# JEAN-PIERRE VERNANT AND THE HISTORY OF THE IMAGE

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Ambitious writing on classical art has, in recent years, made efforts to rethink or to bypass traditional categories of academic aesthetics.[1] It has offered historicist accounts of the image, pondered classical artwriting (or the absence thereof), embraced new terms like "visual culture," borrowed methods from the social sciences, traded art objects for "viewing experiences," and so on. These developments have reinvigorated a field that, almost by definition, is not on the cutting edge; they have been an unalloyed good. In the present essay, however, I voice some long-standing concerns about the viability of this "new classical art history" as presently constituted. Simply put, I am not convinced that the category of the aesthetic is so easily jettisoned, or that terms like "visual culture" or "viewing experience" provide real alternatives to the traditional vocabulary of the history of art (after all, "culture" and "experience" were, along with "style," probably the three core concepts of that discipline in its High Modern orthodoxy). At the same time, I strongly suspect that the strangeness and, indeed, the radical promise of those terms often go unacknowledged. There is something undisciplined, even deeply crazy, about the idea that we can make meaningful statements about lumps of stone and clay that were shaped twenty-five centuries ago;

1 The present essay is adapted from my forthcoming book *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* © 2010 by The University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved. Used with permission. I am grateful to Verity Platt and Michael Squire for the invitation to contribute to this volume and for their comments, and to numerous friends, especially Jaś Elsner and Arnold Davidson, for discussing the issues with me.



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I wish to hold onto that, to acknowledge the glint of madness in the eye of a Winckelmann, a Richter, or a Beazley.

It is telling that Martin Heidegger, writing in the 1930s, could critique contemporary accounts of Greek art in terms remarkably pertinent to the present volume (1979.80):

> The magnificent art of Greece remains without a corresponding cognitive-conceptual meditation on it, such meditation not having to be identical with aesthetics. The lack of such a simultaneous reflection or meditation on great art does not imply that Greek art was only "lived," that the Greeks wallowed in a murky brew of "experiences" braced by neither concepts nor knowledge. It was their good fortune that the Greeks had no "lived experiences."

For Heidegger, the problem of an "art of art history" in classical Greece (that is, the absence of a fully fledged "cognitive-conceptual meditation" on art before Plato) does not throw us back onto a Romantic notion of "experience"; it is not evidence for or against the intelligibility of Greek "aesthetics" in the strict sense; and it does not imply that the Greeks lacked "concepts," whether of art or anything else. The point, for now, is simply that the terms have changed remarkably little in the seventy-five years since Heidegger wrote. My impulse, accordingly, is not to suggest that the new developments in classical art history are too radical and that we need to stick with the old terms; it is, on the contrary, to suggest that the new developments do not go half far enough, and that an investigation of terms like "image," "style," "beholder," in their ordinary use, might show us a way out of an impasse that, all too often, goes unacknowledged. To that end, the bulk of this paper will be devoted to an examination of the work of the most important and the most authentically "new" voice in the study of ancient art of the last fifty years: the great French classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant.

This characterization of Vernant may sound extravagant, since most people would not call him an art historian at all but an historian of religion. But Vernant's studies of the historical ontology of the classical statue have been influential even amongst scholars with no connection to the Paris School. The present volume simply would not exist without Vernant's Collège de France seminars of the 1970s. Vernant's historicism was extreme, and problematic, and yet profound in every sense. With charac-

teristic acuity, he zeroed in on the crucial question: what is at stake, what is entailed, in the seemingly innocent application of the word "image" to certain ancient artifacts? In so doing, he interrogated our agreement, or disagreement, with criteria of identification, recognition, denomination, and classification. What are the criteria by which we recognize an ancient image as such, and by which we recognize changes in style in images over time? Although Vernant's account has serious problems, as we shall see, it is truly exemplary in the sense that even its vulnerabilities are illuminating. Working through Vernant's arguments brings out very rapidly some thorny problems inherent to any historicist account of the image—problems that confront both culturalism and what, for want of a better term, I shall call neo-empiricism (the study of the "viewing experience").

