Eyewitnessing

The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence

Peter Burke

'If you would like to understand . . . history . . . you should look carefully at portraits. In people's faces there is always something of the history of their time to be read, if one knows how to read it.'

GIOVANNI MORELLI

Contents

Introduction: The Testimony of Images

> Ein Bild sagt mehr als 1000 Worte [A picture says more than a thousand words].
> KURT TUCHOLSKY

This book is primarily concerned with the use of images as historical evidence. It is written both to encourage the use of such evidence and to warn potential users of some of the possible pitfalls. In the last generation or so, historians have widened their interests considerably to include not only political events, economic trends and social structures but also the history of mentalities, the history of everyday life, the history of material culture, the history of the body and so on. It would not have been possible for them to carry out research in these relatively new fields if they had limited themselves to traditional sources such as official documents, produced by administrations and preserved in their archives.

For this reason, increasing use is being made of a broader range of evidence, in which images have their place alongside literary texts and oral testimonies. Take the history of the body, for example. Pictures are a guide to changing ideas of sickness and health, and they are even more important as evidence of changing standards of beauty, or the history of the preoccupation with personal appearance on the part of men and women alike. Again, the history of material culture, discussed in Chapter 5 below, would be virtually impossible without the testimony of images. Their testimony also makes an important contribution to the history of mentalities, as Chapters 6 and 7 will try to demonstrate.

The Invisibility of the Visual?

It may well be the case that historians still do not take the evidence of images seriously enough, so that a recent discussion speaks of 'the

invisibility of the visual'. As one art historian puts it, 'historians … prefer to deal with texts and political or economic facts, not the deeper levels of experience that images probe', while another refers to the 'condescension towards images' which this implies.[1]

Relatively few historians work in photographic archives, compared to the numbers who work in repositories of written and typewritten documents. Relatively few historical journals carry illustrations, and when they do, relatively few contributors take advantage of this opportunity. When they do use images, historians tend to treat them as mere illustrations, reproducing them in their books without comment. In cases in which the images are discussed in the text, this evidence is often used to illustrate conclusions that the author has already reached by other means, rather than to give new answers or to ask new questions.

Why should this be the case? In an essay describing his discovery of Victorian photographs, the late Raphael Samuel described himself and other social historians of his generation as 'visually illiterate'. A child in the 1940s, he was and remained, in his own phrase, 'completely pre-televisual'. His education, in school and university alike, was a training in reading texts.[2]

All the same, a significant minority of historians were already using the evidence of images at this time, especially the specialists in periods where written documents are sparse or non-existent. It would be difficult indeed to write about European prehistory, for instance, without the evidence of the cave paintings of Altamira and Lascaux, while the history of ancient Egypt would be immeasurably poorer without the testimony of tomb paintings. In both cases, images offer virtually the only evidence of social practices such as hunting. Some scholars working on later periods also took images seriously. For example, historians of political attitudes, 'public opinion' or propaganda have long been using the evidence of prints. Again, a distinguished medievalist, David Douglas, declared nearly half a century ago that the Bayeux Tapestry was 'a primary source for the history of England' which 'deserves to be studied alongside the accounts in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and in William of Poitiers'.

The employment of images by a few historians goes back much further. As Francis Haskell (1928–2000) pointed out in *History and its Images*, the paintings in the Roman catacombs were studied in the seventeenth century as evidence of the early history of Christianity (and in the nineteenth century, as evidence for social history).[3] The Bayeux Tapestry (illus. 78) was already taken seriously as a historical source by scholars in the early eighteenth century. In the middle of

the century, a series of paintings of French seaports by Joseph Vernet (to be discussed below, Chapter 5), was praised by a critic who remarked that if more painters followed Vernet's example, their works would be useful to posterity because 'in their paintings it would be possible to read the history of manners, of arts and of nations'.[4]

The cultural historians Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) and Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), amateur artists themselves, writing respectively about the Renaissance and the 'autumn' of the Middle Ages', based their descriptions and interpretations of the culture of Italy and the Netherlands on paintings by artists such as Raphael and van Eyck as well as on texts from the period. Burckhardt, who wrote about Italian art before turning to the general culture of the Renaissance, described images and monuments as 'witnesses of past stages of the development of the human spirit', objects 'through which it is possible to read the structures of thought and representation of a given time'.

As for Huizinga, he gave his inaugural lecture at Groningen University in 1905 on 'The Aesthetic Element in Historical Thought', comparing historical understanding to 'vision' or 'sensation' (including the sense of direct contact with the past), and declaring that 'What the study of history and artistic creation have in common is a mode of forming images.' Later on, he described the method of cultural history in visual terms as 'the mosaic method'. Huizinga confessed in his autobiography that his interest in history was stimulated by collecting coins in his boyhood, that he was drawn to the Middle Ages because he visualized that period as 'full of chivalrous knights in plumed helmets', and that his turn away from oriental studies towards the history of the Netherlands was stimulated by an exhibition of Flemish paintings in Bruges in 1902. Huizinga was also a vigorous campaigner on behalf of historical museums.[5]

Another scholar of Huizinga's generation, Aby Warburg (1866–1929), who began as an art historian in the style of Burckhardt, ended his career attempting to produce a cultural history based on images as well as texts. The Warburg Institute, which developed out of Warburg's library, and was brought from Hamburg to London after Hitler's rise to power, has continued to encourage this approach. Thus the Renaissance historian Frances Yates (1899–1981), who began to frequent the Institute in the late 1930s, described herself as being 'initiated into the Warburgian technique of using visual evidence as historical evidence'.[6]

The evidence of pictures and photographs was also employed in the 1930s by the Brazilian sociologist-historian Gilberto Freyre

(1900–1987), who described himself as a historical painter in the style of Titian and his approach to social history as a form of 'impressionism', in the sense of an 'attempt to surprise life in movement'. Following in Freyre's tracks, an American historian of Brazil, Robert Levine, has published a series of photographs of life in Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a commentary that not only locates the photographs in context but discusses the major problems raised by the use of this kind of evidence.[7]

Images were the starting-point for two important studies by the self-styled 'Sunday historian' Philippe Ariès (1914–1982), a history of childhood and a history of death, in both of which visual sources were treated as 'evidence of sensibility and life', on the same basis as 'literature and documents in archives'. The work of Ariès will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter. His approach was emulated by some leading French historians in the 1970s, among them Michel Vovelle, who has worked both on the French Revolution and the old regime which preceded it, and Maurice Agulhon, who is especially concerned with nineteenth-century France.[8]

This 'pictorial turn', as the American critic William Mitchell has called it, is also visible in the English-speaking world.[9] It was in the middle of the 1960s, as he confesses, that Raphael Samuel and some of his contemporaries became aware of the value of photographs as evidence for nineteenth-century social history, helping them construct a 'history from below' focusing on the everyday life and experiences of ordinary people. However, taking the influential journal *Past and Present* as representative of new trends in historical writing in the English-speaking world, it comes as something of a shock to discover that from 1952 to 1975, none of the articles published there included images. In the 1970s, two illustrated articles were published in the journal. In the 1980s, on the other hand, the number increased to fourteen.

