Preface: Kiss the ancient boo-boo, or the slippage between holding, curing, and pointing

Kissing a boo-boo is an English expression for a tender gesture: caressing or kissing a little scratch or wound as an enactment of care, normally for a small child (but no judgement if, for example, you once tried to cut hard, crusty bread with a fine non-serrated knife and it slipped, slicing the top of your finger and making you queasy enough that your husband had to come be the adult in the room, washing the finger under running cold water, and kissing, more or less literally, the boo-boo. These things happen, and when they do, they may leave a permanent pearlescent pink line on the finger you use to point at things. This is, of course, just an example).

I am telling you about this because earlier this year I went to one of my favourite places in Brussels, the Royal Museum of Art and History in the Parc du Cinquantenaire. I was there to see a show on 19th and 20th century expeditions to Egypt, which turned out to be a bit more proud of spoliation than I anticipated. But I digress. It was there that I saw an amulet I had never seen before.

The amulet in question was one of these black stones cut to resemble two fingers. They were typically placed near or atop of the embalming incision in the mummy's torso. One theory is that they stand in for the fingers of the person who embalmed the body.[1] The recurrent position of these amulets suggests that maybe they were meant to protect the wound with magic, or possibly even seal it, physically pressing against the cut.

[1] https://journals.ekb.eg/article_53833_f0d5d587955431a564f0c52b7f25e2c5.pdf

I find them very moving. They are like a pointer from those in this world to those in the next, saying, here, we did our best. We carefully removed some things, and we carefully added some others. We tried to do right by this person, according to what we know about bodies and what we believe about souls. But even more than this admittedly projected intention, I also see them as a trace of the last person to touch the body. Millennia after this person's death, we can still hold, or if you prefer, behold, that last touch.

It reminds me, in a way of this gesture, where people kiss their fingers, and then touch the surface of something that ties them to an absent loved one, like a picture, a tombstone, or a screen. In this way, I think of these amulets as a sort of last kiss for a last boo-boo. But it is also possible that the way I feel about them is due to the moment when I first encountered them. It was an unexpectedly bright day of May, and I was still drunk with grief for the death of my grandmother, my mother's mother, who was my favourite. As she was dying, I held her hand so tightly against the hospital bed that my mother had to ask me to watch out, revealing the indentations the metal was leaving in her flesh. And there are no black stone amulets left on her body to prove how fiercely connected we were.

With which I mean to say, that sometimes a stretched finger or two may point to a way in, be that of a knife, or that of a kiss, making it possible for pointing to be a way of holding attention, and when I say attention, I may mean love, and when I say love, I may mean a promise, and when I say promise, I mean a future, even if it is after death.

For the next 20 minutes or so, I will weave in and out of this entanglement.

Chapter 1: Doubting Thomas, or the need to put one's own finger into it

In a room full of artists and art lovers, I imagine that visualising these fingers on a cut located on a torso's side may have reminded you of the biblical scene where Saint Thomas sees the resurrected Christ, most famously painted by Caravaggio. In this scene, Christ has risen from the sepulchre, and has been visiting the apostles. But Thomas has missed these events, and he declares that unless he can "put [his] hand into [Jesus'] side, [he] will never believe." So, when Christ appears again, he finds Thomas and allows him to reach his hand in.

Since then the Doubting Thomas is a trope that refers to someone who needs to experience something by themselves. I'll leave the judgement on that position up to you. For what is worth, there are many art-historical examples of the Doubting Thomas, very popular in the 1600s. All these pale Christs offering their right sides looking more bored than bothered, all these horizontal gashes fondled by one or two fingers at a time.

Caravaggio's is, of course, not only the best-known, but the one that may make you squirm the hardest. The way the flesh pulls, the dirty nails, the finger so far in. This feeling may be what the Germans call Einfülung, which in English is translated as empathy. But the German term literally means feeling in, which is particularly well-suited to both what is happening here, and what we feel in looking at this image. It is no surprise that this very painting was used for the cover of Robin Curtis' book on Einfülung, which you can see in Toon's introductory essay in the leaflet.

There is something recognizable in this finger. Maybe that's because this finger is, of course, the finger of somebody who pursues knowledge. A researcher's finger. A finger like ours. Fun fact, if you ever go to Rome, you may catch a glimpse of Thomas' very finger, exhibited as a relic, as much of a mummy as a talisman.

