauung*, the same one that the interpreter is trying to bring out of the artwork. Again, as for Baxandall, the "documents bearing witness to the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation" (Panofsky 1955: 39) would not provide privileged access to the object of iconological investigation. They should be treated in the same way as pictures, and therefore there should be an additional external element that represents the key to access them. And so on *ad infinitum*.

5. Does it have any value rejecting (a)?

I have analyzed two positions that are at the antipodes. For those who reject (b), the history of artistic production can only be reconstructed anachronistically. For those who reject (c), anachronism can be avoided by recovering – completely for Panofsky, partially for Baxandall – the worldview of the artist's period. To deal with the paradox of anachronism I therefore suggest a third way, and thus I suggest rejecting (a), or rather, a variation of (a). Proposition (a) basically says that our worldview, that is, our system of belief, is different from that of the people who lived in the past. In general, rejecting (a) means to reject the fact that the worldviews of different historical eras are radically different. However, before coming to the conclusion, it will be necessary to slightly transform the paradox so that it is more picture-specific. Building on Baxandall, I think it may be useful to consider the visual experience of pictures. Therefore, to continue in this direction, specific tools of analysis are needed, which are not usually used when speaking in a general way about the mentality of another era.

5.1. Some arguments from the history of vision claim

Given that the common basis of anachronistic and non-anachronistic approaches to the past is that mentality changes from era to era, in this section I will consider the cognate argument of the so-called history of vision claim, that is, the idea that during different eras the way of perceiv-

ing the world changes. According to this idea, one of the tasks of art history should be to study how human vision has changed over the centuries, and thus how the way we perceive artworks has changed. Some scholars, such as Heinrich Wölfflin (1950) or Alois Riegl (1985), embrace this view. Others, such as Arthur Danto (2001), do not: according to him, vision does not have a history, but the interpretation of vision has a history (Nanay 2015: 260).

Here I will analyze Bence Nanay's approach. After summarizing the debate on the history of vision, Nanay (2015) clarifies two key points for his proposal, namely that: (i) in this debate, when we talk about vision we should mean the visual phenomenology; (ii) when we talk about the history of vision we should mean that visual perception changes from one era to the other in a specific context. Nanay (2015) goes on to argue that the visual phenomenology depends on visual attention and that it is visual attention that has a history. To show that visual attention changes throughout history, Nanay (2015) focuses on a particular type of attention, called twofold attention. It is inspired by Richard Wollheim's (1980, 1998) idea that the nature of pictorial experience is twofold. Looking at a picture, the observer is visually aware of the surface (configurational fold), and at the same time recognizes something emerging from that surface (recognitional fold). For Nanay (2015), it is thus a matter of showing that twofold attention has a history and that therefore there were periods when people did not attend this way and periods when they did. According to Nanay (2015), in the sixteenth century, observers were capable of twofold attention: the dense and tactile brushwork of the later Titian was appreciated by his contemporaries, and appreciation requires that observers simultaneously pay attention to the thing represented and how it is represented. But in the fifteenth century, for Nanay, people were not capable of twofold attention: pictorial *compositio* in Leon Battista Alberti's sense is only a matter of the depicted scene without any attention on the surface. So, attention, in the case of looking at pictures, does have a history.

Nanay offers some very interesting insights for our discussion, however, I would like to dwell on his demonstration that twofold attention has a history. He cautiously states that "we do not have any evidence that fifteenth-century Italians did not exercise twofold attention. But of course the absence of evidence is not an evidence of absence" (Nanay 2015: 268). Just within the text he cites as possible evidence that that kind of visual attention was not exercised in the fifteenth century, however, there are clear references to twofold attention. First, in the first book of *De pictura* (*On*

painting), Leon Battista Alberti argues: “A painting therefore will be the intersection of the visual pyramid according to a given distance after having set the center and established the lights, [an intersection] reproduced with art by means of lines and colors on the given surface” (Alberti 2011: 34). In the second book he claims that painting can be divided into three parts: drawing of profiles, composition, and the reception of light (Alberti 2011: 49-50). Then he writes about how the objects to be painted present themselves to the eye: “we realize that the multiple surfaces of a seen object correspond among themselves, and the artist will rightly summon these connections of the surfaces, in tracing them in the appropriate places, calling it composition” (Alberti 2011: 50). In the second book, Alberti also offers a more precise definition of *compositio* (composition): “Composition, however, is that procedure of depicting according to which the parts are arranged in a work of painting. A very great achievement of the painter is the *historia*; parts of the *historia* are the bodies, part of a body a member, part of a member the surface” (Alberti 2011: 53). And after that: “In drawing, therefore, the profiles of the greater surfaces, one needs to find a new procedure. On this subject, one must keep in mind all the things that first, within rudiments, have been said by us on the surfaces, on the rays, on the pyramid” (Alberti 2011: 53). *Compositio* is not, as Nanay argues, only a matter of the depicted scene without any attention on the pictorial surface, since Alberti, in attempting to suggest how to organize and depict the large surfaces of buildings (which fall under the concept of *compositio*) immediately refers to visual rays and the pyramid, and thus to the projection of an object on the pictorial surface. The visual attention here is twofold: as much on the painted scene as on the pictorial surface. If these passages from *De pictura* proved that even in the fifteenth century people were capable of twofold attention then Nanay’s argument would fall.

5.2. *One argument from the theories of depiction*

Nanay’s (2015) paper is illuminating insofar as it incorporates into the debate on the history of vision an argument inspired by Richard Wollheim’s theory on the nature of pictorial representation.

Since the objects of this study are artworks or, more generally, pictures of the past, I will also follow a similar strategy in an attempt to propose an alternative solution to the paradox of anachronism. In what fol-

lows, therefore, I will consider an argument from the theories of depiction¹².

Some scholars argue that when we talk about picture perception we should take into account not two (as Wollheim 1980 wanted), but three entities (Nanay 2017: 170)¹³. A pictorial representation is a threefold relation between: (i) the pictorial surface, (ii) the representing or depicting object (Husserl 2006) or the three-dimensional object visually encoded in the surface (Nanay 2017), i.e. what a picture shows, and (iii) the represented or depicted object, i.e. what a picture refers to (Cavazzana 2021: 149). What I am interested in here is the relationship between (ii) and (iii): as I see the subject in the painting, I represent the external object to which it refers to, which is not in front of my eyes. That is to say, I assign certain properties not to what I see in the painting (otherwise I would mistake the fictional object for the real thing), but to what it refers to.

5.3. *A new version of the paradox of anachronism*

Now, a new, more restrained, and focused version of the paradox of anachronism can be proposed. This version avoids incorporating generic expressions such as “visual experiences” or “mentality of an era”. In rewriting the paradox, one could have exploited the notion of visual attention by transforming statement (a) as follows: each historical era develops a different kind of visual attention in looking at pictures. But, in the case of twofold attention we have seen that it is not possible to determine with certainty whether people of the fifteenth century were capable of it or not. The new paradox will therefore take this form:

- a) Looking at an artwork or, in general, at a picture, each historical era assigns different properties to the represented object;
- b) in recovering these assigned properties, anachronism must be avoided;
- c) it is possible to recover these assigned properties only through the anachronism.

¹² For an overview on depiction theories, see Cavazzana 2025; Hyman, Bantinaki 2021.

¹³ In addition to Nanay 2017, also Husserl 2006, Mion 2019, and Wiesing 2010 support a threefoldness account. For a criticism, see Voltolini 2018.

According to (a), what changes historically is the ascription of properties to the represented object, that is, it changes how historically the observer represents that object. For example, in front of Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*, a 15th-century observer would assign certain properties to the walnut tree in the foreground, while a 21st-century observer would assign others.

5.4. *Sketching a solution*

But what properties are we talking about? For example, we can consider, among others, basic properties like action properties, that is, those properties related to the ability to manipulate and locate surrounding objects (Ferretti 2016).

My idea is that, looking at a painted walnut tree in a 15th-century painting, a 21st-century observer represents the actual walnut tree to which the painted one refers to by attributing to it specific action properties not too different from those that a 15th-century observer would have attributed to it. In this "weaker" sense we can say that our way to look at ancient paintings is quite similar to that of people in the past.

My proposal, then, is to reject (a). By rejecting (a), I deny that each era ascribes different properties (such as action properties) to the represented or depicted object.

According to Donald Davidson: "[t]he problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign [...] All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation" (Davidson 1973: 313). Following Davidson, we can therefore think that the interpretation of pictures from the past is a radical interpretation. The radical interpreter does not know the language of the speaker, but her first move must involve the so-called Davidsonian *Principle of charity* (Davidson 1967; 1974), i.e., the interpreter must attribute true and consistent beliefs to the speaker whenever it is permissible, since someone is much more likely to believe things she considers true than those she sees as false (Perissinotto 2002). Moreover, according to the *Principle of charity*, these beliefs cannot be too dissimilar from those of the interpreter since communication can only take place on the basis of a massive agreement between the two parties (Cavazzana 2022: 20).

So, applying the principle of charity, the modern interpreter can assume that she does not know what properties were assigned to the depicted object by past observers. Therefore, if the assigned properties are

unknown, the modern interpreter cannot be sure that they were completely different from her own. At this point, it is convenient to think that they were not too different (Di Monte 2005: 10-1).

We could think of the Principle of Charity as an agreement in principle between the artist and the modern observer, where the latter assumes to share with the artist a huge base of common beliefs (Cavazzana, Bolognesi 2020: 41). There could be no perfect correspondence between artist's and modern observer's beliefs, but the important thing is that they agree with most of them, for "without a vast common ground there is no place for disputants to have their quarrel" (Davidson 1977: 244-5).

Finally, when the modern interpreter analyzes a picture from the past, historical sources should certainly be approached by admitting a chronological distance, but to postulate that each historical era develops a different worldview – as Danto, Panofsky and Baxandall do, more or less radically – risks backfiring on the interpreter herself, as we have seen. In investigating the properties assigned to the depicted object it is convenient to admit a basic agreement between most beliefs of the past and the present, dwelling on what seem to be the most obvious discrepancies¹⁴.

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¹⁴ I would like to thank the two anonymous referees for their comments.

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