

# Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History

## An Introduction to “Rigorous Study of Art”

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*Just because art history depends upon seeing does not mean that it should avoid thinking.*

—Heinrich Wölfflin, Review of Alois Riegl's *Die Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom*

Walter Benjamin's influence on the theory and practice of art history in the English-speaking world has grown substantially in recent years, largely as a result of the increasing availability of his work in translation. But because the art-historical reception of Benjamin has focused primarily on the essays dealing with photography and film, it has largely failed to recognize that Benjamin's texts on the theory of mimesis, on the epistemology of form and perception, and, above all, on the philosophy of history are also of tremendous significance for the history of art.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as evidenced by many of Benjamin's works, ranging from the (unfortunately still untranslated) *Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (*The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*) to his posthumously published magnum opus, the *Passagen-Werk* (*Arcades Project*),<sup>2</sup> the practice of a certain kind of art history—understood in a broad sense as the critical, sympto-

1. See, for example, Walter Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” trans. Knut Tarnowski, *New German Critique*, no. 17 (Spring 1979), pp. 65–69; “On the Mimetic Faculty,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Reflections*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979, pp. 333–336; “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1978, pp. 253–264; and especially “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” trans. Knut Tarnowski, *New German Critique*, no. 5 (Spring 1975), pp. 27–58; compare also the translation by Kingsley Shorter in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, London, New Left Books, 1979, pp. 349–386.

2. The former is available in an excellent French translation by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Anne-Marie Lang entitled *Le concept de critique esthétique dans le romantisme allemand*, Paris, Flammarion, 1986; the methodological prolegomena to the *Passagen-Werk* have been translated by Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth as “N (Theoretics of Knowledge, Theory of Progress),” in *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. 15, nos. 1–2 (Fall/Winter 1983–84), pp. 1–40.

matological deciphering of cultural production — was one of Benjamin's primary theoretical concerns.

The intimate connection between Benjamin's work and central methodological issues in the history of art is nowhere more apparent than in his interest in the work of the Austrian art historian and theorist Alois Riegl (1858–1905). As Benjamin explains in a posthumously published narrative curriculum vitae, Riegl's work — and in particular the concept of artistic volition (*Kunstwollen*) — was a "decisive influence" on his early writings.<sup>3</sup> Like Riegl, Benjamin also conceives his work as an attempt "to promote an analysis of artworks which considers them as a complete expression of the religious, metaphysical, political and economic tendencies of an epoch and which, as such, cannot be limited to a particular discipline."<sup>4</sup> For Benjamin the paradigmatic example of such a philosophically informed, interdisciplinary cultural symptomatology was Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry*, a work still generally ignored in Anglo-American art history.<sup>5</sup>

There is both anecdotal and stylistic evidence indicating that Benjamin's first encounter with Riegl's major study was rather early in his career, most likely before 1916.<sup>6</sup> This makes the beginning of his interest in Riegl virtually coinci-

3. Walter Benjamin, "Drei Lebensläufe," in Siegfried Unseld, ed., *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp, 1972, p. 51; unless otherwise noted, this and all subsequent translations are my own. For Riegl's discussion of the concept of *Kunstwollen*, see *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, p. 215; for a more extended treatment, see Erwin Panofsky, "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1920), pp. 321–339.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

5. Given the almost complete absence, until very recently, of translations of Riegl it is hardly surprising that his work remains generally unknown in the English-speaking realm. Despite the fact that the importance of *Late Roman Art Industry* has been pointed out repeatedly — in *Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts* (New York, Pantheon, 1948, p. 226), Bernard Berenson insists that there is "no other publication in our field more indispensable to thoughtful students" — Riegl's magnum opus did not become available in English until 1985, and then in a prohibitively expensive translation by Rolf Winks published in Rome by Giorgio Bretschneider Editore (vol. 36 in the series "Archaeologica").

Secondary material on Riegl in English is equally sparse. Some of the more substantive treatments include: Margaret Iversen, "Style as Structure: Alois Riegl's Historiography," *Art History*, no. 2 (March 1979), pp. 62–72; Otto Pächt, "Art Historians and Art Critics VI: Alois Riegl," *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 105, no. 722 (May 1963), pp. 188–193; Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982 (esp. chapter V: "Riegl," pp. 71–97); Meyer Schapiro, "Style," in *Anthropology Today*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953; Henri Zerner, "Alois Riegl: Art, Value and Historicism," *Daedalus*, no. 105 (Winter 1976), pp. 177–188; B. Harlow, "Realignment: Alois Riegl's Image of Late Roman Art Industry," *Glyph*, no. 3 (1978), pp. 118–136.

