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Formalism in the first half of the twentieth century: 'pure science' or a case of effective rhetoric?

Review of:
German Art History and Scientific Thought – Beyond Formalism, edited by Mitchell B. Frank and Daniel Adler, Surrey / Burlington: Ashgate, 2012, 177 pp, 28 b & w ills., £55.00 hdbk, ISBN 9781409440239.

The historiography of art history can roughly be divided into three major approaches; first, there are overviews of the development of the discipline in which the gradually evolving methodology forms the lead, and in which key figures are attributed with the 'invention' of crucial concepts; then there is the focus either on particular persons, schools or historical periods and the development of specific methods in the field, and thirdly, there are the conceptually oriented inquiries. Studies of the third kind sometimes attempt to overcome criticism of the internalistic descriptions of general historiographies of art history by placing the development in a larger social or academic framework. The volume under review takes this last perspective by opening up the question what kind of relation art history had with other disciplines, especially the human and natural sciences.

The time frame is constituted by the developments in German-speaking countries in the period between 1880 and 1955, when both art history and the sciences were attempting to formulate their fundamental methodologies. Even though this seems a rather obvious subject, there are in fact few publications on this particular relationship. In general volumes on the historiography of our discipline, this perspective is almost always passed over. If it is being dealt with, we often find a reference to the philosophical issues underlying it, which ignore the more practical reasons (for example, taxonomy as a structuring method)that often also played a role in this exchange.[1] Also in studies of particular subjects or persons it is difficult to acquire a good idea of the breadth of this exchange. When it is being discussed, it is mostly done from the perspective of 'Kunstwissenschaft', and even in this case, the precise relation between 'hard science' and the development of ideas and concepts in art history can only be treated generically, as the field is too vast to deal with in its entirety.[2]

The essays in the present volume, even though they all focus on a particular case, help the reader to gain a broader insight in the exchange between science and art history. As the subtitle announces, the publication takes the development of formalism as its lead, and intends to follow how various art historians embarked on the study of artistic form with the help of approaches derived from neighbouring sciences. It underlines that there is no such thing as a coherent or even dominant

[1] See for example Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundation of Art History*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press 1984, which admirably discusses the philosophical foundations of art history, but still treats this development as a fundamental internal process.
[2] An example of an interesting attempt can be found in Matthew Rampley, 'The Idea of a Scientific Discipline: Rudolf von Eitelberger and the Emergence of Art History in Vienna, 1847–1873' in *Art History* 34, 2011, 54-79.

definition of the formalism in the period under discussion, let alone today. To the contrary, the volume implicitly uncovers the origins of the various definitions of formalism to its multiple roots around 1900. Each essay focuses on another scientific tradition that contributed in one way or another to an exclusive attention to form. At the same time, the essays in this volume point out that this narrowing down of the discussion of art to its supposedly quintessential qualities also led to a quest for non-objective aspects that could not be sensed, but only intimated. So, while the objective became stressed as an indication of the scientific character of art history, it also led to metaphysical approaches that could 'explain' deeper meanings, whether historical, social or racial, of the work of art in question.

For this reason, it is no surprise that most attention in this book is paid to the impact of phenomenology, psychology, psychophysiology, and physiognomy on art historians. These were the sciences where explicit attention was paid to those aspects which could not be beheld directly, but which could only tested and/or hypothesised though theoretical lenses – exactly as art historians strove for explanations in which they related the visual evidence to invisible historical, cultural or racial concepts. On the other hand, 'hard' sciences like biology exerted their influence on the discipline, as these worked with series, either organised synchronically or diachronically, on the basis of visual characteristics, exactly as art historians were doing when trying to construct an idea of development on the basis of observable facts. Although this is not explicated here, the debt of art historians to these other academic fields were probably triggered by this kind of practical considerations, and only in hindsight attempted to find common theoretical ground in philosophical concepts.

The majority of the essays start from case studies on well-known art historians; Schmarsow, Wölfflin, Riegl, Julius Meier-Graefe and Sedlmayr all figure prominently in these pages. For example, Andrea Pinotti discusses in his contribution how Schmarsow incorporated psychophysiology and phenomenology into his approach to architecture, in order to stress the way the perception of space was determined by the kinetic experience, and on this basis, to formulate laws of architectural aesthetics. Margaret Olin offers an interesting reading of Riegl's approach to art, as starting out with a detached and neutral description of works of art, slowly developing this into an involved and engaged way of perceiving art. The latter approach is compared to the teaching methods of the biologist Agassiz, who forced his students to 'live' with their specimen over a longer period of time in order to arrive at a deepened form of contemplation. Olin argues that towards the end of his life, Riegl strove towards a comparable goal when preservation of historical monuments necessitated involvement on the part of the art historian. Joan Hart describes how factual description and the uncovering of fundamental laws, which were the hallmark of Wölfflin's approach in art history, led to an exchange between him and the sociologist Max Weber, who at the very same time was formulating a systematic theory in order to interpret social facts. However, this still leaves the question unanswered how both academics fitted into a broader academic trend, and whether it is possible to determine a mutual source from which they both drew. It does clarify, however, that more practical aspects of research often led to mutual exchange of ideas.

Daniel Adler also takes up Wölfflin as his main character. Adler's conclusion, however, that the method of formalism is a combination of a positivist analysis of the object *and* a speculative approach (in this case by means of psychological interpretation) is in itself not new. Wölfflin's application of subtle but effective rhetorical strategies in combining apparently incompatible points of view have been the subject of an extensive study that already illuminated the non-objective side of his reasoning.[3] That, on the other hand, this paradoxical amalgam of approaches in art history was in itself prompted by a wider dilemma in the human sciences in response to a growing emphasis on experimentation, sketches an interesting background to the art historical attempts to deal with *Wissenschaft* as the authoritative model for the humanities.

