

INTRODUCTORY: GOMBRICH'S STRUGGLE AGAINST METAPHYSICS

JÁN BAKOŠ

Abstract: The paper deals with E.H.Gombrich's lifelong polemics against metaphysics in art history and the humanities. They began in 1937 and continued up until his final (posthumous) book *The Preference for the Primitives*. Analyzing the “fallacies” and “pitfalls” resulting from metaphysical collectivism, essentialism, expressionism, holism and relativism such as a “belief in hypostatized collective personalities” and “style as a super-artist” or “physiognomic fallacy”, Gombrich also unmasked their ideological implications. He first targeted nationalism and racialism, then the perils of totalitarianism and finally all forms of relativism. Gombrich's plea for the universality of the “canon of excellence” can be regarded not only as a defence of humanism but also as a form of apology for the values of Western liberal democratic society.

Keywords: metaphysics; relativism; art history; Gombrich.

The greatest compliment to be paid to Gombrich would be to treat his theories with the seriousness which they deserve, and to examine their ideological and philosophical basis.

Stephen Bann

“Hypostatized Collective Personalities”

In the German art historical journal *Kritische Berichte* (1937) the twenty eight year-old Ernst Gombrich, who had already immigrated to London reviewed Ernst Garger's essay *Über die Wertungsschwierigkeiten bei mittelalterlicher Kunst* (Gombrich 1963, 70-77). Max Dvořák's disciple Ernst Garger referred to Alois Riegl's theory of *Kunstwollen* in order to improve its insufficient ability to distinguish between “intention” and “achievement” (*Wollen* and *Können*). He proposed to estimate the value of a medieval work of art by means of comparing the original intention with the final achievement. But Garger's solution was resolutely rejected by the young Gombrich. He argued that Garger's idea of medieval art as intention was in principle wrong.

According to Gombrich, medieval works of art falling within the category of the “primitive mode of image making” had to be conceived of as a “conceptual image” and “pictorial writing”. Implicitly following his teacher Julius von Schlosser's notion of medieval art as rooted in tradition and convention and, as a consequence, based on schemes and stereotypes, Gombrich also rejected Max Dvořák's and Ernst Garger's interpretation of medieval art as expression including “the widely held assumption that... the so-called transcendentalism of medieval art is

a direct reflection of transcendental metaphysics” (Gombrich 1963, 75). Nevertheless, neither the idea of the history of art as the history of intentions nor the notion of art as the expression of a world view were the only targets of Gombrich’s criticism. He also strictly rejected the belief in “hypostatized collective personalities—either of a people or a period” (*ibid.*)—regarded as carriers of the history of art, and in styles conceived of as their expressions. Metaphysical collectivism, expressionism and relativism, i.e. the three main objects of Gombrich’s lifelong polemics against metaphysics in art history had already been addressed in a review of Garger’s essay. In the ensuing polemics lasting more than six decades Gombrich developed, enlarged, improved and reiterated these original arguments. Even in his last posthumously published book *The Preference for the Primitive* (2002) Gombrich repeated his reservations about Riegl’s relativistic idea of the history of art as the history of incommensurable intentions and its variant, Dvořák’s history of art as the history of ideas (Gombrich 2002, 35-37).

Nevertheless, it was not Garger himself, but Riegl and his theory of *Kunstwollen* (“the will to form”) and Dvořák’s *Geistesgeschichte* (the history of world views) and Hegel’s philosophy of history that were above all the implicit addressees of Gombrich’s critique. The significance attributed to the early paper was expressed by Gombrich himself when he included it under the title *Achievement in Medieval Art* among his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* published sixteen years later in 1963 (Gombrich 1963).

“Trugbild einer ‘autonomen’ logischen Entwicklung”

