

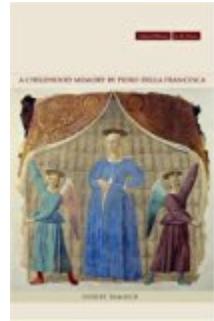
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hubert Damisch. *A Childhood Memory by Piero della Francesca.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007. xi + 113 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-3441-7; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-3442-4.

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Creation Myths: Childhood and Art History

Hubert Damisch is among the few authors whose books both transform our understanding of the specific work at hand and also intervene critically in the history of art by excavating the traditional ground on which the discipline has been erected. Biography and psychobiography are targets of his critique in this incredibly smart book, which revolves around the *Madonna del Parto* (c. 1460) that Piero painted in Monterchi near his birthplace of Borgo San Sepolcro. The fresco is both the focus of analysis, and it also thematizes the author's process of exposing and unraveling the discipline's entanglements with authorship and intentions. In the image, two angels hold the flaps of a fabric pavilion over their heads that they have apparently parted to reveal the Virgin, a process that echoes the slit where her dress has opened over her swollen belly. She points at this opening, an indexical gesture that is unusual, as Damisch reminds us repeatedly. It functions, like the vanishing point in perspective, as a point of origin; the Virgin's womb is a metaphor for both the generation of the work of art and the structure of artistic creation.

The analogy between procreation and artistic production was a commonplace in Renaissance art theory, but it is taken up here through the *topos* of the artist who fails to give birth to his work. This is the fate of Piero and Leonardo da Vinci according to both Giorgio Vasari, the famous author of *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1568), and Sigmund Freud. The famous analysis of the latter, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His*

Childhood (1910), is both a departure point for Damisch and also a kind of anamorphic mirror through which to view the structure of art history. Freud attributes Leonardo's failure to complete his work to his homosexuality, a characterization he bases on a reference to a childhood dream of an erotic oral encounter with a vulture. That the anecdote is mistranslated and a commonplace is one thing; but for Damisch, Freud's investment in Leonardo's story, like the anecdotes that fill Vasari's *Lives*, demonstrates how fables about artists not only become sedimented in art history but also determine interpretation. By taking up the *Madonna del Parto* within Freud's construct of childhood memory, Damisch is able to show how both psychoanalysis and the biographical project of art history fail. Both are circular: like Freud's reconstruction of Leonardo's life on the basis of a childhood memory, Vasari's fables are used as evidence by art historians to understand an artist's life and to interpret his or her oeuvre. Stories about a person's childhood supposedly provide insights into the intentions of the artist, even though these memories are anecdotal, and often fictions, a situation magnified by the lack of any evidence about Piero's early years. Moreover, art historians who follow the biographical trail tend to treat pictures as mere historical documents, as objects made by an artist under certain conditions (for a patron, on a theme, at a site, on a date). Those pictures are often assessed as if texts that tell us about the mind of the artist instead of considering them as visual artifacts that make demands of viewers, as objects that require us to look in specific ways. Art

historians, Damisch implies, often look askance: at texts and documents instead of at images.

The pairing of Leonardo and Piero comes from Vasari who fostered the idea that neither was raised by a father. This is one of his fables, at least for Piero, as Damisch points out, since there is no evidence that his father died before he was born, and some evidence to the contrary. Piero's *Madonna* is thus doubly resonant: painted upon his return to his childhood home after his mother's death, she symbolizes the maternal body. Second, the Virgin's conception of Christ signifies the absent father and also the impossibility of knowledge about him. For Vasari, the missing father becomes a way to explain the failure of both Leonardo and Piero to complete artworks. The *Madonna dell'Parto* thus both stands for, and also allegorizes, the discipline's methodological tendency to ascribe meaning to biography.

These connections, drawn out in the first two chapters, are expanded in the third, where Damisch makes it clear that what is at stake in the book is the writing of history: the relation between childhood memories and the adult, between origins and the nation, between past and present. Genealogy is central here, as is Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action, reconstruction, afterwards-ness), the later revival of an earlier, usually traumatic episode, such as the death of Piero's mother, but also, more generally, in the ways that sources like Vasari are used to construct history. Indeed, although Damisch is critical of psychoanalysis (of a particular kind), the argument of the book, as already noted, is refracted through Freud. Damisch repeats that he is not *applying* psychoanalysis, as if responding to those who would reduce his text to one that *uses* this as a method to interpret the past. Instead, working against the more predictable tendency by art historians to discard work deemed to be theoretical, Damisch uses Freud in complex ways: to call attention to the risks, on one level, of harnessing biography to interpretation in art history, while drawing on the theoretical implications of his method on another. As Damisch reminds us at the end of the book, Freud's method was not to *interpret* one story on the basis of "isolated elements or traits" (p. 87); instead, he sought out the connections between two stories in order to *construct* how they communicate. For pictures, this means that images painted by Piero cannot be understood on the basis of his childhood any more than his mind can be interpreted from reading images that he painted. Instead of interpreting Piero on the basis of Vasari's stories, then, we ought to read his fables as symptoms, as "certain traits that might have played a role in the genesis of the said

fables" (p. 41). The construction of those stories is evidence, therefore, of a cultural interest in childhood and its connection to the production of art. Hence, Damisch's analogy between Freud's famous question, "where do babies come from?", and the art historical one, "where do works of art come from?" (p. 40), is not merely rhetorical, but historical. And both questions are entangled, as Damisch shows, with interests in creation, conception, childbearing, and legitimacy among the contemporaries of Piero and Leonardo.

