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Gombrich and Cultural History

First of all I would like to comment on the title of this paper – Gombrich and Cultural History. Some of you may in these words identify Gombrich's dearest concern: the preservation of our cultural tradition. Others may immediately sense trouble in the air and form associations with Gombrich's most fundamental rejection and thus read the words of the heading as "Gombrich and Hegel," which almost sounds like "Gombrich and the Devil." Neither of you would be wrong. In fact, this very ambiguity is the topic of this paper.

On the one hand you have Gombrich's forceful refutation of cultural history as a philosophy of history on Hegelian foundations, almost synonymous with the so-called *Geistesgeschichte* ("History of the spirit"). This is what the concept of "cultural history" generally refers to. An evil, that is, that paves the way for totalitarianism. There are cases, on the other hand, where Gombrich uses "cultural history" as a fairly neutral label, referring to our common cultural past. Then of course it is a good thing. Most often though, Gombrich prefers to speak more specifically about our cultural tradition, which is almost an equivalent to the classical tradition. Now this is a great thing. I hardly need to remind you that Gombrich was not only the Director of the Warburg Institute but also Professor of the History of the Classical Tradition at the University of London. As much as he has tried – throughout his career – to

fight the dangers of cultural history, in the Hegelian sense of the word, he has struggled to defend and promote the cultural tradition of the Western world.

My starting-point for this essay is that I feel as uncomfortable with Gombrich's ban of cultural history as with his defense of the cultural tradition. Perhaps you will now think that if there is any ambiguity here, it is with me. You might think that I confuse two totally different things: Gombrich's very justified argument with an unhealthy philosophical legacy from the nineteenth century, with his admirable support for ancient humanism in an age of unreason. In a way you would be right. The two stand as far apart as possible – as praise to blame, as black to white.

Nevertheless, I think that these two conceptions are closely related to each other in Gombrich's work, not least so in his most famous achievement – his general theory of image-making (notably in *Art and Illusion*). In fact, they could be said to frame his whole enterprise as an art historian. Both of them have also remained substantial parts of his project at least since the 1950s. In the following I will try to critically characterize these two components in Gombrich's art history: his curse of Hegelian cultural history and his blessings of the classical tradition.

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When Gombrich in 1967, in his most clarifying essay on the topic, says that we are today "In Search of Cultural History," he uses the word in its most neutral sense. We are in search of cultural history, he argues, because the cultural history as we yet have known it "has been built, knowingly and unknowingly on Hegelian foundations which have crumbled."[1] The search is thus directed towards a non-Hegelian cultural history.

The major part of this important essay is suited to demonstrate the after-effects of Hegelianism in German scholars such as Schnaase,

[1]Gombrich, "In Search of Cultural History" (1967), in *Ideals and Idols. Essays on Values in History and Art*, Oxford, 1979, p. 28.

Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Lamprecht, Riegl, Dvořák and Panofsky. I think it could be doubted whether any of these famous men actually "knowingly" tried to offer a kind of cultural history based on Hegel. Gombrich does not give us any literal evidence that any of these men should have had such an ambition. He must therefore collect enough circumstantial evidence to prove his case – that these scholars, who are of course only the most prominent examples of a vast trend, were all under the spell of Hegel.

The only one of them who has rendered a reputation in art historiography as a Hegelian, and the only one who ever met Hegel in person, through his lectures, was Carl Schnaase.[2] This would seem to be Gombrich's easiest case. But, although Schnaase was impressed by the philosophy of Hegel, and in the introduction to his monumental art history survey textbook – which Gombrich quotes – spoke without hesitation about art as expressing the national spirit, he also felt the danger of substituting these philosophical abstractions for the reality of things.[3] It has been said that Schnaase used the concept of "national spirit" in order to understand art as a historical phenomenon, "without adopting Hegel's doctrine of the art forms and its consequences, the so-called theory of the end of art."[4] We must also remember that even though Schnaase did speak about the "spirit of the age" and the "spirit of the people", most of his unfinished nearly 4000-page long textbook consists of a close empirical study of art and its connections with religion, ethics and philosophy. The text is totally devoid of speculative systematization. But even though recent research has rejected the idea that Schnaase was a Hegelian, I think that Gombrich's assertion can pass; that Schnaase, at least in his early years, was indeed under the spell of Hegel. It must be remembered though, that no major art historian during the nineteenth century explicitly confessed himself a Hegelian.