Vernant begins from the crucial insight that figural representations were grouped with signs in the archaic period. The verb γράφειν, for instance, could mean writing, drawing, and painting; γράμματα could be both letters and painted figures; σήματα, "signs," could be statues, unworked slabs, bird omens, or symbols. By the fourth century, however, philosophers like Plato and Xenophon could think of figural representation as an autonomous category, distinct from signs. Not only that, but they could theorize figural representation in a new way: as the imitation or μίμησις of visible appearance. For Vernant, this change was momentous. He argued that it amounted to the emergence of a new, historically specific class of entity: "The *image* properly speaking, that is, the image conceived as an imitative artifice reproducing in the form of a counterfeit the external appearance of real things" (Vernant 1991.152; emphasis added). The classical period of Greece witnessed "the birth of images."

Vernant traces this emergence in a number of studies. In general, he argues that all of early Greek statuary evolved out of "aniconic" figures, mere slabs of stone and planks of wood. Such objects did not represent by means of imitation or resemblance but through substitution.[2] For Vernant, all of archaic statuary was an extension and elaboration of this principle.

2 Vernant 1983.305–20, 1990.17–82, 1991.141–92. See also Elsner 1996. More recently, Steiner 2001.3–78 and passim follows Vernant's arguments. Although they are known chiefly from literary accounts, such *argoi lithoi*, "unworked stones," have been found in a late seventh-century context near the Temple of Apollo at Metaponto in Southern Italy and in a sixth-century context at Paestum. Metaponto: Adamesteanu 1970. Paestum: Greco et al. 2001.39.

What we might call a "statue" was, for the Greeks, a *symbole plastique*: a substitute or a stand-in and not an image. It was, in a word, a σῆμα or "sign."[3] Its referent might be a dead person (in the case of funerary art), a divinity (in the case of cult statues), or a sacrificial ritual (in the case of votives). All were, in one way or another, absent, hence invisible: the dead were gone below, the gods were difficult to perceive, the sacrifice was an ephemeral act that slipped into the past. But the sign was a constant presence in the here and now. Hence the dual function of Greek sculpture was to mark absence while overcoming it; to mark the alterity of the supernatural while giving it form (Vernant 1991.153; emphasis added):

> In the context of religious thought, every form of figuration must produce *an inevitable tension*: the idea is to establish real contact with the world beyond, to actualize it, to make it present, and thereby to participate intimately in the divine; yet by the same move, it must also emphasize what is inaccessible and mysterious in divinity, its alien quality, its otherness.

Even in iconic statuary, the σῆμα continued to operate "in the paradoxical manner of a double" (Vernant 1990.32; my translation):

> It inscribes absence, emptiness, at the very heart of that which it makes visible as present. The being it evokes, like a substitute, appears in the form of the stone as that which has gone far away, that which would not deign to be there, that which belongs to an inaccessible "elsewhere."

On this view, in short, the archaic "statue-sign" was an exercise in dialectic: a chiastic interplay of presence in absence, presence *as* absence (cf. Vernant 1991.168). Only in the classical period—perhaps even as late as the fourth century—did the concept of the "image" emerge.

Vernant's interventions have been hugely influential. Instead of taking the identification of image and imitation for a theoretical premise,

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3 Greek applies this last term chiefly to tomb sculpture, but Vernant argues that the formulaic nature of early Greek statuary made it misleading to make fine distinctions on the basis of nomenclature. In this regard, he has been seconded in Sourvinou-Inwood 1995.

Vernant made it a topic of historical investigation. In so doing, he opened the study of classical art to new types of questions and new types of answers: the strict definition of a "paradigm shift." While one might quibble with his philology and the evolutionary history that he proposed, this contribution was nothing short of a landmark, and much of the most exciting work in Greek sculpture over the last thirty years shows his influence. This scholar, a giant in the field of Greek religion, wound up being one of the most important classical art historians of his generation as well.

Yet Vernant's work is not without difficulties. Specifically, Vernant has a tendency to elide a crucial distinction between what he calls "the image, properly speaking," an historically specific category that emerged in the classical period, and "the notion of figural representation," a much broader term. This elision has important consequences for his arguments overall, for it renders unclear the very nature of archaic art, hence what was new about the classical image.

