

*“A Primitive Kind of Superstition”:
The Idea of the Paranoid Style in Art,
Psychiatry, and Politics*

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Commenting on Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, Sigmund Freud observed that in publicizing the religious and apocalyptic visions he had experienced during his psychiatric ordeal, Schreber was acting “much as we are told that the prophets were.”¹ This extraordinary statement—which found confirmation in Schreber’s claim that his only goal in publishing his book was to “further knowledge of truth in a vital field, that of religion”²—draws our attention to the ambivalent role modern psychiatry assigned religious experiences. If the apocalyptic experience was a mental state common to the paranoid and the prophet, the psychology of religion and psychopathology were not simply comparable phenomena but were potentially one and the same.³ If so, paranoia was nothing but religion

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¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Schreber Case*, trans. Andrew Webber (London: Imago, 1943), 9.

² Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903; New York: NYRB, 2004), 7.

³ August Wetzel, “Das Weltuntergangserlebnis in der Schizophrenie,” *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie* 78 (1922): 403–28. See also François Tosquelles,

in statu nascendi and Schreber's memoir another book of revelation.⁴ The implications were far-reaching and potentially devastating: parsing the New Testament for symptoms, some early twentieth-century studies suggested that early Christians suffered from schizophrenia. Such claims were sufficiently disturbing to bring Albert Schweitzer to offer a refutation as a theologian and a doctor.⁵ Yet, such comparisons encountered less resistance when applied to paganism. Like the shamans of primitive societies living in a world of spirits, the paranoid supposedly took their "subjective fantasies" for reality.⁶ Primitive religion soon became a testing ground for hypotheses about schizophrenia. Alfred Storch, a psychiatrist from Tübingen saw paranoia as a regression toward an archaic stratum of the self which found in the *Weltuntergangserlebnis* (apocalyptic or end-of-the-world experience) its basic structure of experience: for the paranoid and the primitive alike, the world did not consist in "objective relations between things" but was constantly at risk of dissolving into their "occult connections."⁷

The triptych formed by paranoia, apocalyptic experience, and primitive religion has proven to be a resilient trope of cultural and political analysis. It rests on the idea that there is an affinity between a specific psychological condition, a vision of time and history, and archaic beliefs, and that this affinity manifests itself in a certain set of expressive characteristics—in other words, a style. But the irrational and absolutist nature of the disposition this style captures also suggests it has distinctive political implications, in particular an affinity with authoritarian tendencies. All these assumptions converged into what remains the best-known formulation of this idea: Richard Hofstadter's notion of "paranoid style."

With the recent reedition of Hofstadter's work in the prestigious Library of America collection, the notion of "paranoid style" has been presented as an indispensable contribution to our understanding of contemporary politics. Is it? Hofstadter's trademark term obfuscated older linkages between paranoia, style, and politics, not all of which aligned with his own agenda.

Le vécu de la fin du monde dans la folie: Le témoignage de Gérard de Nerval (Grenoble: Millon, 2012); Ernesto De Martino, *La fine del mondo: Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (Torino: Einaudi, 2019).

⁴ Georges Dumas, *Le surnaturel et les dieux d'après les maladies mentales (Essai de théogénie pathologique)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946).

⁵ Albert Schweitzer, *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus: Exposition and Criticism* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1963).

⁶ Eugenio Tanzi and Gaetano Riva, "La paranoia: Contributo alla teoria delle degenerazioni psichiche," *Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria* 133, no. 3 (1886): 107–8.

⁷ Alfred Storch, "Über das archaische Denken in der Schizophrenie," *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie* 78 (1922): 501.

While the idea of paranoid style has been widely associated with totalitarian attitudes, the Nazis too had mobilized a heuristic of style and paranoia in implementing their eugenic policies. While this may seem quite remote from Hofstadter's project, which indeed stigmatized political enemies on the right, these antecedents cannot be ignored—in fact, they were not.

Hofstadter acknowledged that the notion of paranoid style contained some unresolved tensions.⁸ I suggest that these tensions had to do with the various intellectual strands that it wove together. In particular, in using “paranoia” to designate a symbolic rather than a psychological phenomenon, Hofstadter relied on interpretive mechanisms that were essentially similar to those very mechanisms he denounced. The following essay reconstructs the dilemmas and ambivalences inherent to the idea of “paranoid style.” Ultimately, its suggestive power rested on its indeterminacy: it indicated an area where the distinction between the visible and the invisible, the normal and the pathological, perception and reality, symbols and power seemed to collapse.

To the extent that its main advocate chose to gloss over these contradictions, such a reconstruction is inevitably circuitous. It is not, however, conjectural: the art historian Ernst Gombrich immediately saw that using style as a heuristic device meant introducing an irrational element uncomfortably close to paranoia itself or, worse, to totalitarian politics. The first sections identify the main sources of the “Paranoid Style” article in the work of Karl Mannheim and studies of artistic style. I then follow the refraction of these sources in Gombrich's considerations about style and politics but also their problematic elaborations in interwar discussions about art and psychiatry and, much closer to Gombrich, in the work of Aby Warburg. Finally, I consider Gombrich's reticence about the idea of paranoid style in relation to the fusion of primitive religion, paranoia, and politics in Karl Popper's notion of “conspiracy theory.”

HOFSTADTER AND THE PARANOID STYLE

First published in 1964 in *Harper's Magazine*, Hofstadter's “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” identified a consistent paranoid rhetoric that regularly surfaced in American history. In *The Age of Reform* (1955), Hofstadter had already explored the conspiracist mindset of the late

⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage, 2008), xxxi. The original version of the essay was published in 1964 in *Harper's Magazine*.

nineteenth-century agrarian movement. Steeped in a moral economy upended by industrialization, American populists viewed themselves as victims of invisible, distant enemies wielding supernatural powers. For them, history was “in effect, a conspiracy.”⁹ The 1964 essay elaborated these insights into a psychological archetype that transcended specific periods, “an old and recurrent mode of expression in our public life . . . whose content remains much the same.”¹⁰

Hofstadter’s latest book at the time, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), had attended to “the essentially theological concern that underlies right-wing views of the world.”¹¹ On its tail, “The Paranoid Style” was rife with references to apocalyptic religiosity and its proximity to paranoia: the paranoid style is “apocalyptic in expression”; its spokesman sees worldwide conspiracies “in apocalyptic terms” and delivers “apocalyptic warnings . . . he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point; it is now or never in organizing resistance to conspiracy. Time is forever just running out. Like religious millenarians, he expresses the anxiety of those who are living through the last days and he is sometimes disposed to set a date for the apocalypse.”¹²

In using the notion of paranoia, Hofstadter sought to capture an aspect of political life that could not be adequately understood in rational terms. The turn to psychology held the promise of accounting for political phenomena that could not be explained on the basis of self-evident “interests,” which the social sciences had traditionally taken to be an index of rationality. “Political life,” Hofstadter wrote, also “acts as a sounding board for identities, values, fears, and aspirations.” Despite recognizing that its application was “chancy,” he thought that “depth-psychology” offered a window onto “feelings and impulses that are only marginally related to the manifest issues” and made it possible to explore the “non-rational side of politics.”¹³ In doing so, he followed a path already cleared by Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Elias Canetti, and Franz Neumann—who was Hofstadter’s colleague at Columbia, where he gave an important lecture on

⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage, 1955), 71.