One of the shortcomings, if we may call it that, of the book is its chronological time span. It starts from the assumption that art history started as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, with the creation of chairs in German speaking countries from 1855 onwards, and that this ran more or less parallel to the invention of modern science. However, a number of art historical approaches were derived from earlier authors, such as Vasari and Winckelmann, and also these earlier works had been influenced by contemporary scientific, religious and cultural concepts. A case in point is the relation between biological models of evolution and the art historical description of style. In this volume, Mitchell B. Frank argues that the nineteenth-century concepts of recapitulation and evolutionism had an impact on, or at least showed a striking analogy to, the concepts used by art historians for the chronological ordering of their material. This ignores the earlier history of this conceptual model. For example, the metaphor of the tree, as used by in the work of Meier-Graefe to explain the relation of several historical schools of painting, did not come from Cuvier, Darwin or other nineteenth-century taxonomists; they all made use of a metaphor that can be traced back to the Bible. As the nineteenth century discussion of evolution was heavily contested – and thus influenced – by religious arguments, this led to the adaptation of models with a much longer history, which in turn had been influencing art historical concepts of chronology long before 1800.

In her essay, Daniela Bohde indeed stresses this longer historical framework when discussing the indebtedness of architectural history to the 'science' of physiognomics. Seventeenth century treatises on architecture already compared the 'face' of a building, or its architectural details, to human anatomy.[4] At the same time, she is able to show that the appropriation of these physiognomic concepts in art history around 1900 facilitated the conceptualization of historical and national styles by means of circular reasoning; it actually provided a way to go *around* the quest for objective data, while still allowing for a rhetoric of rationality. The success of this kind of argumentation actually paved the way for the association between art history and racial thinking which was taken up by Pinder, and which found its apex in Sedlmayr's works.

[3] Marshall Brown, 'The Classic Is the Baroque: On the Principle of Wolfflin's Art History', *Critical Inquiry* 9/2, 1982, 379-404 already discussed the rhetorical structure of Wölffin's *Grundbegriffe*.
[4] See Vaughan Hart, 'From Virgin to Courtesan in Early English Vitruvian Books' in Vaughan Hart/Peter Hicks, *Paper Palaces - the rise of the Renaissance architectural treatise*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 297-319.

With this conclusion, Bohde at least in part contradicts the next essay by Ian Verstegen. This essay does not focus on the impact of scientific thought (meaning the human and natural sciences) on Sedlmayr's art historical approaches but deals with philosophical concepts of science from the first half of the twentieth century. Verstegen's discussion suggests that Sedlmayr had indeed drifted far from the natural and human sciences and their focus on empirical enquiry, into philosophical and ethereal realms in which the object itself was of less importance. It was exactly by means of this trajectory that Sedlmayr was able to solve the lingering tension between object, character and evolution that pervaded art historical thinking since the beginning of the twentieth century. His rather arcane approach enabled him to combine the two elements into a philosophy of art in which character and evolution were defined in racial terms. So far, this perfectly accords with Bohde's conclusion that the exchange between art history and physiognomy led to a widely accepted form of circular reasoning in which the object did no longer pose limits to its interpretation. But if this is true, Sedlmayr's early work cannot be separated from his later National Socialist publications. One is tempted to conclude that Sedlmayr only drew the final conclusion after half a century of scientific thinking by art historians. Verstegen's aim to restore the appreciation for Sedlmayr's first publications is therefore problematic, as the philosophical and methodological assumptions from which Sedlmayr started already contained in an embryonic state that which later was to become his racist view on Germanic art.

The cumulative insight the reader acquires from this volume is that the approach of art history to the sciences was all but a clear trajectory towards objectivity; it called forth an increasing subjective and sometimes holistic appreciation of visual experience. This is partially the result of the breadth of what we might call sciences – as these were not only the 'hard' sciences such as physics and biology, but also sociology, psychology and phenomenology. One gets the impression that the latter group of disciplines exerted a dominant influence on art history. All but two contributions in this volume focus on these fields, which all tried to cope in exactly the same period with the tension between objective facts, abstracted theories and invisible relations. The 'scientific' approach actually provided a legitimization for the former humanistic art history to become the more objective *Kunstwissenschaft*, and therefore became accepted in the academic context. Scientific methodology therefore often presented more a rhetorical device than a reality. Several essays in this volume point this out; for example, Mitchell B. Frank states at the end of his discussion that the use of biological models in art history served 'narrative utility'.

The last essay in this volume, by Christian Fuhrmeister, perfectly supports this assumption, as it discusses the strategies adopted after 1945 by German art historians in order to save their career. They responded to the post-war investigations on their affiliation with the National Socialist party by claiming that art history as a discipline had remained aloof from political intervention, precisely because of its assumed scientific and objective methodology. In other words, they separated their own discipline from other fields of science that supposedly had been more openly involved in the Nazi world view – and that often had been even more 'scientific' in character. By describing scholarship as an abstract process, which cannot be influenced from outside, they completely ignored the trajectory their

discipline had taken in the preceding decades, and the often explicit and paradoxical junction of objective facts and ideology that had made up the character of Nazi science. By retreating to the scientific 'ivory tower', they purged their discipline, and remodelled their methods accordingly. This goes to show that an internalistic explanation cannot account for methodological developments in art history. Instead, external influences – in this case the general idea of the natural sciences and their quest for 'facts' as the 'model' for all other academic fields, and even the later confrontation with denazification – were fundamental to what course the discipline took, as this volume accurately illustrates.

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