That the 1980s were a turning-point in this respect is also suggested by the proceedings of a conference of American historians held in 1985 and concerned with 'the evidence of art'. Published in a special issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, the symposium attracted so much interest that it was quickly republished in book form.[10] Since then, one of the contributors, Simon Schama, has become well known for his use of visual evidence in studies ranging from an exploration of seventeenth-century Dutch culture, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (1987), to a survey of western attitudes to landscape over the centuries, *Landscape and Memory* (1995).

The 'Picturing History' series itself, which was launched in 1995,

and includes the volume you are now reading, is further evidence of the new trend. In the next few years it will be interesting to see how historians from a generation which has been exposed to computers, as well as television, virtually from birth and has always lived in a world saturated with images will approach the visual evidence for the past.

Sources and Traces

Traditionally, historians have referred to their documents as 'sources', as if they were filling their buckets from the stream of Truth, their stories becoming increasingly pure as they move closer to the origins. The metaphor is a vivid one but it is also misleading, in the sense of implying the possibility of an account of the past which is uncontaminated by intermediaries. It is of course impossible to study the past without the assistance of a whole chain of intermediaries, including not only earlier historians but also the archivists who arranged the documents, the scribes who wrote them and the witnesses whose words were recorded. As the Dutch historian Gustaaf Renier (1892–1962) suggested half a century ago, it might be useful to replace the idea of sources with that of 'traces' of the past in the present.[11] The term 'traces' refers to manuscripts, printed books, buildings, furniture, the landscape (as modified by human exploitation), as well as to many different kinds of image: paintings, statues, engravings, photographs.

The uses of images by historians cannot and should not be limited to 'evidence' in the strict sense of the term (as discussed in particular detail in Chapters 5, 6 and 7). Room should also be left for what Francis Haskell has called 'the impact of the image on the historical imagination'. Paintings, statues, prints and so on allow us, posterity, to share the non-verbal experiences or knowledge of past cultures (religious experiences, for example, discussed in Chapter 3 below). They bring home to us what we may have known but did not take so seriously before. In short, images allow us to 'imagine' the past more vividly. As the critic Stephen Bann puts it, our position face-to-face with an image brings us 'face-to-face with history'. The uses of images in different periods as objects of devotion or means of persuasion, of conveying information or giving pleasure, allows them to bear witness to past forms of religion, knowledge, belief, delight and so on. Although texts also offer valuable clues, images themselves are the best guide to the power of visual representations in the religious and political life of past cultures.[12]

This book will therefore investigate the uses of different kinds of

image as what the lawyers call 'admissible evidence' for different kinds of history. The legal analogy has a point. After all, in the last few years, bank robbers, football hooligans and violent policemen have all been convicted on the evidence of videos. Police photographs of crime scenes are regularly used as evidence. By the 1850s, the New York Police Department had created a 'Rogue's Gallery' allowing thieves to be recognized.[13] Indeed, before 1800, French police records already included portraits in their personal files on major suspects.

The essential proposition this book seeks to support and illustrate is that images, like texts and oral testimonies, are an important form of historical evidence. They record acts of eyewitnessing. There is nothing new about this idea, as a famous image demonstrates, the so-called 'Arnolfini portrait' of a husband and wife in the National Gallery in London. The portrait is inscribed *Jan van Eyck fuit hic* (Jan van Eyck was here), as if the painter had acted as a witness to the couple's marriage. Ernst Gombrich has written about 'the eyewitness principle', in other words the rule which artists in some cultures have followed, from the ancient Greeks onwards, to represent what – and only what – an eyewitness could have seen from a particular point at a particular moment.[14]

In similar fashion, the phrase 'the eyewitness style' was introduced into a study of the paintings of Vittore Carpaccio (*c.* 1465–*c.* 1525), and some of his Venetian contemporaries, in order to refer to the love of detail these paintings display and the desire of artists and patrons for 'a painting that looked as truthful as possible, according to prevailing standards of evidence and proof'.[15] Texts sometimes reinforce our impression that an artist was concerned to give accurate testimony. For example, in an inscription on the back of his *Ride for Liberty* (1862), showing three slaves on horseback, man, woman and child, the American painter Eastman Johnson (1824–1906) described his painting as the record of 'a veritable incident in the Civil War, seen by myself'. Terms such as a 'documentary' or 'ethnographic' style have also been used to characterize equivalent images from later periods (below pp 19, 130, 138).

Needless to say, the use of the testimony of images raises many awkward problems. Images are mute witnesses and it is difficult to translate their testimony into words. They may have been intended to communicate a message of their own, but historians not infrequently ignore it in order to read pictures 'between the lines', and learn something that the artists did not know they were teaching. There are obvious dangers in this procedure. To use the evidence of images safely, let alone effectively, it is necessary – as in the case of other kinds of

source – to be aware of its weaknesses. The 'source criticism' of written documents has long formed an essential part of the training of historians. By comparison, the criticism of visual evidence remains undeveloped, although the testimony of images, like that of texts, raises problems of context, function, rhetoric, recollection (whether soon or long after the event), secondhand witnessing and so on. Hence some images offer more reliable evidence than others. Sketches, for example, drawn directly from life (illus. 1, 2), and freed

1 Eugène Delacroix, Sketch for *The Women of Algiers*, *c*. 1832, watercolour with traces of graphite. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

2 Constantin Guys, Watercolour sketch of the Sultan going to the Mosque, 1854. Private collection.

from the constraints of the 'grand style' (discussed in Chapter 8 below), are more trustworthy as testimonies than are paintings worked up later in the artist's studio. In the case of Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), this point may be illustrated by the contrast between his sketch, *Two Seated Women*, and his painting, *The Women of Algiers* (1834), which looks more theatrical and, unlike the original sketch, makes references to other images.