During World War II Gombrich was “largely removed from scholarship” since “he was occupied with the exacting job of radio monitor, listening to and retailing the content of German broadcasts” (McGrath 2002, 111-115). After the War he resumed his critique of Riegl’s theory of art history in the Swiss encyclopedia *Das Atlantisbuch der Kunst* (Gombrich 1952, 653-664). Explicitly declaring Riegl’s belief in the autonomy of the evolution of art for an abstraction or even phantom (*Trugbild*) and blaming Riegl for neglecting “*ausserkünstlerische Motivierungen politischer oder soziologischer Natur*” (Gombrich 1952, 661), Gombrich did not reject the idea of the autonomy of the evolution of art as such. According to him, autonomy could be accepted if understood as a concrete artistic (workshop) tradition instead of as an abstract intention (*Kunstwollen*). But Gombrich’s critique of Riegl’s theory was aimed this time primarily against its Hegelian inspiration. Following Hegel, Riegl attempted “*diese ‘autonome’ Entwicklung der Formen... in der Entwicklung des Zeigeistes zu verankern*”, according to Gombrich (Gombrich 1952, 660). Thus, adopting Hegel’s holism he a priori supposed the unity of all the expressions of an age and hypostatized the existence of such entities as “people” (*Volk*) or “race” (*Rasse*) regarded as the “carriers of the evolution” (*Träger der Entwicklung*) of art (*ibid.*, 661-662). As a consequence, Riegl assumed that “*der ‘Stil’ sei ein Schlüssel zum ‘Wesen’ einer Zeit oder eines Volkes*” (*ibid.*, 661).

“The Intellectual Mousetrap of Dialectical Materialism”

Sharing with Karl Popper his aversion to all forms of Hegelianism as expressed in Popper’s “I have not the slightest sympathy with these “spirits”, neither with their idealistic prototype nor with their dialectical and materialistic incarnations, and I am in full sympathy with those who treat them with contempt” (Gombrich 1960, 17), Gombrich made use of the review of Arnold Hauser’s *Social History of Art* to take a strong line over Marxist version of Hegelianism (Gombrich 1963, 86-94). Hauser, according to Gombrich, despite his attempt at a materialist

social history of art, became stuck “within the fantasy-world of Hegel’s metaphysical system”. Consequently “he has caught himself in the intellectual mousetrap of “dialectical materialism”... which is “untroubled by the discovery of contradictions” (*ibid.*, 86, 88, 91). Moreover, Hauser as “a collectivist” “believed in nations, races or periods” and replaced them only with social classes regarded henceforth “as unified psychological entities” (*ibid.*, 91). As a result, he maintained, according to Gombrich, that the problematic idea of “style” in art as an expression of collectives is now interpreted in a Marxist way as “an expression of the class-situation” or “an indication of social and intellectual change” (*ibid.*, 91, 118). Thus Hauser believed in impersonal social determinism instead of realizing that “what we bundle together under the name of art has”, according to Gombrich, “a constantly changing function in the social organism of different periods... because form follows function” (*ibid.*, 91). The idea of the function of art as an argument against expressionist historicism articulated by Gombrich two years earlier in the essay *Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form* (1951) was reiterated here.

“Style: This Imaginary Super-artist”

Metaphysical collectivism and expressionism were also targeted by Gombrich in his review of André Malreaux’s *The Voices of Silence* (Gombrich 1963, 78-85). In his expressionist history of art Gombrich ascertained “the neglect of social setting and function of images”, “the uncritical faith that the visual arts provided the shortest route to the mentality of civilisations”, “the Romantic belief that style—this imaginary super-artist... expressed” the “world view of a civilisation” or “the spirit of the respective age”, and that “each style of a period or race directly mirrors its group-mind” (*ibid.*, 79-80, 82). But the expressionist idea that historical changes in styles reflected changes in group mentality must, according to Gombrich, lead to extreme relativism as articulated by Oswald Spengler. Gombrich resolutely rejected Spengler’s conclusion that “each culture represents a different species”, and that, consequently, “the concept of mankind is empty” (*ibid.*, 83). He also strongly opposed epistemological relativism according to which “the historian being immured in his own culture can never understand only describe”. Reflecting Popper’s theory of science as testing/falsifying hypotheses Gombrich expressed the conviction that “critical reason... can ... advance towards the truth by testing interpretations, by sifting the evidence... narrowing the scope of myth” (*ibid.*, 85). He also referred to Malreaux’s idea of *le musée imaginaire* (the “Museum without Walls”) characterized sceptically by Gombrich as “a temple dedicated to a myth.”

“The Simulacrum of an Explanation Hostile to Scholarship”

Even if there is, according to Gombrich (1979, 57-58), an “essential difference... between the role of research in the sciences and in the humanities” and “the scientist... is ultimately valued for his discoveries rather than his knowledge” while “humanistic education aims first and foremost at knowledge, he is convinced that “the study of art can be conducted in a rational way”. Using the clear difference between science and myth, “truth”, and “falsehood” as his starting point, Gombrich (1963, 107) believes that “where scholarship decays, myth will crowd in”. In the Inaugural lecture at University College, London in February 1957 *Art and Scholarship*, Gombrich decided to challenge the most ambitious theories of art history pretending to scientific status (*ibid.*, 106-119). Riegl’s theory and Viennese structuralism and iconology received particular attention there. According to Gombrich, Riegl’s theory of *Kunstwollen* is more myth than scientific explanation:

Riegl's idea that all style is intentional has obscured rather than illuminated the problem and, as a consequence, this type of explanation is not only hostile to reason; it is also hostile to scholarship because it produces that simulacrum of an explanation which put an end to further research (*ibid.*, 117).