6. This is documented by Michael Jennings in his study, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 154, note 32. Whereas Werner Kraft, for example, recalls that Benjamin had read *Late Roman Art Industry* during the war ("Über Walter Benjamin," in *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, p. 62), Benjamin himself writes only that he read it during his "student years," i.e., prior to 1919 (*Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp, 1972, vol. 6, p. 225). Jennings also points out that Benjamin employs technical terms from Riegl's system as early as 1916 in texts such as "Über das Mittelalter" (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pp. 132–133) and "Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie" (pp. 137–140).

dent with a profound disenchantment with Heinrich Wölfflin, which can be dated quite precisely to 1915, the year Benjamin began to attend Wölfflin's university lectures in Munich. In a pair of letters to Fritz Radt, unfortunately not included in the two-volume edition of Benjamin's correspondence, Benjamin describes at some length his terrible disappointment with Wölfflin as a teacher.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, so negative was Benjamin's impression that at one point he notes: "I often think of writing a piece which would be devoted to chronicling and preserving the spectacle of this man, even if it would not be something which could be published in the near future. For the very hideousness of this phenomenon makes it significant and typical."<sup>8</sup> Despite the Rieglian logic of this remark, which, one could imagine, might have made such an essay on Wölfflin imperative, the project seems to have remained at the stage of a passing intention whose only concrete traces are a series of epistolary remarks. Both the theoretical and anecdotal interest of this eyewitness account by Benjamin warrant an extended citation:

I did not recognize right away what Wölfflin was up to. Now it is clear to me that what we have here is the most disastrous activity I have ever encountered in a German university. A by no means overwhelmingly gifted man, who, by nature, has no more of a feel for art than anyone else, but attempts to get around this by using all the energy and resources of his personality (which have nothing to do with art). As a result, he has a theory which fails to grasp what is essential but which, in itself, is perhaps better than complete thoughtlessness. In fact, this theory might even lead somewhere were it not for the fact that, because of the inability of Wölfflin's capacities to do justice to their object, the only means of access to the artwork remains exaltation, i.e., a feeling of moral obligation. He does not see the artwork, he feels obliged to see it, demands that one see it, considers his theory a moral act; he becomes pedantic, ludicrously catatonic, and thereby destroys any natural talents that his audience may have. For the combination of an ungrounded, surreptitiously obtained concept of refinement and distance, and the brutality with which he obscures his lack of (receptive) genius, has the effect of attracting an audience that clearly has no idea what is going on: they are getting an understanding of art which is on the same level and of the same purity as their "normal" understanding of culture. In a word, the sources which are

7. Letters to Fritz Radt (dated "Munich, November 21, 1915" and "Munich, December 4, 1915") cited in full by Gershom Scholem in a 1980–81 essay entitled "Walter Benjamin und Felix Noeggerath," reprinted in Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel. Vierzehn Aufsätze und kleine Beiträge*, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp, 1983, pp. 79–89. I am very grateful to Gary Smith for having brought this text to my attention.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

the most inaccessible but have therefore remained unsullied even if unchanneled, are being muddied.<sup>9</sup>

In the following years it was thus not Wölfflin but Riegl who served Benjamin as a methodological model. Riegl's rehabilitation of late Roman craft served as an analogy for Benjamin's revaluation of the previously dismissed seventeenth-century genre of German tragic drama. Both projects focused on periods whose aesthetics violated fundamental tenets—beauty and vitality—of the classical philosophy of art. Indeed Riegl remained an influence on Benjamin's work, as is evidenced by a 1929 article entitled "Books That Have Remained Alive," in which Benjamin accords Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry* a place in a distinguished quartet of theoretical writings whose other members include Alfred Gotthold Meyer's *Eisenbauten (Iron Structures, 1907)*; Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption (1921)*; and Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness (1923)*. Riegl's study, Benjamin writes, is an

epoch-making work [that] applied with prophetic certainty the sensitivity and insights of expressionism (which occurred twenty years later) to the monuments of the late Imperial period, broke with the theory of "periods of decline," and recognized in what had previously been called "regression into barbarism" a new experience of space, a new artistic volition [*Kunstwollen*]. Simultaneously, this book is one of the most striking proofs that every major scholarly discovery results in a methodological revolution on its own, without any intention to do so. Indeed, in the last four decades no art-historical book has had such a substantive and methodologically fruitful effect.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Benjamin's rather striking methodological affinity to Riegl—for example, in his shift away from the individual artist toward collective, anonymous works, in the significance accorded to the detail, the marginal phenomenon, the work as a cultural cipher, and so on—this affinity has only recently been considered in the English-language literature.<sup>11</sup> It is in this light that the

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 84–85.

