1. Interpreting Forms of Representation

Visual order as concretized worldview – Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form*

Described by W.J.T. Mitchell as an "epic of visuality", Panofsky's essay on perspective, originally published in 1927,[1] is a concentrated synthesis of the history of perspective, as well as a history of visuality as cultural practice. The text has received renewed critical attention during the founding phase of visual culture studies.[2]

Perspective – "seeing through" as Dürer, quoted by Panofsky, called it (27)[3] – refers not to the process of seeing but to the method of translating what is seen into a representation, with reference to the transfer of seen three-dimensional space onto the two-dimensional picture plane. The best-known technique of this kind is central or one-point perspective, an achievement attributed to the Italian Renaissance that has shaped European painting in its quest for accurate portrayal of objects in space ever since. Although it is just one of the available options, one way among many to produce an image of the world, central perspective has since become a metaphor for the modern way of viewing the world. In recent decades it has faced criticism on several fronts. Most interestingly in the context of this book, poststructuralist critiques of the claim to truth made by Enlightenment rationality deployed perspective as

1 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher Wood (New York 1991).

2 Mitchell's essay "The Pictorial Turn", which announced the turn designed to dethrone the "linguistic turn", offers a very positive rereading of Panofsky's essay on perspective: "It aims at nothing less than a critical iconology, a self-theorizing account of visual culture." This is also Mitchell's yardstick for Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer*: W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn", in Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago 1994), 11-34: 23.

3 For smoother reading, page numbers for quotes in Part One are placed in brackets in the text rather than in footnotes.

a metaphor for Cartesianism, logic and western reason's hegemonic worldview. This critique also played a part in the genesis of visual culture studies, something I will return to in chapter 4.

As early as 1927, Panofsky attempted to historicize the changes undergone since antiquity by perspective as a "symbolic form" in the sense of Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.[4] From this viewpoint, one-point perspective, like the other techniques, is a phenomenon that can be explained in historical and cultural terms, but it is not the only "correct", objectively right method of depicting the world with a unique claim to truth. According to a quotation from Ernst Cassirer cited by Panofsky, in symbolic forms "spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete material sign and intrinsically given to this sign" (41). Perspective as a model for representing three-dimensional seeing on the picture plane is thus the concrete material sign that Panofsky will link back to the spiritual meanings which have been (and continue to be) "intrinsically given" to it. Although perspective can be seen, it is not simply "visible", needing instead to be extracted from its specific application in a given picture. Panofsky carefully examines his prize witnesses (frescoes, vases and canvases from antiquity to the Renaissance) in search of evidence pointing to their specific model for converting three dimensions into two. This raises the question of whether Panofsky's interpretation "proves" something that is undeniably there, or whether he presupposes something that his seeing then detects or, to put it more pointedly, constructs. By describing perspective not just as a practical artistic technique, but as a "sign" linked with a "spiritual meaning", he also turns the artist's seeing into a construction in the sense of something culturally determined, a cultural practice, subject to historical change. This construction even extends to the physiological conditions of seeing itself; the eye is a creature of habit, so to speak, and not just an optical bio-mechanism. As an example, Panofsky cites Kepler, who "fully recognized that he had originally overlooked or even denied these illusory curves only because he had been schooled in linear perspective. He had been led by the rules of painterly perspective to believe that straight is always seen as straight, without stopping to consider that the eye in fact projects not on to a *plana tabella* but onto the inner surface of a sphere" (34).

From his own observations, combined with source texts and the results of previous research, Panofsky extracts descriptions of three models of per-

4 Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms:* Vol. 1, *Language*, 1923; Vol. 2, *Mythical Thinking*, 1925; Vol. 3, *Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 1929.

spective – for antiquity, the Middle Ages and the early modern era. He then reads each model as a sign of basic intellectual dispositions specific to the historical period in question. In the art of antiquity, for example, the rendering of bodies is persuasively illusionistic; it focuses on bodies and surfaces, showing only what is tangible as well as visible (41). But these bodies remain isolated, not inhabiting a homogenous overall space. Instead, space here is "only that which remains, so to speak, between the bodies" (41); there is no "continuum of a higher order" (41). At this point, Panofsky introduces the key conceptual distinction between "aggregate space" and "systematic space": the space of antiquity is an "aggregate space; it never becomes that which modernity demands and realizes, a systematic space" (42). This is then applied to the worldview of ancient philosophy (43-44). Based on pictorial structure, then, Panofsky draws a parallel between perspective, view of space and worldview in which what is true of this pictorial structure is also claimed to be true of the corresponding view of space and worldview. The heuristic advantage of this approach lies in the elucidation of the uniform spiritual character of an age via its individual components, as well as the integration of art into the character of a historical period. The periods are in turn integrated into a telos that transfers horizontal period-uniformity onto the vertical axis of historical time: modernity with its notion of homogenous and infinite mathematical space. However, when Panofsky postulates that modernity "demands" this space (and, apparently, none other) then his logic of analogy, structural parallel and mutual elucidation begins to smack of circular reasoning.