¹⁰ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 6.

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 134.

¹² Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, xxxv, 4, 29, 30.

¹³ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, xxxiii.

the political significance of anxiety in 1954.¹⁴ Like them, Hofstadter proceeded like a psychiatrist, moving from the symptom to the underlying condition: “What interests me here is . . . using political rhetoric to get at a political pathology.”¹⁵

Hofstadter was aware of the danger of reductionism involved in such borrowings from psychology—a danger which he had not always managed to avoid.¹⁶ He pointedly distinguished his use of the concept of “paranoia” from its psychiatric meaning. Unlike true paranoiacs confined to their solipsistic worlds, Hofstadter’s paranoid politicians manifested a collective experience that could not be dissolved into discrete individual pathologies.¹⁷ The social currency of the phenomenon made it substantially different from a psychiatric condition. Hofstadter could not have been more explicit: “I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes.”¹⁸

These purposes were to describe a specific worldview: Hofstadter was interested in paranoia only to the extent that it characterized “styles of thought and rhetoric,” a “style of mind,” and specific “modes of expression.”¹⁹ Whether or not these aspects could be considered symptoms of an underlying psychopathological condition was beside the point. In that sense, Hofstadter’s “style” owed more to art history than to psychiatry: “When I speak of the paranoid style, I use the term much as a historian of art might speak of the baroque or the mannerist style.”²⁰

Hofstadter’s reference to art history was less casual than it may seem. The idea that artistic style provided a model for cultural and political analysis can be traced to one of the influences Hofstadter explicitly acknowledged: Karl Mannheim.²¹ “It is, indeed, the history of art that provides us with a term capable of doing justice to the special nature of history of thought,” Mannheim had suggested in a 1927 essay on “Conservative

¹⁴ Franz Neumann, “Anxiety and Politics,” in *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State*, ed. Herbert Marcuse (New York: Free Press, 1957); Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (1960; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984); Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; New York: Schocken, 2004).

¹⁵ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 6.

¹⁶ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 17, 71, 72n2.

¹⁷ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 4.

¹⁸ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 3.

¹⁹ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, xxxii, 3, 4.

²⁰ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, 4.

²¹ Andrew McKenzie-McHarg, “From Status Politics to the Paranoid Style: Richard Hofstadter and the Pitfalls of Psychologizing History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 83, no. 3 (2022): 451–75.

Thought,” which Hofstadter had likely read while he was working on *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. The term was, of course, “style.”

Mannheim’s study of conservatism as a “style” of thought built upon a previous methodological essay, the *Beiträge zur Theorie der Weltanschauungsinterpretation* (1922, “On the Interpretation of ‘Weltanschauung’”). Both essays were translated into English in 1952 and 1953 respectively and thus available to Hofstadter.²² The *Beiträge* was Mannheim’s first attempt at defining a scientific method for inferring the worldview of an entire society or an age from discrete cultural traits: “How can we describe the unity we sense in all works that belong to the same period in scientific terms capable of control and verification?”²³ The difficulty was that such general worldviews were never fully articulated because they designated patterns of experience that preceded rationalization: they were the “spontaneous, unintentional, basic impulse of a culture.”²⁴ To recover them, one had to abstract from various cultural phenomena the features that documented the common worldview which they all expressed.

This method found its accomplishment in the study of style: “The more one is impressed by the inadequacy of explaining *Weltanschauung* [world] in terms of philosophy, the more promising will be the attempt to start from art and analyse *all other fields of culture in terms of concepts derived from a study of plastic arts.*”²⁵ “Style” was precisely such a concept that cut across different spheres of cultural activity. Mannheim offered as an illustration of this method Alois Riegl’s classic study of the Roman cultural industry. For the Viennese art historian, “a seemingly insignificant procedure employed in the treatment of the material” brought to light corresponding traits in other domains which, taken together, indicated a general worldview characterizing Roman society.²⁶ By gathering scattered documentary evidence, one extrapolated a general concept that stood behind all cultural phenomena of a given period and took the form of a “basic intention,” which Riegl called “art motive” (*Kunstwollen*).²⁷ It was not different, Mannheim

²² The 1922 *Beiträge* was published in Mannheim’s *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (1952) while the 1927 piece appeared in his *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology* (1953). Both texts have been subsequently collected in Kurt Wolff, ed. *From Karl Mannheim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

²³ Mannheim, “On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*,” in *From Karl Mannheim*, ed. Kurt Wolff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 49.

²⁴ Mannheim, “On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*,” 14, also 41–42.

²⁵ Mannheim, “On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*,” 51 [emphasis mine].

²⁶ Mannheim, “On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*,” 33.

²⁷ Mannheim, “Conservative Thought,” in Wolff, ed., *From Karl Mannheim*, 136.

pointed out, from Werner Sombart's "ethos," Wilhelm Dilthey's "Weltanschauung," or Max Weber's "spirit."²⁸

The attempt to extrapolate a specific worldview from its symbolic expressions was exactly the project that Hofstadter set for himself in "The Paranoid Style." It is hard to overstate the influence of Mannheim's methodological cues, not least because he had pointed out that concepts that could be applied across cultural spheres, such as the concept of style, made it possible "to ask meaningful questions regarding art as well as literature, philosophy *as well as political ideology*."²⁹ Like Mannheim's "Conservative Thought," Hofstadter's "Paranoid Style" was a direct application of the research program formulated in the 1922 *Beiträge*: witness his attention to "political culture as a whole," his interest in the "non-rational side of politics," and his adoption of "style" as the guiding concept for the interpretation of a paranoid and conspiracist political worldview.

There is no doubt that Hofstadter saw the analogy with art history implied in the notion of "style" as a bulwark against psychological reductionism. His entire project of a historical, non-clinical understanding of paranoid politics rested on it: like an art historian, the student of fringe politics could isolate a relatively stable set of formal characteristics recurring across individual instances that revealed the worldview inherent to a specific political subculture. And yet, there was a sleight of hand in this reference to art history. Could a style be said to be "paranoid" in the same way it was "Mannerist"? Did the detour through art history sufficiently distance the paranoid *style* from the psychopathological condition?

STYLE AS PATHOLOGY: BAROQUE AND MANNERISM

Hofstadter's reference to the Baroque style and Mannerism was not casual: both styles featured in Mannheim's 1922 essay and were often mentioned in relation to mental illness in the art-historical or psychiatric literature. When it was rediscovered in the 1930s, Mannerism was widely interpreted as a symptom of social and cultural decadence.

Mannheim saw them as styles that pointed beyond the objective meaning of a work of art and toward a general worldview. He called this process of abstraction "sublimation": "The concept of 'baroque' is sublimated if, instead of designating the purely visual, stylistic category, it is used to refer

²⁸ Mannheim, "On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*," 33.