10. Walter Benjamin, "Bücher, Die Lebendig Geblieben Sind," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, p. 170.

11. Cf., for example, the very insightful remarks in Charles Rosen's "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin," *New York Times Book Review*, vol. 24, no. 17 (October 27, 1977), pp. 31–40; reprinted in Gary Smith, ed., *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1988, pp. 129–175; esp. 140–141; and a section in Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images*, pp. 151–163. The only works which focus exclusively on this topic are Wolfgang Kemp, "Walter Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft. Teil I: Benjamins Beziehungen zur Wiener Schule," *Kritische Berichte des Ulmer Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1973), pp. 30–50; "Walter Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft. Teil 2: Walter Benjamin und Aby Warburg," *Ibid.* vol. 1, no. 3 (1975),

essay “Rigorous Study of Art” takes on such great importance: as one of the only texts in which Benjamin discusses the work of Riegl and of Heinrich Wölfflin explicitly and at some length, it provides a unique opportunity to examine closely Benjamin’s positions on the reigning debates in art-historical methodology and, in turn, Benjamin’s own model for the rigorous study of art.

The essay “Rigorous Study of Art” is a review of the first volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*,<sup>12</sup> a forum for art-historical essays by scholars from the Vienna School, which Meyer Schapiro described at the time as “perhaps the most advanced organ of European academic writing on art history today.”<sup>13</sup> As indicated by the title of Hans Sedlmayr’s lead essay “*Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft*” (“Toward a Rigorous Study of Art”), which Benjamin adapted for the title of his review, the yearbook was polemically conceived as the inauguration of a new method for the study of art. Benjamin was sent the volume shortly after its publication by one of the contributors, Carl Linfert, whose essay on architectural drawings displays a marked theoretical indebtedness to Benjamin’s work on the German tragic drama.<sup>14</sup> Excited by what he perceived to be the translation into art-historical practice of his own critical, redemptive project, Benjamin subsequently wrote a review of the volume, which he submitted for publication to the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.

This text, the first version of “Rigorous Study of Art,” never appeared in print, having been rejected by Friedrich T. Gubler, the editor of the feuilleton section at the time, and by Benno Reifenberg. But since Benjamin’s friend Linfert was a regular contributor to the newspaper, he was thus able to meet with the editors to establish the reasons for the rejection. Over the course of their extended discussion—which Linfert later conveyed in meticulous detail in a long, confidential letter to Benjamin dated December 12, 1932<sup>15</sup>—it became clear that their negative response was a product of their inability to understand Benjamin’s critique of the dangers of Wölfflinian formalism as anything but a categorical dismissal. Secondly, their (symptomatic) lack of familiarity with

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pp. 5–25; and “Fernbilder, Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft,” in Burkhardt Lindner, ed., *Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, Koenigstein, Athenaeum, 1978, pp. 224–257, esp. 224–228.

12. Otto Pächt, ed., *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, Berlin, Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1931.

13. Meyer Schapiro, “The New Viennese School,” *Art Bulletin*, vol. 18, no. 2 (June 1936), pp. 258–266. Schapiro’s extensive review concentrates primarily on volume II of the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, Berlin, Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1933, including detailed summaries of the articles by Guido Kaschnitz-Weinberg, Hans Sedlmayr, Karl M. Swoboda, Otto Pächt, Maria Hirsch, Michael Alpatoff, and Emil Kaufmann. The first three pages, however, are a response to the methodological program set out in Sedlmayr’s lead article in volume I.

14. In an enthusiastic letter to Linfert confirming receipt of the book, Benjamin remarks on the “numerous and profound affinities between our work” (Letter dated July 18, 1931, cited in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, p. 653). The following remarks rely on the excellent documentation—including the correspondence between Benjamin and Linfert—provided by Hella Tiedemann-Bartels, the editor of volume 3 of the Benjamin *Schriften*, pp. 652–660.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 653–657.