To what extent, and in what ways, do images offer reliable evidence of the past? It would obviously be foolish to attempt a simple general answer to such a question. A sixteenth-century icon of the Virgin Mary and a twentieth-century poster of Stalin both tell historians something about Russian culture, but – despite certain intriguing similarities – there are obviously enormous differences both in what these two images tell us and in what they omit. We ignore at our peril the variety of images, artists, uses of images and attitudes to images in different periods of history.

Varieties of Image

This essay is concerned with 'images' rather than with 'art', a term which only began to be used in the West in the course of the Renaissance, and especially from the eighteenth century onwards, as the aesthetic function of images, at least in elite circles, began to dominate the many other uses of these objects. Irrespective of its aesthetic quality, any image may serve as historical evidence. Maps, decorated plates, ex-votos (illus. 16), fashion dolls and the pottery soldiers buried in the tombs of early Chinese emperors all have something to say to students of history.

To complicate the situation, it is necessary to take into account changes in the kind of image available in particular places and times, and especially two revolutions in image production, the rise of the printed image (woodcut, engraving, etching and so on) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the rise of the photographic image (including film and television) in the nineteenth and twentieth. It would take a large book to analyse the consequences of these two revolutions in the detail they deserve, but a few general observations may be useful all the same.

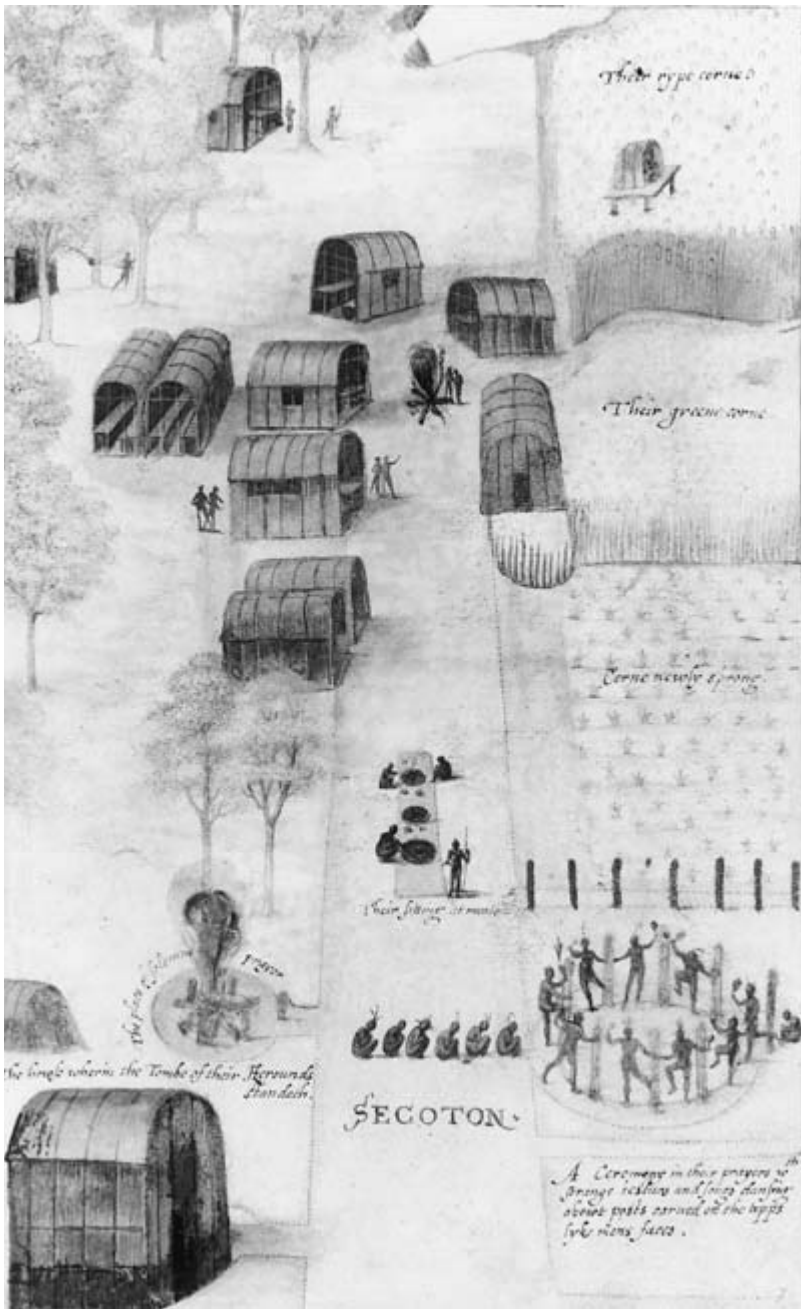
For example, the appearance of images changed. In the early stages of the woodcut and the photograph alike, black and white images replaced coloured paintings. To speculate for a moment, it might be suggested, as has been suggested in the case of the transition from oral to printed messages, that the black and white image is, in

Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, a 'cooler' form of communication than the more illusionistic coloured one, encouraging greater detachment on the part of the viewer. Again, printed images, like later photographs, could be made and transported much more rapidly than paintings, so that images of current events could reach viewers while the events were still fresh in the memory, a point which will be developed in Chapter 8 below.

Another important point to bear in mind in the case of both revolutions is that they made possible a quantum leap in the number of images available to ordinary people. Indeed, it has become difficult even to imagine how few images were in general circulation during the Middle Ages, since the illuminated manuscripts now familiar to us in museums or in reproductions were usually in private hands, leaving only altarpieces and frescos in churches visible to the general public. What were the cultural consequences of these two leaps?