The same paradigm of uniformity and development is used to explain the apparent break with antiquity's body-space illusionism in the art of the Middle Ages. Panofsky's argument is as surprising as it is brilliant: "If Romanesque painting reduced bodies and space to surface, in the same way and with the same decisiveness, by these very means it also managed for the first time to confirm and establish the homogeneity of bodies and space." (51) Although Romanesque art abandoned the reproduction of physical three-dimensionality, it overcame the additive structure of antique space in favour of a unity, thus creating the basis for the systematic space of the early modern period. Here, too, Panofsky draws parallels with the history of ideas, this time to the theological worldview of the Middle Ages. But with Giotto, the "vista or 'looking through" that was blocked in the Middle Ages begins to open (56), becoming a window – Alberti's metaphor for painting. With van Eyck, the picture becomes a "slice of reality" (60-61) and with the invention of "costruzione legittima" in 1420 the development from aggregate space to systematic space

is complete (65). This systematic space is "nothing other than a concrete expression of a contemporary advance in epistemology or natural philosophy": the development of the concept of "an infinity not only prefigured in God, but indeed actually embodied in empirical reality" (65). From the additive, body-oriented worldview of antiquity, the path leads via the Christian postulate of unity – oneness in God – to the mathematically unifying abstraction of empirical reality as infinite space.

Having reached the goal of his developmental history, with perspective as a necessary concretion of the modern worldview, Panofsky opens up the supposed closure of this model of seeing by highlighting its ambivalences. Central perspective as an "objectification of the subjective" proves to be a "two-edged sword" (67): "Perspective creates distance between human beings and things […] but then in turn it abolishes this distance by, in a sense, drawing this world of things, an autonomous world confronting the individual, into the eye. Perspective subjects the artistic phenomenon to stable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes the phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual: for these rules refer to the psychological and physical conditions of the visual impression, and the way [these rules] take effect is determined by the freely chosen position of a subjective 'point of view.'" (67) The following sentences are worth quoting in full: "The history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self. Artistic thinking must have found itself constantly confronted with the problem of how to put this ambivalent method to use." (67) The telos of this history of development is thus, on the one hand, a "sense of the real" whose mode of seeing combines distance and objectivity, and, on the other, its opposite, described as a struggle for power expressed in the denial of distance. For readers today, this is surprising insofar as recent decades have produced a discourse on perspective that views objectivizing distance as a function of control and power;[5] a discourse that emerged, among others, in feminist art history and which, interestingly, coincided with the perfection of techniques of visual simulation aimed at negating distance between the

5 See also a more recent publication: Linda Hentschel, *Pornotopische Techniken des Betrachtens. Raumwahrnehmung und Geschlechterordnung in visuellen Apparaten der Moderne* (Marburg 2001).

viewer and what is viewed (as for example in virtual reality and other immersive image-technologies), a development that cannot be seen as an emancipatory counter-model to the controlling distance of the viewer. With regard to seeing, distance and immersion constitute a pair of opposites that reflects the old problem of the differentiation of subject and object in updated form, with all the attendant consequences (e.g. for questions of power and control). Panofsky clearly stands on the side of the Enlightenment model of distanced and distancing looking, describing it as the "consolidation and systematization of the external world". Proximity or even merging of subject and object, on the other hand, he finds suspect; denial of distance is human struggling for power, something he describes as an "extension of the domain of the self", as if an undistanced gaze would result in the subject incorporating the object. In such a scenario, the subject's struggle for control would come at the cost of the external world. Such rebellion against perspective is not a phenomenon of recent decades, however: Panofsky refers to the "most modern aesthetic thinking" that accuses perspective of being "the tool of a limited and limiting rationalism" (71), and in a footnote he describes El Lissitzky's critique from 1925: perspective allegedly "limited space, made it finite, closed it off", conceiving of it as "rigid three-dimensionality" (154). The most recent art, he claims, tries to break these bonds, "exploding the entire space" by "dispersing the centre of vision" (154).