What about Jakob Burckhardt then, who seems to be Gombrich's hardest case, since he devotes most space to this particular

[2]Stemmrich, Gregor, "Carl Schnaase: Rezeption und Transformation berlinischen Geistes in der Kunsthistorischen Forschung", in Pöggeler, Otto/Gethmann-Siefert, Annemarie (eds.), *Kunsterfahrung und Kulturpolitik im Berlin Hegels*, Bonn, 1983, pp. 263-82.
[3]Lübke, Wilhelm, "Carl Schnaase. Biographische Skizze", in Schnaase, Carl, *Geschichte der bildenden Künste im 15. Jahrhundert*, 2 ed., Stuttgart, 1879, p. XXVIII.
[4]Stemmrich, p. 265.

plea? What makes it hard may, among other things, be the fact that Burckhardt throughout his life refused to admit any Hegelian inclination and that he is generally regarded as one of the greatest heroes of the German humanities – a position out of reach for proper Hegelians. The best indication Gombrich is able to give – what he calls his most "striking example" of Burckhardt's Hegelianism – is a personal letter to a friend which Burckhardt wrote at the age of 24. Here of course the young man speaks dreamingly about "the evolution of the Spirit."[5] Well, this is hardly hard evidence. Neither are the other scattered pieces from the great historian's works, which Gombrich puts forth. The German art historian Nikolaus Meier has quite persuasively argued that neither Schnaase nor Burckhardt was a Hegelian. Their use of concepts like "Spirit" and "National Spirit" were never integrated into any ordered philosophical system. Often they were only functioning as a kind of verbal ornament.[6] I think that this goes for a lot of the other pieces of "evidence" of the spread of Hegelianism that Gombrich mobilizes. Furthermore: the word "Spirit" occurs in even the most indisputably non-Hegelian texts of contemporary philological art history, for instance in Franz Kugler, the teacher of Burckhardt.[7] This "spiritual rhetoric" – if I may call it so – was simply commonplace in nineteenth-century German art and cultural history.

Under the title "Hegelianism without metaphysics", Gombrich goes on to trace an even more diluted form of Hegelianism in the works of the authors I mentioned. But here the evidence is even worse. In the case of Heinrich Wölfflin, for instance, Gombrich simply proclaims that the Hegelian formula dominated Wölfflin's work. Since Wölfflin was Burckhardt's successor as a Professor of Art History in Basel, Gombrich tries to make his assertion seem "quite consistent." Lately it has been argued that neither Wölfflin nor his teachers had any particular interest in Hegel, but that he instead was deeply influenced by neo-Kantianism.[8] Of course, Gombrich's argument is not refuted by a mere stated lack of

[5]See note 1., p. 35.
[6]Meier, Nikolaus, "Wilhelm Lübke, Jakob Burckhardt und die Architektur der Renaissance", *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Alterthumskunde* 85, 1985, pp. 181-86.
[7]See Kugler, Franz, Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte, Stuttgart 1842.
[8]Hart, Joan, "Reinterpreting Wölfflin: Neo-Kantianism and Hermeneutics", *Art Journal*, Winter 1982, pp. 292-300, esp. note 1.

interest. After all, he does believe that the Hegelian creed influenced these scholars on a much deeper – partly unknown – level. Well, even if this is so, I think this could be called a diluted truth. Every German historical scholar was in one way or another affected, on a very general level, by the most influential philosopher of history in the nineteenth century. That applies to the rest of Gombrich's examples as well as to Gombrich himself, in fact, who once characterized himself as a "runaway Hegelian."[9] Negative influences are sometimes the most influential.