Sometimes it sounds as though Vernant is making a fairly straightforward claim to the effect that a new concept of "the image" emerged in the classical period. Earlier Greeks, accordingly, lacked this concept. Instead, they used the language of signs to talk about figural representations; that is, they classed figural representations along with symbolic operators like bird omens and alphabetic characters. Note that, on this view, it need not follow that the Greeks made no distinction between figural representations and symbols, anymore than the fact that the Greeks classed men and women together as mortals would mean that they equated men with women. Analogy is not identity.

At other times, however, Vernant seems to make a much more radical claim. In this version, it is not merely the concept of the image "properly speaking" that turns to have been absent from archaic Greece. It is the very "notion of figural representation" as such (Vernant 1991.152; emphasis added):

> The notion of figural representation does not just come from itself. Neither univocal nor permanent, it is what might be called a historical category; a construct elaborated, not without difficulty, through very different routes in different civilizations . . . At the pivotal point of the fifth and fourth centuries . . . the category of figural representation *emerges* in its specific features.

When arguing in this vein, Vernant's claim is not just that archaic Greeks lacked the specifically classical concept of the image. It is that they lacked any concept of figural representation whatsoever, such that what look to us like statues are in fact "symbolic actualizations" of the divine, and "figural representation" is a creation of the classical period.[4]

In the first, or weak, version of the argument, Vernant *distinguishes* "figural representations" from "images properly speaking," such that the early Greeks could possess the former while lacking the latter. In the second, or strong, version, however, he *equates* "figural representations" with "images properly speaking" in such a way that lacking the latter means lacking the former as well.[5] This second, strong version of the thesis is the more interesting but also the more problematic of the two.

One problem immediately arises with the claim that figural representation did not exist before the fourth century, that what look like archaic statues were really signs, σήματα. It is unclear what might serve as a criterion of identity for "figural representations" in this version of the thesis. If every civilization had a completely unique and idiosyncratic "notion of figural representation," then there would be no grounds for comparing one "notion" with another. There would be no term of comparison. As a practical matter, there would be no grounds for modern archaeologists and philologists to recognize ancient figural representations or images as such. Here the example of Lascaux is instructive. Does Vernant believe that the Paleolithic cave dwellers lacked *any* "notion of figural representation"? To be sure, they need not have subscribed to a post-Platonic view of the image as "an imitative artifice reproducing in the form of a counterfeit the external appearance of real things." (It would be astonishing if they did so.) But that is not the same as lacking any notion at all. Absent some shared notion or

4 All quotations to be found in Vernant 1991.151–52. Distinguishing between these views can be tricky. In the space of two pages, for instance, Vernant can affirm an "advent of figuration" in eighth-century Greece; deny that any of the archaic words for "divine idol" has "any relation whatsoever to the idea of resemblance or imitation, of figural representation in the strict sense"; and assert that "the category of figural representation emerges in its specific features" only circa 400. It seems, in other words, that there is "figuration" from the eighth century, but no "figural representation in the strict sense" until the fourth. Here "figural representation in the strict sense" corresponds to a theory of "resemblance or imitation," that is, to Platonism. But this definition seems either to obscure or to beg all the key questions. In what follows, I try to untangle some of these statements, but there is always the risk of forcing Vernant to be precise when he is deliberately vague.

5 See "The Birth of Images" in Vernant 1990.

concept, Vernant and the rest of us ought not to be able to recognize the cave paintings as paintings in the first place. By extension, there ought to be no good reason for Vernant to introduce *kouroi* into his discussion, but not ashlar blocks or retaining walls or spindle whorls. The very selection of some artifacts (i.e., *kouroi*) as bearing comparison with "images properly speaking" begs some important questions.

But the real issues lie deeper. The essence of Vernant's radical argument is that the early Greeks did not experience, did not see, statues either as "figural representations" or as "images properly speaking"; they experienced them, saw them, as signs or "presentifications." So the question is: what will count as experiencing something as a "figural representation" or an image? The question is one of criteria, and it holds the key to our understanding not just of Vernant but of the problem he raises: the problem of radical historicism in the history of art. How can we know what people saw, hence what counted as a figural representation (or as an image) in the Greek form of life? What will count as proof of our claims in this regard?