²⁹ Mannheim, "On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*," 49.

to the general ‘baroque principle,’ the ‘spirit’ of baroque, which can be grasped only by an intentional act directed to a documented essence.”³⁰ Max Dvorák’s study of El Greco, for instance, exemplified the way in which “a fragmentary aspect of a work such as a characteristic treatment of line, spatial structure, or colour composition can convey documentary meaning” about the spirit of an age.³¹

Yet, the notion that sublimation excluded pathology was misleading. More than any other styles, the Baroque style and Mannerism had invited clinical interpretations. Tanzi and Riva, for instance, had called some symptoms of paranoia “stylistic baroquisms.”³² Mannerism, in particular, blurred the distinction between art and psychopathology. In the essay cited by Mannheim, Dvorák had paid particular attention to the Mannerist perception of the world: El Greco’s *Burial of the Count Orgaz* made “mystery and spirituality manifest”; it elicited a “sense of the supernatural” and of a “dream-like, unreal existence.”³³ From his master Tintoretto, he had retained the tendency to substitute Renaissance naturalism with “a ghostly plan of fantasy” and the men he depicted were like “masks and phantoms.”³⁴ El Greco, “the seer of spirits,” was, Dvorák candidly suggested, simply “unhinged.”³⁵

Dvorák’s descriptions provided prime evidence for the relationship between Mannerism and mental illness. In a 1956 essay specifically addressing their commonalities, Ludwig Binswanger observed that the expressions Dvorák and other art historians used were interchangeable with those employed by psychiatrists to characterize schizophrenia.³⁶ This was particularly striking in the classic works of Wilhelm Pinder, Hans Sedlmayr, and Hans Hoffmann, who provided Binswanger with coherent examples of Mannerism as a pathological development in art. Compared to the assertive, vivid art of the Renaissance, Mannerism was for Hoffmann an unnatural style “that turn[ed] away from the reality of existence.”³⁷ It expressed the insecurity, brittleness, and frailty of human existence. Pinder saw Man-

³⁰ Mannheim, “On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*,” 54.

³¹ Mannheim, “On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*,” 31.

³² Tanzi and Riva, “La paranoia,” 111.

³³ Max Dvorák, “El Greco and Mannerism,” in *Readings in Italian Mannerism*, ed. Liana De Girolami Cheney, (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 196.

³⁴ Dvorák, “El Greco and Mannerism,” 202, 209.

³⁵ Dvorák, “El Greco and Mannerism,” 197.

³⁶ Ludwig Binswanger, *Drei Formen Missglückten Daseins: Verstiegtheit Verschrobenheit Manieriertheit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1956), 121.

³⁷ Hans Hoffmann, *Hochrenaissance Manierismus Frühbarock: Die italienische Kunst des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Zürich: Leemann, 1939), 180.

nerism as a style expressing “doubt” about oneself and about the world.³⁸ Sedlmayr proposed that its dominant sentiment was one of “anxiety,” “strangeness,” a “profound and intimate relationship to death,” and “fear of the world.” Mannerism was inclined toward what was “stiff, cold and dead, not [toward] the form created by a true organic life.”³⁹

Binswanger drew mostly on Hoffmann for interpreting Mannerism’s basic phenomenology, its “Weltgefühl.” Art no longer showed life in its naturalness, but as something constricted by the imposition of roles and appearances. The natural and the organic was overtaken by the formulaic and the artificial; the bodies of Mannerist art were ensconced in corsets, armors, and masks.⁴⁰ This impression of stricture and limited movement was associated with a diminished sense of the self. With its receding lines of perspective, its vanishing points, its elusive depth, space itself caved in as if the individual was engulfed in a fading world.⁴¹ Inexorably drawn into this *Raumflucht* (enfilade), overpowered by mysterious external forces, the self dissolved into nothingness.⁴² Reality gave way to uncanny spiritual and symbolic connections that seemed threatening.⁴³ A fading world revealing a web of magic connections, a diminished sense of self, overpowered by mysterious and invisible forces: for Binswanger, Mannerism epitomized the apocalyptic *Weltuntergangserlebnis* of the schizophrenic.⁴⁴

To some extent, Binswanger’s psychological portrait of Mannerism reflected the bias of his sources, who were critical of a style allegedly replete with the “characteristic symptoms of the modern disease.”⁴⁵ Unlike them, he was interested in understanding the convergences between Mannerism and schizophrenia, not in conflating them. He rejected Sedlmayr’s systematic reliance on psychopathological terms to characterize art works: the formal similarities between schizophrenia and artistic Mannerism did not imply a common underlying condition.⁴⁶ Instead, they pointed at a generic “mannerist form of existence,” which was not necessarily pathological and

³⁸ Wilhelm Pinder, “Zur Physiognomik des Manierismus,” in *Die Wissenschaft am Scheidewege von Leben und Geist: Festschrift Ludwig Klages zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans Prinzhorn (Leipzig: Barth, 1932), 151.

³⁹ Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1957), 189, 90.

⁴⁰ Binswanger, *Drei Formen*, 118–19.

⁴¹ Hoffmann, *Hochrenaissance*, 61; Binswanger, *Drei Formen*, 126–27.

⁴² Hoffmann, *Hochrenaissance*, 180.

⁴³ Hoffmann, *Hochrenaissance*, 100.

⁴⁴ Binswanger, *Drei Formen*, 129.

⁴⁵ Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, 190, 91.

⁴⁶ Binswanger, *Drei Formen*, 121.

needed to be understood in its specificity.⁴⁷ This form of existence was characterized by anxiety, the fear of an opaque world held together by mysterious symbolic connections, in which the self failed to be genuinely itself. To shore up its mundane existence it sought refuge in artifice and convention: where the Renaissance put forward the essence, the character, the talent, Mannerism saw the class, the rank, the title behind which individuality disappeared.⁴⁸ The self-consciousness of style was a substitute for authentic self-expression.

There were other reasons why Binswanger suggested that some of his sources, like Sedlmayr, should be “taken with caution.”⁴⁹ Pinder and Sedlmayr had been Nazi activists, and their negative views of Mannerism served as an indictment of social modernity.⁵⁰ While Hoffmann’s ideological orientation is unclear, not only did he build on Pinder and Sedlmayr, but his insistence in 1938 that interest in Mannerism was “more than five years old” suggests that he was aware of the intricate relationship between National-Socialist ideology and the interest in Mannerism.⁵¹ A stylistic category coined at the turn of the twentieth century, Mannerism had become a proxy for the morbidity of the modern age. The historical background of Mannerism was the consolidation of princely power over the old republican order and the fall of the Renaissance citizen into “bondage.”⁵² For Sedlmayr, it was “the art of the princely courts.”⁵³ Projected onto the twentieth century, this tyranny became that of abstract social forces that subjugated the individual. “The interest in mannerism as a specific stylistic phenomenon . . . is based on experiences of our own time,” Hoffmann suggested: “We are in the middle of a transition. The individual has lost its highest value. The collective takes its place.”⁵⁴

The demonic power of invisible forces, an apocalyptic sense of the end of the world, the threat to individual freedom and authenticity: Mannerism contained in a nutshell all the ingredients of the “paranoid style” that would flow into Hofstadter’s essay. Mannerism may have been the art of a bygone era, yet for these art historians it reflected the anxieties of the present; it

⁴⁷ Binswanger, *Drei Formen*, 166–67.

⁴⁸ Hoffmann, *Hochrenaissance*, 182.

⁴⁹ Binswanger, *Drei Formen*, 122.

⁵⁰ Maria Männig, “Kunstgeschichte mit Konsequenzen: Hans Sedlmayr,” *Neue Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* 2 (2016).