What is it then, to summarize Gombrich's objections against the Hegelian legacy, that bothers him most? The Hegelian version of cultural history asserts, according to Gombrich, not only that everything in a particular culture is "connected with everything else", but that everything is also "a symptom of something else" – namely, the essence of this culture, its *Volksgeist*. In practice this means, for instance, that a particular art historical style directly reflects the *Geist* of the culture in question. Furthermore, the historical course of a particular culture is determined by a necessary, teleological logic. It seems that all the historian can do is to passively watch the world spirit work itself towards its own realization. Because one thing is certain: "one does not argue with the Absolute."[10] According to this dialectic there can be no fixed standards, since everything is constantly evolving towards a higher level (through occasional backlashes of course). Total relativism rules.

I think it can be debated whether the ghost Gombrich is chasing really deserves to be called Hegelian. Especially since the quintessence of Hegel's theory more or less is to be found in the eighteenth-century classicist scholar Winckelmann.[11] The literally most central concept of Gombrich's version of Hegelian cultural history – *Volksgeist* – is also an old one, stemming at least from Herder.[12] What seems to me to be the most important component in Hegel's system is precisely its systematic character. His philosophy of history is *basically* – not

[9]Gombrich, "'The Father of Art History'. A reading of the Lectures on Aesthetics of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831)", in *Tributes. Interpreters of our Cultural Tradition*, Oxford, 1984, p. 51.

[10]See note 1, p. 29.

[11]See note 9, pp. 50-69.

[12]Jaeger, Friedrich/Rüsen, Jörn, *Geschichte des Historismus*, München, 1992, p. 26.

incidentally – a metaphysical construct. History is seen as an essentially logical process, with the spirit as the agent, heading for its ultimate self-recognition and self-resolution at a particular time in history, namely, its final stage. Again, I think it is safe to say that this belief is not shared by any major art historian in the nineteenth century, and even less so in our century. There have of course always been attempts by aestheticians to erect airy constructs à la Hegel, but that particular tradition is very far from Gombrich's concern.

Now, as we all know, the Ghost in question has yet another name: "historicism." The terms "Hegelianism" and "historicism" are never quite clearly distinguished in Gombrich's discourse. He can for example speak of "the Hegelian myth of Historicism".[13] This leads us directly to Karl Popper, who always must be invoked in discussions concerning Gombrich's theory or general *Weltanschauung*. This is not the place to investigate Popper's theory in any detail. Suffice it to say that Gombrich's conception of "Hegelian Historicism" is more or less an echo of Popper's very peculiar interpretation, first presented in his book *The Poverty of Historicism*. According to Popper, historicism is a social philosophy, characterized by a doctrine prescribing historical development as necessary and governed by inexorable laws. This being so, it is also possible to predict the future course of history. In short, this evil philosophy is characterized by, or leads to, a whole army of horrors: metaphysics, irrationalism, holism, totalitarianism, defeatism, relativism, collectivism, among other things. Ultimately – the end of civilization.

The terminology here is very confusing. It must be stressed that Popper's interpretation of the doctrine of historicism has very little to do with what is generally acknowledged as "historism" (German: *Historismus*) in the humanities.[14] Historism here refers to the dominant paradigm in the German humanities during the nineteenth century, the world-view that more or less unites all the emerging historical sciences in the beginning of the century (ultimately a consequence of the

[13]Gombrich, "Art and Scholarship" (1957), in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and other Essays on the Theory of Art* (1963), Oxford, 1985, p. 114. See also "The Logic of Vanity Fair: Alternatives to Historicism in the Study of Fashions, Style and Taste" (1974), in *Ideals and Idols*, p. 90.
[14]See note 12, p. 7f.

historical revolution in fields like geology and archaeology around 1800). Characteristic of historism is, for example, the *reluctance* to describe historical development in terms of rigid laws.[15] This tradition usually also *rejects* all sorts of general, *a priori* explanations in favour of particular, historical explanations. The attempt, furthermore, to make scientific *predictions* about the future can hardly pass as a criterion of historism, rather of a specific kind of positivism, of which Hippolyte Taine may be the best example – a positivism emerging during the end of the nineteenth century as a response to an acute crisis of historism.[16] The kind of historism I speak of here has basically understood itself in terms of an emancipation from the Hegelian philosophy of history. So: we must not confuse historism – in the sense of the nineteenth-century paradigm in the humanities – with Popperian historicism. As we have seen, they can actually sometimes be opposites.