The consequences of printing have commonly been discussed in terms of the standardization and the fixing of texts in permanent form, and similar points might be made about printed images. William M. Ivins Jr (1881–1961), a curator of prints in New York, made a case for the importance of sixteenth-century prints as 'exactly repeatable pictorial statements'. Ivins pointed out that the ancient Greeks, for instance, had abandoned the practice of illustrating botanical treatises because of the impossibility of producing identical images of the same plant in different manuscript copies of the same work. From the late fifteenth century, on the other hand, herbals were regularly illustrated with woodcuts. Maps, which began to be printed in 1472, offer another example of the way in which the communication of information by images was facilitated by the repeatability associated with the press.[16]

In the age of photography, according to the German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) in a famous essay of the 1930s, the work of art changed its character. The machine 'substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence' and produces a shift from the 'cult value' of the image to its 'exhibition value'. 'That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.' Doubts may be and have been raised about this thesis. The owner of a woodcut, for example, may treat it with respect as an individual image, rather than thinking of it as one copy among many. There is visual evidence, from seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of houses and inns, for example, showing that woodcuts and engravings were displayed on walls just as paintings were. More recently, in the age of the photograph, as Michael Camille has argued, reproduction of an



3 John White, Sketch of the Village of Secoton, Virginia, *c.* 1585–7. British Museum, London.

image may actually increase its aura – just as repeated photographs add to the glamour of a film star rather than subtracting from it. If we take individual images less seriously than our ancestors did, a point that still remains to be proved, this may be the result not of reproduction in itself, but of the saturation of our world of experience by more and more images.[17]

'Study the historian before you begin to study the facts,' the author of the well-known textbook, *What is History?*, told his readers.[18] In similar fashion, one might advise anyone planning to utilize the testimony of images to begin by studying the different purposes of their makers. Relatively reliable, for example, are works that were made primarily as records, documenting the remains of ancient Rome, for instance, or the appearance or customs of exotic cultures. The images of the Indians of Virginia by the Elizabethan artist John White (fl. 1584–93), for example (illus. 3), were made on the spot, like the images of Hawaiians and Tahitians by the draughtsmen who accompanied Captain Cook and other explorers, precisely in order to record what had been discovered. 'War artists', sent to the field to portray battles and the life of soldiers on campaign (Chapter 8) and, active from the emperor Charles V's expedition to Tunis to the American intervention in Vietnam, if not later, are usually more reliable witnesses, especially in details, than their colleagues who work exclusively at home. We might describe works of the kinds listed in this paragraph as 'documentary art'.

All the same, it would be unwise to attribute to these artist-reporters an 'innocent eye' in the sense of a gaze which is totally objective, free from expectations or prejudices of any kind. Both literally and metaphorically, these sketches and paintings record a 'point of view'. In the case of White, for instance, we need to bear in mind that he was personally involved in the colonization of Virginia and may have tried to give a good impression of the place by omitting scenes of nakedness, human sacrifice and whatever might have shocked potential settlers. Historians using documents of this kind cannot afford to ignore the possibility of propaganda (Chapter 4), or that of stereotyped views of the 'Other' (Chapter 7), or to forget the importance of the visual conventions accepted as natural in a particular culture or in a particular genre such as the battle-piece (Chapter 8).

In order to support this critique of the innocent eye, it may be useful to take some examples where the historical testimony of images is, or at any rate appears to be, relatively clear and direct: photographs and portraits.

1 Photographs and Portraits

> While photographs may not lie, liars may photograph.
> LEWIS HINE

> If you would like to understand the history of Italy completely, you should look carefully at portraits … In people's faces there is always something of the history of their time to be read, if one knows how to read it.
> GIOVANNI MORELLI

The temptations of realism, more exactly of taking an image for reality, are particularly seductive in the case of photographs and portraits. For this reason these kinds of image will now be analysed in some detail.

Photographic Realism

From an early date in the history of photography, the new medium was discussed as an aid to history. In a lecture delivered in 1888, for example, George Francis urged the systematic collection of photographs as 'the best possible picturing of our lands, buildings and ways of living'. The problem for historians is whether, and to what extent, these pictures can be trusted. It has often been said that 'the camera never lies'. There still remains a temptation in our 'snapshot culture', in which so many of us record our families and holidays on film, to treat paintings as the equivalent of these photographs and so to expect realistic representations from historians and artists alike.

Indeed, it is possible that our sense of historical knowledge has been transformed by photography. As the French writer Paul Valéry (1871–1945) once suggested, our criteria of historical veracity have come to include the question, 'Could such and such a fact, as it is narrated, have been photographed?' Newspapers have long been using photographs as evidence of authenticity. Like television images, these photographs make a powerful contribution to what the critic

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) has called the 'reality effect'. In the case of old photographs of cities, for example, especially when they are enlarged to fill a wall, the viewer may well experience a vivid sensation that he or she could enter the photograph and walk down the street.[1]

The problem with Valéry's question is that it implies a contrast between subjective narrative and 'objective' or 'documentary' photography. This view is widely shared, or at least it used to be. The idea of objectivity, put forward by early photographers, was supported by the argument that the objects themselves leave traces on the photographic plate when it is exposed to the light, so that the resulting image is not the work of human hands but of the 'pencil of nature'. As for the phrase 'documentary photography', it came into use in the 1930s in the USA (shortly after the phrase 'documentary film'), to refer to scenes from the everyday life of ordinary people, especially the poor, as seen through the lenses of, for instance, Jacob Riis (1849–1914), Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), and Lewis Hine (1874–1940), who studied sociology at Columbia University and called his work 'Social Photography'.[2]

However, these 'documents' (illus. 63, for example) need to be placed in context. This is not always easy in the case of photographs, since the identity of the sitters and the photographers is so often unknown, and the photographs themselves, originally – in many cases, at least – part of a series, have become detached from the project or the album in which they were originally displayed, to end up in archives or museums. However, in famous cases like the 'documents' made by Riis, Lange and Hine, something can be said about the social and political context of the photographs. They were made as publicity for campaigns of social reform and in the service of institutions such as the Charity Organisation Society, the National Child Labour Committee and the California State Emergency Relief Administration. Hence their focus, for instance, on child labour, on work accidents and on life in slums. (Photographs made a similar contribution to campaigns for slum clearance in England.) These images were generally designed to appeal to the sympathies of the viewers.