Chapter 2: A Finger is a Finger is a Finger, or an iconology of pointing

You have seen St Thomas' fingers. One same digit iterated again and again, in the particular and powerful way images have of invoking each other. Not all fingers are St Thomas' finger, of course, but the echoes of the specific gesture, in both form and intention, are part of our cultural hard-wiring - and resonate when we encounter them.

For example, when I watched this film by Palme d'or winner Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Memoria*, I had a moment of putting my own finger on something. Tilda Swinton plays Jessica, an English expat living in Colombia. One day, Jessica wakes up hearing a mysterious sound, which proceeds to haunt her from then on. You could say that the moment when Jessica points at this sound and asks what it is, She becomes a researcher, somebody who searches over and over. She spends the rest of the movie trying to understand what this boom is. She points it out to others, but only she can hear it. Pointing is not enough for her, she wants to fully grasp it. In a scene, she finds herself in a lab, observing the found ancient bones of what had once been a girl, her skull ritually perforated. Her instinctive gesture is, of course, to reach out and put her finger into the orifice, asserting the damage done, witnessing it across vast amounts of time.

We can recognise old images in new ones because they are visual motifs. Like literary fragments that get studied and repeated, these images are citational. The culturally-sensitive analysis of their subject matters is what we call iconology.

This whole thing is, in part, an iconology of pointing. We are interested in the cultural implications of these images, as well as the way they create meaning in and of themselves, and in neat comparative clusters such as this. Iconology is full of dead images coming back to life through their reinterpretations. And an iconologist's job is to point at these ghosts, and, in a way, keep them alive. Someone even called this phenomenon the afterlife of images, and the result of the task of studying them, and laying them out, a "ghost story for adults". But more on this later.

Chapter 3: Stars, Lambs, and Bones, or the promise of stayin' alive

Iconological fingers multiply. The finger Thomas inserts in Christ's resurrected flesh creates a time-loop, end meeting beginning, with this other finger: the archangel Gabriel's, pointing at the heaven above when he breaks into Mary's place to announce that she is to carry God's child. Mary's hands vary between submission and surprise, and in some cases, horror, but Gabriel's are often directed above, to something greater hovering in the stars. Sometimes, there is a second finger, considerate enough to point at her at the same time, making sure the message comes across. Up there, and down here, says Gabriel. This is the deal.

In turn, all this pointing business also echoes with yet another Christian iconographical trope, that of Saint John the Baptist. In a similar attitude to Gabriel, the Baptist points towards Christ's arrival and his message of salvation. Sometimes,

as you see in this gloomy El Greco, the Christ is a lamb. Sometimes, despite the fierce lamb decidedly bleeding itself out into a golden cup, the finger points upwards, like the archangel's. The messages these fingers carry, or if you want, point to, are the same: you can have a life after death if you believe. Or in other words, this is the path to " stayin' alive".

Alas, for all the upturned fingers, we also have the downturned ones. Once they point down, the message remains the same, but with a significant change in emphasis. Instead of starry heavenly promises, they become a reminder that death is coming, and unless you accept the message of salvation, all you will become is bones, like those Tilda Swinton examined earlier. These oddly pointy hands, though, are Saint Jerome's. Particularly, unamused Saint Jerome. You may think he is the one you can see in the KMSKA in Antwerp, but he is not. Neither is this more glowy, surprised Saint Jerome, they are both in El Prado, in Madrid. The one in Antwerp is, of course, the most fashionable one of the lot, having changed the stiff red hood for that rather fabulous crimson hat with delightful tassels, a bit like a lion's mane (if you know, you know).

Saint Jerome's not-amused, surprised, or stylish pointing is, as I was saying, a form of memento mori with a side of hope. Which brings me to a neighbour of the stylish Saint Jerome. You may have also seen this in the KMSKA, and if you have, the chances that you have stood transfixed before it are high. I mean, just look at it. Look at the varnished buttocks of this cherub, look at the tennis ball breast, the whitest breast to have ever existed. Look at the shaved forehead, and its spheric resonance within this very picture, bouncing our gaze back to the boob, and all the pearls. But if I bring this up now it is because you may also want to look at the baby Jesus' tiny

finger, pointing to the left of the painting. Alas, what is there to see? If you've only ever seen this painting in Antwerp, you may not know that this is actually half a diptych (or, rumour has it, possibly a triptych, but we are not going to get into that). The Antwerp display is incomplete. Before the re-opening of the KMSKA, though, this painting was exhibited in Berlin, where left panel and right panel were placed alongside each other, like this.