Nevertheless, Riegl's scientific ambition failed not only due to the fact that he "fell victim to... the fetishism of the single cause", according to Gombrich, but because he had found the carrier of *Kunstwollen* "in those Hegelian collectives, the spirit of the age and the spirit of the race" (*ibid.*, 114).

In addition, Gombrich came to the conclusion that not only the intellectual variant of Riegl's theory, i. e. the history of art as the history of world-views, but also iconology fell victim to Hegel's holism: "Iconology is subject to the same dangers to which the interpretation of styles had been so prone, the danger of circularity" (*ibid.*, 116).

But neither did the attempt of Viennese structuralists at a "new *Kunstwissenschaft*" achieve success. Their ambition to base "rigorous science" on the analysis of the structure of a single work of art failed, according to Gombrich, "for surely it is not scientific to take signs... out of context, and investigate their 'structure'" (*ibid.*, 112). Paradoxically, the structuralist immanent approach resulted in metaphysical essentialism: "This procedure only leads to... the myth that the system of signs, the style, is not a language but an utterance of the collective, in which a nation or an age speaks to us" (*ibid.*, 112).

"Physiognomic Fallacy"

The art historical models mentioned above all shared in common "the tendency to see the past in terms of its typical style" called "physiognomic fallacy", to invoke Gombrich's own terminology (*ibid.*, 108). That tendency "would be a harmless fallacy" if it did not result in relativism, according to Gombrich, "if it did not strengthen the illusion that mankind changed as dramatically and thoroughly as did art" (*ibid.*, 108). However, Gombrich claims to know the way out of all the metaphysical "pitfalls". Besides taking into consideration "a change of function in the image", Gombrich calls for the revival of the craftsmanship idea of art as follows: "We may have to retrace our steps to Vasari and acknowledge the role of skill, of the learning process which is involved" (*ibid.*, 117).

"Mythological Explanation Weakens Resistance to Totalitarian Habits of Mind"

In Gombrich's opus magnum *Art & Illusion* (1960) relativism became the main target of his critique. Riegl's attempt "to account for all stylistic changes by one unitary principle... made him a prey to pre-scientific habits... the habits of mythmakers", according to Gombrich (1960, 16). His *Kunstwollen* ("the will to form") as a kind of "a ghost in the machine" has its origin in Hegel's philosophy of history as well as his idea of art as the "expression of the age... and a symptom... of the World Spirit." But "this reliance of art history on mythological explanations" is not only "pre-scientific", according to Gombrich, it is even "dangerous". As he put it: "By inculcating the habit of talking in terms of collectives, of mankind, races, or ages, it weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind" (*ibid.*, 17). The political radicalization of Gombrich's polemics had surely been inspired by Karl Popper's pillorying of all forms of totalitarianism. But the immediate impulse to come to grips with an extreme relativism followed on from Hans Sedlmayr interpretation of Riegl's theory (Sedlmayr 1927). Gombrich

professed proudly to “all those ...ideas which Sedlmayr... asked (us) ... to discard in favour of a Spenglerian historicism” (Gombrich 1960, 17). He “passionately believes” in the idea, that “only individual human beings are real while groups and spiritual collectives are mere names”; “in the unity and immutability of human nature and human reason”; “in the idea that “nature remains the same and is only represented ‘in different modes’”; and in “the causal analysis of history” which “conceives of historical change merely as a resultant of blind and isolated chains of causation” (*ibid.*). Gombrich believes that

There are few historians today, and even fewer anthropologists who believe that mankind has undergone any marked biological change within historical periods... even those who might admit the possibility of some slight oscillation in genetic make-up of mankind would never accept the idea that man has changed as much ... as have his art and his style (*ibid.*, 18).