For Panofsky, perspective as an "ordering of the visual phenomenon" (71) becomes an arena for conflicting forces: objectivity, distance, solidity and rationality face off against subjectivity, volatility and denial of distance. Perspective signals the end of antique theocracy and the emergence of "modern anthropocracy" (72) – Panofsky's scepticism towards this new ruler is unmistakeable. For Christopher Wood, Panofsky's perspective is a metaphor for another metaphor: "It is perspective, after all, that makes possible the metaphor of a *Weltanschauung*, a worldview, in the first place."[6] Insofar as worldview is criticized by theories of difference as a model tending to promote unity, the same will apply to perspective. Panofsky's analogy between perspective and modern anthropocracy, on the other hand, at least opens up the criticized unity of his model of progress to doubt.

Seeing, for Panofsky, is an activity whose psychophysical character can be studied, but which only becomes visible in the depiction of something seen. And this depiction, in turn, can only be the result of a cultural and in some

6 Wood, "Introduction" in Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 13.

cases symbolizing activity – making it an object of study for the iconologist. Together with perspective, however, Panofsky also turns the visual order on which it is based into a sign, a symbol in Cassirer's sense. The ordering or convention that governs depiction is just as open to interpretation as the depiction itself. What is not covered by this system of interpretation is the gaze and act of seeing of the one doing the interpreting. It reveals itself implicitly in the evidential power of those elements that are "extracted" from what is seen (the artworks) by this gaze. Seeing in Panofsky's essay is highly selective. It looks for both similarity and difference, it compares and abstracts from isolated cases to groupings of similarities oriented towards clearly defined historical periods. It is a structural seeing, guided by the aims of inquiry, but Panofsky does not specifically address it as such. One could refer here to the well-known fundamental problem in the theory of science that structural interdependencies may exist between epistemological interest, research method, interpretation and result, potentially leading to tautology. Far more interesting, however, would be to ask how, if this is the case with Panofsky's essay, it is still possible to get so much out of reading it?

We could ask a different question: What does Panofsky actually see? One criticism often levelled at iconologists is that they see not forms but only objects that mean something, that they look beyond or through the forms at an object (such as the lily that symbolizes Mary's innocence). In Panofsky's case, this would mean that if he wishes to study the visual order of spatial representation, he sees the surface and the forms that determine how the objects stand on the surface and in relation to each other. But his descriptions show that he deliberately abbreviates this moment of seeing to those formal elements that provide evidence for his argument – as in the case of the floor tiles in 14th-century painting[7] that allow vanishing points to be more precisely identified. In the unwieldy concept of the symbolic form, this tautological tendency is already present: this form is actually an object, an object of symbolization.

Seeing as a psychophysical process only figures in Panofsky where it is a matter of underlining its distinctness from constructed perspective. This creates a kind of base and superstructure model: the empirical process of seeing as the base for the superstructure of perspective construction. Finally, it remains uncertain how the relationship between base and superstructure is to be conceived of. We are left with a dichotomy of nature (empirical seeing) and culture that displays parallels with recent debates such as those between

7 One lovely example being that of Master Bertram of Minden (59).

empiricist and constructivist positions. For Panofsky, this doesn't seem to be a problem: he addresses the phenomenon of seeing where it becomes visible – in cultural practice. From today's viewpoint, he reinforces the constructivist position when he uses the example of Kepler to show how perspective as a cultural convention dominates and transforms empirical seeing. This is doubtless one of the reasons for the current renewed interest in his essay and for its compatibility with today's concepts of visuality. What is problematic is the importance accorded to the authorial prerogative on interpretation – a prerogative which includes, as both precondition and consequence, the fact that the act of seeing itself remains undiscussed. The essay is also problematic in terms of its macro-historical findings. Such aspects are criticized by current constructivist-leaning readings like that of Christopher Wood.

Seeing as an approach to reality – Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*[8]

The book's cover shows Magritte's painting *Le Palais des Rideaux, III*.[9] Against some wooden panelling, on bare floorboards, a small distance apart, stand two identical, irregular seven-sided pictures in pale grey frames. On closer inspection, the obviousness of the way the pictures are arranged in space becomes less clear, causing a strange flickering of the visual effect: Are the pictures resting against the wall? Their slight backwards inclination suggests this, but the shadows on the floor and wall suggest not. On a pale grey-blue ground, the picture on the right features the word "ciel" (sky) in cursive script. The left-hand picture shows a slightly cloudy sky in blue-grey-white. Magritte's picture offers a pointed visual remark on the question of painterly representation, but with a thrust that differs from Gombrich's: the painting points to the difference between text and picture, while Gombrich is interested in the difference between perception and picture.

Gombrich begins with a question: Why does pictorial representation have a history? The backdrop against which this question makes sense is a presupposition that he formulates as another question: Why did it take so long

8 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (first published 1960), eleventh printing with a new preface (Princeton, Oxford 2000).