Riegl's work rendered unintelligible Benjamin's critique of universal history, the privileging of the micrological focus of the monograph, and his emphasis on the marginal case. They simply could not grasp, so Linfert explains, that Benjamin was simultaneously endorsing Wölfflin's shift away from an anecdotal, biographical, and largely sentimental art-historical practice toward a close visual study, and yet criticizing the increasingly formalist tendency of Wölfflin's materialism because it failed to think through the epistemological stakes of formal change.<sup>16</sup>

Based on this inside information from Linfert, Benjamin subsequently rewrote the review, reluctantly excising certain potentially offensive passages—such as the polemical remarks about Sedlmayr and the extended discussion of Linfert's essay—and strategically incorporating certain ideas suggested by his friend. "Perhaps now," Benjamin wrote in a letter accompanying the revised second version, "—thanks to the toning down of various sections and the citation of various authorities—Reifenberg's resistance will be overcome."<sup>17</sup> This seems to have been the case, since on July 30, 1933, "Rigorous Study of Art" finally appeared in the literary section of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* under Benjamin's pseudonym Detlef Holz.

The resistance that "Rigorous Study of Art" encountered prior to its publication is, of course, highly indicative, a veritable barometer of the radicality of Benjamin's theoretical positions at the time.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the availability of

16. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," perhaps the best known example of just such an epistemological meditation on the ramifications of formal change, it is thus no surprise that Benjamin immediately refers to the Vienna school of art history (Riegl and Wickhoff in particular) in his analysis of the politics of the transformation of perception brought about by the new medium. See Chryssoula Kambas, *Walter Benjamin im Exil. Zum Verhältnis von Literaturpolitik und Ästhetik*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1983, esp. pp. 128–141, "Filmische Wahrnehmung, gedacht aus Riegls methodischen Ideen."

17. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, p. 658.

18. Although motivated by different theoretical stakes, the resistance to Benjamin's writing continues well into the present. Indeed, the publication of the translation of "Rigorous Study of Art" encountered difficulties surprisingly similar to those that befell the original essay. Initially intended for a special "Art and Ideology" issue of a leftist journal, the text was judged to be "too theoretical" and was returned to the translator with the request that he simplify some of the more dense formulations and eliminate what was deemed an unnecessarily philological interpolation of the two versions. Unwilling to edit Benjamin and determined to take advantage of the rare opportunity to document Benjamin's own encounter with editorial pressures, the translator decided instead to offer the text to a journal that would respect both its integrity and theoretical density.

What is significant about the initial rejection of the translation, however, is not only the amusing structural parallel to the fate of the original essay, but also the disturbing similarity of the logic that gave rise to this editorial decision and certain contemporary neoconservative positions. A leftist journal that imposes an "ordinary language" requirement on theory—in its advertisements the journal in question prides itself for having "presented the best Marxist and other radical scholarship in jargon-free English—unwittingly adopts a position uncomfortably close to right-wing antitheoretical polemics. The resemblance is evident, for example, in a recent virulently anti-Marxist article by Roger Kimball, "The October Syndrome," *New Criterion*, vol. 7, no. 2 (October 1988), pp. 5–15. This would-be indictment of *October*, a xenophobic, resentment-laden rehearsal of reactionary clichés, does little more than decry the "deliberate obscurity," "triumph of opacity," "arcane pseudo-philosophical jargon" and the "obfuscatory theories imported from the continent." Indicati-

both versions of the text provides an unusual opportunity to examine the subtleties of Benjamin's rhetorical calculus at work in his successfully strategic revisions of the rejected first version. In order to make it possible for the English reader to undertake such a comparative analysis, the following procedure has been adopted in the English version of Benjamin's essay. The translation contains the entire text from the manuscript of the more polemical first version (V1); all passages from V1 *deleted* in the second, published, version (V2) are marked within the text by pointed brackets "<.....>"; finally, all passages *added* in the second version are included in footnotes located at the site of their insertion. In short, everything from *both* the rejected and the published versions has been included, with only one exception: for the sake of a slightly less cumbersome apparatus, additions or deletions of single words and/or punctuation have been noted only where it was deemed to be significant.

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vely, the only German writer whom Kimball includes in his list of insufferable crypto-hermeticists such as Barthes, Bataille, de Man, Derrida, and Foucault is none other than Walter Benjamin.