“The History of Preferences”

On the other hand, Gombrich does not contest generally the existence of “attitudes, beliefs, or tastes that are shared by many... as the mentality or outlook dominant in a class, generation, or nation”. Rejecting only their metaphysical interpretation he is convinced that “changes in intellectual climate and changes in fashion or taste” can be interpreted sociologically as “symptomatic of social change” (*ibid.*, 17). According to Gombrich, styles in art can also be regarded as sociological phenomena as “problems arising within a tradition ... as instances of such traditions”. Besides, Gombrich emphasises that the idea of “styles as symptomatic of something else” presupposes “some theory of alternatives” because “an act of choice ... is expressive of something only if we can reconstruct the choice situation” (*ibid.*, 18). Consequently: “The history of taste and fashion”, and we can add that the same is true of the history of styles, is not the history of automatic expressions or indexes but “is the history of preferences, of various acts of choice between given alternatives” (*ibid.*). If, on the contrary, changes are conceived of as autonomous (“changes becomes the symptom of change as such”) and “this tautology” is hidden, then, according to Gombrich, “some grandiose scheme of evolution has to be called in, as happened not only to Riegl, but to many of his successors” (*ibid.*). In that sense “Evolutionism is dead but the facts which gave rise to its myth are still stubbornly there to be accounted for” according to Gombrich (*ibid.*). Thus,

what is their (i.e. Riegl and his followers and interpreters’) greatest pride is in fact their fatal flaw: by throwing out the idea of skill... they have made it impossible to realize their ambition, a valid psychology of stylistic change (*ibid.*, 17).

“The Enemies of Reason” and “Mumbo-jumbo”

However, Gombrich was confronted very early with the fact that neither metaphysical essentialism nor relativism was as dead as he believed them to be. The Festschrift “*Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttheorie im 19. Jahrhundert, Probleme der Kunstwissenschaft I*” (1963), devoted to Hans Sedlmayr’s 65th anniversary by his disciples provoked Gombrich to utter very “harsh words against the enemies of reason” because “the failure to speak out against them... has caused enough disasters” (Gombrich 1964, 418-420). He strongly criticized the essentialist belief in the “ontological place of *Kunstwissenschaft*” or the idea that “the

art historian must for ever stick to the essential last". Sedlmayr's claim that the value of structuralism can be seen "*inter alia* in the recognition that 'reason is a variable that changes with history'" has been resolutely rejected by Gombrich as a "mumbo-jumbo" from which such a nonsense could be deduced as "art being both everything and nothing" or that "art is not a fit subject for a 'science' or for any discussion, since all statements... will equally apply as will their contradictions" (*ibid.*, 418-419).

"The Hegelian Wheel" and 'a Circular Reasoning'"

The Philippe Maurice Deneke Lecture *In Search of Cultural History* delivered by Gombrich at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford on November 1967 provided him with an occasion for unmasking the hegemony of Hegelianism in art history. According to Gombrich (1979, 50), Hegelianism "has blocked the emergence of a true cultural history". The true cultural history has to avoid the metaphysical collectivism as well as "the belief in the existence of an independent supra-individual collective spirit" and "fix its attention firmly on the individual human being" (*ibid.*), according to him. Thus the belief in "a collective, the supra-individual entities of nations and periods" must be superseded by the individualist notion of "movements... started by people" (*ibid.*). Besides, it has also to banish "the Hegelian Wheel" i.e. the holistic belief in "the unity of all manifestations of a civilisation", the idea that they were all "the expression of the same ... national spirit" (*ibid.*, 42). The expressionist premise that "everything must be treated not only as connected with everything else, but as a symptom of something else" (*ibid.*, 46) results, according to Gombrich, in a circular reasoning that "finds in every factual detail the general principle that underlies it" (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, metaphysical collectivism and holism lead inevitably into a relativism that represents another obstacle to a true cultural history. As Gombrich puts it, since

the changing styles of art... become the index of changing spirit (and) since the individual... could only be thought of as a part of such collective it was quite consistent for Hegelians to assume that "man" underwent profound changes in the course of history (*ibid.*, 34, 50).

But relativism results not only in the pessimist assumption that "different species of man could never understand each other", but also in the projects of "the totalitarian philosophies... to create a new man." In order to avoid that a true cultural history has to "resist the temptation to use changing styles and changing fashions as indicators of profound psychological changes ... a radical change in the mental make-up" (*ibid.*, 50, 51).

