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Table of Contents

Bernardino Branca and Fabio Tononi
Edgar Wind's 'Intellectual Tragedy'
pp. 1-2

Jaynie Anderson
Memories of Edgar Wind
pp. 3-11

Peter Burke
Remembering Edgar Wind
pp. 12-17

Oswyn Murray
Reflections on Edgar Wind
pp. 18-25

Erminald Bertel
Death in the Garden of Venus: Remarks about Botticelli's Mythological Paintings
pp. 26-42

Remembering Edgar Wind[1]

Peter Burke

Abstract

This article offers reminiscences of Edgar Wind from the period 1957–62. These memories are followed by an attempt to view his work in context or, more precisely, in two possible contexts. First, I follow the fortune of one of Wind's favourite concepts, embodiment. Second, I discuss the reception of Wind's ideas as an example of the distinctive contribution of exiles caught up in the 'Great Exodus' of the 1930s to the humanities and social sciences.

Keywords

Art; Embodiment; Exiles; History; Iconography

When I arrived in Oxford in Michaelmas Term 1957, Edgar Wind, Oxford's first professor of art history, had spent two years in his chair; he would continue in the position for ten more years. He was a significant presence in my life. I listened to his lectures, participated in his seminars and, finally, was a research student who sought his advice.

Wind's lectures were certainly a phenomenon. Although no formal course in art history was yet available, everyone went, whatever they were studying or teaching – mathematics, philosophy, history or literature… My first reminiscence concerns his series of lectures on Leonardo – the last lectures, if I remember rightly, that were held in the Old Schools. Even this huge lecture room proved to be too small to hold all the listeners and so, in later years, Wind was moved to the Playhouse, where he gave one series on Raphael and the Vatican apartments and another on what he called 'muted humanism' in Venetian art. Even the Playhouse eventually proved to be too small for the audience, and Wind ended up giving the same lecture twice a week.

The most appropriate setting for these lectures was of course the Playhouse. I am not suggesting that Wind's style was histrionic, like that of some other famous lecturers at Oxford in those days, notably Isaiah Berlin and A. J. P. Taylor. Berlin spoke rapidly and

[1] This article originated as an informal talk delivered at the launch of *Edgar Wind: Art and Embodiment* at Trinity College, Oxford, in April 2024. My thanks to Jaynie Anderson for inviting me to speak on that occasion.

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dramatically in a deep voice with a strong Russian accent, presenting intellectual conflicts from the point of view of different participants, thus making it difficult for his listeners to write anything down (which was perhaps his intention). Taylor spoke in various voices, moving from the rhetoric of denunciation to a stage whisper that offered the illusion that he was taking the audience into his confidence. Like Wind, Taylor spoke without notes but did so, being Taylor, in a more demonstrative fashion, keeping his hands in his pockets while he spoke.

Unlike these two orators, Wind had a conversational style, exemplifying the art that conceals art – in other words, the *sprezzatura* that was valued so highly in Renaissance Italy. Yet he too was (as William Heckscher once remarked), a 'magician'; other listeners spoke of the lectures as 'mesmerizing' and one even of being 'hypnotized' by the speaker.[2] I remember thinking of Wind as a kind of conjurer. Memories are notoriously unreliable, especially if they go back more than sixty years, as in this case, but I retain the vivid impression that whenever Wind offered us a new or paradoxical idea, his eyes would twinkle through or over his gold-rimmed spectacles as if he had just pulled a rabbit out of his hat. Indeed, in a sense this was exactly what he had done, presenting a whole succession of rabbits, of new and provocative ideas. The 'mischievous' side of Wind, mentioned in *Art and Embodiment*, became clear when he so clearly enjoyed telling us that the Victorians had got Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* the wrong way round since it was the naked woman who represented the sacred and not, as the Victorians assumed, the one with her clothes on.[3]

Thinking now of the content of the lectures, what impressed the audience most, so I believe now, was the novelty of the lecturer's approach to art history. At this time, the British generally regarded art history as the history of styles, but now we were told that it was also the history of meanings, revealed by the patient description of details and supported by the evidence of texts, whether classical, medieval or Renaissance. In this respect, Wind's range of references was formidable. For example, I have never forgotten his discussion of a painting of the Virgin Mary by Leonardo, with an aqueduct in the background. The obvious question is what this aqueduct is doing in a religious painting. The fact that Leonardo was, among other things, an engineer is relevant but also insufficient to explain the aqueduct's presence. The solution to the problem, so Wind told us, was that St Bernard had compared Mary to an aqueduct because she was the mediatrix of all graces, a kind of conduit leading from the Almighty to us sinners down below.