I have here only referred to established terminological practice. What I myself feel to be the most problematic feature of Popper's version of historicism, is that he fails to historicize historicism. Instead he regards it as an almost timeless theory, which, in his idealistic mode of thought, has survived since Plato and occasionally reared its ugly head in the writings of Hegel, Marx, Mannheim and others.[17] Now, all this is not so much a problem to Popper, who has coined his own definition of the historicist enemy to suit his own specific purposes. The problem arises with Gombrich's faithful adoption of this curiously "unhistorical" concept of historicism. The fact that Gombrich does not bother to distinguish historicism from what I have just referred to as historism, may sound like a somewhat pedantic remark, but I do think that this inability accounts for one of the most problematic traits in Gombrich's *œuvre*.

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[15] Nordin, Svante, *Från tradition till apokalyps. Historieskrivning och civilisationskritik i det moderna Europa*, Malmö, 1989, p. 24f.

[16] See Iggers, Georg G., *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, (1968), 1983.

[17] Popper, Karl, *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), London, New York, 1991.

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We have seen what kind of cultural history Gombrich rejects. Let us now look at what kind he prefers. I think that it is fair to say that one of the most characteristic and disastrous elements of the "Hegelian" cultural history is what Gombrich calls "cultural relativism." And the cardinal sin of cultural relativism – from Gombrich's viewpoint – is that this doctrine denounces the concept of "value." It is, literally speaking, a worthless or valueless doctrine. It has deprived itself of a means to sift the wheat from the chaff. In the essay we first examined, Gombrich speaks ironically of the relativist conception of culture, according to which "human cultures/.../can be studied, as bacterial cultures must be studied, without ranking them in order of value."[18] No, of course cultures must be ranked in order of value, some high, some low. Some cultures are superior, others inferior. Some must be preserved at any cost, others are more dispensable.

We have now come to Gombrich's objectivist alternative to cultural relativism – "the cultural tradition." This alternative is never explicitly formulated as such by Gombrich. Neither is it deducible from any single particular text. It is rather disseminated through all, or nearly all, of his works. As a convenient response to the senseless historicist aspiration of studying cultures with an equal historical interest, Gombrich singles out one culture worthy of attention. This valuable culture is most often called "our" culture, that is Western culture, and essentially its classical core.

Now – you might want to object – what could be wrong with taking a serious interest in one's own cultural history? Do I mean to say that Gombrich should study African culture instead? Or that he, if he aspires to study cultural history at all, must study every remote culture on earth? Of course not. What disturbs me is only his attempt to "objectivize" his personal as well as cultural bias. It would be a poor defense of Gombrich's position to say that he only studies his own culture and, accordingly, that it is up to others to study theirs, because this

[18] See note 1, p. 26.

would come dangerously close to a full-fledged relativistic statement. As if other cultures were just as good or worthy of study as "our" culture. They are not. Only "our" culture embodies objective values of humanity. To challenge or relativize this glorious culture would simply be dehumanizing, and a threat to civilization and mankind.[19] This sounds perhaps a little drastic, but "our" culture is really believed to be Culture with a capital C. Which is also the capital C of Civilization. Gombrich has actually said the following: "The identification of our civilization with civilization as such is certainly open to the charge of what is nowadays called ethnocentricity, and perhaps also élitism."[20] I would not deny that this is the case. He has also said that "civilizations have been known to die," meaning that we must actively protect "ours" from falling asunder.[21] Well, indeed some civilizations have been extinct from the face of the earth, thanks to this stubborn protection of "our" civilization. Sometimes it takes a civilization to save one.

The "we" of this discourse naturally corresponds to a "they," what in contemporary prose is usually referred to as "the Other." Gombrich is certainly something of a dream-target to the so-called multiculturalist camp, who is struggling exactly against this tendency to hegemonize, universalize and naturalize specifically Western concepts. What Gombrich fails to see is that his conceptions of "culture," "civilization," as well as of "reason" and of "man" itself, are – to use his own terminology – "terms of exclusion."[22] They are not grounded in nature, in biology, but in a specific historical situation. They are – in the broadest sense of the word – political. They exclude non-classical and non-Western definitions of greatness, of rationality and perfection. They also exclude women, both in theory and in practice. Gombrich has successfully managed to keep his survey textbook *The Story of Art* – through numerous editions – free from women artists. But of course, he

[19] Gombrich, "Art History and the Social Sciences" (1973), in *Ideals and Idols*, p. 162ff, and also "The Logic of Vanity Fair", p.92.
[20] Gombrich, "Focus on the Arts and Humanities" (1981), in *Tributes*, p. 12.
[21] Gombrich, "The Embattled Humanities: The Universities in Crisis" (1985), in *Topics of our Time. Twentieth-century Issues in Learning and in Art* (1991), London, 1992, p. 35.
[22] Gombrich, "Norm and Form. The Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in Renaissance Ideals" (1963), in *Norm and Form. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance I* (1966), Oxford, 1985, p. 88f.

did set out to limit himself to the study of "real works of art, and cut out anything which might merely be interesting as a specimen of taste or fashion."[23]

A recurrent motif in the writings of Gombrich is his embattlement against the dream of a "value-free" science. But this is not only a fight against some scientistic positivists, like those of the Vienna School of Philosophy, for example. No, in Gombrich's eyes the idea of a value-free science is also regarded as a consequence of the old Hegelian cultural relativism. The function of this motif is not only to combat these twin enemies of culture though, but to replace this vain claim with a powerful alternative, namely, the active advocating of timeless values. Thus his totally uncontroversial remark about the impossibility of a perfectly neutral science serves, so to speak, to facilitate the transmission of a more controversial message. It is certainly one thing to admit that scientists, among others, are bound by certain valuations, but quite another to take this necessity as an excuse for the advocacy of certain specific values, which is thought to have nothing to do with changing valuations.

In other words, Gombrich's concept of "value" is eminently unhistorical. This goes, by the way, for his other value-laden concepts – "reason," "truth," "beauty," "man," et cetera – as well. They are all static, supposedly objective, and therefore not submitted to revaluations or transformations, only to transportation. This explains the importance Gombrich attaches to the concept of "tradition." This concept is actually the substitute for "history." The old, sinister version of cultural history, with its emphasis on change, is exchanged for the stability of one cultural tradition – *the* cultural tradition. The former history was supposed to be the embodiment of the moving spirit, the latter tradition is supposed to be the embodiment of fixed values. I hardly need to confess to you that I find both these interpretations misguided. Gombrich simply lacks an interest in exploring cultural and historical differences, and this on theoretical rather than on personal grounds. If he sometimes seems to take an interest in this, it is only to prove the common humanity beneath all superficial variations. He finds the relativistic jar-

[23] Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (1950), 13th ed., Oxford, 1979, Preface, p. 1.

gon about incommensurables so repulsive, because he fears that this would lead to a total communication breakdown. Of course this must not be so. To use his own words: one must not take a difficulty for an impossibility. You do not have to be a fanatical relativist to acknowledge an incommensurability of certain concepts, certain language-games or patterns of thought from different cultures.