⁵¹ Hoffmann, *Hochrenaissance*, 9.

⁵² Hoffmann, *Hochrenaissance*, 183.

⁵³ Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, 191.

⁵⁴ Hoffmann, *Hochrenaissance*, 9.

was a warning against the impending doom awaiting a society in which invisible collectives lured the individual into a world of artifice and subjugated her. But the admixture of style and psychopathology as well as the contempt of art historians for the morbid features of Mannerism constitutes a troubling precedent for Hofstadter's explicitly "pejorative" view of the paranoid style.⁵⁵ These historians projected into Mannerism the very anxieties that found a political outlet in National-Socialism and its obsession with conspiracies. All this points to a complex pedigree behind the idea of paranoid style that introduces in Hofstadter's essay the multiple echoes of other attempts at grappling with the politically heuristic value of style.

THE POLITICS OF STYLE (I): ERNST GOMBRICH AND THE PROBLEM OF PROPAGANDA

Interviewed about Hofstadter and the paranoid style in 1973, Gombrich admitted that the "mechanisms of paranoia are very illuminating."⁵⁶ The problems it illuminated, however, were very different from those of concern to the American historian. A few years earlier, Gombrich had been invited by the University of London to give the 1969 Creighton Lecture in History. He chose to speak about his wartime experience in a BBC listening post as an analyst of German propaganda broadcasts. His subject—"Myth and Reality in German Wartime Broadcasts"—may have sounded far removed from the history of art, but Gombrich immediately pointed out that the two subjects were related:⁵⁷ "Myth" referred to a general question of the role of symbols in the perception of the world. "The study of myth," he pointed out, "is germane to the work of the Warburg Institute."⁵⁸

What characterized wartime German propaganda according to Gombrich was its tendency to fit any single piece of information, any event, no matter how relevant or irrelevant, into a general stereotype of German strength and enemy depravity. This stereotype remained stable, and indeed the purpose of propaganda was to constantly reinforce it. It reflected, according to Gombrich, a specific mindset, a basic structure of perception: "There exists a mental condition which is prone to this type of reaction—I

⁵⁵ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, 5.

⁵⁶ "Ernst Gombrich Discusses the Concept of Cultural History with Peter Burke," *The Listener* 90 (27 December 1973): 881–83.

⁵⁷ In E. H. Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), 93–111.

⁵⁸ Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 93.

mean the way the paranoiac scans his surroundings for signs to confirm his ideas of persecution and wickedness. . . . What is characteristic of Nazi propaganda is less the lie than the imposition of a paranoiac pattern on world events.”⁵⁹

Gombrich did not stop at the suggestion that Nazi propaganda was an example of paranoid style. He sought to specify how these terms related to each other. Although for him paranoia was a “mental condition,” it extended beyond psychological dysfunction. “Paranoia,” he suggested, “is not simply an illness like typhoid.”⁶⁰ It designated a fundamental structure of experience. Gombrich’s notion of “pattern” emphasized the formal characteristics of the “stereotype” that provided an organizing principle for the perception of the world. In a letter to his Viennese friend and collaborator Ernst Kris, Gombrich clarified his views: “It is a misconception to think of ‘propaganda’ as of a means to put ‘something’ across. . . . It is first and foremost a way of se[e]ing things, an interpretation of events, not of some events but of *all* events, past, present and future.”⁶¹ Once it was understood as a frame of mind, German propaganda became something akin to paranoia but also to style—of which it represented a crude, simplistic version: “The evil art of propaganda is not so far removed in technique from the mechanism of real art. In my book on *Art and Illusion* I have tried to show how the artist makes use of what I called schemata and how he scans the world around him for motifs which can be accommodated to this pre-existent vocabulary.”⁶² Nazi propaganda both enabled and constrained the perception of specific patterns in the sensorial environment. It rested on a stable frame of perception that sharpened the eye and shaped the world. It was, in other words, a consummate example of paranoid style.

Propaganda, paranoia, style: in suggesting that the paranoid propaganda of the Nazis was “not far removed” from art, Gombrich indicated a problem inherent in the notion of style. He did not deny that these phenomena were different. But his argument also implied that they were related. As a result, the notion of style was not *necessarily* separate from psychopathol-

⁵⁹ Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 102.

⁶⁰ Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 107.

⁶¹ Gombrich to Ernst Kris, 23 July 1941, quoted in Louis Rose, *Psychology, Art, and Antifascism: Ernst Kris, E. H. Gombrich, and the Politics of Caricature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 177.

⁶² Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 105. See for instance: “A style, like a culture or a climate of opinion, sets up a horizon of expectation, a mental set, which registers deviations and modifications with exaggerated sensitivity.” Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 53.

ogy or its political expressions. Simply put, differences between art, psychopathology, and propaganda did not register at the level of style.⁶³

CARL SCHNEIDER, HANS PRINZHORN, AND THE STYLE OF PARANOIACS

Gombrich had a very clear notion of the problematic entanglements of style, paranoia, and Nazi politics, which informed his reflections on style. Nazi propaganda had sought to establish a clear-cut boundary between art and psychopathology, using the latter to attack “degenerate art.” The distinction between mental illness and artistic creation was the main subject of an article published in 1939 in the *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*. “Entartete Kunst und Irrenkunst” (Degenerate and insane art) offered an analysis of the infamous 1937 Munich exhibition in which the art of the expressionist avant-garde was displayed next to the work of mentally ill patients and “primitive” peoples. Its author, Carl Schneider, was the Nazi-appointed director of the Heidelberg psychiatric clinic, the institution directed by Emil Kraepelin until 1903, which was at the time the main center for the study of schizophrenia.

Schneider distinguished between two conceptions of the work of art. In the first, found in the “Germanic-Nordic Lebensraum,” the artist received his gift from the “natural laws of life” and, through his art, enhanced the biological strength of his community. The second, typical of “southern” people, understood art by analogy with prophetic revelation. The artist’s gift for preternatural sensitivity allowed the secrets of the future to be revealed to him through episodes of “ecstatic madness.” He was a “seer” who received his inspiration directly from the divinity.⁶⁴

There is no need to belabor Schneider’s racist bloviations; what warrants scrutiny is his linkage of primitive religion, art, and schizophrenia. According to Schneider, the psychological reinterpretation of the prophetic experience as the manifestation of a psychopathological condition by twentieth-century psychiatrists had dangerous implications for the conception of the artistic process. If prophecy was nothing but a tendency to experience reality as a web of invisible connections between things also found in schizophrenes and primitives, then art, too, became a phenomenon

⁶³ Gombrich, “Art and Propaganda,” *The Listener* (7 December 1939): 1118.

⁶⁴ Carl Schneider, “Entartete Kunst und Irrenkunst,” *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten* 110 (1939): 136, 37.

close to mental illness and primitivism. Nothing separated the apocalyptic *Weltuntergangserlebnis* from the morbid sense of decadence and doom that suffused modern art.

The notion that art tapped into an archaic stratum of the human psyche found in the primitive, the schizophrenic, and the modern artist alike was intolerable for the Nazis.⁶⁵ Only a formalist conception of style, Schneider claimed, made it possible to conflate genius and madness. Any distinctive criteria for real art were lost, and the creations of deranged minds could claim the title of art. This confusion resulted from the exclusion as “auxiliary” of criteria that did not belong to the formal properties of the work of art, in particular communal, racial, and biological factors that informed the creative energies of the artist. For the Nazi psychiatrist, these criteria were fundamental because they reinstated a distinction between art and madness.