"Holistic Conviction"

Gombrich's item on *Style* in the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (Gombrich 1968) provided an occasion to return to the critique of Riegl's evolutionism on the one hand and develop his criticism of Hegel's holism on the other. The way out of metaphysical determinism that was characteristic of art historical evolutionism can be found, according to Gombrich, only by conceiving of "the future as open" and resisting "the temptation... to regard the outcome... as inevitable". In addition, the evolutionist notion of "a continuous chain of development" must be regarded, according to Gombrich, as "the tradition within which the masters concerned operated" (*ibid.*, 357).

As far as the "holistic conviction", i.e. the belief in "one unitary principle", "one common centre" or "central cause from which all the characteristics of a period can be deduced" is

concerned, Gombrich states that such a “connection is assumed on metaphysical grounds” because “there is no necessary connection between one aspect of a group’s activities and any other” (*ibid.*, 358). “What distinguishes all these (i.e. holistic—J.B.) theories from a genuinely scientific search for causal connections is their a priori character” and “arguing in a circle” (*ibid.*, 357-358).

“Hegel’s ‘Giants’ and ‘Siren Songs’”

Gombrich’s lecture on *A Reading of the Lectures on Aesthetics of G. W. F. Hegel* delivered when he was awarded the Hegel Prize of the City of Stuttgart in February 1977 can be regarded as a summary of Gombrich’s critical handling of Hegel (Summers 2002, 143). He appreciated Hegel as *The Father of Art History* (Gombrich 1984), the founder of universal/World history of art on the one hand, yet still held him responsible for all the metaphysical confusion and pre-scientific failures of art history on the other. The following metaphysical “giants” of Hegel’s aesthetics were enumerated by Gombrich: “aesthetic transcendentalism”, “historical collectivism”, “historical determinism”, “metaphysical optimism”, and “dialectical relativism”. “The dangerous allures of these siren songs” ensued, according to him, not only from the deep influence of (Hegel’s) philosophy on “the further course of events”, but also from “its temptingly easy applicability” (*ibid.*, 62-63). And concerning “the dialectic”, it justifies the relativistic assertion that “every method of interpretation can claim success” since it “makes it all too easy... to find a way out of every contradiction” (*ibid.*, 63).

Despite that, Gombrich does not “wish to create the impression that he lacks respect for these masters” i. e. for Hegel and his followers. As he assures us “It cannot be too often repeated that the best tribute that one can pay a scholar is to take him seriously and constantly to reappraise his line of argument” (*ibid.*, 62). No doubt, it holds true about Gombrich’s relationship to Hegel at least.

“Canon of Excellence”

As part of the Roman lecture *Art History and Social Sciences* delivered by Gombrich at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford on 22 November 1973 a cognitive relativism has been commented on as follows: “There are some who even wish to deprive science of the claim to serve the truth” and

even scientific truth has been described as relative to the society that practices it, so that the history of science should really be written not as a story of discoveries and problem solutions but merely as the account of the changing behaviour of those members of society who call themselves scientists (Gombrich 1979, 141).

But Gombrich has no sympathy with other kinds of relativism either. “I happen to have no more sympathy for moral relativism than I have for the aesthetic variety” (*ibid.*, 162). He accepts neither “stylistic relativism” according to which “different styles resemble different games which have their own yardsticks of success” (*ibid.*, 154) nor epistemological subjectivism i.e. the idea that “the work of art means what it means to us, there is no other criterion”. Despite the historicity of art i.e. the fact that “art is not a game with fixed rules but makes up the rules as it goes along that leads to “radical relativism” according to which “we can only compare performances within the same game” (*ibid.*), Gombrich dares “to assert that even in the elusive