It is useful at this point to contrast Vernant's historicization of the image with a better known exercise in the historical analysis of concepts: Michel Foucault's account of Greek erotics.

> Our carving of sexual behaviors into homo- and heterosexual is absolutely not relevant to the Greeks and Romans. This means two things: on the one hand, that they did not have the notion, the *concept*, of homo- and heterosexual; and, on the other hand, that they did not have the *experience* of them.[6]

Of course, Foucault was not out to deny that Greek men engaged in practices that would today cause them to be identified (and, in many cases, to identify themselves) as homosexuals. Quite the opposite: that fact was his point of departure. His argument was that the ancient practices were articulated according to different criteria, proceeded under different rules and in

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6 Michel Foucault, quoted in Davidson 2001.180–81. My reading of Foucault is indebted to Davidson in every way. For other retreats to "erotics" as a comparison for the historicist and essentialist dilemmas of the "art of art history" in antiquity, see Squire and Habinek in this volume.

different institutional settings from those of today. On the one hand, there were certain physical acts, more or less constant across the ages; this constancy is what enables comparison between ancients and moderns in the first place. On the other, there were historically specific ways of *conceptualizing* and *experiencing* those acts within broader "fields of stabilization." These fields were the topic of Foucault's historical inquiry, up to and including his prime *desideratum*, a "history of the present."

It may sound as though Vernant is mounting a similar argument. Like Foucault, he says that the Greeks lacked a concept and an experience that most moderns take for granted. In Vernant's case, the concept was "the image" and the experience was, presumably, "the experience of seeing an image as such" (the phrase is mine, not his). One might, therefore, imagine the following analogy between the two histories:

Statues : The Concept/Experience of "Image"

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Sexual Behaviors : The Concept/Experience of "Homosexual"

But this analogy would be false; the terms are incommensurate. Part of Foucault's claim is that engaging in certain sexual behaviors is not a sufficient condition for being a "homosexual." Greek men, for instance, engaged in the relevant behaviors (e.g., having sexual intercourse with one another), but they were not "homosexuals." This distinction means, according to Foucault, that they had neither the *concept* nor the *experience* of being homosexual. But this claim does not map onto that of Vernant. For there is a crucial difference between sexual behaviors and statues. The difference is that a particular kind of experience is definitional of figural representations. That experience is: seeing the entity in question as a figural representation in the first place (as opposed to failing to see it as such, say by mistaking it for "the real thing" or by walking past it all unawares). *The experience is a necessary condition of identity.* In most cases, it is a sufficient condition as well (an exception being cases where one mistakes something for a figural representation of that thing, as when a street performer stands so still that passersby think he is a statue). Thus where the historian of sexuality can distinguish between certain behaviors, experiences, and concepts, the historian of images and figural representations does not have this luxury. Behavior, experience, and concept hang together in a distinctive way.

Another way of putting the matter is that images and figural representations are things, not a kind of behavior. To make the analogy with Foucault, we should compare like with like, as in the following:

"Image Behaviors" : The Concept of "Image"

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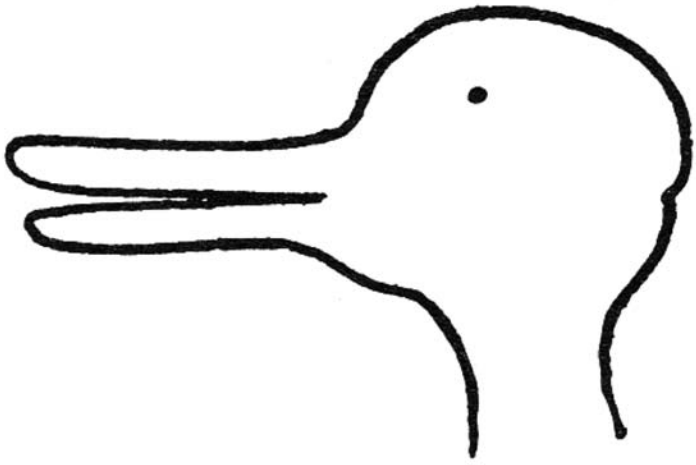
Sexual Behaviors : The Concept of "Homosexual"