To secure the common ground for cultural communication, Gombrich seeks to prove the common humanity of man, that deep down we are all the same – a true family of man.[24] Any objection to this simplification is dismissed as "racialism."[25] He especially likes to quote Alexander Pope's famous dictum, that "The proper study of mankind is Man."[26] Well, even if this may be true, it is not what is at stake here. No art historian primarily studies mankind – not even Gombrich – but man-made art. Now, to understand and interpret these complex cultural and historical artifacts – not least the differences between them – the reference to a basic common ground in the species of Homo Sapiens does not explain very much. In fact, it only transfers the historical problem to the comparatively timeless realm of biology.[27]

What I would like to call Gombrich's "ideology of culture," his refutation of Hegelianism and his corresponding confinement to the classical tradition, is further supported by his general theory of image-making. In fact, the main thesis in *Art and Illusion* is that tradition is a precondition for the history of pictorial representation.[28] Nothing comes of nothing. Tradition – in the form of formulas, symbols, conventions and images – is the very heart of his theory of "schema and correction." And even though this persuasive theory of image-making is based on the conquest of illusion in Western art, it is a general theory, based on common human psychology, that is, biology.[29] The history of

[24] See Gombrich, Ernst/Eribon, Didier, *Looking for Answers. Conversations on Art and Science* (1991), New York, 1993, p. 173.
[25] Gombrich, "Relativism in the Humanities: The Debate about Human Nature" (1985), in *Topics of our Time*, p. 37.
[26] Ibid., p. 43f.
[27] See note 19, p. 158f.
[28] Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Oxford, 1960.
[29] See note 24, p. 133.

art must accordingly be the study of coherent artistic traditions. This seems all very logical, on a general level. But as has been shown enough already, Gombrich does not stop at a general level. In the end it is only one particular coherent artistic tradition that counts. And this, of course, has nothing to do with Gombrich's subjective preferences (which he also often explains), but follows from his belief in the objectivity of the values that are part of this particular tradition.

Although Gombrich frequently stresses that he is a historian and not a critic, in certain ways he has more in common with the latter. Not with a critical critic though, but with a critic of the affirmative, not to say propagandistic, kind. Not to say an uncritical critic. An *exegetic* critic, who sees as his prime task to comment on and pay tribute to tradition. What matters is to spread the word, to conserve the peaks of the past and keep tradition alive, to secure the possibility for future artists to add to the precious string of pearls of Western art history. This is also, by necessity, their only possibility. To Gombrich, the concept of an "artistic traditional break" must almost be a contradiction in terms. One cannot break away from tradition. This is also why Gombrich must reject the theory of the avant-garde and the rhetoric of modernism, which aspires to achieve precisely this. Again, this rejection has really nothing to do with his personal preferences, but is simply a consequence of his fundamentally traditionalist belief. Another basic fault with modern art is of course also that it is pregnant with a form of Hegelianism, in that it aims at expressing not only the soul of the artist but also something of the modern man or the modern age.

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I hope I have succeeded, so far, in demonstrating the interconnections between Gombrich's critique of the vicious pretensions of cultural history and his praising of the cultural tradition. How they can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The coin being Gombrich's peculiar conception of art history as a historical enterprise. Perhaps I ought to make clear that on the whole I share Gombrich's criticism concerning

Hegelianism and the Popperian historicism. I have just as little patience as he has with metaphysics, historical laws and prophecies. Naturally, I also think that the preservation and interpretation of the Western cultural heritage are of the greatest importance. I only think that Gombrich's dismissal of cultural history is as exaggerated and schematic as his elevation of the cultural tradition is one-sided. We are now approaching the end of this paper. I will not bore you with a repetition of my scattered complaints but try only, in a few concluding remarks, to state my complaint in a slightly more positive way.

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One of the most beautiful paragraphs in the essay "In Search of Cultural History" is the one where Gombrich makes a psychological reflection concerning all those men who fell victim to Hegelianism. Although none of them completely accepted Hegelian metaphysics, he explains, "all of them felt, consciously or unconsciously, that if they let go of the magnet that created the pattern, the atoms of past cultures would again fall back into random dustheaps."[30] I believe that Gombrich himself very much shares this fear, the fear of letting go of the magnet. And perhaps even more so than all those confident men in search of a common cultural spirit. Because in contrast to their magnet (named *Volksgeist*), Gombrich's magnet has no theoretical steel but simply consists of his faith in a single precious cultural tradition – a tradition he feels is threatened to come to an end, fall into oblivion and ultimately come to look like a mere dust heap among dust heaps.

Gombrich is so afraid of letting go of his traditionalist magnet and so busy combating Hegelianism, that he actually misses rather than solves (or fails to solve) the problem. The problem, that is, that the cultural historians of the nineteenth century were struggling with – the whole problem of the relationship between a certain art form and a certain culture, in short between art and culture, art and society. I feel that

[30] See note 1, p. 42.

Gombrich is throwing out the baby with the bath water. He argues persuasively against some nasty after-effects of an obviously obsolete metaphysical philosophy, but what he really heaves away is the whole context of cultural history. Gombrich actually exchanges the great, lively painting of cultural history – to make use of a frequent nineteenth-century metaphor – for a ready-made, a fixed, interartistic tradition of canonical masterpieces.

I think it would be worthwhile today to look a bit more closely at the pursuits of the historians of culture in the nineteenth century, and not only lump them together as hopeless Hegelians. I think that we could downright admire their open-minded ambition to embrace all aspects of world-wide culture in their finest details, their patient search for a pattern among the dust heaps of the past, a trace of the peculiarities of the times and, not least, their reluctance to embrace any inherited doctrines of universal humanity. Their relative cultural relativism is hardly the enemy! A certain amount of cultural relativism is rather a necessary precondition for a peaceful coexistence, communication and understanding among all cultures, all traditions, on earth. The attempt to equate civilization with the classical tradition, and cultural relativism with dehumanization, is not only a horrible proposition, but one refuted by history. No, cultural relativism is not the greatest threat to the subject of art history. But the temptation to see art history as a closed internal artistic system, a fixed tradition of Great images echoing other Great images, et cetera, et cetera, may in the end render art history irrelevant to a broader cultural public and even to professional historians of culture. Art history does have a bearing on cultural history, not just the other way around.

Of course Gombrich has always remained convinced that "/t/he art historian must be a historian"[31]. Well, this sounds very nice, but what Gombrich really means by that, is only that if the art historian did not know enough history, he would not succeed in making correct attributions and apply correct stylistic labels to the artifacts. I will not deny that this is so, but simply confess that I find this interpretation of the importance of history on behalf of the art historian a little limited.

[31] See note 19, p. 133.

As basically a representative of the autonomous art history from the beginning of our century, Gombrich primarily aims to study art for its own sake. And the optimal end product of this is not a broader understanding of art and its historical and social context but something much simpler: pleasure. This may sound a bit old-fashioned today. Personally, I am more interested in the even more old-fashioned business of studying cultural history through art – which does not imply a degradation of art to a mere tool for the purposes of cultural history. It only implies that the greatest pleasure for an art historian (and not only an art lover) in my view is to be found when art is not only supported by, but taken to enlighten, other and more general aspects of culture.

It still remains, I think, a justified historical task to search for such connections between intercultural phenomena, between art and religion, art and economy, art and law, art and science, art and philosophy, art and literature and so on. And of course you can do this without postulating a structural essence or a higher organic unity of all the parts, and without assuming any sort of necessary direction of events. I do agree with Gombrich when he says that it is almost too easy to draw comparisons like these, that they are sometimes very hard to disprove. But I do not share his conclusion that we should give up trying. And to consider his alternative: his traditionalist conviction which – as he often emphasizes – implies a search for continuities.[32] But such a directed search for continuities within a single tradition is often a bit too easy as well. It easily leads to the construction of fairly superficial and unhistorical chains of development. Harder and just as important to investigate are the disruptions and breaks in the continuity of traditions. Not to mention the hardly recognizable differences that loom behind the more apparent traditional continuities.

Of course there are no innocent eyes – but there is always more to art than meets the eye. As there is more to cultural history than the traditionalist will see.

[32] See note 1, p. 59.