9 *The Palace of Curtains III*, 1928-1929, Museum of Modern Art, New York. This cover was used for the eleventh edition, published in 2000 (Princeton Paperbacks). Other editions have had different covers.

for humanity to develop the means for plausible rendering of visual effects, to create the illusion of "lifelikeness"? (291) This implies a kind of historical determinism: the history of the picture or, more narrowly, the history of painting, is placed under the necessity, the telos, the unwavering goal of achieving such "lifelikeness". Illusionism becomes an anthropological constant, or at least a dimension welcomed by all people. This opens up the problem also posed in a certain way by Panofsky in his perspective essay: How to explain the fact that there have been periods in the history of (European) art when painting did not look at all as if it was concerned with a plausible rendering of reality? Panofsky locates these differences in the field of historically changing ideas about the world; for him, the various ways of portraying figure and space are symbolic forms of the specific worldview in question. Gombrich constructs a different model to explain the differences between representation and reality: In a first step he tries to understand perception with the help of experimental psychology (very popular in the 1950s) and gestalt psychology.[10] By referring to disciplines that have the status of natural sciences capable of generating falsifiable results, he wishes to show that art history, too, is able to bring forth such results. He assembles a series of arguments around seeing that show him in a fundamental dilemma: On the one hand, he writes against the myth of the "innocent eye" according to which seeing is understood as a purely passive registering of the outside world, uninfluenced by any knowledge, unformatted (to use a fitting metaphor from computer culture), and against painting as a faithful reproduction of the image on the retina. Here, he follows psychology in assuming that seeing takes place on the basis of subjective "schemata" that format perception (to stick with that metaphor), thus opening up his construction to the *subjectivity* and relativity of what is seen and depicted. On the other hand, he insists on an *objectivity* not subject to human influence that must remain a benchmark for the representation of what is seen. And this benchmark can only be the outside world – that which is represented. Gombrich's dilemma is essentially the elementary conflict that runs through western attempts to explain the relationship between individual and world – the conflict (in very simplified terms) between constructivism and positivism.

10 He refers, for example, to: Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (1954); Edwin G. Boring, *Sensation and Perception in the History of Experimental Psychology* (1942); F.A. Hayek, *The Sensory Order* (1952); Charles E. Osgood, *Method and Theory in Experimental Psychology* (1953).

To my mind, experimental psychology seems to reflect this conflict rather than bridging it, when it attempts to render the processes of perception themselves objectively understandable by means of experiments. Here, too, the question is: is seeing purely passive (with the objectively existing world encountering "empty" perceptive organs) or is it subjectively shaped and focused by pre-existing knowledge? The psychology of perception assumes the latter, while attempting to generalize this subjective element in terms of objectifiable patterns ("schemata"). These patterns are considered not as individually unique, and thus subjective, but as common to all people. And if these patterns and schemata are assumed to be universal, then perception, located within the subject and its pre-knowledge, can be objectified.

Gombrich takes these insights from psychology and applies them to his thinking about the kind of seeing that is relevant to art history: the seeing of painters and viewers. As mentioned above, he believes painting to be driven by the desire to achieve a plausible representation of the illusion of "lifelikeness". He thus considers seeing under this premise. What does this have to do with historically changing ways of representing reality in art? Art shows itself as historical precisely by these changes, be it a development towards a specific endpoint (for Gombrich: the perfect illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface) or not. Gombrich calls this historical quality "style" or "manner". Measured against what he sees as the endpoint of the development, style is what deviates from the perfect illusion, and thus also what confounds the viewer attempting to reconcile what she sees in the picture with external reality. Style is convention (291), the share of seeing based on patterns which the viewer (referred to by Gombrich always as the "beholder") brings with her, patterns that guide seeing and make it an active process; conventions, schemata, prior knowledge are modified and corrected in seeing via a comparison with reality. At this point in my very brief account it becomes clearer that linking Magritte's *Palace of Curtains* with Gombrich's agenda brings forth a strange reading of the painting – as if Magritte's aim had been to highlight this difference between perception and objective reality, between image and reality, between innocent seeing and convention. But Magritte seems to have placed enough clues in the picture that constantly lead the viewer back only into the picture's own reality, also blocking the path into another parallel world, that of text.