Style indicated an external reality, so stylistic similarities indicated beyond any possible doubt that the artists who painted like schizophrenics or primitives were themselves mentally ill or carried a defective racial heritage. Perhaps because they saw that this conclusion was inescapable, Schneider surmised, degenerate artists had taken cover behind “Jewish” psychiatry in order to turn their own backwardness into the essence of art.⁶⁶ Their art was thus a deliberate attempt at infecting the healthy parts of German society. Schneider would later oversee the organized murder of thousands of mentally ill patients.

In the midst of all his antisemitic attacks and innuendos, Schneider reserved his most pointed criticism for a psychiatrist, Hans Prinzhorn, who certainly was not an opponent of the Nazi movement when he died in 1933.⁶⁷ Prinzhorn had completed a doctorate in art history at the University of Vienna before switching to psychiatric medicine.⁶⁸ Between 1919 and 1922, he worked at the Heidelberg psychiatric hospital, where he supervised the development of a collection of artworks by mental patients. By the time he left Heidelberg, this extraordinary collection numbered more than 5,000 works created by about 450 patients from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, and the Netherlands—a number of which Schneider later lent to the 1937 exhibition on “degenerate art” to provide comparative evi-

⁶⁵ Éric Michaud, *Un art de l'éternité: L'image et le temps du national-socialisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).

⁶⁶ Schneider, “Entartete Kunst,” 152.

⁶⁷ E.g., Hans Prinzhorn, “Gemeinschaft und Führertum: Ansatz zu einer biozentrischen Gemeinschaftstheorie,” in *Die Wissenschaft am Scheidewege von Leben und Geist*.

⁶⁸ Sander L. Gilman, “The Mad as Artists,” in *The Prinzhorn Collection*, ed. Catherine De Zegher (Los Angeles: UCLA Hammer Museum, 2000).

dence for the pathological nature of the artistic avant-garde. Yet, while Prinzhorn had built the collection that the Nazis would use to support the idea of “degenerate” art, he had drawn radically different conclusions.

Published in 1922, Prinzhorn’s *Bildneri der Geisteskranken* (Artistry of the mentally ill) contained a vast selection of pictures from the Heidelberg collection and proposed an original treatment of the question of “pathological art” (*Irrenkunst*).⁶⁹ The visual reproductions illustrated the striking resemblances between the figurative creations of schizophrenes, the drawings of young children, the artifacts of primitive societies, and a range of artistic works from various historical eras. What did these affinities mean and how could they be explained? Prinzhorn rejected the positivist model of the natural sciences, which juxtaposed photographs of paintings, drawings, and other artifacts to clinical files to suggest a causal correlation between physiology and symbolic expressions; instead, he adopted a resolutely phenomenological approach.⁷⁰

In art, Prinzhorn pointed out, the notion of style usually referred to the role of “tradition and education,” and artists were said to express the character of the historical period to which they belonged, including in its more specific components such as “race or nationality.”⁷¹ Prinzhorn’s collection called into question this diffusionist approach: the affinities between the style of “primitives,” children, and the mentally ill excluded any form of historical transmission or cultural diffusion. Instead, they indicated an anthropological invariant. Prinzhorn called this invariant *Gestaltung*: an innate, instinctive impulse that turned the inordinate psychic experience of inner life into a visual image with no finality but expression and gave a form to a basic sense of the world (*Weltgefühl*). Under normal circumstances, this impulse was disrupted and inhibited by “civilizing customs and restrictive rules,” but it reemerged in exceptional situations where such constrictions were lifted, such as the psychiatric clinic, the prelogical world of the child or the primitive, or even the free movement of the hand in a moment of absent-mindedness.⁷² It then appeared in a pure form (*in Reinkultur*) as a psychic automatism that manifested a common stock of fundamental psychic experiences, “elemental thought processes” that could be found “in a

⁶⁹ Hans Prinzhorn, *Bildneri der Geisteskranken: Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie der Gestaltung* (Berlin: Springer, 1922), 3. Prinzhorn disliked the term “Irrenkunst.”

⁷⁰ Prinzhorn, *Bildneri*, iii, 350.

⁷¹ Prinzhorn, *Bildneri*, 343.

⁷² Prinzhorn, *Bildneri*, 306.

child who draws, a painter, a sculptor from any epoch, or an Australian aborigine.”⁷³

Prinzhorn was reluctant to formulate general conclusions from his observations. But for all his cautiousness, a firm point remained: it was impossible to infer a psychological condition from characteristics of style. Formal similarities between different images yielded no clues as to the psychological condition of those who had made them. Prinzhorn “resolutely” rejected the inferences drawn from comparison between the stylistic characteristics of contemporary art and those of the creations of the mentally ill: “The affirmation: this painter paints like a given mental patient, therefore he is mentally ill, is neither more convincing nor more sensible than this other affirmation: Pechstein and Heckel make sculptures that look like those of the Africans from Cameroon, therefore they are Africans from Cameroon.”⁷⁴ The artist made a conscious decision to turn away from familiar reality and rearrange its components according to invisible connections, while the schizophrenic experienced as an overwhelming fate his alienation from the same reality and “succumb[ed] to the secret meaning of the perceptible world.”⁷⁵ In the end, the mentally ill person may occasionally produce art but could not be an artist. These differences, however, could not be recovered at a formal level; they belonged only to the immediate experience and remained difficult to probe.⁷⁶ Fifteen years before the Nazi exhibition on “degenerate art,” *Bildneri der Geisteskranken* offered a categorical refutation of the theoretical premises underpinning the exhibition by separating symbolic expression and clinical condition.

Prinzhorn’s book circulated widely and triggered a renewed interest in paranoia among artists. The Surrealists, who discovered it through Max Ernst, thought paranoia gave access to aboriginal forms of perception and an enhanced capacity for symbolic expression. André Breton and Paul Eluard in literature and Salvador Dalí in visual art sought to reenact it as a stylistic device.⁷⁷ The fascination with paranoia as a stylistic phenomenon found echoes in psychiatry. Jacques Lacan, who wrote his 1932 dissertation on paranoia, closely followed these artistic experiments. In 1930, he

⁷³ Prinzhorn, *Bildneri*, 47.

⁷⁴ Prinzhorn, *Bildneri*, 346.

⁷⁵ Prinzhorn, *Bildneri*, 297, 347.

⁷⁶ Prinzhorn, *Bildneri*, 336.