In any case, the selection of subjects and even the poses of early photographs often followed that of paintings, woodcuts and engravings, while more recent photographs quoted or alluded to earlier ones. The texture of the photograph also conveys a message. To take Sarah Graham-Brown's example, 'a soft sepia print can produce a calm aura of "things past"', while a black-and-white image may 'convey a sense of harsh "reality"'.[3]

The film historian Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) once compared Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), for a long time the symbol of objective history, with Louis Daguerre (1787–1851), who was more or less his contemporary, in order to make the point that historians, like photographers, select which aspects of the real world to portray. 'All great photographers have felt free to select motif, frame, lens, filter, emulsion and grain according to their sensibilities. Was it otherwise with Ranke?' The photographer Roy Stryker had made the same essential point in 1940. 'The moment that a photographer selects a subject', he wrote, 'he is working upon the basis of a bias that is parallel to the bias expressed by a historian.'[4]

On occasion, photographers have gone well beyond mere selection. Before the 1880s, in the age of the tripod camera and twenty-second exposures, photographers composed scenes by telling people where to stand and how to behave (as in group photographs to this day), whether they were working in the studio or in the open air. They sometimes constructed their scenes of social life according to the familiar conventions of genre painting, especially Dutch scenes of taverns, peasants, markets and so on (Chapter 6). Looking back on the discovery of photographs by British social historians in the 1960s, Raphael Samuel commented somewhat ruefully on 'our ignorance of the artifices of Victorian photography', noting that 'much of what we reproduced so lovingly and annotated (as we believed) so meticulously was fake – painterly in origin and intention even if it was documentary in form'. For example, to create O. G. Rejlander's famous image of a shivering street urchin, the photographer 'paid a Wolverhampton boy five shillings for the sitting, dressed him up in rags and smudged his face with the appropriate soot'.[5]

Some photographers intervened more than others to arrange objects and people. For example, in the images she shot of rural poverty in the USA in the 1930s, Margaret Bourke-White (1904–1971), who worked for the magazines *Fortune* and *Life*, was more interventionist than Dorothea Lange. Again, some of the 'corpses' to be seen in photographs of the American Civil War (illus. 5) were apparently living soldiers who obligingly posed for the camera. The authenticity of the most famous photograph of the Spanish Civil War, Robert Capa's *Death of a Soldier*, first published in a French magazine in 1936 (illus. 4), has been challenged on similar grounds. For these and other reasons it has been argued that 'Photographs are never evidence of history: they are themselves the historical.'[6]

This is surely too negative a judgement: like other forms of evidence, photographs are both. They are particularly valuable, for

4 Robert Capa, *Death of a Soldier*, 1936, photograph.

5 Timothy O'Sullivan (negative) and Alexander Gardner (positive), *A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July, 1863*, pl. 36 of Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, 2 vols (Washington, DC, 1865–6).

instance, as evidence of the material culture of the past (Chapter 5). In the case of Edwardian photographs, as the historical introduction to a book of reproductions has pointed out, 'we can see how the rich dressed, their posture and demeanour, the restrictiveness of Edwardian dress for women, the elaborate materialism of a culture which believed that wealth, status and property ought to be openly paraded'. The phrase 'candid camera', coined in the 1920s, makes a genuine point, even though the camera has to be held by someone and some photographers are more candid than others.

Source criticism is essential. As the art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) perceptively observed, the evidence of photographs 'is of great use if you know how to cross-examine them'. A spectacular example of this kind of cross-examination is the use of aerial photography (originally developed as a means of reconnaissance in the First and Second World Wars), by historians, notably historians of medieval agriculture and monasticism. The aerial photograph, which 'combines the data of a photograph with that of a plan' and records variations in the surface of the land which are invisible to people on the ground, has revealed the arrangement of the strips of land cultivated by different families, the locations of deserted villages, and the layout of abbeys. It makes possible the reconnaissance of the past.[7]

The Portrait, Mirror or Symbolic Form?

As in the case of photographs, many of us have a strong impulse to view portraits as accurate representations, snapshots or mirror images of a particular sitter as he or she looked at a particular moment. This impulse needs to be resisted for several reasons. In the first place, the painted portrait is an artistic genre that, like other genres, is composed according to a system of conventions which changes only slowly over time. The postures and gestures of the sitters and the accessories or objects represented in their vicinity follow a pattern and are often loaded with symbolic meaning. In that sense a portrait is a symbolic form.[8]

In the second place, the conventions of the genre have a purpose, to present the sitters in a particular way, usually favourable – although the possibility that Goya was satirizing the sitters in his famous *Charles IV and Family* (1800) should not be forgotten. The fifteenth-century Duke of Urbino, Federico da Montefeltre, who had lost an eye in a tournament, was always represented in profile. The protruding jaw of the emperor Charles V is known to posterity only through the unflattering reports of foreign ambassadors, since painters

6 Thomas Gainsborough, *Mrs. Philip Thicknesse, née Anne Ford*, 1760, oil on canvas. Cincinatti Art Museum.

(including Titian) disguised the deformity. Sitters generally put on their best clothes to be painted, so that historians would be ill advised to treat portraits as evidence of everyday costume.

It is likely that sitters were also on their best behaviour, especially in portraits made before 1900, in the sense of making gestures, or of allowing themselves to be represented as making gestures, which were more elegant than usual. Thus the portrait is not so much a painted equivalent of a 'candid camera' as a record of what the sociologist Erving Goffman has described as 'the presentation of self', a process in which artist and sitter generally colluded. The conventions of self-representation were more or less informal according to the sitter or indeed the period. In England in the later eighteenth century, for example, there was a moment of what might be called 'stylized informality', which may be illustrated by the painting of Sir Brooke Boothby lying on the ground in a forest with a book (illus. 51). However, this informality had its limits, some of them revealed by the shocked reactions of contemporaries to Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of Mrs Thicknesse, who was represented crossing her legs under her skirt (illus. 6). One lady remarked that 'I should be sorry to have any one I loved set forth in such a manner'. By contrast, in the later twentieth century, the same posture on the part of Princess Diana in Bryan Organ's famous portrait could be taken to be normal.