region of aesthetic judgment there are statements which are true and others which are false” (*ibid.*, 144). As a consequence, the critique of relativism is transformed into an apology for the universality of artistic values. Gombrich believes that “our response to art is rooted in human nature and must therefore be universal” and that “there is something universally human in the psychological states we have seen embodied in art” (*ibid.*, 158). According to him, “to insist on this universality is not to ignore the surprising plasticity of ‘human nature’”, since all art forms “belong to the common experience of humanity” (*ibid.*). Thus Gombrich also believes in “objective criteria of artistic mastery” and “in the objectivity of aesthetic values” (*ibid.*, 164). As a consequence, following his teacher Julius Schlosser, Gombrich insists on the individualist idea of the history of art: “The history of art”, according to him, “is rightly considered to be the history of masterpieces and of the ‘old masters’” (*ibid.*, 152). It leads to a transhistorical notion of artistic values: Even if “invariably rooted in the life and value system of their age and society” masterpieces of art “transcend these situations” and “stand the test of time not as formal exercises but as an embodiment of a value system which teaches us to recognize” (*ibid.*, 162-163). They represent the “canon of excellence” which “plays the real role in any culture” and “offers... standards of excellence which we cannot level down without losing direction” (*ibid.*, 163). The “canon” is, according to Gombrich, “deeply embedded in the totality of our civilisation” so that “what we call civilisation may be interpreted as a web of value judgments which are implicit rather than explicit” (*ibid.*, 163). Thus as seen, anthropological universality has been transformed by Gombrich into the universality of a civilisation as expressed in a letter to Quentin Bell: “We were born into our civilisation and we owe our orientation to that tradition... to the ‘canon’” (*ibid.*, 181). Despite the fact that the civilisation has not been explicitly specified by Gombrich, the apology for the universality of “the canon of excellence” represented by Michelangelo as its peak (*ibid.*, 144-183) leads unequivocally to the glorification of Western civilisation. In addition, since he takes competitiveness as an anthropological constant concerning “the logic of the situation” of capitalist market competition as a metahistorical principle in his essay *The Logic of Vanity Fair: Alternatives to Historicism in the Study of Fashions, Style and Taste* (1965) (*ibid.*, 60-92), it seems that Gombrich’s apology refers implicitly to Western neo-liberalism. Expressed in Jonathan Harris’s words: “The canon of great art, and its confirmation in, and by art history, are thus both integral parts of the humanism of western liberal-democratic society” (Harris 2001, 37).

“Humbug”

In the first half of the 1970s Gombrich believed that “we art historians generally attempt to mitigate or avoid the most radical relativist conclusions” (Gombrich 1979, 146). Four years later he had to change his mind admitting that “I do not think I am too far wrong if I also describe this relativism as the official dogma, so to speak, of the contemporary art historical teaching” (Gombrich 1984, 65). Moreover, he came to the conclusion that “the fallacies which tempted art history to adopt cultural relativism” and which he had relentlessly attempted to unmask such as “physiognomic fallacy” and the belief in styles as expressions of an age or a nation or “the circular reasoning”, “also occur in other fields of humanities” (Gombrich 1991, 40). As a consequence he decided to enlarge his polemics against hegemony of relativism to the whole field of the humanities. Nevertheless, there had been for Gombrich also a very personal reason to focus on the critique of relativism. Throughout the 1980s Gombrich and his idea of a universal “canon” in particular became the target of revisionist criticism by the radical and poststructuralist strand of art history (Rees and Borzello 1986, 21-24, 135, 159; Bryson 1983, 43; Moxey 2001,

79-80; Harris 2001, 37, 41). Gombrich responded to the invasion of relativism with a series of essays against relativism in the humanities and the history of ideas or in the appreciation of art (Gombrich 1991, 36-46, 47-55, 56-61). In the plenary address given to the Seventh International Congress of Germanic Studies in Göttingen in August 1985 Gombrich avowed his allegiance to Goethe's "belief in the universality of human nature" as expressed in his belief that "They were all human beings—so much is plain" in contrast to Hegel's "cultural relativism" which "refuses to acknowledge any constants that would enable us to recognize a permanent nature behind all changing appearances" (*ibid.*, 36-39). The relativistic assertions that "every generation has its own truths" and that "our concern with testimonies of the past cannot be much more than a clever game that does not serve knowledge but simply the display of intellectual acrobatics" or that "any striving for understanding is naive and obsolete" because "not only the search for explanations, but even the striving for understanding should be thrown on to the scrap heap" (*ibid.*, 38) have been declared to be "humbug" by Gombrich (*ibid.*, 39). In his view it has "led to the jettisoning of the most precious heritage of all scholarly work" (*ibid.*). "The negation of all standards" is, according to him, an "exaggeration (that) can only lead ad absurdum" (*ibid.*, 39).

Universality as "a Working Hypothesis"

It is worth mentioning that despite his radical critique of subjectivism Gombrich's polemics against relativism became more cautious and objective throughout the 1980s. He acknowledged that "no doubt it is fallacious to conclude from the fact that "they were all human beings" that they must also have thought and felt as we do" (*ibid.*) since "the way in which various cultures try to cope with the insistent clamour of our natural instincts is subject to countless variations" (*ibid.*, 41). Admitting the positive role played by cultural relativism in damping down a narcissistic presentism Gombrich conceded that "the influence of cultural relativism must certainly be welcomed... where it restrains us in applying our own cultural standards to other societies" (*ibid.*, 39). He even goes as far as to admit that the belief in the "universality of human nature" is only "working hypothesis". Despite that "the hypothesis that there are indeed constants in the psyche of man" is anyway worth testing, according to Gombrich (*ibid.*, 44):

I believe it is always worthwhile to make the initial assumption that even in foreign countries and in distant ages we have to do with people who are not all that different from ourselves... even though this assumption may occasionally fail to stand a further test (*ibid.*, 41).

