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978-0-521-06680-8 - Hegel's Art History and the Critique of Modernity

Beat Wyss

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HEGEL'S ART HISTORY AND THE CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

In this study, Beat Wyss provides a critical analysis of Hegel's theories of art history. Analogous to his philosophy of history, Hegel viewed the history of art in dialectical terms: With its origins in the ancient Near East, Western art culminated in classical Greece, but began its decline already in the Hellenistic period. Yet, as Wyss posits, art refuses its programmed demise. He highlights the political dimension of this contradiction, showing the implication of theories which subordinate art to the will of absolute rule. Wyss follows his analysis of Hegel's theories with a discussion of the work of four modern successors – Nordau, Spengler, Sedlmayr, and Lukács, all of whom adapted Hegel's dialectic model – in an effort to demonstrate the central contradictions of twentieth-century aesthetics.

A scholar of art history, German literature, and philosophy, Beat Wyss is Professor in the Institute of Art History at the University of Stuttgart.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In order to facilitate the reader's consultation of texts quoted, especially in the case of longer quotations, some standard or widely available translations have been used. Most notable among these is Thomas M. Knox's generally admirable translation of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, which is valuable both for his attention to detail and for his annotations. This and other translations are marked in the Bibliography with an asterisk. However, even Knox can slip up or sound awkward sometimes, and where this is the case I have supplied my own translation. Biblical quotations are taken from the Authorised King James Version of the Bible. Wherever there is no reference to an available English translation, the translation is mine.

Hamburg, 1998

C.D.S.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

'Hegel? Isn't he dead and buried?' was the reaction when, at the beginning of the 1980s, I began work on this book. Admittedly, the agents of the spirit of 1968 had long since found their way into the Establishment: I should have expected the sharpest criticism to come from that quarter. In attempting to subject a section of the utopian cultural inventory of that era (which was also my own!), I ran counter to the rule of letting bygones be bygones. By undertaking a kind of intellectual self-analysis I re-awakened certain views to which I had myself, without consciously realising it, virtually or actually subscribed. It was not my intention to reduce the thinking of my teachers, whether friendly or otherwise, to mere concepts, but to make it possible to relive their arguments by a process of imitative translation: to achieve *anamnesis*, re-remembrance in the truest sense. A mimetic method, assuming the other viewpoint, is suited to the main purpose of this book, which is to rescue images from concepts. At first my enterprise seemed intellectually impossible, since it involved challenging the supremacy of the concept by the conceptual means of language. At this point I remembered an expression of Adorno's: he defined as 'the mimesis of the hardened and the alienated' a certain quality of art whose façade of sycophancy suddenly bursts to reveal the dazzling light of opposition and alternative. The purpose behind my method was to imitate the deceptive mutability of images by verbal means. This direct expression of a system of thought does away with a great deal of clever professional commentary. Subversive affirmation is comparable to the sparring technique of aikido: one overcomes the opponent by means of the latter's own energy, by deflecting it in increasing measure into empty space.

Daß das weiche Wasser in Bewegung
 Mit der Zeit den mächtigen Stein besiegt.
 Du verstehst, das Harte unterliegt.

(Water is soft, but set in motion
 Will, given time, demolish a stone wall.
 Hard things give way faster, after all.)

Brecht's summary of Lao-tse's teachings was often on the lips of two generations of left-wing sympathisers, without their actually putting it into practice.

The second chapter, 'The Unholy Alliance', came up against criticism. 'Il n'y a que la vérité qui blesse', it's only the truth that hurts; at first I too shied away from an equal