The accessories represented together with the sitters generally reinforce their self-representations. These accessories may be regarded as 'properties' in the theatrical sense of the term. Classical columns stand for the glories of ancient Rome, while throne-like chairs give

the sitters a regal appearance. Certain symbolic objects refer to specific social roles. In an otherwise illusionistic portrait by Joshua Reynolds, the huge key held by the sitter is there to signify that he is the Governor of Gibraltar (illus. 7). Living accessories also make their appearance. In Italian Renaissance art, for example, a large dog in a male portrait is generally associated with hunting and so with aristocratic masculinity, while a small dog in a portrait of a woman or a married couple probably symbolizes fidelity (implying that wife is to husband as dog is to human). [9]

7 Joshua Reynolds, *Lord Heathfield, Governor of Gibraltar*, 1787, oil on canvas. National Gallery, London.

8 Joseph-Siffréde Duplessis, *Louis XVI in Coronation Robes*, *c*. 1770s, oil on canvas. Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

Some of these conventions survived and were democratized in the age of the photographic studio portrait, from the mid nineteenth century onwards. Camouflaging the differences between social classes, the photographers offered their clients what has been called 'temporary immunity from reality'.[10] Whether they are painted or photographic, what portraits record is not social reality so much as social illusions, not ordinary life but special performances. But for this very reason, they offer priceless evidence to anyone interested in the history of changing hopes, values or mentalities.

This evidence is particularly illuminating in those cases when it is possible to study a series of portraits over the long term and so to note changes in the manner of representing the same kinds of people, kings for example. The large portrait of Richard II at Westminster, for instance, is unusual in its size, but the frontal image of a king enthroned, wearing a crown and holding a sceptre in one hand and an orb in the other was commonplace on medieval coins and seals. However stiff it may look today, the famous portrait of Louis XIV in his coronation robes by Hyacinthe Rigaud (1659–1743) made a conscious move towards informality by placing the crown on a cush-

9 François Girard, Aquatint after Louis Hersent's state portrait of Louis Philippe (original exhibited 1831, destroyed 1848). Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

ion instead of on the king's head and by representing Louis leaning on his sceptre as if it were a walking-stick. In its turn the Rigaud portrait became exemplary. What had been invention turned into convention. Thus a series of French state portraits evoked Rigaud's image of Louis XIV by showing Louis XV, Louis XVI (illus. 8) and Charles X all leaning on their sceptres in the same way, perhaps in order to emphasize dynastic continuity or to suggest that the later rulers were worthy successors of Louis 'the Great'.

On the other hand, after the revolution of 1830 and the replacement of absolute by constitutional monarchy, the new ruler, Louis Philippe, was represented in a deliberately modest way, wearing the uniform of the National Guard instead of coronation robes, and closer to the eye level of the viewer than had been customary, although the king still stands on a dais and the traditional throne and rich curtains remain (illus. 9).[11] The fact that the artists, sitters and a number of viewers would have been aware of the earlier paintings in the series increases the significance of even small divergences from the traditional model.

In the twentieth century, leaving aside deliberate anachronisms like the portrait of Hitler as a medieval knight (illus. 30), the state portrait

was transformed. Fyodor Shurpin's portrait of Stalin, for example, *The Morning of the Motherland* (1946–8), reproduced on the cover of this book, associates the dictator with modernity, symbolized by the tractors and pylons in the background as well as by the sunrise. At the same time, the genre 'state portrait' was overtaken by events in the sense of becoming more and more associated with the past in the age of the signed official photograph and the moving image on the screen.

Reflections on Reflections

Paintings have often been compared to windows and to mirrors, and images are constantly described as 'reflecting' the visible world or the world of society. One might have said that they are like photographs – but as we have seen, even photographs are not pure reflections of reality. So how can images be used as historical evidence? The answer to the question, which will be elaborated in this book, might be summed up in three points.

1. The good news for historians is that art can provide evidence for aspects of social reality which texts pass over, at least in some places and times, as in the case of hunting in ancient Egypt (Introduction).

2. The bad news is that representational art is often less realistic than it seems and distorts social reality rather than reflecting it, so that historians who do not take account of the variety of the intentions of painters or photographers (not to mention their patrons and clients) can be seriously misled.

3. However, returning to the good news, the process of distortion is itself evidence of phenomena that many historians want to study: mentalities, ideologies and identities. The material or literal image is good evidence of the mental or metaphorical 'image' of the self or of others.

The first point is obvious enough, but the second and third points may deserve a little more elaboration. Paradoxically enough, the historian's pictorial turn has come at a time of debate, when common assumptions about the relation between 'reality' and representations (whether literary or visual) have been challenged, a time when the term 'reality' is increasingly placed within inverted commas. In this debate the challengers have made some important points at the expense of the 'realists' or 'positivists'. For example, they have stressed the importance of artistic conventions and have noted that even the artistic style known as 'realism' has its own rhetoric. They have pointed out the importance of 'point of view' in photographs and paintings in both the literal and the metaphorical senses of that

phrase, referring to the physical standpoint and also to what might be called the 'mental standpoint' of the artist.

At one level, then, images are unreliable sources, distorting mirrors. Yet they compensate for this disadvantage by offering good evidence at another level, so that historians can turn a liability into an asset. For example, images are at once an essential and a treacherous source for historians of mentalities, concerned as they are with unspoken assumptions as much as with conscious attitudes. Images are treacherous because art has its own conventions, because it follows a curve of internal development as well as reacting to the outside world. On the other hand, the testimony of images is essential for historians of mentalities, because an image is necessarily explicit on issues that may be evaded more easily in texts. Images can bear witness to what is not put into words. The very distortions to be found in old representations are evidence of past viewpoints or 'gazes' (Chapter 7). For example, medieval world maps, such as the famous Hereford map that shows Jerusalem in the centre of the world, are valuable evidence of medieval world views. Even Jacopo Barbari's famous early-sixteenth-century woodcut of Venice, apparently realistic as it is, may be interpreted, and has been interpreted, as a symbolic image, an example of 'moralized geography'.[12]

Nineteenth-century images of European harems (those painted by Ingres, for example), may tell us little or nothing about the domestic world of Islam, but they have a great deal to say about the fantasy world of the Europeans who created these images, bought them, or viewed them in exhibitions or in books (Chapter 7).[13] Again, images may help posterity tune in to the collective sensibility of a past period. For example the early nineteenth-century European image of the defeated leader symbolized the nobility or the romanticism of failure, which was one of the ways in which the age saw itself, or more exactly one of the ways in which certain prominent groups saw themselves.