"Image behavior" means, simply, seeing something in a certain way, that is, as a figural or iconic representation (as opposed to not seeing it this way, as when Nabokov's bird crashes into "the false azure of the windowpane," mistaking a reflection for the sky). More specifically, it means "giving voice" to this way of seeing: reacting, acknowledging in some manner, the fact that one has seen *that way*. Such behavior is the real analog to Foucault's "sexual behaviors." But—and this is the crucial point—the experience (as determined by the relevant behavior) is analytic to the concept of a figural representation. This is not the case with erotic acts, which can be described without invoking any first-person experience of them. Here the analogy between the history of art and the history of sexuality breaks down.

But what will count as experiencing something as a depiction (or an image, a figural representation, what have you)? There is a famous response to this question in the second part of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. He is talking about a famous drawing that can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit (see below). He asks how we can tell which of the two a person has seen, which "experience" the person has had (duck or rabbit?). "What is the criterion of the visual experience?—The criterion? What do you suppose? The representation of 'what is seen'" (1958.198).

Wittgenstein's point is that there is no better, more direct description of the experience, no better evidence for "what we do," than such a public representation. It is tempting to imagine that science could come to the rescue. A neuroscientist might want to prove that a subject has had a certain experience by hooking him or her up to electrodes; if certain synapses fire and are measured, then might not that data suffice to prove that the subject has had the experience? Alas, such a causal, physiological explanation would be of no help, for our descriptions do not invoke physiology. In describing my experience of a picture, for instance, I do not say, "Now the rods and cones in my eye are registering light and sending electrical impulses into



The Duck Rabbit; after Wittgenstein 1958.

my visual cortex, causing certain synapses to fire!" *That* is not the experience I have, electrodes notwithstanding.

Other hidden, inner processes meet a similar objection. The suggestion that early Greek statues were really signs, not images, implies a process of interpretation: you see the sign and then interpret it, process it cognitively, to produce a reading (Nagy 1990a.202–22). How might this operation work? Wittgenstein characterizes semiotic theories of this sort as proposing an inner "materialization" of the image that is then subject to interpretation. But the only evidence to suggest that such an inner interpretation had played a role in the act of seeing would be, again, the "outer" expression or "representation of 'what is seen.'" Whether one engages in a mysterious inner process of interpretation or just sees an image without reading it makes no difference as far as the expressions go.[7] So the inner process does no work, it is null. The behavior, again, is the criterion of the experience. If the Greeks treated certain entities as images, used them as

7 To be sure, dissimulation is always a possibility. When Polonius agrees with Hamlet that a cloud is "very like a whale" (*Hamlet* III.ii), it is not certain that he actually sees it so. He is a courtier, after all. But it is clear that he possesses the relevant concept, and the only way to tell whether he had or had not seen it would be by examining his behavior.

images, then regardless of what they called those entities, this behavior will satisfy the criteria for their having had the relevant visual experience.

And what of concepts, as in "the concept of the image"? This question is forensic. Just as "the representation of 'what is seen'" is the criterion of the experience, so the experience should be the criterion of the concept (of a figural representation). It gains us nothing to say that the Greeks treated certain objects as figural representations, experienced those objects as figural representations, talked about them as figural representations, yet did not possess the concept of a figural representation. For in that case, the concept of a figural representation would be, literally, *useless*; there would be no use, no behavior, to which possession or lack thereof might correspond. Like the "inner materialization," it would be null.

But verbal expressions might not be the only evidence one might use to demonstrate experience. Other forms of behavior might do the trick. One might, for instance, adduce the intentional manufacture of entities that we are inclined to call figural representations. Examples would include *kouroi*, *korai*, grave stelai, and so on. Statues, no less than statements, are "representation[s] of 'what is seen,'" not in the Romantic sense that they reveal their makers' subjective perception of the model, but in the grammatical sense that they reveal the maker's perception *of the statue*. After all, it is not a coincidence that a *kouros* looks just like a figural representation. That is a criterion of its *being* a figural representation. We know it is a figural representation because it looks like one, which is to say, it *counts for us* as a Greek "representation of 'what is seen.'"