⁷⁷ André Breton et Paul Eluard, *L'immaculée conception* (Paris: Seghers, 1961); Astrid Ruffa, “Dalí, photographe de la pensée irrationnelle: Une appropriation créative des théories psychologiques de Gabriel Dromard,” *Etudes photographiques* 22 (2008).

had met Dalí (who was then developing his “paranoiac-critical” method) and later wrote about the relationship between paranoia and style in the surrealist journal *Le Minotaure*.⁷⁸ Paranoia, he suggested, was not a localized dysfunction but an alteration of the entire personality. It wasn’t a faulty elaboration of reality, but an altogether different perception of the world, which was “not comparable to the intuition of objects which is that of the average civilized person.”⁷⁹ The rich symbolism of paranoia was comparable to “the mythical creations of folklore” and was culturally valued in older civilizations. The concrete paranoid experience, therefore, was better understood as an “original syntax,” the knowledge of which, Lacan concluded, was indispensable to the understanding of the symbolic value of art and of the genesis of style.⁸⁰

By severing any linear connection between style and psychology, Prinzhorn had turned style into a cipher whose relation to art, psychopathology, and politics remained indeterminate. By the same token, style no longer offered a guide for disentangling them—a problem that would beset subsequent efforts at defining a distinctly paranoid style.

PARANOIA AND MYTH IN WARBURG

On August 17, 1921, Prinzhorn arrived at the Bellevue sanatorium in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, to pay a brief visit to Aby Warburg. In April of that year Warburg, who was suffering from acute psychosis and had gone through several unsatisfactory treatments in other institutions, had been entrusted to Ludwig Binswanger’s care at Bellevue. He would remain there for three years. According to Warburg’s clinical file, on that day he and Prinzhorn had a “very deep and objective discussion about symbolism.”⁸¹ The following summer, Binswanger offered *Bildneri des Geisteskranken* as a gift to Warburg, who perused the book “with great interest” (but also convinced

⁷⁸ Jacques Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1975). The encounter is told by Salvador Dalí in *La vie secrète de Salvador Dalí* (Paris: Table Ronde, 1952), 34–36. Vanesa Baur, “Paranoia y creación: Un lazo antiguo entre Lacan y Dalí,” *Perspectivas en Psicología* 7 (2010).

⁷⁹ Lacan, “Le problème du style et la conception psychiatrique des formes paranoïaques de l’expérience,” in *De la psychose paranoïaque*, 385–86.

⁸⁰ Lacan, “Le problème du style et la conception psychiatrique,” 387–88.

⁸¹ Ludwig Binswanger and Aby Warburg, *La guarigione infinita: Storia clinica di Aby Warburg* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005), 81.

himself, as he told the clinic staff, that the book had been written specifically for him).⁸²

In his biography, Gombrich chose to glide respectfully over Warburg's psychiatric ordeal. He pointed out, however, that the "paranoid hallucinations" Warburg suffered from were directly related to his two main intellectual preoccupations—the expression of emotions and the reaction to primitive fears.⁸³ Warburg touched on themes related to his condition when on April 21, 1923, he addressed the small audience of the Kreuzlingen clinic and spoke about the snake ritual of the Pueblo Indians, which he had witnessed during his travel to New Mexico in the 1890s.⁸⁴

In Pueblo culture, the snake symbolizes lightning. In the course of a ritual dance, the Pueblo Indians hold live snakes in their mouth in order to provoke rainstorms and propitiate the harvests—a ritual that exemplifies the role of symbols as mediators between the primitive and a threatening and chaotic cosmos. The snake and the lightning were not joined by formal analogies: they were the same elemental entity, saturated with a demonic power whose magic the Indians sought to harness.⁸⁵ In the last lecture he had given before his internment, Warburg had observed that the "fear of demons" was "the most primitive form of religious causality," which gradually gave way to more rational forms of understanding.⁸⁶ Art occupied an intermediate place in this process, halfway between myth and science, as its images were no longer magic symbols yet retained something of this primitive energy.

In the snake ritual Warburg saw the "primitive and pagan form" of the response to primeval fear.⁸⁷ Its perpetuation into modern times was a survival of antique paganism (*Nachleben der Antike*), a question that was central to Warburg's interests. The historical resilience of the symbolism of the snake suggested that it was an "indestructible reminiscence" and a univer-

⁸² Binswanger and Warburg, *La guarigione infinita*, 102–3.

⁸³ Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), 215.

⁸⁴ Warburg, "Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer," in *Werke*, ed. Martin Tremml et al (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010): 524–566. Translated into English as *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* by Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

⁸⁵ See also Ernst Cassirer, "The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking," in *The Warburg Years (1919–1933)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 21.

⁸⁶ Warburg, "Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten," in *Werke*, 447. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 218–19.

⁸⁷ Warburg, "Bilder," 557.

sal symbol.⁸⁸ These archaic reminiscences gave images their emotive force, as they tapped into “the substratum of an elementary humanity” and its immemorial stock of emotions.⁸⁹ Seen in the cold light of rationalism, myth was only a false belief in the power of invisible entities and magic connections. As a form of experience, however, it had much in common with paranoia. In two essays sent to Warburg before his lecture, Ernst Cassirer had described myth not as a distortion of reality but an altogether different structure of perception, prior to rationalization. In this structure, signs immediately had an existential force.⁹⁰ Myth had to do first and foremost with the intensity of this experience and its power over consciousness: “The problem is not the material content of mythology, but the intensity with which it is experienced, with which it is *believed*—as only something endowed with objective reality can be believed.”⁹¹ Like paranoia, it was not a deviation from an objective reality but a “self-contained system” in which delusional thoughts had the force of reality. Warburg was aware of these affinities. In a letter to Saxl, he described the lecture as “the confession of an (incurable) schizophrenic bequeathed to the archives of the soul doctors.”⁹² His conception of the history of the symbolic forms as a history of non-contemporaneity in which the archaic resurfaced in the present mirrored his own inner struggles, of which the snake ritual offered a reflection. Warburg believed that his condition gave him insight into the question of style and the emotive force of symbols, and commentators have stressed the role of his paranoia for his view of the historical development of art. Edgar Wind, for instance, pointed out that “each shattering experience, which he overcame through self-reflection, became a means of enriching his historical insight.”⁹³

Wind also observed that the “ancient,” in Warburg’s perspective, was “a Janus-face of Olympian calm and daemonic terror.”⁹⁴ The history of culture was the history of attempts at balancing this tension—a fragile achievement that always had to be started anew, lest the irrational forces of

⁸⁸ Warburg, “Bilder,” 554.

⁸⁹ Warburg, “Bilder,” 545.

⁹⁰ Cassirer, “The Form of the Concept,” 22.

⁹¹ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955), 2:5.

⁹² Quoted in Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante: Histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2002), 366.

⁹³ Edgar Wind, “Warburg’s Concept of *Kulturwissenschaft*,” in *The Eloquence of Symbols: Studies in Humanist Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 26. Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante*, 363–90.

⁹⁴ Wind, “Warburg’s Concept of *Kulturwissenschaft*,” 29.

myth prevail over the soothing, distancing action of images. In the notes Warburg had prepared for the lecture, he observed that “humanity in its entirety is eternally, at all times, schizophrenic.”⁹⁵ He compared himself to a “seismograph” that registered the tremors of history. “Sometimes,” he mused toward the end of his life, “it looks to me as if, in my role as psycho-historian, I tried to diagnose the schizophrenia of Western civilization from its images in an autobiographical reflex.”⁹⁶ In Warburg’s search for a “psycho-history” of art, attentive to the anthropological dimension of symbolism, the proximate questions of myth, paranoia, and style were no longer confined to an abstract phenomenology of perception but inevitably raised historical and political questions.