As the last remark about groups suggests, it can be extremely misleading to view art as a simple expression of a 'spirit of the age' or *Zeitgeist*. Cultural historians have often been tempted to treat certain images, famous works of art in particular, as representative of the period in which they were produced. Temptations should not always be resisted, but this one has the disadvantage of assuming that historical periods are homogeneous enough to be represented by a single picture in this way. Cultural differences and cultural conflicts are surely to be expected in any period.

It is of course possible to focus on these conflicts, as the Hungarian Marxist Arnold Hauser (1892–1978) did in his *Social History of Art*,

first published in 1951. Hauser viewed paintings as so many reflections or expressions of social conflicts, between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, for instance, or between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. As Ernst Gombrich pointed out in his review of Hauser's book, this approach is still too simple, not to say crudely reductionist. In any case, the approach works better as an explanation of general trends in artistic production than as an interpretation of particular images.[14]

There are, however, alternative ways of discussing the possible relation between images and the culture (or cultures, or sub-cultures) in which they were produced. In the case of the testimony of images – as in so many other cases – the witnesses are least unreliable when they are telling us something they, in this case the artists, do not know they know. In his well-known discussion of the place of animals in early modern English society, Keith Thomas remarked that 'In David Loggan's late-seventeenth-century engravings of Cambridge there are dogs everywhere … The overall total comes to 35.' What the engraver and the viewers of the time took for granted has become a matter of interest to cultural historians.[15]

Morelli's Ears

This last example illustrates another point relevant to historians and detectives alike, the importance of paying attention to small details. Sherlock Holmes once remarked that he solved his cases by paying attention to small clues, in the same way as a physician diagnoses illness by paying attention to apparently trivial symptoms (reminding readers that Holmes's creator, Arthur Conan Doyle, had been a student of medicine). In a celebrated essay, comparing the approach of Sherlock Holmes to that of Sigmund Freud in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg has described the pursuit of small clues as an epistemological paradigm, an intuitive alternative to reasoning. Ginzburg's former colleague at the University of Bologna, Umberto Eco, seems to be referring to this essay in his novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) when he introduces his friar-detective, Brother William of Baskerville, in the act of following the tracks of an animal. The Dutch historian Renier's language of 'traces' (Introduction) expresses a similar idea.[16]

Another observer of significant details, as Ginzburg noted, was the Italian connoisseur Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891). Morelli, who had had a medical training, seems to have been inspired by the work of the palaeontologists who try to reconstruct whole animals from surviving

fragments of bone, making the classical adage *ex ungue leonem* ('from the claw, the lion') come true. In similar fashion, Morelli developed a method, which he called 'experimental', for identifying the author of a particular painting in cases of controversial attributions.

The method, which Morelli described as reading 'the language of forms', was to examine with care small details such as the shapes of hands and ears, which each artist – whether consciously or unconsciously – represents in a distinctive manner, allowing Morelli to identify what he called the 'fundamental form' (*Grundform*) of the ear or the hand in Botticelli, for example, or Bellini. These forms might be described as symptoms of authorship, which Morelli regarded as more reliable evidence than written documents. Conan Doyle probably knew about Morelli's ideas, while the cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt found his method fascinating.

Aby Warburg's famous essay on Botticelli's representation of the movement of hair and drapery does not refer to Morelli, but it may be viewed as an adaptation of his method to the purposes of cultural history, an adaptation that the quotation from Morelli in the epigraph to this chapter suggests he would have approved. This is the model that I shall try to follow, as far as I can, in this book.[17]

Siegfried Kracauer was thinking along similar lines when he claimed that a study of German films, for example, would reveal something about German life that other sources could not. 'The whole dimension of everyday life with its infinitesimal movements and its multitude of transitory actions could be disclosed nowhere but on the screen … films illuminate the realm of bagatelles, of little events.'[18]

The interpretation of images through an analysis of details has become known as 'iconography'. The achievements and the problems of the iconographical method will be examined in the following chapter.

References

Introduction

1 Gordon Fyfe and John Law, 'On the Invisibility of the Visual', in Fyfe and Law, eds, *Picturing Power* (London, 1988), pp. 1–14; Roy Porter, 'Seeing the Past', *Past and Present*, CXVIII (1988), pp. 186–205; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (1990: English trans. London, 1994), p. 3; Ivan Gaskell, 'Visual History', in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, (1991: second edn Cambridge, 2000), pp. 187–217; Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London, 1996), p. 7.

2 Raphael Samuel, 'The Eye of History', in his *Theatres of Memory*, vol. I (London, 1994), pp. 315–36.

3 David C. Douglas and G. W. Greenaway, eds, *English Historical Documents, 1042–1189* (London, 1953), p. 247.

4 Francis Haskell, *History and its Images* (New Haven, 1993), pp. 123–4, 138–44; the critic is quoted in Léon Lagrange, *Les Vernet et la peinture au 18e siècle* (second edn Paris, 1864), p. 77.

5 Haskell, *History*, pp. 9, 309, 335–46, 475, 482–94; Burckhardt quoted in Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt* (Chicago, 2000), pp. 361–2; on Huizinga, cf. Christoph Strupp, *Johan Huizinga: Geschichtswissenschaft als Kulturgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1999), especially pp. 67–74, 116, 226.

6 Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays* (London, 1975), p. 4; cf. *idem*, *Ideas and Ideals in the North European Renaissance* (London, 1984), pp. 312–5, 321.

7 Robert M. Levine, *Images of History: 19th and Early 20th Century Latin American Photographs as Documents* (Durham, NC, 1989).

8 Philippe Ariès, *Un historien de dimanche* (Paris, 1980), p. 122; cf. Michel Vovelle, ed., *Iconographie et histoire des mentalités* (Aix, 1979); Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789–1880* (1979: English trans. Cambridge, 1981).

9 William J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago, 1992), introduction.

10 Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds, *Art and History: Images and their Meanings* (Cambridge, 1988).

11 Gustaaf J. Renier, *History, its Purpose and Method* (London, 1950).

12 Haskell, *History*, p. 7; Stephen Bann, 'Face-to-Face with History', *New Literary History* XXIX (1998), pp. 235–46.

13 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst, 1988), pp. 66–102; Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, 1989), pp. 28–9.