In this left panel, we can see Étienne Chevalier, the person who commissioned the artwork, dressed not unlike Saint Jerome, as well as his patron saint, Saint Stephen, who is carrying a stone or prehistoric axe because his martyrdom involved getting stoned to death. Baby Jesus, then, is pointing at the man who paid the painter. But you could also say that baby Jesus, the divine incarnate, is pointing at a mere mortal. Which is the reverse of Saint Thomas, who puts his grubby finger right into the miracle of reincarnation. Except, of course, that our man here has achieved, if nothing else, a sort of afterlife by means of this painting. It is not just Baby Jesus pointing at him here, and now. It is also us, acknowledging the existence of this gentleman, long gone.

But now that the right panel is back in Antwerp, and he is no longer being pointed at by this solid, white baby, we may ask ourselves, what, or who, could the little dude be pointing at, these days?

Chapter 4: Aby the Seismograph, or the sensitive science

This is Aby. Aby Warburg. In my mother tongue, avi, spelled differently, means grandfather. Aby was a foundational figure in my PhD. When, at the very beginning

of my scholarship, my avi, my father's father, died, I rode seven hours on the last day of 2017 in a full train to get back home, reading Gombrich's biography of Aby. Maybe the circumstances justify one of my worst academic sins so far, which is that I never actually finished that book. The train ticket remains inserted half way through as a page marker to this day. This is how Aby became an academic avi, a researcherly ancestor.

Aby died in 1929, leaving his most famous work, the Atlas Mnemosyne, unfinished. The atlas was a monumental effort. By pinning images on black panels like this one, Aby tried to trace how the depiction of embodied emotion continued and shifted through different periods and cultures. To somebody with access to Google images, his may seem a very mundane exercise, but in Aby's days this was extraordinary. He was the one to call this form of study iconology.

The thing with Aby is that he was not only extra-ordinary, he was extra-sensitive. There is much to be said, here, about Aby's special sensitivity, for he was infamously diagnosed with severe mental issues, but instead I will focus on one single anecdote. And that is that Aby defined himself as a seismograph. You know what a seismograph is, naturally - a machine that receives and records seismic tremors. A sort of medium telling us when the earth rumbles. He wrote: "When I look back on my life's journey, it seems that my function has been to serve as a seismograph of the soul, to be placed along the dividing lines between different cultural atmospheres and systems."[2] Not only was he a seismograph then, but one based on spirit rather than earth, capable of connecting with the intangible energies that make culture. It is no surprise, then, that it is him who called this whole thing a ghost story for adults.

[2] Michaud 332

More specifically, he referred to the atlas, which in turn became a ghost in itself, permeating the research of people like me, born 57 years after his death, almost to the day. Warburg really put his finger on something. His work touches me to this day. Or you could say, it haunts me.

Chapter 5: L'Imbécile, or iconology's reassurance

I have shown you a clip from Memoria, but the truth is I do not watch many films. I just can't seem to ever have enough time or mental space for them, much to the frustration of my long-suffering husband - he who cleans my wounds -, who grew up in a family that would go to the cinema all the time. But a movie that marked a before and after in my life is Amélie, which I know makes me not only a cliché, but a cliché dated back to the earliest 2000s. Specifically, there is this scene that comes to mind every now and then, where Amélie turns Paris into her playground and sends her beloved, Nino, on a wild goose chase to find her, and a photo album (how Warburgian this photo album is or isn't is a topic for another day). Following all sorts of visual cues, Nino finds himself climbing the stairs in Montmartre, where this happens.

The young boy says, "Sir, when the finger points to the sky, the idiot looks at the finger". And in a way, iconology, as a discipline, would agree with this. Iconology is a compulsion to pointing, to say look at this! And at this! And now look at these together! Iconology is the study of pointing at that which haunts us, that which touches us. Sometimes, iconology is pointing at people pointing. In this sense, iconology declares itself very much not idiotic, for it tells us to look at whatever the finger points at, instead of the finger itself. Or, at least, it is assumed to.