I was so much impressed by Wind's lectures that when, like Oswyn Murray, I was awarded a college prize, I too asked for a copy of *Pagan Mysteries*, which had just been published (in 1958). I still have that copy, complete with the college arms emblazoned on the binding. I owe this study a lasting debt for introducing me to one idea in particular,

[2] Quoted in Bernardino Branca, *Edgar Wind, filosofo delle immagini* (Mimesis, 2019), pp. 156, 160, 179.
[3] Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 122.

which was shared by Wind's master, Aby Warburg, and Warburg's master, August Schmarsow. It is that the Renaissance offers many examples of cultural 'hybridization' – between the medieval and the classical and the sacred and the profane – as well as the Christianising of the classical and the classicizing of the Christian. For example, Wind noted that Botticelli's Venuses are difficult to distinguish from his Madonnas.[4]

I turn now to Wind's seminars. The one in which I participated focused on the Renaissance medal. Unlike in the crowded Playhouse, there were only a dozen or so of us at the seminar, seated around a table in the Ashmolean Museum. Wind began by telling us not to trust photographs, which, he said, are mere 'shadows'. To appreciate medals properly, he added, they had to be viewed as they were viewed at the time they were made, held on the palm at the right distance from the eyes. At this point – to our surprise – he passed a few examples round the table! This was possible because the seminar was held inside the museum.

Having met Wind in this way, I was emboldened to ask his advice about a paper that I had volunteered to give at another seminar, organized by Hugh Trevor-Roper. My topic was the Italian baroque. Wind's advice – his mischievous side appearing once again – was to recommend an essay by Jonathan Swift on 'the mechanical operation of the spirit'. From this, I drew the conclusion that Wind disliked baroque art, which he thought histrionic. He surely preferred the understatements of Reynolds and Gainsborough to the drama of Caravaggio or Bernini.

More positively, Wind asked me what I was studying, and on hearing that my D.Phil. dissertation was concerned with the history of historical writing in the seventeenth century, he suggested that I look at the frontispieces of works of history published in that period and decode their meaning. I began collecting examples, at a time when the Bodleian still allowed pages from rare books to be xeroxed, but I never published anything about the topic. The gap was eventually filled, decades later, by a German scholar.[5]

At this point, I should like to make two suggestions about possible contexts in which to view Wind's oeuvre. In the first place, I was very glad to learn from the volume launched here of the importance that the idea of embodiment (or *Verkörperung*, the term that he used in his German phase) held for him. I must confess that I had had no idea that Wind was an admirer of the American philosopher (or, more exactly, polymath) Charles Peirce.[6] The history of the idea of embodiment in the 20th century is intriguing and surely deserves to be studied in a general way. After Wind, the next milestone in this concept's career – at least the next known to me – was its adoption by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose concept of *corporéité* is expounded in *La phénoménologie de la perception*, published in 1945. A

[4] Peter Burke, *Hybrid Renaissance* (Central University Press, 2016); Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, p. 29.

[5] Marion Kintzinger, *Chronos und Historia* (Harrassowitz, 1995).