THE POLITICS OF STYLE (II): INVISIBLE ENTITIES AND TOTALITARIAN IDEOLOGY

The evolution of the Warburg tradition under Gombrich’s aegis away from its initial approach to art in terms of *Kulturgeschichte* has been carefully reconstructed by Carlo Ginzburg.⁹⁷ The political aspects of this evolution, however, deserve further inspection. Gombrich undoubtedly built upon Warburg’s legacy, but he emphasized some of its aspects at the detriment of others, and his selective inventory reflected pressing political concerns. Seen in hindsight, what Warburg had called “the resurgence of demoniac antiquity”⁹⁸ had come to designate a problem that tied together myth, paranoia, and art, but also a dangerous form of political power. Primitive magic and paranoia were fused into an unsettling triptych: “It is only a step from the primitive medicine-man to the paranoiac, and from both of them to the despot of history,” Canetti observed in *Crowds and Power*.⁹⁹ In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Cassirer had revisited the question of myth in *The Myth of the State*: mythical thought was no longer a philosophical problem but a *political* one.¹⁰⁰ Arendt had also pointed out that totalitarian ideologies operated like “the systems of paranoiacs.”¹⁰¹ The

⁹⁵ Quoted in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 223.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 303.

⁹⁷ Carlo Ginzburg, “Da Warburg a Gombrich: Note su un problema di metodo,” in *Miti emblematici* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000).

⁹⁸ Warburg, “Heidnisch-antike Weissagung,” 484.

⁹⁹ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 292.

¹⁰⁰ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946), 4.

¹⁰¹ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 590.

paranoid-schizophrenic perception of the world as a web of magic forces and the myth-making function of primitive symbolism did more than give a privileged access to the anthropological sources of art: they now shed light on the sources of totalitarian will to power.

Gombrich's considerations on myth and propaganda directly addressed these issues. Like the primitive and the paranoid, the Nazi lived in a magic world populated by invisible and threatening entities, a world which cast the question of style under a new light. What was at stake was not a specific worldview or a political ideology, but a resurgent archaism that took the form of a surrender to the magic force inherent to symbols. "The language we speak," Gombrich warned, "is imbued with myth, and so we return with ease to the animistic reaction of turning abstractions into living entities and classes or nations into mythical beings."¹⁰² And no word could channel myths as well as "style," especially when it was used to designate the spirit of an epoch, a society, or a race, an invisible and supra-individual reality endowed with will, as in Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen*.¹⁰³ For Gombrich, such conceptions of style were nothing short of mythical thought and assumed the existence of a "ghost in the machine."¹⁰⁴ Their political implications were already made plain in *Art and Illusion*: "reliance of art history on mythological explanations seems so dangerous to me. By inculcating the habit of talking in terms of collectives, of 'mankind,' 'races,' or 'ages,' it weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind."¹⁰⁵

And yet, in the absence of more rational explanations, such stylistic affinities across time and space inevitably elicited mythical beliefs: "As long as we have no better hypothesis to offer, the existence of uniform modes of representing the world must invite the facile explanation that such a unity must be due to some supra-individual spirit, the 'spirit of the age' or the 'spirit of the race.'"¹⁰⁶ Stylistic similarities were explained either as manifestation of an invisible entity, or as the expression of an archaic stratum of the human psyche that came into plain view, as in the case of the primitive or the schizophrenic. Either way, such conceptions of style were inextricably bound with mythical thought and with totalitarian tendencies. The difference between

¹⁰² Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 107.

¹⁰³ Erwin Panofsky, "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 14 (1920).

¹⁰⁴ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon, 1959), 16.

¹⁰⁵ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 16–17.

¹⁰⁶ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 17.

the paranoid style of propaganda (or, for that matter, schizophrenic art) and true art had become once again a pressing question.

Gombrich's solution consisted in reformulating the question of style by emphasizing the role of the artist in actively choosing between alternative formal languages.¹⁰⁷ Rather than being a passive mouthpiece for mythical spirits, the artist was now in charge. Styles may be symptomatic of deeper attitudes, but they were so precisely because they were selective and discarded possibilities: there was an irreducible element of choice involved. Even the idea of *Kunstwollen* implied a choice situation which it was the historian's task to reconstruct: "only against the background of alternative choices can the distinctive way also be seen as expressive."¹⁰⁸ In the end, for Gombrich, art history was the history of individual choices made in constrained situations. The mythical residues still left in Warburg's *Nachleben der Antike* became genteel traditions allowing for the exercise of choice between different perceptive and expressive possibilities. In striking a balance between rationalism and irrationalism, between choice and tradition, Gombrich reformulated the question of style in terms of bounded rationality, thus aligning art history with Cold War social science.¹⁰⁹

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Gombrich's efforts to reconcile rationality and tradition were typical of Cold War liberalism. They also pointed to a very specific source, "Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition," a paper that Karl Popper had given in July 1948 at the Third Annual Conference of the Rationalist Press Association in Oxford. Popper sought to strike a middle ground between the irrationalism of those who saw the social order as the spontaneous outgrowth of the atavistic and impersonal forces of tradition and the radical form of rationalism, which, for many liberals, implied that society was entirely open to administrative manipulation and technical engineering.¹¹⁰ Popper connected this latter view to what he called "historicism," the belief that there existed laws of social development, which, once discovered, allowed for the

¹⁰⁷ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 20.

¹⁰⁸ Gombrich, "Style," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 130.

¹⁰⁹ Vardan Azatyan, "Ernst Gombrich's Politics of Art History: Exile, Cold War and 'The Story of Art,'" *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 2 (2010).

¹¹⁰ Karl Popper, "Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition," in *Conjectures and Refutations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1963).

steering of social and historical evolution. He elaborated these ideas the following month in an essay titled “Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences.”¹¹¹ Both texts were subsequently amalgamated into chapter fourteen of the second edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1950), to which Gombrich refers on several occasions. The reference to Popper is nothing surprising per se, as it is ubiquitous in Gombrich’s writings. The two men had briefly met in Vienna and their intellectual relationship resumed in 1936, when Popper presented *The Poverty of Historicism* in Hayek’s seminar at the London School of Economics.¹¹² Gombrich knew the 1948 essays and was familiar with that chapter, since he played a minor role in its composition.¹¹³

The 1948 essays and the chapter that resulted are remarkable in their own right. In them, Popper coined the concept of “conspiracy theory.”¹¹⁴ The “conspiracy theory of society” was the belief that “whatever happens in society . . . is the direct design by some powerful individuals and groups.” Popper’s concern with epistemology has obscured what his original formulation also owed to current ideas about paganism and mythical thought. Conspiracy theories, he suggested, were nothing but “the secularization of a religious superstition.” They manifested the residual existence of primitive paganism: “The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups—sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from—such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists.”¹¹⁵ He defined conspiracy theory as a “primitive kind of superstition,” “more primitive than most forms of theism.”¹¹⁶ Like paranoid

¹¹¹ Popper, “Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences,” in *Conjectures and Refutations*.

¹¹² Gombrich, “The Logic of Vanity Fair: Alternatives to Historicism in the Study of Fashions, Style and Taste,” in *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1979), 925; Gombrich, “Personal Recollections of the Publication of *The Open Society*,” in *Popper’s Open Society after 50 Years*, ed. Ian Jarvie and Sandra Pralong (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹¹³ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 687n15. Gombrich, “The Logic of Vanity Fair,” 926n8.