As evidence of the historical investment in both questions, about the generation of babies and works of art, the author cites the ubiquity of texts and images about childbirth, such as the numerous images of the Visitation and the Nativity, and the importance of naming children, particularly boys. Renaissance art historians, however, have tended to conflate the two questions, thereby harnessing the production of art to the person, as evidenced in the discipline's traditional preoccupations with authorship, provenance, and the biographical monograph. Instead, Damisch argues for a different kind of history, one that abandons interpreting authorial intentions of the artist in favor of delineating how that identity is constructed by the work. This strategy is brought forward by how Damisch positions himself in relation to his own work of writing: the title of the book is "not *of* but *by* Piero della Francesca" (p. 1), and the chapters are not titled; we should not read the book as Damisch's baby, in other words, but as an opening (a series of interconnected parts that open into each other, to other texts, between those texts and the reader, etc.). We need not abandon the name of the artist, which provides the "proofs or indices, the traces of an activity, the outline of a role" (p. 32); however, instead of the artist as the object of analysis, and the art historian as the analyst, Damisch is interested in the "operation of painting" (p. 75), in how painting is always open to something that can never be settled, an idea that suggests the range of ways his project opens up, instead of closes down, a dialogue with the past.

This is explicit in the following chapters, which each probe the fresco through a different lens. Chapter 4 turns more directly to the historiography of the work, to religious history and to Marian theology. The claim of iconography, that the "true meaning" of the work can be discovered by identifying the right text, is the focus of the author's critique here, as the pointed example of one art historian makes clear who "flatters himself that he has uncovered the 'true meaning' of the *Madonna del Parto* (as if the 'meaning' of art were a matter of true or false)" (pp. 45-46). The author's penetrating visual

analysis and scholarship demonstrate how iconography neglects the differences between images and texts. This is also a lesson taken from Freud's distinction between interpretation and construction noted above. By interpreting an image on the basis of a text instead of constructing the connections between them, the iconographer overlooks the process of communication between the visual image and the observer. Instead of yoking the *Madonna del Parto* to a text, Damisch redirects our focus to the work's visual strategies, its ambivalences, its original site, and a context of images within which, and to which, he opens up the picture.

Chapter 5 turns to perspective and anthropology in order to explore the earlier suggestion that we consider the Virgin's womb in relation to the vanishing point and origins. The parting of her dress prompts the maternal body/work of art analogy to be conjoined with a series of mechanisms for generating art, from the perspectival window, to a First Nations' Kwakiutl [Kwakwaka'wakw] transformation mask, to Alberti's veil. Here the target of Damisch's critique is the divide between science and art.

The last chapter turns to the unconscious and to the ambiguity of the fresco: it is unclear if the angels are opening the flaps of the pavilion or closing them, a kind of suspension that characterizes works of art more broadly as concerned with openings. The point here is not only how the work is framed, but "how the definition of the picture must constantly reference its initial delimitation" (p. 75). That is, the image is always in the act of doing something, and thus, the viewer always held in an imaginary relation to it, one staged by the *Madonna del Parto* who "gives her *self* to vision" (p. 80). The assertion is that there is always a structural relation to an earlier form of which this image is a transformation, and that we too have a structural relation to the work through the mother and our unconscious: the way in which the painting posits us as subjects. And that subject position is in relation to "an archaic past" (p. 90) onto which the work is an opening. Against biography and interpretation, then, we should be attentive to how the subject is generated by the work, and to how the work of art performs its own operation.

Although short in length, this is a complex and self-aware book that unfolds in myriad ways and on many levels. For Renaissance and early modern historians of childhood, the text brings forward the pivotal role of conception and childbirth: it is a theme, even a point of ori-

gin, that generates an overlapping visual, religious, and social culture in the period. If historians of childhood are accustomed to looking at images of childbearing and childbirth as reflections of a culture with an investment in children—as a straightforward relation between the signifier and the signified—this book will challenge readers to think about how those images constitute that investment through the meanings opened up by pictures. Piero's *Madonna del Parto* does not only illustrate the Virgin's conception of Christ and gesture toward the historical importance of children, it also thematizes creation, propelling the past into the present in ways, as stated earlier, that can never be settled.

Above all, the book is a critique of art history, particularly of a Renaissance kind, and although the lessons are familiar to some, I would urge everyone in the discipline to read it. It will also irritate many readers, not only for its trenchant criticisms, but also for its theoretical complexity, structuralism, and psychoanalysis. The book is an homage to Freud, somewhat less "parodic" than asserted, and read, in part, through Jacques Lacan. To cite the author's erudition would be an understatement, but the text and endnotes are worth reading for this alone. The book is also important as a demonstration—and this is the case in all Damisch's books with which I am familiar—of how we need to be attentive to the work that images do, and to how they constitute us as beholders.

Translating Damisch cannot be easy; as in his earlier *The Origin of Perspective* (1994, which this reader found easier to follow in the French, *L'origine de la perspective*, 1987), many words are multivalent and metaphorical, such as "operation," and these do not all translate well. Some may find the poetic character of his writing challenging, since the trajectory of his text is not straight; instead it opens up, as if encountering Russian dolls that have neither a beginning nor an end. Sometimes sentences are missing a subject or a verb. Nevertheless, Goodman's translation is impressive, since the text is both clear and yet also maintains Damisch's style. He can be sarcastic in his criticisms, as the example cited earlier shows, but also very funny, pointing out problems of interpretation. For example, he refers to Aby Warburg's "torture" of works of art, which is a reference to the earlier scholar's effort to make paintings speak. This is a book, to be sure, for art historians. Part of its brilliance lies in what it suggests not only about method, but also about how we write, and why history matters.

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