14 Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (2 vols, Cambridge, MA, 1953); cf Linda Seidel, *Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait: Stories of an Icon* (Cambridge,

1993); Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye* (London, 1982), p. 253.

15 Patricia F. Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 5, 125.

16 On texts, Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto, 1962); cf. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (2 vols, Cambridge, 1979). On images, William H. Ivins, jr, *Prints and Visual Communication* (Cambridge, MA, 1953); cf. David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print 1470–1550* (New Haven, 1994), p. 239.

17 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936: English trans. in *Illuminations* [London, 1968], pp. 219–44; cf. Michael Camille, 'The *Très Riches Heures*: An Illuminated Manuscript in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Critical Inquiry* XVII (1990–1), pp. 72–107.

18 Edward H. Carr. *What is History*? (Cambridge, 1961), p. 17.

1 *Photographs and Portraits*

1 Francis quoted in James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion and Folklife in an American City* (Urbana, 1980), p. 271; Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect' (1968: English trans. in *The Rustle of Language*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 141–8).

2 Roy E. Stryker and Paul H. Johnstone, 'Documentary Photographs', in Caroline Ware, ed., *The Cultural Approach to History* (New York, 1940), pp. 324–30; F. J. Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography* (London, 1972); Maren Stange, *Symbols of Social Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (Cambridge, 1989); Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, 1989), pp. 190–2.

3 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst, 1988), pp. 117–52; Stange, *Symbols*, pp. 2, 10, 14–15, 18–19; Sarah Graham-Brown, *Palestinians and their Society, 1880–1946: A Photographic Essay* (London, 1980), p. 2.

4 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (New York, 1969), pp. 51–2; cf. Dagmar Barnouw, *Critical Realism: History, Photography and the Work of Siegfried Kracauer* (Baltimore, 1994); Stryker and Johnstone, 'Photographs'.

5 Raphael Samuel, 'The Eye of History', in his *Theatres of Memory*, vol. I (London, 1994), pp. 315–36, at p. 319.

6 Trachtenberg, *Reading*, pp. 71–118, 164–230; Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography*: *A Cultural History* (London, 1997), pp. 178–85; Michael Griffin, 'The Great War Photographs', in B. Brennen and H. Hardt, eds, *Picturing the Past* (Urbana, 1999), pp. 122–57, at pp. 137–8; Tagg, *The Burden*, p. 65.

7 Paul Thompson and Gina Harkell, *The Edwardians in Photographs* (London, 1979), p. 12; John Ruskin, *The Cestus of Aglaia* (1865–6: reprinted in his *Works*, vol. XIX [London, 1905], p. 150); M. D. Knowles, 'Air Photography and History', in J. K. S. St Joseph, ed., *The Uses of Air Photography* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 127–37.

8 David Smith, 'Courtesy and its Discontents', *Oud-Holland* C (1986), pp. 2–34; Peter Burke, 'The Presentation of Self in the Renaissance Portrait', in Burke, *Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 150–67; Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London, 1991).

9 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, 1958); the English examples from Desmond Shawe-Taylor, *The Georgians: Eighteenth-*

Century Portraiture and Society (London, 1990).

10 Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effect* (New York, 1981), p. 70.

11 Michael Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis Philippe* (New Haven, 1988), p. 3.

12 J. Brian Harley, 'Deconstructing the Map' (1989: reprinted in T. J. Barnes and James Duncan, eds, *Writing Worlds* [London, 1992], pp. 231–47). Cf. Jürgen Schulz, 'Jacopo Barbari's View of Venice: Map Making, City Views and Moralized Geography', *Art Bulletin* LX (1978), pp. 425–74.

13 Ruth B. Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature* (New Haven, 2000).

14 Jan Bialostocki, 'The Image of the Defeated Leader in Romantic Art' (1983: reprinted in his *The Message of Images* (Vienna, 1988), pp. 219–33; Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (2 vols, London 1951); cf. the criticism of Ernest H. Gombrich, 'The Social History of Art' (1953; reprinted in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* [London 1963], pp. 86–94).

15 Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (London, 1983), p. 102.

16 Carlo Ginzburg, 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm' (1978: reprinted in his *Myths, Emblems, Clues* [London 1990], pp. 96–125).

17 'Ivan Lermolieff' (Giovanni Morelli), *Kunstkritische Studien über italienische Malerei* (3 vols, Leipzig 1890–3), especially vol. I, pp. 95–9; cf. Hauser, *Social History*, pp. 109–10, and Ginzburg, 'Clues', pp. 101–2; Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (1932: English trans Los Angeles 1999).

18 Siegfried Kracauer, 'History of the German Film', (1942: reprinted in his *Briefwechsel*, ed. V. Breidecker [Berlin 1996], pp. 15–18).

2 *Iconography and Iconology*

1 Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (2 vols, Cambridge, MA, 1953); Eddy de Jongh 'Realism and Seeming Realism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting', (1971: English trans. in Wayne Franits, ed., *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered* [Cambridge, 1997], pp. 21–56); *idem*, 'The Iconological Approach to Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting', in Franz Grijzenhout and Henk van Veen, eds, *The Golden Age of Dutch Painting in Historical Perspective* (1992: English trans. Cambridge, 1999), pp. 200–23.

2 Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (New York, 1939), pp. 3–31.

3 Ernest H. Gombrich, 'Aims and Limits of Iconology', in his *Symbolic Images* (London, 1972), pp. 1–25, at p. 6; de Jongh, 'Approach'. Cf. Robert Klein, 'Considérations sur les fondements de l'iconographie' (1963: reprinted in *La Forme et l'intelligible* [Paris 1970], pp. 353–74).

4 Panofsky, *Iconology*, pp. 150–5; Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958: second edn Oxford, 1980), pp. 121–8.

5 Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (1932: English trans. Los Angeles, 1999), pp. 112–15.

6 Charles Hope, 'Artists, Patrons and Advisers in the Italian Renaissance', in Guy F. Lytle and Stephen Orgel, eds, *Patronage in the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 293–343.

7 Ernest H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford, 1969); K. Bruce McFarlane, *Hans Memling* (Oxford, 1971).

8 Ronald Paulson, *Emblem and Expression* (London, 1975); Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, eds, *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge, 1988).

9 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London, 1995).

10 Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting*