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The Pursuit of Order – Some Reflections on *Art and Illusion*

How can we know the
dancer from the dance?

(Yeats)

Art and Hegelianism

In one of his articles, Ernst H. Gombrich tells the following anecdote from U.S.A.:

“In one of the great galleries of that rich continent a little unpretentious sketch by Corot once struck my fancy. It seemed to me a real gem of a painting, immensely subtle in tone, immensely simple in subject matter. I broke my journey to go to that museum mainly looking forward to a fresh encounter with this little masterpiece. I could not find it. Everything had been rearranged, and though there were still enough masterpieces, including Corots, to satisfy any visitor, my pleasure was spoiled.”¹

Also in other places in his writings, Gombrich shows his concern with art as aesthetic objects. In the article “Approaches to the History of Art: Three Points for Discussion,” he writes: “(O)ur civilization, like all civi-

¹Richard Woodfield (ed.), *E.H. Gombrich, Reflections on the History of art*, (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1987) p. 193. The article was first published in *Museum*, Vol. 21, 1968.

lizations, is ... held together by values – social, moral or aesthetic. It is these values which I found embodied in what I call the canons of art, the standards of mastery without which there could be no history of art.”¹ However, science also makes its claims: “Our civilization is a rational one and it demands rational answers based on evidence which can be tested by methods of science.”² As an object for art historical research, art must submit to the demands of the scientific method. In this field Gombrich has established himself as a sharp critic of central elements in the tradition of art historical research, and specifically of those concepts of style and history that are based on the philosophy of Hegel, but he has also made an active effort to assist in establishing alternative tools for art historical research. *Art and Illusion* (1960) is a major contribution in this respect. Many of the concepts and theoretical reflections which are also found throughout his many articles, are collected in this book.

My concern here is to show that there is – despite the fundamental differences – a similarity between the Hegelian tradition and those concepts of style and history advocated by Gombrich. This similarity is in my opinion a result of certain “bindings” that are implicit in art historical research as an institution. These bindings are of particular consequence for how we deal with the aesthetic dimensions of the art object.

Gombrich characterizes the Hegelian heritage in art historical research as “Hegelianism without metaphysics.”³ Hegelianism has primarily influenced the manner in which art historians have dealt with the form or style of art objects as products of specific epochs in the history of art. In the tradition of art historical research labelled *Kunst-*

¹Ernst H. Gombrich, “Approaches to art History: Three Points for Discussion,” *Topics of our time. Twentieth Century issues in learning and art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1991) p. 73.

²Ibid. p. 73.

³Ernst H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) p. 25. This book is a sustained attack on Hegelianism in art history, a criticism which is repeated in other places in the works of Gombrich, among else in his speech on “Hegel und die Kunstgeschichte” on the occasion of his receiving the Hegel Prize in Stuttgart in 1977. This speech is translated into Danish, and published in Lars Aagaard-Mogensen (ed.), *Kunst og billedsprog. Udvalgte essays* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1979).

geschichte als Geistesgeschichte, the style of an art object is described and explained as the expression of a supraindividual consciousness – a “Spirit of the time” (cf. Hegel’s concept of “Zeitgeist”), or as a “national sensibility” (cf. Hegel’s concept of “Volksgeist”). In other words, Hegelianism has generated concepts in the field of style that uphold the idea of an internal and essential relationship between art and any other cultural expression. The stylistic concepts of historical epochs are used as if they were self-explanatory, i.e. without the metaphysical foundation on which they rest in Hegel’s thinking. Art, religion and politics may indiscriminately be regarded as expressions of the same historical dynamism, without the motive power – or, in Gombrich’s words, the hub of the wheel of history – being made explicit in the same way as Hegel makes it explicit in his philosophy (cf. the concept of “Weltgeist”). A telling example of this holistic concept of style is found in the statement by the architect Adolf Loos that “(if) nothing were left of an extinct race but a single button, I would be able to infer, from the shape of that button, how these people dressed, built their houses, how they lived, what was their religion, their art, and their mentality.”¹

A similar belief in style as the expression of a supraindividual and totalizing universal motive power of history is found in art historical research inspired by Marxism. However, Hegel’s ideas of “Spirit” are now replaced by Capital, so that style is interpreted and explained as the expression of the inherent logic of Capital – as class consciousness and ideology. Gombrich has strongly criticized also this type of art historical research, and his criticism has been taken as a rejection of social history as such.²

Gombrich’s criticism of Hegelianism is in short that it contains a fundamental logical flaw which constitutes a break with the ideals of scientific stringency. When the style of an artwork is regarded as an ex-

¹Quoted from Ernst H. Gombrich, “Style,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, London 1968, p. 358.

²Gombrich’s criticism of the linking of art and social history is particularly pointed in his review of Arnold Hauser’s *Social History of Art* (1951), first published in *Art Bulletin*, March 1953, and reprinted in Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and other essays on the Theory of Art* (London and New York: Phaidon, 1963).

pression of a supra-individual consciousness which is the motive power of history and manifests itself in all parts of a culture, virtually anything can be proven. The style of a Renaissance work is explained with reference to a specific Renaissance sensitivity, and the hypothesis that there is such a phenomenon as a Renaissance sensitivity is proven with reference to the style of the artwork. Thus we are caught in a circular argumentation, where the hunt for similarities between individual artworks and between artworks and other cultural expressions apparently can go on forever without running into intellectual opposition. Gombrich characterizes this as a most unscientific attitude: "The genuine researcher does not look for support for his hypotheses; he is primarily looking for examples that will prove him wrong. A theory that has no limitations is also without scientific content. The danger in the Hegelian heritage lies precisely in the fact that it is so seductively easy to apply."¹ *Art and Illusion* may therefore be read as Gombrich's comprehensive effort to give art historical research a more solid foundation – to make style or form in art into a phenomenon that can be studied in a scientific manner.

Art and schemata

"Did they paint what they saw?" Gombrich asks, with reference to Alain's cartoon in *The New Yorker Magazine* reprinted on page 1 of *Art and Illusion*. Here we see an Egyptian art class drawing a life model who mimes the stylized human forms of Egyptian painting in absolute *en face* and profiles. In this manner Gombrich illustrates his main concern: the relationship between representation and reality, or in his own words, "the riddle of style." Thus we are immediately confronted by one of the basic problems in the scientific study of images: How can some black lines on a sheet of white paper in any way be a picture of anything else? How are we to understand the formation of visual meaning? How can

¹Ernst H. Gombrich, "Hegel og kunsthistorien," in Aagaard-Mogensen (ed.), *Kunst og billedsprog*.

style have a history, when the reference of the images – the external world – seemingly does not change?

The Egyptian nude in Alain's cartoon is a spoof on the naïve image theory which postulates a direct correspondence between the image and the experience of reality, between the meaning of the picture and pure perception. This understanding of the image can be traced back to Antiquity. We find it in the writings of Plato, who distinguishes clearly between the image and the object of knowledge. The image is connected to perception and can only express something about the particular and the occasional – about objects as they appear from an arbitrary point of view in time and space. Reflection, on the other hand, can raise itself to the level of the general and the abstract, and attain insight into the essence of the objects. Similar ideas about pure perception and pure reflection underlie the characterization of Egyptian art as conceptual, originating in reflection, and Renaissance art as conditioned by naturalism or perception.

Gombrich argues against this distinction between knowledge and perception, because it presupposes a view of human consciousness as a *tabula rasa* – an organ that passively registers sense impressions. Knowledge thus becomes something we acquire inductively, i.e. by storing and processing individual sense impressions. This view of consciousness and knowledge is maintained, for instance, by the classical empiricists. Gombrich labels this the “bucket” theory, with reference to Karl R. Popper: the human consciousness is at first an empty bucket, which is slowly filled up with sense perceptions that form the basis for more generalized ideas and concepts.¹

There is no such thing as an empty consciousness, says Gombrich. Nor is there ever a direct correspondence between the perceptual stimuli that meet the eye and what we experience. A simple test will demonstrate this fact: If you draw the contours of your own head on a misty mirror, this “image” – where you really feel you are standing face to face with yourself – will turn out to be only about half the size of your head. When you see your own face in “full size” in the bathroom

¹Karl H. Popper, “The Bucket and the Searchlight: Two Theories of Knowledge,” in *Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford U.P., 1972). Popper presented a version of these theories in a lecture as early as 1948.

mirror as you comb your hair or shave, it is, in other words, an illusion. Perceptual psychology provides countless examples of similar phenomena relating to our experience of the size, colour and shape of objects. To put it briefly, we perceive the world as far more constant than it “actually” is, i.e. in relation to the perceptual stimuli that hit the eye. The perceiver is an active part in the perceptual construction of reality.

Beyond these general psychological conditions, which pertain to human consciousness as such, our experience of external reality is conditioned by a number of cultural factors. According to Gombrich, there is no such thing as the neutral eye, or an unconditioned perception of the world. One of his illustrations of this fact is a drawing of a figure that can be interpreted both as a duck and a rabbit, though not as both simultaneously. To see is always to see something *as* something, and this last something originates in the perceiving individual. A viewer from a culture without the rabbit, would be unable to interpret the drawing to this effect. Hence, the very concept of an image on the retina is a misunderstanding. There is no image in the eye; it is *we* that give the objects identity through our culturally conditioned interpretations.

In contrast to the “bucket” theory, Gombrich argues for a “searchlight” theory that he borrows from the writings of Karl R. Popper. According to this theory, the human consciousness is no “empty bucket,” but should rather be compared to a mobile searchlight which will make certain aspects visible at the cost of excluding others. According to this theory, what guides this light source is our horizon of expectations: in a process of trial and error we test certain possibilities for interpretation on the perceptual data. If, for instance, we are standing at the bus stop waiting for bus number 4, we will unceasingly try to find confirmation both of the presence of the bus and of “number 4” in the signals we receive from the external world. In such a situation we also recognize the particular bus much more quickly than we would if the situation, and therefore also our horizon of expectations, was different. *Schemata* is Gombrich’s term for this frame of reference which supplies meaning to the inputs of perception and helps constitute our reality.

One of Gombrich’s illustrations of the function of such schemata, is the body that is cut off below the chest. As we enter a mu-

seum, our consciousness is guided by an aesthetic schema that he labels “the institution of the bust.” On a battlefield, on the other hand, our horizon of expectations or schemata is different: here we experience not a bust, but a violated and dead human body. In this way Gombrich transfers the “searchlight” theory of consciousness to the realm of art, where he employs the concept of schemata to solve what he calls “the riddle of style.”

Neither is there such a thing in art as the neutral eye, that establishes direct correspondence between perception and the meaning of a picture. Gombrich here argues against the idea of the picture as a “window” – a metaphor which has been employed in picture theories since the Renaissance. Nobody becomes a better painter simply by staring at nature. There is a quantum leap from the physical object to the colour spot on the canvas. In the painting the colour spot enters into an aesthetic context, where it is balanced against other colours and shapes in a visual totality. There is no one-to-one relationship between individual elements in the picture and reality. A vertical line in a picture can be read as a nose as well as a pole. When we in a given context perceive the line as a nose, it is on account of the fact that there are other elements in the picture that support such an interpretation, such as two dots above the vertical line (“eyes”) and a horizontal line below (“mouth”). All perception is relational, i.e. conditioned by whatever *else* we also see. When we read a meaning into a picture, it is therefore not based on correspondence between something inside and something outside the picture frame, but on a correlation between two qualitatively different entities: in a specific context the vertical line may be equivalent to a real nose. The pictorial medium also includes certain limits for which traits of an object may be represented at the same time. If, for instance, the purpose is to visualize the constructive or structural traits of a boat, it is impossible simultaneously to present the characteristics of the boat seen from a specific point in time and space – as in impressionistic paintings. When we see something *as* something in a picture, that process is rather to be explained by the conventions of art than by reference to reality. All representation of nature is based on a set of conventions or codes of representation, i.e. *schemata*.

When, for instance, Claude Lorrain colours the grass brown in the foreground of his landscape paintings, it is, according to Gombrich, the result of a seventeenth-century schema for the representation of nature. If he had painted the grass green, people would simply have found it ugly. However, impressionism created a novel schema for grass, which introduced a sharp green colour to painting. In consequence it also became impossible for the viewer to experience Lorrain's grass as anything but brown. "The history of 'seeing'" should therefore, according to Gombrich, be described as "the history of a learning process through which a socially coherent public was trained by the artist to respond in a given manner to certain ... signs."¹

What is it, then, that brings about change in the style or the schemata of pictures? If it is neither Hegel's Spirit nor Marx's Capital that constitutes the motive power of history, what is it that creates the history of pictorial form? All pictures, says Gombrich, enter into a social context or situation which opens up for a number of pictorial solutions and precludes others. When visual schemata are maintained or changed, the explanation can be found in what Gombrich calls "the logic of the situation".² In Egyptian culture for instance, pictures did not have a function that made it necessary to individualize the representation of human beings. Altogether there was very little in that culture to forward individualizing patterns of thought or behaviour. Hence, the pictorial representation of human forms also became pictographically simple. Artists stuck to the inherited schemata, and thus stayed within what Gombrich calls the *making* phase in the history of style.³ With the Greeks, on the other hand, the situation was different. Precisely here it was possible for the spark of individuation or imitation of nature to be ignited, and thus start a process in which the schemata

¹Ernst H. Gombrich, "Signs, Language and Behaviour," in Richard Woodfield (ed.), *E.H. Gombrich, Reflections on the History of art*, p. 238. The article is a review of Charles Morris's book by the same title, and was first published in *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 31, 1949.

²Ernst H. Gombrich, "The Logic of Vanity Fair: Alternatives to Historicism in the Study of Fashions, Style and Taste," in E.H. Gombrich, *Ideas and Idols. Essays on values in history and art* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1979).

³*Art and Illusion*, pp. 118–125

of tradition were constantly revised through a comparison with perceptual experience of nature in a *making-and-matching*-phase.¹

With these concepts of schemata and correction (*matching*) Gombrich has created an alternative to the totalizing and essence-centred concept of style and history of Hegelianism. And his alternative has specific advantages. Gombrich, for instance, can readily explain stylistic differences within a single artwork, as for instance the fact that birds and animals are presented in a more realistic manner than human beings in Egyptian paintings. His concepts within the area of representation, however, rely heavily on the psychology of perception, since he says there is an isomorphism or structural similarity between the mechanisms which pertain to art and those that pertain to the perceptual encounter with nature. This creates certain problems, which are of consequence for how we can deal with the aesthetic dimension of the artworks.

According to Gombrich, the principle of schemata and correction (*matching*) is an essential characteristic of perception as well as of pictorial art. In his use of these concepts, however, he confuses psychology and logic. If one takes seriously the role of language in constituting reality, it is a logically valid point to say that all perception contains an element of interpretation. However, there is no reason to believe that this interpretation, which then entails the act of seeing something *as* something, amounts to a process of trial and error in the sense of empirical psychology, as postulated by the "searchlight" theory. Nor is Gombrich consistent when the concepts borrowed from the psychology of perception are applied to the writing of history. In the *making* phase, as in Egyptian painting, where the pictorial schemata remain unchanged for a long period, the process of trial and error, which is said to characterize all perception, has no function. In Greek art, on the other hand, it gains the stature of nothing less than the dynamics of history. This is

¹The source of inspiration for this view of the history of style is Karl Popper's philosophy of science. In his *Logik der Forschung* (1934) Popper establishes falsifiability as the criterion of scientific work: the researcher starts out by establishing an hypothesis about particular connections (cf. Gombrich's concept of *making*), which is then tested for validity through a process of falsification (cf. Gombrich's concept of *matching*).

also the case in the Renaissance, and in later phases of the history of art.

In general, as pointed out by Richard Wollheim, Gombrich applies the concept of schema in different ways.¹ The term "schema" refers both to individual pictorial forms, the "primitive" forms that characterize the beginning of any *making-and-matching* period, and to the phenomenon of style in general. However, the element that unites the various uses of the term, is the search for visual determination. When, in this perceptual encounter with nature, we see something *as* something, this latter something always has an unequivocal identity: it is *either* a duck *or* a rabbit.

Similarly in Gombrich's examples of schemata in pictorial art: we see the artwork *either* as canvas *or* as reality. And Gombrich's primary interest is in the presence of reality: he is concerned with the conditions of *illusion* in pictorial art. When we interpret a picture within a specific context, we make it visually determinate on the basis of "the logic of the situation." If, for instance, the altar of a church is made the context for an interpretation of Konrad Witz's painting of a fishing scene on Lake Geneva, then the pictorial forms will unquestionably be identified as Christ and his apostles.²

If the purpose of the analysis is an historical reconstruction and the object of research is a picture painted before museums came into existence, the concept of the logic of the situation may be a suitable tool for analysis. However, certain problems arise when one wants to say something about the pictures created within the modern realm of interpretation: the institution of art. In this case the picture is its own purpose, it is "purposeful without purpose," as Immanuel Kant said ("Zwäckmässigkeit ohne Zweck"). It has, so to say, become its own context, or as Gombrich says: "For that strange precinct we can call 'art' is like a hall of mirrors or a whispering gallery. Each form conjures up a thousand memories and after-images. No sooner is an image presented

¹Richard Wollheim, "Reflections on Art and Illusion," in Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind* (London: Allen Lane, 1973).

²The example is found in Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London and New York: Phaidon, 1950), p. 181.

as art than, by this very act, a new frame of reference is created which it cannot escape.”¹

One may always ask what it is that raises some pictures and not others to the stature of high art – what it is that makes art into art. I will not try to solve that mystery here. Neither does Gombrich aspire to that goal. The problem is that his concept of schema appears to be incompatible with the aesthetic experience of an artwork. An example may illustrate this. In 1905 Matisse painted a portrait of a woman which he entitled *Portrait with green stripe*. Here we see a female head painted with an extraordinary intensity of colour. The picture is dominated by the complementary colours of red and green, juxtaposed in large patches of colour applied with thick strokes. In the middle of the face, which is turned towards the viewer with a gaze that is at the same time directed out of the picture and turned inwards on herself, Matisse has painted a thick, green stripe. If we were to apply the concept of schema to this green stripe, we would have to say that the artist has here created a new schema for a nose. However, that would be an extremely poor description of what we experience as we face this picture in the National Gallery in Copenhagen. The aesthetic experience is, among other things, characterized by the fact that form and reference are fused in such way that we see the green stripe and the nose at the same time. In the aesthetic experience we experience both-and, as opposed to the either-or of our perceptual encounter with ducks and rabbits. The concept of schema is therefore better suited to an analysis of pictures in which the element of reference is important (as in documentary photographs, book illustrations, etc.) than as a tool for understanding the creation of visual meaning in art in general. If we take the concept of schema as the starting-point for the understanding of the form of a picture, there is no room for aesthetic dimensions like “subtle in tone,” “immensely simple in subject matter,” which is how Gombrich characterizes Corot’s sketch.

¹Ernst H. Gombrich, “Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form,” in Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and other essays on the Theory of Art*, p. 11.

Art and science

The importance that Gombrich attaches to that which is visually determined in our perceptual encounter with a work of art is something he shares with the tradition of research that he criticizes, “Hegelianism without metaphysics.” In the philosophy of Hegel, the Spirit is an entity that yearns towards transparency, i.e. towards a condition in which it is at one with itself and appears as identity between the internal and the external. This idea of identity also characterizes the concept of style in art historical “Hegelian thinking without metaphysics.” An art historian within this tradition treats, for instance, Renaissance pictorial style and Renaissance mentality, that is, its form and content, as an indivisible unit. Here is no room for ambiguities, breaks or individual differences. In the terminology of the philosophy of language this means that the individual is subsumed under the heading of the general, i.e. that the individual artwork is taken as an expression of what can be found also in other artworks.

Gombrich’s concept of the form and style of an artwork as a bundle of schemata also erases the tracks of individuality and differences. As will be apparent from his descriptions of his encounters with individual works of art, as for instance with Corot’s small sketch, this is not the result of a lack of either interest or aesthetic sensibility. When these dimensions of the research object are left out, both by Gombrich himself and by the research tradition that he criticizes, I believe that to be the result of certain traits in the *institution* of art research. The practical work of art research is generally governed by the ideals of classification and generalization.¹ Even when individual traits are singled out as objects of research in the study of the works of a particular artist, the need to create order and coherence has a tendency to erase the differences between the artworks. In studies of a single painter the function of individual works is most often to exemplify a general line of development, which may well be based on an analogy between life and

¹This idea is supported by the views held by art historians on their own work: See for instance Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (London: Penguin, 1955).

works. The form is ascribed meaning and determination which is derived from life itself.

However, the desire to establish order and general patterns is not a trait that characterizes art research alone. This trait is a characteristic of all scientific effort. However, the process of making art history into an exact science presents a striking contrast to the situation of the artwork outside of the institution of the exact sciences. In the art historical practice of our time it is not the general elements – what the artwork shares with other works – that concerns us as viewers. In the art gallery and in the museum we are – like Gombrich – attracted to an individual artwork in which there is something which attracts and strikes us and which we cannot ignore. It is this “something” that the art critic struggles to articulate, and in this effort to create a language for the singular and the unique, he or she is rarely assisted by art history. For in this tradition art criticism has been marginalized and excluded from the realm of respectable knowledge. If one, like Gombrich, desires to create new concepts for the study of the significance of form in pictorial art, one therefore has to begin to take practical art criticism seriously. For it is here, and not in the psychology of perception or in Karl Popper’s philosophy of science, that one finds the experience which is relevant and necessary in order to rethink art research.