For the biological core of man represents the base of the visual arts, according to Gombrich. As he put it "I am convinced that the visual arts also rest... on biological foundations" (*ibid.*, 44). That is why great artists "operate within fields of tensions which derive their energy from the original polarity of universal human reactions" (*ibid.*), and why masterpieces represent universal values, in Gombrich's view.

"Inhuman Cold Objectivity" and One of Gombrich's "Lacunae"

Despite conceiving of the idea of anthropological constant as a hypothesis and regardless of the fact that the humanities including psychology "being science... must not submit to any dogma, not even to dogma of the unity of mankind" (*ibid.*, 43), Gombrich reiterates that "to oppose relativism" represents a first-rate task in order "to prevent it (i.e. relativism) from dominating the entire field" (*ibid.*, 39). Endorsing the substantial difference between science

and ideologies and considering science as the main weapon against myth, Gombrich emphasizes that the “interactions... between ideologies and the development of science” cannot be studied “if we give up the belief in the objectivity of certain scientific discoveries” and “if we eliminate the notion of error altogether and adopt a wholly relativistic stance” (*ibid.*, 48-49). At the same time he claims that “the humanities... would atrophy and die if they attempted to become ‘value free’” (*ibid.*, 55). Nevertheless, Gombrich’s “attempt to rest humanism on a ‘scientific basis’” (Hemingway 2009), or, in other words, his “desire to bring to humanistic studies something of the discipline of scientific method” (Onians) can be classified among his “lacunae” (Horowitz 1998, 318; Bakoš 1996, 247-248): Insisting on the substantial difference between the rational and the mythical approach or between science and ideologies on the one hand, Gombrich believes that “the study of art” and humanistic studies in general “can be conducted in a rational way” (Gombrich 1979, 165). On the other hand, he denies the humanities the status of objective and disinterested or value free research: While “ideas originate with human beings and affect human beings” “to discuss them with cold objectivity” seems to Gombrich “inhuman in the true sense of the word” (Gombrich 1991, 55). Thus he invites us to carry on treating the humanities as a moralizing or ideological activity. Paradoxically, Gombrich involuntarily confirms Maurice Mandelbaum’s assertion that “an insistence on knowledge as value-charged can have only one resultant: relativism” (Mandelbaum 1967, 36). Moral responsibility is regarded by Gombrich as being more important for the humanities than scientific objectivity. And really, his critique of metaphysics lasting more than six decades first served to condemn nationalism and racialism, and later to warn against all forms of totalitarianism, and finally to glorify the fundamental values of Western civilization: rationality and individualism. Thus his plea for humanism has become a concealed apologia for liberal democratic society (Harris 2001, 37; Vidrih 2004, 346; Hemingway 2009).

Tributes to E. H. Gombrich

It should be noted from the very beginning that the present issue of Human Affairs, which is devoted to Ernst Hans Gombrich is not intended to worship the work of one of the key figures of art history in the latter half of the 20th century. The centenary of the birth of this eminent robust scholar has rather been regarded as an opportunity to examine the ideological basis and political implications of his ideas against the background of “the relativism versus universalism” problem with which Gombrich was fully occupied throughout his whole life. The authors of the contributions assess Gombrich’s achievements from different axiological and methodological perspectives, and none aspires to cover the complexity of his work. Nevertheless, they all share Gombrich’s belief that

It cannot be too often repeated that the best tribute that one can pay a scholar is to take him seriously and constantly to reappraise his line of argument (Gombrich 1984, 62).

Having compared the similarities and differences between Karl Popper’s and Ernst Gombrich’s methods and patterns of thoughts, Norbert Schneider comes to the conclusion that while the ideas of Karl Popper have not been heard recently, Gombrich’s immense scholarly achievements continue to be a massive stimulus in the field of art historical debate.

Karen Lang argues that Gombrich’s opposition against radical relativism on the one hand and consensus on the other made him to adopt the defence of cultural memory, tradition and a canon as conditions of communication and the rise of cultural values.

