

Ruti Direktor

## Can Someone Please Turn Off the Light?

Can someone please turn off the light?  
Is anyone willing to advance the slides?

First slide, please.

A university classroom. Darkness. Two slide projectors illuminate the screen. Pairs of slides are projected in sequence: an archaic Greek sculpture juxtaposed with a classical Greek sculpture, a fresco from Pompeii with a fresco from the Renaissance, a painting by Picasso with a painting by Matisse. The entire history of art is in our classroom, flickering between the two projectors, the perfect epitome of a "museum without walls." There is no church ceiling that the slide fails to reach, no detail it does not vanquish – a brush stroke, a pencil line, a smooth marble surface. The art album which André Malraux described in the mid-20th century as a "museum without walls" or an "imaginary museum,"<sup>1</sup> has wandered over to the blackboard, losing even the materiality of the paper, materializing by means of a light beam, with the help of two projectors. Years later it will turn out that Wölfflin, the art scholar who arranged art history for us in pairs of opposites (classical-baroque, linear-painterly, plane-recession, etc.), is also the one who brought the mode of presenting slides in pairs to American universities.<sup>2</sup> Generations of students, first in America and later around the world, including Israel, have been raised on the concept that art comes in pairs: a thing and its opposite, a thing

1.  
André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1953).

2.  
Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1984), p. 48.

and its counterpart, a thing and a detail thereof. Generations of students, later to become artists or art teachers or art scholars, have been raised on art that comes from the dark, erupting from the wall (or the screen or the board; at times bisected by the contours of the surface which has not been properly adapted to the dimensions of the slide). The history of art forever framed in a rectangular format, either enlarging or shrinking the original.

Next slide, please.

I sit in the museum library, preparing a lesson. I pick slides, and feed them, one by one, into a long cartridge. Raising each slide up to the light, and proficiently turning it twice: once downward, and once again – from right to left. Only then do I insert it into the slot, praying that there will be no glitches. Does Velasquez's Venus recline from right to left, or the other way round?

Oops, the carrier falls, and the slides scatter.

Darkness. The projector's lamp has gone off.

In comparison to the slide projector, Malraux's art album emerges as a safe haven, solid ground which is all pre-technological manuality, exempted from the inevitable breakdowns and distortions bound to occur when technology is involved.

Next, please.

(Some) police investigator in (some) detective movie (we've seen dozens like it) gathers his team for a briefing. The room is crowded and dark. The cops smoke and joke. Slides are projected on the wall one after another. They are blurred, but the detective points at the picture with a rod or a light beam, explaining in an authoritative voice: here is the criminal getting out of his car; here he is seen in the company of other dubious types; here he shakes the mayor's hand..., hmmm... mmm. The task is to capture the criminal, to prevent the next crime. The police slide is in

the service of law and order, a matter-of-fact, efficient, non-artistic slide; the bureaucratic embodiment of the slide projector. Light, in this case, implies control, supervision, and order.

Next, please.

I bought a scanner. Someone is installing it for me; showing me what to do. I am terrified. A new technology means another conspiracy of capitalist-consumerist society (against me personally). I place a book, and scan my first digital image into the computer, already missing the slides, whose operation in retrospect seems ever so simple and clear and controllable (provided that you overlook the failure potential, see slide no. 2). And there is the disappointment in view of the quality of the digital projection: the blurred picture, the enlarged pixels. Where is the sharp image to which we became accustomed in slides?

Hundreds of small slides (inside plastic sleeves or in plastic boxes) still fill my drawers at home. I haven't touched them in four years. Most of them by now have a digital replacement, and the others – who ever remembers them? But to throw them away?!

Next slide, please.

The advertising agency conference room in the television series *Mad Men*. The charming protagonist, advertising genius Don, makes a marketing presentation to his Kodak clients for their new product: a slide projector with a tuning wheel. It is hard to sell a technological product, he admits, unless one manages to create an emotional bond with it, or invoke a sense of nostalgia. On the dark wall he projects slides of his family: the children, the family on vacation, him and his beautiful bride on their wedding day. The slides advancing with a click are in perfect sync with his perfect family, the family is in perfect sync with the circulatory ritual of the slideshow. "This is not a spaceship, it's a time machine," he says.

"It goes backwards and forwards, and it takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called 'The Wheel,'" he continues. "It's called 'The Carousel.' It lets us travel round and round and back home again." The Kodak clients are overwhelmed with emotion and immediately cancel their meetings with other agencies. The episode is called "The Wheel."

The life span of the domestic slide projector – from the late 1930s to the early 2000s – was shorter than the life cycle of the average man. The first toddlers, whose photographs were screened by the rotating slide projectors, now photograph their grandchildren with their cell phone cameras. The wheel, the first technology invented by man, still valid in many respects, is indeed an inappropriate name for the short-lived, nostalgia-bound technology of the slide projector. "Carousel," a name associated in our consciousness with childhood, is more befitting a technology whose very mention involves a dimension of naïveté and sentimentality.

Last slide, please.

End of the presentation; the projector's light projects itself on screen. The good old slide projector, embedding the light of the magic lantern and the light of Enlightenment. Ostensibly, two different, even contradictory types of light; magic associated with spell versus the light of Enlightenment in the sense of knowledge, education, and reason. The slide projector fuses the didactic and the magical; technology in the service of reason, and an intermediate state between wakefulness and sleep, under the cloak of darkness. Kant's famous "Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", originally published in 1784 in a German magazine, begins as follows: "*Enlightenment* is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. *Immaturity* is the inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another. ... *Sapere aude!* [Dare to be wise!] Have courage to use your own

3.  
Immanuel Kant, "An  
Answer to the Question:  
What is Enlightenment?"  
(1784), in *Immanuel  
Kant, Groundwork for the  
Metaphysics of Morals*, ed.  
Lara Denis, trans. Allen.  
W. Wood (New Haven,  
Connecticut: Yale, 2002),  
p. 119.

understanding! is therefore the motto of enlightenment."<sup>3</sup> This battle cry for the freedom of reason is partly contained in the experience of the projector and all that it implies: lessons, lectures, study of the truth, learning and interpretation; it does not, however, apply to all the rest – experience and enchantment, dozing and the sleep of reason.