[6] Fabio Tononi and Bernardino Branca, 'Edgar Wind: Art and Embodiment', *Edgar Wind Journal* 2 (2022), pp. 1–8.

short step then takes us to Gilbert Ryle's *Concept of Mind* (1949), in which the author mocked Descartes' idea of a split between mind and body as the doctrine of 'the ghost in the machine'. In his Oxford years, Wind became acquainted with Ryle. A longer step takes us to 1972, to Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of practice. Bourdieu, who studied philosophy before turning to anthropology and sociology, was an admirer of Merleau-Ponty. His favourite concept for discussing embodiment was that of *habitus*, which goes back to Aristotle's idea of *hexis* but which, so he once told me, Bourdieu derived from Panofsky (more specifically, from the essay 'Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism', which he translated into French).[7] One further step takes us to the Chilean neuroscientist Francisco Varela, whose study of the embodied mind, written with two colleagues, was published in 1991.[8]

Inspired by these examples, I should like to reflect for a moment on the emotional as well as the intellectual power of art, its impact on our bodies or, as Wind wrote, the 'vibration' of symbols. An extreme case of this impact was on the famous connoisseur Bernard Berenson, who fell into 'ecstasy' (his term) before some works of art, and when viewing the *Surrender of Breda*, wrote that his eyes 'sank' into the painting and that he almost 'disappeared into it'. When asked to justify his sometimes controversial attributions of paintings to particular artists, Berenson would refer to his feelings: for example, viewing a painting of St Sebastian, he said, 'I felt that it could not be other than Antonello'.[9] Some recent important discussions of the effect of art on the viewer include the British anthropologist Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*, which presents the image as 'a mirror, vehicle or channel of agency', and the theory of the *Bildakt* put forward by Hans Bredekamp.[10]

The second of the two contexts for Wind's years in England that I should like to discuss here is the history of exiles. I am not an art historian but a plain general or cultural historian who has been working for some decades now on the history of knowledge or, more exactly, the history of 'cultures of knowledge', a relatively new phrase that is used in the title of an interdisciplinary, collective research project located in the History Faculty at Oxford.[11]

In one study, I investigated the distinctive contribution of exiles to knowledge in the humanities – in other words, the link between their displacement from one culture to another and their later contributions to the humanities and social sciences (I am not sure whether the achievements of natural scientists are linked to the experience of exile in this

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Seuil, 2000).

[8] Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *Embodied Mind* (MIT Press, 1991).

[9] Quoted in Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Legend* (Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 38.

[10] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 17–20; Horst Bredekamp, *Bildakt und Verkörperung* (Wagenbach, 2008); Sabine Marienberg and Jürgen Trabant (eds), *Bildakt at the Warburg Institute* (De Gruyter, 2014), p. 23; Marion Luschke and Pablo Schneider (eds), *Manifeste zu Bildakt und Verkörperung* (De Gruyter, 2018).

[11] http://www.culturesofknowledge.org

way).[12] Take the example of the 'Great Exodus' of scholars from Central Europe in the 1930s, following Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the annexation of Austria. The scholars who arrived in Britain at this time became particularly influential in two disciplines, sociology and art history. Both disciplines were new and small in Britain but had developed earlier and become much larger in Germany and Austria. This situation allowed exiles such as Wind to punch above their weight, along with fellow Warburgians such as Rudolf Wittkower and Ernst Gombrich, not to mention other exiles such as the Hungarian Marxist Frederick Antal, who influenced both John Berger and Anthony Blunt (who with characteristic discretion described what he learned from Antal as 'method' – a code word for 'Marxism').[13] Luckily for some of the exiles, their search for employment in their new home took place at a time when the demand for art historians (and, to a lesser extent, sociologists) was growing in Britain.

The obvious strategy for exiles to adopt in this situation was to act as mediators between the scholarly culture of their homeland and that of their 'hostland', to use the term that is now established in the field that has become known as exile studies. Like Erwin Panofsky in the United States, Wind, Wittkower, Gombrich and others introduced iconography and, more generally, *Kulturwissenschaft* into Britain. They concentrated on the Italian Renaissance but on occasion wrote about English culture from an unfamiliar angle, as when Wind tackled the heroic portrait. Again, surely only a foreigner would have thought of giving lectures, as Nikolaus Pevsner did, on the 'Englishness of English art'![14]

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[13] Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450–1600* (Oxford University Press, 1940), preface.

[14] Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (Architectural Press, 1956).

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