¹¹⁴ McKenzie-McHarg, “Conspiracy Theory: The Nineteenth-Century Prehistory of a Twentieth-Century Concept,” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph Uscinski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹¹⁵ Popper, *Open Society*, 306.

¹¹⁶ Popper, “Prediction and Prophecy,” 459; “Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition,” 165.

schizophrenia, the concept of conspiracy theory indicated the permanence or the resurgence of primitive religion in the modern world.

Gombrich's reference to these texts sets Popper's notion of conspiracy theory in an intriguing relation to Warburg's ideas. One cannot fail to notice that Popper used "the aversion to snakes" to illustrate the idea that universal behaviors did not have to be explained by atavisms and psychological laws. The example could not but evoke Warburg's opposite claims in his 1923 conference about the universality of a symbol connected to primeval emotions.¹¹⁷ There is no reason to assume that Popper knew of Warburg's lecture, but it is implausible to imagine that Gombrich repeatedly referred to this text without countenancing its critical implications; rather, one must assume that the reference to Popper allowed him to distance himself from some aspects of Warburg's work.

Likewise, it is difficult not to see in Popper's definition of conspiracy theory as a "primitive superstition" (literally, a survival) a negative version of Warburg's *Nachleben der Antike*. Popper represented an alternative perspective in which the survival of paganism was no longer a matter of alluring nymphs and other moving *Pathosformeln* but a disquieting political possibility. Conspiracy theory illustrated the darker, Dionysiac facet of the survival of pagan mythologies: not the serene image of art but the regression into magical thinking, mythology, and primeval fears of invisible entities. Conspiracy theories were *Nachleben der Antike* gone wrong that did not lead to "real art" but to paranoid Nazi propaganda.

In his reflections on propaganda, paranoia, and style, Gombrich had identified a problematic point of contact between art and politics. The political mythologies of Nazism were a direct illustration of the dangers contained in the expressive conception of "style" as the embodiment of invisible entities. Certainly, he found in Warburg a sane rejection of the romantic, Hegelian view of style in terms of collective mentality.¹¹⁸ Yet, this approach came with evolutionistic undertones, a fascination with myth, and a theory of symbols that implied an irreducible element of irrationalism—which led Gombrich to point out that one "cannot overlook" the convergences between some of Warburg's interpretations and the writings of Arthur Moeller van den Bruck.¹¹⁹ After 1945, these elements could no longer be dissociated from the recent past. The mythopoietic "projection of causes" in the world had become Nazi conspiracy theory: "Just as the primitive myth stud-

¹¹⁷ Popper, *Open Society*, 302.

¹¹⁸ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 313.

¹¹⁹ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 240.

ied by anthropologists tends to personalise the forces of the natural universe into beneficent or malign beings,” Gombrich wrote, “so the Nazi propagandist transformed the political universe into a conflict of persons and personifications.”¹²⁰ The “paranoiac myth” led straight to “the more primitive habits of mind which Le Bon attributed to the crowd.”¹²¹ In this context, Gombrich used Popper to make a selective inventory of Warburg’s ideas. He discarded the *Nachleben der Antike*, now assimilated to the modern mythology of conspiracy theories, in favor of tamer “traditions,” and he reformulated Warburg’s conception of style as a Popperian logic of situation that emphasized choice within a range of constrained possibilities. As Ginzburg rightly pointed out, “Gombrich subtly reinterpret[ed] the Warburgian tradition by projecting into it his *own* problems.”¹²²

CONCLUSION

Gombrich explicitly addressed the political motivations behind his opposition to “historicist” conceptions of style. Popper’s crusade against social determinism and its attendant “totalitarian philosophies” had direct implications for the history of art, where “style” perpetuated dangerous mythologies. As a student, Gombrich himself had been attracted by the idea that works of art “are linked with others and with their time by many elusive threads,” before becoming skeptical and, eventually, critical of it.¹²³ It was precisely such ideas that allowed Sedlmayr, his one-time fellow student and rival in Vienna, to turn Riegl’s *Kunstwollen* into the stuff of National-Socialist mythologies.¹²⁴ The influence of historicism and political mythologies in art history could be traced back to “one of Popper’s main opponents,” who had “a foot in both camps, that of political utopianism and of historical holism”: Karl Mannheim. Gombrich indicted one text in particular: the *Beiträge zur Weltanschauungsinterpretation*, the study that provided the methodological scaffolding for Hofstadter’s “paranoid style” essay.¹²⁵

Needless to say, this was a gross mischaracterization on Gombrich’s part—not least because Mannheim had addressed the same criticisms to

¹²⁰ Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 105.

¹²¹ Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*, 107.

¹²² Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 314–15, 20–21. Ginzburg, “Da Warburg a Gombrich,” 74.

¹²³ Gombrich, “The Logic of Vanity Fair,” 925.

¹²⁴ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 16–17.

¹²⁵ Gombrich, “The Logic of Vanity Fair,” 955n2.

Riegl.¹²⁶ But it is significant that Mannheim's 1922 *Beiträge* surfaced in Gombrich's polemic against totalitarian tendencies in the study of style, for it reveals an ambiguity, if not a contradiction, at the core of Hofstadter's project and, more generally, of the idea of "paranoid style." In painting the portrait of the paranoid mind, Hofstadter relied on a notion of style that, for Gombrich, was uncomfortably close to the mythical thought of the primitive and the paranoid worldview of the totalitarian. It reproduced, in the heart of the cultural sciences, "the animistic reaction of turning abstractions into living entities and classes or nations into mythical beings."¹²⁷ Indeed, Hofstadter had done away with Mannheim's sociological attention for the conflicts among social groups that stood behind styles of thought, preferring instead to paint the portrait of a pure "mind."¹²⁸ The subtle line that distinguished the mind that scanned the world for signs of conspiracies from the one that distilled symbols and rhetoric into a dangerous mindset unaffected by the vicissitudes of history had become blurred.

By attempting to dissociate the "paranoid style" from reductive psychological interpretations, Hofstadter's reference to art history revealed a complex and paradoxical picture. For Hofstadter, Gombrich, and Popper, the paranoid style was characterized by the belief in the agency of invisible collectives, a belief that connected primitive superstitions, schizophrenia, conspiracy theories, and totalitarian movements. It stigmatized the irrationalism of illiberal politics. But this critique was legible because it built upon established analogies that had already provided fodder for propaganda in the past. Although they re-elaborated these ideas, the thinkers of the paranoid style remained trapped in a contradiction—one that Gombrich had wrestled with—that led them to rely on "style" as the manifestation of invisible phenomena. In trying to extrapolate from symbolic elements a paranoid *forma mentis* still steeped in myth, magic, and apocalyptic dispositions, they reproduced the mechanism they denounced. The result was no longer a historical interpretation of political protest movements in relation to processes of cultural sedimentation and social transformation; it was the denunciation of a psychological atavism, the conjuring of an eternal enemy, and the production of liberal myths and liberal propaganda—if not of liberal paranoia.

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¹²⁶ Mannheim, "Conservative Thought," 136.

¹²⁷ Gombrich, "Myth and Reality in German Wartime Broadcasts," in *Ideals and Idols*, 107.

¹²⁸ Hofstadter, "Paranoid Style," xxxv.