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comparison of the right-wing nationalist prophet Spengler with the Communist rabbi Lukács. I should rather have chosen to examine the immediate successors of Hegel, such as Ruge, Rosenkrantz or Vischer, suggests Werner Jung (*Argument*). Certainly, this line would be worth considering, but it was not my ambition to follow the development of the Hegel school of historical and philosophical aesthetics; these successors to Hegel only made a modest impression on art criticism as a whole. Only in the universities do systems of thought expand to become complex 'schools of thought'. Where they become more banal, but on the other hand more effective or even popular, as for instance in cultural criticism, clear concepts become mixed together in the silence of private reading and meaning. This method of reception is one of the reasons why epochal mentalities do not proliferate in a precise line, like the elastic path created by the stroke of a billiard cue, but rather spread out diffusely like a gas, often coming to the surface at several different points simultaneously to ignite apparently independent flames. It was the intellectual effectiveness of the underlying thought, not its philosophical precision, that governed my choice of texts. I was concerned to sketch the facets of the mentality of modern times: history's claim to perfectibility as well as its way of combining the prophetic voice with a terror of impending chaos. Underlying this representation is the theory that a mentality has no specific characteristics, but is rather a thing whose basic inclinations can tilt in favour of aesthetics, ethics or politics. The models of culture criticism presented here move within the modern era like parallel monads. I have considered Hegel in greatest depth, not as the direct catalyst of the writers who are dealt with after him, but because he demonstrates an early and brilliant form of modern cultural criticism.

As the author's standpoint has shifted since the completion of this book, let me add a note of self-criticism at this juncture. I would not now leap so wholeheartedly to the defence of the avant-garde. I also agree with Jochen Nolte of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that the circle formed by the 'unholy alliance' is missing a few faces. Of course it is possible to attribute to the Frankfurt School, even to Benjamin and Adorno, a tendency to see history as a self-perfecting process; they cannot, even in their negation of it, totally escape the mental fog of their own generation. It would be even easier to describe the delusion of perfection seen in the pathos of modernist art movements. Art criticism tends to view the expansion of modernism as a victorious advance on the battleground of tradition. Wherever one turns, the avant-garde makes its presence felt in the cities, where Futurism and the Bauhaus have long since established their concrete empire.

So is this a postmodernist study? Certainly not! Postmodernism originates from the spirit it wishes to negate; its very name is modern in its claim to herald a new era. I would argue for a correctly incorrect translation of 'avant-garde' as 'provisionalism'. This book sees itself as an advocate of the sceptical stroll through mutable and alterable provisos. Modernism has already *done* far too much; the present era has to rediscover

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a slow pace and the art of non-action. This is where the contemplation of paintings can come in. Simply observing a work of art is one of the last reserves of 'theory', of pure seeing. Works of art are also, but not exclusively, made to be understood; aesthetic experience is not a prerogative of zealously communicative museum pedagogues, whose offers of enlightenment are all too readily exploited by the art market as customer service.

Once I had recognised silent contemplation as a positive form of aesthetic behaviour I had to reckon with the probability that I would be accused of 'falling back' on certain premises. I do not think that the history of philosophy has shown the kind of steady progress that can (for instance) be seen in the automobile; it is rather the case that philosophy, and culture as a whole, is only enriched when it rediscovers knowledge that has been written off as outdated. Aesthetic contemplation can signify passive resistance to the materialistic impulses of modern pragmatism. With this in mind, I have attempted to show the art of interpretation to be a critical moment in the apparently irresistible logic of the historical process. The interpretation of art and the contemplation of art together form a single matrix containing both documents from the past and their exegesis in the present as 'histories'. The truth of these histories is a constant source of speculation in a culture that forever hankers after new meaning.

The art historian is a traveller, a hunter-gatherer. The fluid lines between flotsam and prey, between honest trade and highway robbery are what characterise the *hermeneutes*, the messenger winged by Hermes, the god of thieves and of wandering souls. To his protection I commend this book.

Gomera, January 1989

B.W.

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'Habent sua fata libelli', it has been said, yet it is possible to influence this a little. In the case of the English translation of this book, the process began with an invitation to the Getty Center from Kurt Forster. Introduced to the center by Herb Hymans, I made many new friends in Santa Monica, among whom Francesco Pellizzi and Joseph Rykwert were bold enough to suggest the publication of this book, which is now all of fourteen years old, to Cambridge University Press. Beatrice Rehl has my thanks for her patience, Russell Hahn for his tolerance of the special demands made by an author with mild stage fright. This edition would not have been possible without the excellent translation by Caroline Saltzwedel, who with great sensitivity smoothed my somewhat manneristic German into a prose that sounds natural to the reader of English. The publication of this book has been generously supported by the Swiss cultural foundation Pro Helvetica.