Ladislav Kesner conceives of one of the remarks on human nature by late Gombrich that concerned the historical plasticity of human genetic equipment as a contribution to the latest research into the issue of historicity and conventionality of vision.

Outlining the history of the functionalist credo that “form follows function”, Jan Michl comments on its interpretation by H. W. Janson and E. H. Gombrich coming to the conclusion that Gombrich’s adoption of the formula was a paradoxical one.

Emphasising Ernst Gombrich’s indebtedness to Karl Popper Andrew Hemingway classifies him as a representative of the British political conservatism of the early Cold War period and argues that Gombrich fell back on naturalistic descriptions of individuals due to his aversion to social determinism and rejection of holistic analysis.

Vardan Azatyan decided to compare two survey texts on the World Art History published in during the post-war years, one by Mikhail Alpatov and the second by Ernst Gombrich. In order to identify their ideological backgrounds, Azatyan considers them not only as examples of two opposite methodological poles of the Vienna School of Art History—universal historicist and nominalist individualist ones—but also as manifestations of two opposing political stances i.e. nationalist universalism and neo-liberal individualism.

Critically assessing Gombrich’s art historical work James Elkins admits that any practice of art history will have to come to terms with Gombrich. Nevertheless, he argues that there are ten principal reasons why Gombrich’s work, according to Elkins, can no longer be connected to the current practice of (Anglo-American) art history.¹

References

- Bakoš, J.** The Vienna School’s Hundred and Sixty-eighth graduate: The Vienna School’s Ideas Revised by E. H. Gombrich. In R. Woodfield (Ed.). *Gombrich on Art and Psychology*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Bryson, N.** *Vision and Painting, The Logic of the Gaze*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983.
- Gombrich, E. H.** Kunstwissenschaft. In *Atlantisbuch der Kunst, Eine Enzyklopädie der bildenden Künste*. Zürich, 1952.
- Gombrich, E. H.** *Art & Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London 1960.
- Gombrich, E. H.** *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*. London and New York: Phaidon, 1963.
- Gombrich, E. H.** Review of Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttheorie im 19. Jahrhundert. *The Art Bulletin*. Vol. XLVI, 418/420, 1964.
- Gombrich, E. H.** Style. *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. Vol.15, New York: Free Press, 352-361, 1968.
- Gombrich, E. H.** *Ideals and Idols. Essays on Values in History and in Art*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1979.
- Gombrich, E. H.** *Tributes, Interpreters of our Cultural Tradition*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1984.
- Gombrich, E. H.** *Topics of Our Time. Twentieth-Century Issues in Learning and in Art*. London: Phaidon, 1991.
- Gombrich, E. H.** *The Preference for the Primitive. Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art*. London and New York: Phaidon, 2002.
- McGrath, E. E. H.** Gombrich (1908-2001). *Burlington Magazine*, 111-115, February 2002.
- Harris, J.** *The New Art History. A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

¹ I thank Professor Robert Gibbs, who kindly improved my English in the original version of the paper.

- Hemingway, A. E. H.** Gombrich in 1968: Methodological Individualism as a Cold War Posture. A paper read at international conference *Kunstgeschichte nach 1968*. Institut für Kunstgeschichte der Universität Karlsruhe, 15-16 Mai 2009.
- Horowitz, G.** Gombrich, Ernst Hans Josef. In M. Kelly (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Oxford-New York. Vol.2, 315-320, 1998.
- Mandelbaum, M.** *The Problem of Historical Knowledge. An Answer to Relativism*. New York, Evanston, London: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Moxey, K.** *The Practice of Persuasion, Paradox & Power in Art History*. Ithaka and London: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Onians, J.** *Gombrich, Sir Ernst Hans Josef (1909-2001)*. In Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Index number 101076475.
- Rees, A.L., Borzello, F. (Eds.)**. *The New Art History*. London: Camden Press, 1986.
- Sedlmayr, H.** Die Quintessenz der Lehren Riegls (1927). In A.Riegl. *Gesammelte Aufsätze*. Augsburg-Wien, XII-XXXIII, 1929.
- Summers, D. E. H.** Gombrich and the Tradition of Hegel. In P. Smith, C.Wilde (Eds.). *A Companion to Art Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
- Vidrih, R.** Gombrichov boj [Gombrich's Fight]. In *Zbornik za umetnostno zgodovino/Art History Journal*, Seria Nova XL, Ljubljana, 326-346, 2004.

Institute of Art History,
Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Klemensova 19,
813 64 Bratislava,
Slovak Republic
E-mail: dejubaja@savba.sk