But did it count that way for them, for the Greeks? Here, again, the example of Lascaux is invaluable: we readily recognize the marks on the cave walls as figural representations in the absence of any corroborating evidence whatsoever. The paintings themselves are the best, the only, evidence for what the cave dwellers saw. Just so, *kouroi*, *korai*, etc. are evidence for what the Greeks saw. The visual facts are primary evidence.

A further example may clarify the point. One of the most important achievements of classical archaeology during the last century was the decipherment of the Greek writing system of the Bronze Age, Linear B (see Chadwick 1958). Through a combination of cryptography and guesswork, the British architect Michael Ventris assigned hypothetical sound values to the signs of this script. But his theory found confirmation only when these signs, and their sound values, were juxtaposed with pictures (figure 3). In 1952, a clay tablet was found at Pylos. It bore pictures of tripods and flagons; after each picture of a tripod there was a series of marks indicating

a number, followed by three or four Linear B characters that, according to the scheme Ventris had devised, should stand for *ti-ri-po-de*—in short, "tripod." The "Tripod Tablet" thus confirmed the sound values that Ventris had tentatively assigned to the various characters, and complete decipherment followed swiftly.

The decipherment of Linear B was confirmed by interpreting signs (the characters of the script) in terms of figural representations (the tripods). The comprehensibility of the figural representation had analytic priority over the comprehensibility of the writing system, such that the figural representations verified the decipherment of the script (as opposed to the other way around). We assume the figural representations to be comprehensible prior to the script; indeed, the comprehensibility of the figures grounds that of the script.[8]

In its strong form, Vernant's thesis produces a conflict between philology, which finds our words ("image") to be incommensurate with Greek ones (σῆμα), and a mode of perception capable of seeing depictive content in certain pieces of carved stone in the absence of corroborative data. The lesson of Linear B, however, is that perception has analytic priority: *phenomenology grounds philology.*[9] This fact is already taken for granted in these disciplines. It poses a problem for the radical version of Vernant's thesis. Like Ventris, Vernant took depictiveness, and the potential comprehensibility of iconic depictions prior to linguistic notations, as a premise. For example, he recognized *kouroi* and *korai* as figural representations. Unlike Ventris, he then proceeded (sometimes) to argue that the Greeks lacked the very concept of a figural representation and did not experience statues and pictures as such. Something has to give.

It is a perennially astonishing fact that we can recognize very old lumps of carved stone, very old daubs of paint, as depictions. The figures themselves provide continuity between our words—our worlds—and theirs. Nothing shows our kinship with the Greeks better than the fact that

8 It is not an uninteresting fact for cultural history that the Bronze Age Greeks should have paired word and image in this way, but the pairing must be distinguished rigorously from identification.

9 I have not in this study found an opportune moment to address the propositions and arguments of Gell 1998. Insofar, however, as I am correct to understand Gell as offering a semiotics of what he calls "agency," then the arguments mounted here about the limits of Vernant's historical semiotics might be brought to bear on Gell's as well. The criterial role of the "representation of what is seen" anticipates semiology no less than philology.

we have words like "statue" and "sign" ready-to-hand to name certain of their artifacts and concepts (cf. Wittgenstein 1993.133). Nothing shows our distance from them more clearly than the fact that they identified the two. Our words and the Greeks' words—the language games—are not fully congruent when it comes to statues. But for all that, we do see carved lumps of stone as figural representations, effigies, icons, statues. We invoke *our* concept whenever we see *their* stones in this way. Indeed, if we did not do so, then we would have nothing to talk about. We would be in some sense blind to their statues, deaf to their words. As Wittgenstein puts it, "The common behavior of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language" (1958 §206). In the present instance, the common behavior is seeing, responding to, and recognizing figural representations as such. The question of whether early Greek statues were images or "presentifications" only arises against the background of this broad agreement in criteria and in judgments.

