

PANOFSKY'S HUMOR
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In the immense literary legacy of Erwin Panofsky there is nothing quite like the two texts translated in this volume, with respect both to content and to form. And in their exceptionality they reveal an essential, if unexpected, aspect of Panofsky's sensibility, both personal and intellectual. As to content, these are the only two works in which Panofsky ventured into the domain of modern art—film and commercial design; the former in extenso, the latter en passant.¹ They both deal with basic aesthetic principles, in the first instance the "filmic" nature of the art of the motion picture, in the second the "English" nature of the art of the British Isles. And they both entail ironic inversions of what might be expected from a traditional historian of high intellect devoted to medieval and Renaissance art. In the first essay Panofsky takes seriously a frivolous theme: the artistic development of a new, egregiously popular and commercial technique; in the second essay he gives a frivolous spin to a kind of subject that Panofsky had seen become, especially in his own native country, deadly serious: the definition of the inherent character of a millennial national culture, the "genius" of a people.

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The article on film was published in three versions: initially in 1936 with the title "On Movies"; again the following year, slightly enlarged and with a new title, "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures"; and in the definitive version, extensively revised and expanded and with the word "Moving" in the title changed to "Motion," a decade later, when it was described as "one of the most significant introductions to the aesthetics of the motion picture yet to be written."² Reprinted at least 22 times heretofore, it is by far Panofsky's most popular work, perhaps the most popular essay in modern art history. This unexampled success is the more astonishing given the author's traditional training and otherwise almost exclusive preoccupation with traditional "high" art. In fact, the essay offers a rare, if not unique, instance in which a sensitive and informed "eye- (and later "ear-) witness" comments extensively on the evolution of a revolutionary new technical invention into a high art. Panofsky himself cites as a comparable

innovation in the history of human communication the development of print-making in the fifteenth century, but we have no comparable analysis of its nature and significance by a contemporary observer.³

Panofsky displays an amazing fund of knowledge—of plots, actors, directors, producers, filmic devices—which he obviously accumulated from an early age. He remembered the only Kino ("obscure and faintly disreputable") in all Berlin in 1905, when he was 13, and he saw the medium develop from its earliest infancy as a technical curiosity to a major international industry of great technical and artistic virtuosity. In this essay, therefore, the private-life experience of an avid movie-goer rises to the intellectual surface of a supremely articulate historian and theoretician of art. The circumstances of its origin are of great importance—not a formal presentation to a scholarly audience but a casual talk to a group of Princeton amateurs intent upon founding a film archive (ultimately one of the greatest in the world) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.⁴

Having moved permanently to the United States in 1933, and to Princeton in 1934, the occasion marked the rapport Panofsky had established with the distinctly public-spirited and WASPish social and cultural ambient then in the process of creating the portentous amalgam of European sophistication and American enthusiasm that would establish New York as a new world cultural center of modernism.⁵

The genial, peculiarly American context from which the essay arose is reflected in its original title, "On Movies." This distinctly colloquial American term contrasts with the more genteel "moving" or, better still, "motion" picture in English, and has no real counterpart in other languages.⁶ The original title expressed the two essential points of Panofsky's conception of the medium and its development, one social, the other aesthetic. Panofsky lays great stress at the outset on the fact that film was first and foremost a medium of popular entertainment, devoid of aesthetic pretention, which re-established the "dynamic contact between art production and art consumption" that is "sorely attenuated, if not entirely interrupted, in many other fields of artistic endeavor." "Movies" were a genuine "folk art," and if they rose to the level of high art they did so largely by never losing their common touch. This unpretentious social aspect of Panofsky's

definition of the film is the substantive counterpart of his choice of the colloquial name for the medium.

The second principle on which Panofsky's analysis is based corresponds to the aesthetic aspect of his title, movement. The essence of the medium lies in its having given movement to a representation of the real world, an observation which, as he admits, seems banal until he states and proceeds to develop his binary definition of the motion picture as the "dynamization of space" and the "spatialization of time." Although he does not say so explicitly, it is evident that this formulation suggesting an endemic interdependence of space and time, a sort of space-time continuum, owed much to the relativity theory of Einstein, who had been appointed to the Institute for Advanced Study in 1933, two years before Panofsky became his colleague. An important corollary is the integration into this matrix of sound, the spoken word being fatefully wedded to movement through the device of the close-up. Panofsky defines this sound-movement corollary of the space-time continuum as the "principle of coexpressibility." Much of the remainder of the essay is devoted to exploring the implications of these principles, including the dangers inherent in disregarding them, much like those attendant upon neglecting the roots of the medium in popular culture.

In the third, final version of the essay two complementary changes were introduced. The trace of colloquialism that remained in the second title was replaced by the purely formal "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," which focuses entirely on the relationship between the technical properties of film and its expressive qualities. In the text, the social characterization retains its place, with some changes of wording at the beginning, but it becomes a kind of prelude to the now greatly expanded section dealing with the nature of the medium itself. The personal chat on a modern form of entertainment was thus transformed into a proper theoretical essay on a form of modern art. Balance is restored, however, in the last paragraphs, which deal with two subjects that together form the crux of the matter: film's relation to society based on its commercial nature, and its relation to physical reality based on its technical nature. The requirement of communicability imposed by the first relationship and the requirement of realism imposed by the second, are the preconditions for style in this uniquely modern medium.

To call the film essay "proper" is rather misleading, however. The title and the content are more ambitious than in the original version, but perhaps the most important feature of the text remained undiminished: the whole argument, full of erudite references to old and new films as well as to works of traditional art, is presented with an impish charm and wit wholly in keeping with the popular nature of the subject as Panofsky conceived it. Panofsky moves between Betty Boop and Buster Keaton with the same breathtaking ease born of intimate knowledge as between Albrecht Dürer and the Gothic cathedral. The prose combines the urbanity and entertainment value one might expect from the *New Yorker* magazine, with the philosophical depth and methodological rigor one might expect from a German university professor. Even in its ultimate form, then, the essay hovers in a sort of genre-limbo somewhere between personal reminiscence, high journalism, formal art criticism, and professional art history. From any of these points of view it is a rogue, and it marks the birth of what can only be described as a new literary star—in English!

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While both the title and the content of the Rolls-Royce essay are remarkable, still more remarkable is the relationship between the two.⁷ Nowadays, one might expect from the title something in the nature of a sociological disquisition on the taste and luxury of the English upper class, but one would be disappointed on two accounts. The structure of English society is mentioned only incidentally, and the Rolls-Royce is mentioned only in the last, very brief paragraph. The body of the work is a bold attempt to define the basic principle that inhabits English art, as well as other aspects of English culture, from the beginning in the early middle ages through the nineteenth century. Panofsky finds in English art and in English culture generally an "antinomy of opposite principles" comprising, on the one hand, "a highly subjective emotionalism" that may even be described as "Romantic," and on the other "a severely formal rationalism." He relates this bipolarity—as an incidental analogy, not as a causative "explanation"—to the peculiar "fact that social and institutional life in England is more strictly controlled by tradition and convention, yet gives more scope to individual 'eccentricity' than anywhere else."

The fact that Panofsky engaged in this enterprise at all is profoundly rooted in his heritage of continental, especially German art history. Two major books, both by German scholars, had been devoted to the Englishness of English art, though curiously enough Panofsky does not refer to either of them: Dagobert Frey's *Englisches Wesen in der bildenden Kunst*, Stuttgart and Berlin, 1942 (496 pages), and Nikolaus Pevsner's *The Englishness of English Art*, New York, 1956 (208 pages). All three works reflect a long tradition of characterological study, both individual and national, traceable to the eighteenth century and beyond. The pursuit of what might be called an ethnic and geographical taxonomy of style in art was a special preoccupation of German scholars of that generation. England evidently presented a particular temptation for them, partly for substantive reasons—its insularity and the pronounced individuality of its artistic traditions—and partly no doubt also for its Anglo-Saxon "snob appeal." Despite wide differences in their approaches, moreover, all three studies have certain elements in common, methodologically and substantively. All three perceive and define the essential character of English culture in terms of opposing though occasionally amalgamated forces of subjectivity and objectivity, intuition and rationality, Romanticism and Classicism, naturalness and order, etc. All three relate this dichotomy to extra-artistic factors such as the character of Britain's society, geography and racial mix.⁸

Panofsky's essay differs in many ways from its predecessors, of course, among the most notable being its brevity. To be sure, it was presented in the form of a lecture, at the American Philosophical Society, America's oldest and most sedate scientific society. But the vast cultural panorama Panofsky evokes in a series of miraculously encapsulated surveys of English eighteenth-century gardens and architecture, medieval miniature painting, architecture and literary sources, is an essential factor in the persuasiveness of his argument. The brilliant concatenation of ideas, illustrations and texts presented in epigrammatic formulations carries the bedazzled reader with dizzying speed to an abrupt halt before the concluding paragraph. At this point the Rolls-Royce radiator appears, with its severely classical Greek temple-front grille improbably surmounted by the curvaceous Romantic windblown "Silver Lady" alias the Victory of Samothrace—the very incongruity of this design becomes the inevitable epitome, the trademark par excellence, of everything it means to be English. Perhaps the most enchanting

aspect of the essay, in fact, is precisely that the climax of an utterly serious and penetrating analysis of a major European culture is, to use Panofsky's favorite word for things ironic but profound, "amusing."

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The lapidary style and especially the potent dose of humor in a normally solemn academic and scholarly context, are vintage Panofsky—Panofsky in his American phase, it should be noted, for neither of these things can be said of his earlier work in German.⁹ As to the first point, Panofsky himself described the transformation toward economy of thought and expression that the adjustment to the English language used in his adopted country entailed.¹⁰ What he did not mention is an equally profound transformation of his academic persona. Panofsky's wit had always been irrepressible and legendary, from cradle to grave, as it were; witness the immortal epitaph which he said appeared to him in a dream after spending an afternoon with his granddaughter:

He hated babies, gardening, and birds;
But loved a few adults, all dogs, and words.¹¹

I speak here of the infusion of this personal quality into the koine of scholarly discourse. The charm and humor that abound in almost everything he wrote in English were a product of his Americanization. They were his own invention, however, for they were no more characteristic of previous American scholarship in art history than they were of European. And they brought a breath of fresh air to academe, both here and abroad.

ENDNOTES

1. A minor and inadvertent instance, often misinterpreted as signifying a lack of sympathy for modern art on Panofsky's part, was a letter to the editor of *Art News*, never intended for publication, in which he corrected what turned out to be an editorial error in an illustration caption giving the Latin title of a painting by Barnett Newman (*Art News*, LX, 1961, No. 2, p. 6; in the ensuing exchange, No. 3, p. 6, No. 5, p. 6, Newman was clandestinely assisted by Meyer Schapiro, as Mrs. Newman told me and Schapiro confirmed a decade ago). I called this episode to the attention of K. Michels (and introduced her to Meyer Schapiro), who subsequently reported it without due acknowledgement; see n. 10 below.
2. "On Movies," in *Bulletin of the Department of Art and Archaeology of Princeton University*, June, 1936 (the date is mistakenly given as 1934 in some sources), 5-15; "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures," in *Transition*, XXVI, 1937, 121-33, and in D. L. Durling, *A Preface to Our Day*, New York, 1940, 57-82; "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" in *Critique. A Review of Contemporary Art*, I, 1947, 5-28 (the evaluation I quote is from the editors' preliminary note). I rely for bibliographical information on H. Oberer and E. Verheyen, *Erwin Panofsky. Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, Berlin, 1974 (copy with addenda by Gerda Panofsky through 1992 in the library of the Institute for Advanced Study).
3. Perhaps the nearest analogy is the twelfth-century Abbot Suger's commentary on the new Gothic architecture at St.-Denis, a work of which Panofsky had published his celebrated edition (*Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures*, Princeton, 1946) the year before he revised the movie essay. The connection is not as far-fetched as it may seem and, curiously enough, the link may have been the *New Yorker* magazine. In his memorial, reprinted in this volume, William Heckscher has pointed to the *New Yorker* profile as an inspiration for Panofsky's biographical essay on Suger (see p. 113 below), and Panofsky himself makes reference to the *New Yorker* in his study of the film (see p. 27 below).
4. As noted by D. Talbot, ed., *Film. An Anthology*, New York, 1959, 15. Margaret Barr, wife of Alfred H. Barr, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, was a student in Panofsky's first seminar in America (see the commemoration by Millard Meiss in *A Commemorative Gathering for Erwin Panofsky at the Institute of Fine Arts New York University in Association with the Institute for Advanced Study*, New York, 168, 9), and they remained life-long friends. Heckscher (below, p. 116) provides some personal reminiscences of Panofsky on the movies, including his delight during 1946-47 in giving the talk (evidently the newly revised version), followed by a showing of a silent film like Buster Keaton's *The Navigator* with comic commentary.
5. Panofsky recounted the facts and repercussions of his move to America in his "Three Decades of Art History in the United States. Impressions of a Transplanted European," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City, N. Y., 1955, 321-46.

6. The popular German coinage "Kino" refers to the theater, not the film itself; the equally colloquial English "flick," refers to the effect of light, rather than of movement, which was Panofsky's primary concern.
7. "On the Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, CVII, 1963, 273-88.
8. On this last point, it is interesting to note that Pevsner (p. 9) praises Frey's book as being "absolutely free" from any "Nazi bias"; but by the time his book was published Frey had participated in the plundering of the Royal Castle at Warsaw. See J. Lileyko, *A Companion Guide to the Royal Castle in Warsaw*, Warsaw, 1980, 84; further, H. Dilly, *Deutsche Kunsthistoriker 1933-1945*, Munich and Berlin, 1988, 73.
9. It is certainly "amusing" in the Panofskian sense that the one explicitly humorous work in German is one of his few publications (all memoirs of former friends and colleagues) in German after he emigrated, in a *Festschrift* devoted to his beloved teacher Adolph Goldschmidt, entitled "Goldschmidts Humor" (*Adolph Goldschmidt zum Gedächtnis. 1863-1944*, Hamburg, 1963, 25-32). The early essay "Sokrates in Hamburg oder Vom Schönen und Guten," hardly counts in this respect since it was published under the pseudonym A. F. Synkop, in a literary, not a scholarly journal (*Querschnitt*, XI, 1931, 593-99; reprinted in *Idea. Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle*, I, 1982, 9-15).
10. See his "Three Decades," cited in n. 5 above. The transformation of Panofsky's prose has been perceptively discussed by K. Michels, "Bemerkungen zu Panofskys Sprache," to appear in the acts of the Erwin Panofsky-Symposium Hamburg 1992.
11. Hugo Buchthal conveyed the warmth and generosity of Panofsky as a teacher in Hamburg, in *A Commemorative Gathering for Erwin Panofsky at the Institute of Fine Arts New York University in Association with the Institute for Advanced Study, New York*, 1968, 11-14; the epitaph was reported by Harry Bober in the same publication, p. 20. Panofsky's personal qualities, as well as his intellectual gifts, are stressed in every memorial of him (for a list see H. van de Waal, "In Memoriam. Erwin Panofsky. March 30, 1892-March 14, 1968," *Mededelingen der koninklijke nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde*, XXXV, 1972, 227-44, cf. pp. 242-44).