Chapter 6: Finger Gloves, or the glitch holds the wound close

If you spend enough time trying to consult digital books, the way researchers are known to do, you may find odd glitches. To me, these, where the fingers of the people who scan hundreds if not thousands of pages a day get caught by the scanner, and are thus captured forever in the digital version of a book Google holds, are the most fascinating. It reveals the very real bodies keeping digital knowledge readily available. These hands and their different skin colours are always covered with finger gloves, often in a bubblegum pink colour. These protect paper and skin from each other. Flesh wounds are sealed, and the white surface of the book, kept clean. But these gloved fingers make idiots of all of us. Once we see them, we cannot separate them from the books they are holding. We stay with them, invested in the anonymity of these disembodied hands and fingers. We stare at the finger, not at the text, nor the sky. And thanks to the flattening effect of the scan, we find ourselves before a document where the hand is genuinely as much part of the digital artefact as any word written on a page. They have become images, and therefore they've started working as such. The ghosts of manual labour are hidden in the pages of any book researchers need. A convenience, inconceivable in Warburg's days. This is an iconology of service.

And it puts its own finger into something. For these scanned fingers to be recognised, someone else needs to be seeing them, capable of understanding these are not meant to be part of the file. Otherwise, the system, the machine does not imagine they are there. These fingers' reveal not only their presence, but that of their beholder. Which is to say, in a way, these fingers point at you.

Conclusion: The Monster, or sometimes you just have to go through it

Aby had several mottos, little sayings that would condense his ideals. One was “per monstra ad sphaeram”. This is a personal version of a Latin expression, ‘Per aspera ad astra’, which translates to something like through the rough to the stars. It means that you have to go through adversity to reach whatever the stars may be, glory, fortune, joy. In Warburg’s version, we have spheres, which are still a form of celestial reference, but then we also have monstra, monster. So, for Aby, the way to a more heavenly life is to defeat one’s monsters[3].

A Latin relative of the word monster is monstrare, to show. This is how we get words like demonstrate in English -meaning, let me show you this. But its direct root is monstrum, a sign, an omen, something noticeable, odd. A monster is that which makes us point. If Aby’s seismographic sensitivity teaches us something, if those gloved fingers teach us something, is that sometimes, the pointing and the being pointed at converge. Sometimes, we are the monster.

Today, I have brought up not only iconology, but research in general, several times. I have even told you how research is, literally, to search again. One of the grandparents of performance studies, Richard Schechner, defined performance as “twice behaved behaviour”.[4] And what is research, then, if not that?[5] We search over and over, and then we reenact our searching in a paper, or in a lecture like this one. We become the monster - and a performative one at that, too. And when it comes to iconology, this

[3] https://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=2341

[4] Schechner in Phelan, Peggy.”Introduction: The Ends of Performance,” in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (eds.), *The Ends of Performance* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 6.

[5] Holly, xv.

performativity becomes extra apparent, for our seismographic readings are put on display, our ghosts appearing on to the surface of the work.

If we go back to the mozzarella baby Jesus, orphaned of his left partner, I would argue that unlike in the depictions of Saint Jerome, the Baptist, or even Saint Thomas, the accidental de-contextualisation means that there is no real moral left here. Instead, once we get over the unreal beauty of the painting, we may find that there is nothing left to point at, except its audience, us. The finger points and points, and we look and look, trapped in a performative, practically intersubjective, feeling in.

And this is why I think it is fair to tell you about finger scars, movie habits, and grandparents. This is me pointing at myself, of course. I do not mean for this to be a mere fondling of one's own wounds. Instead, I hope to be able to prove the stories we tell about images are not devoid of skin, even when we dress them up as research. The finger that points at and touches these images still holds a kiss or two. The body gets in the way. Our fingers get caught by the scanner.

Reenacting my research before you, I become not only a monster, but one aware of its condition, and willing to play with it, perform it for you. Which means, of course, that my standing here is co-dependent of you sitting there. In telling you what haunts me, be it art or the dead I carry with me, I hope, as a final gesture, to point my own finger at you, and ask what haunts you. What makes you search, and search again? What keeps you going through the rough? Or in other words, how are you stayin' alive?