Where does all this leave the "art of art history" and, beyond it, the questions of experience and culture with which we began? First, and most obviously, the presence or absence of a "cognitive-conceptual meditation" on art turns out to be incidental to the history of the image insofar as that history presupposes a mode of seeing that exists independently of, and is irreducible to, verbal discourse. Second, the visual evidence acquires new dignity. In its strong or radical variant, Vernant's philology tends to render early Greek art occult. We are told not to trust our eyes: what look suspiciously like statues are said to be, in reality, signs. It is as if, upon digging up a marble *kouros*, an archaeologist needed to check in a book, do a bit of research, before distinguishing it from a fieldstone or a building block.[10] But this position turns out to be unintelligible. The paradoxes of Vernant's historical ontology of the image bring out the logical primacy of the historian's own visual experiences in any account of ancient figural representations, or art, or visual culture, or "viewing experience."

It is, of course, a cliché of cultural history that we all see things

10 Compare the following newspaper account of the discovery of the Sacred Gate *kouros*: "Suddenly the experienced excavation worker Tassos Boudroukas struck something which he immediately recognized as sculpted marble. It came from the left shoulder of an Archaic kouros, lying on its stomach, as a rapid cleaning quickly showed" ("Find of the Century in the Kerameikos," *Athener Zeitung*, May 2002; my translation). The original text may be found at www.griechische-botschaft.de/weeknews/2002/mai/220502.htm (last accessed 09.2008).

from within our cultural context. But that is not my claim. Instead, my claim is twofold. First, that an historical ontology of images poses particular problems (is particularly interesting) insofar as the representation of the visual experience is a criterion of identity for a figural representation as such. Second, that a commitment to the intelligibility of such experiences, hence of images, is not something we can easily jettison. Disagreement about such experiences—say, varying "readings" of ancient images, different accounts of the style or the significance of a statue—will, on this account, be indistinguishable from good, old-fashioned aesthetic disputes.

But it would be wrong to reject Vernant's arguments *tout court*. Just the reverse: Vernant is more pertinent than ever. For as Foucault and others have stressed, grammatically identical statements can occupy different places in different fields of stabilization, different forms of life. So it is with representations of "what is seen." Our distance from the Greeks should not be minimized, even if its very ground is a certain nearness, that is, a potential comprehensibility exemplified in the recognition of figural representations as such. Vernant may have gone too far in insisting that the Greeks did not possess a functioning concept of figural representation. But his central insight remains intact: there were entities in Greece that it seems appropriate to call signs, and there were entities that it seems appropriate to call statues, and even if we cannot coherently identify the two, nonetheless the Greeks did just that. My goal is not to minimize the strangeness of the Greeks or to deny their historical specificity but to insist upon the evidentiary priority of the visual, of the critic's eye, in the very recognition of that strangeness.

After Vernant, the Greek concept of figuration seems strangely chimerical, a bit like a concise version of that famous "Chinese encyclopedia" with which Foucault began *Les mots et les choses* (1970 [1966].xv–xxi). The interesting question, therefore, is not whether "sign" or "image" is really a proper translation of σῆμα. What matters is, as Foucault put it, "the set of other statements in the midst of which [the word] appears . . . the domain in which one can use or employ it . . . the role or the functions it has to play."[11] What does a statue do?

We cannot know what a statue does without describing its effects on beholders—for a statue does nothing at all but elicit such effects. We

11 Foucault, quoted (and translated) in Davidson 2001.185.

cannot know those effects without knowing the expressions to which they give rise—for there is nothing else to know. Classical art history would, on this view, amount to the effort to correlate our descriptions, our judgments, of artworks with those offered in ancient sources (which need not be "cognitive-conceptual meditations"). It would amount to attentive and historically informed accounts of particular artworks, "the intrinsic description of the monument" (Foucault 1972 [1969].7). Phrased that way, it may sound tame, even conservative, but the methodological implications are actually significant. In place of an anthropology or a sociology of classical art, we need an "historical criticism," even a phenomenology.[12] What counts as knowledge in this discipline is inseparable from aesthetics, as the very idea of an history of the image is inseparable from our voiced responses to certain carved stones and marked surfaces. Acknowledgment of these conditions ought to be anything but conservative. On the contrary, after Vernant, the study of classical art, the production of such "intrinsic descriptions," turns out to be an effort to think an impossibility or, more precisely, to ask, with Foucault, "what is it impossible to think?" (1970 [1966].xv).

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12 "Historical criticism": Baxandall 1983.