In his review of *Art and Illusion,* Nelson Goodman gave a brief account of its basic questions that can be summarized as follows:[11] To say that we know what we see is no more true than to say that we see what we know. Perception depends on conceptual patterns; there is no innocent eye. The "raw material of seeing" cannot be extracted from the "finished product". Representation cannot consist in simply rendering the world as it is or as it is "correctly" seen. Differences in style are not explained by differences in eyesight or dexterity; what is to be represented depends on the schemata within which things are seen. Conversely, one cannot say that the painter reproduces what s/he knows rather than what s/he sees. A painterly representation transfers something into two dimensions; it does not duplicate, but describes in painterly language. Gombrich explains the evolution of representation in terms of the development of such a language. By trial and error, via ongoing experimentation and modification of our perception and our methods of transferring what we see, we gradually realize increasingly effective representations.

For Gombrich, this activity based on trial and error resembles a scientific approach, both on the side of the painter and on that of the viewer: "… the very process of perception is based on the same rhythm that we found governing the process of representation: the rhythm of schema and correction. It is a rhythm which presupposes constant activity on our part in making guesses and modifying them in the light of our experience. Wherever this test meets with an obstacle, we abandon the guess and try again, much in the way we proceeded in reading such complex pictures as Piranesi's *Carceri*." (271/272) Seeing is equated with the acquisition of knowledge, as described by Karl Popper, whom Gombrich cites: "In this emphasis on elimination of false guesses, on trial and error in all acquisition of knowledge 'from the amoeba to Einstein,' I am following K. R. Popper." (272)

The problem to be solved by painter and viewer is described by Gombrich as follows: the painter transforms the visible world into a piece of painted canvas. But he cannot simply copy what he sees, since "the successful *trompe l'œil* no less than the striking caricature are not only the results of careful looking but also the fruit of experimentation with pictorial effects. The invention of these effects, as I have tried to show, was stimulated by the dissatisfaction which certain periods of Western civilization felt with images that failed to look convincing." (xli) This "gradual modification of the traditional schematic

11 In *The Journal of Philosophy* 57, no. 18 (1960), 595-599.

conventions of image making under the pressure of novel demands" (xlii) constitutes the history of art.

By analogy, the same applies to the viewer, whose "reading" of the picture means "to collaborate with the artist and to transform a piece of coloured canvas into a likeness of the visible world". In the case of Piranesi's *Carceri* with their baffling spatial structures, this is especially problematic, as Gombrich explains, since it proves impossible to understand the illusion of three-dimensionality based on the logic of strict perspective. Gombrich is sure: "We enjoy nothing more than the demand made on us to exercise our own 'imitative faculty', our imagination, and thus to share in the creative adventure of the artist." In this context, rather than creating fantasy worlds, the imagination reconstructs the reality whose illusion is created by the picture: the pleasure we derive from illusion lies in the intellectual effort of bridging the difference between art and reality, as Gombrich says, quoting Quatremère de Quincy (278/279). As a result, his suggested approach to an interpretation of the *Carceri* involves imagining the stage set that could have served as the model for the illusions in Piranesi's etchings (245/246).

This brings to mind the concept of narrative: the viewer is called on to develop the narrative of a plausible spatial continuum for the picture. When Gombrich uses this construction to resolve the conflict between the subjectivity of seeing and the "objective standards of representational accuracy" (xli), he is basically fulfilling a need of his own, though one that remains latent: Just as he claims that the "beholder" (who, for all the historicization of his schemata, remains abstract) desires to perceive a plausible illusory space, he himself clearly follows his desire for a logical correlation between imagination and picture. There must, then, be an explanation for the unfathomable interweavings of space in Piranesi's work; faced with such resistance to interpretation, the creativity of the viewer's imagination lies in devising a semantics that secures the picture as a (spatial) *unity*. For the *Carceri*, this would be the construction of a stage set. Similar to words forming a plausible sentence or the sequence of film images forming a narrative continuum, the focus in Gombrich's model (plausibility, matching with reality, picture making) seems to be on perceiving logical units rather than fragments or, rather, on cognitively shaping perceived fragments into units. It is in these activities that the psychological element he refers to in connection with painterly representation resides.

Any engagement with *Art and Illusion* must itself remain fragmentary. Even examining the different readings of Gombrich's book since its pub-

lication, in various disciplines from philosophy to art history, would be a worthwhile large-scale project – and a contribution to the history of science. Criticism of Gombrich's ideas has been diverse: the earliest and most theoretically rigorous critique came not from art history but from Anglo-American philosophy, the main focus here being the confrontation between objectivity and relativity of cognition.[12] In recent decades, with changing paradigms in the humanities, the character of the critiques has shifted. In art history since the 1980s, Gombrich's aim to establish a history of style in scientific terms (for him this means falsifiable in terms of Popper's critical empiricism) has been resisted on several grounds: on account of his Popperian rationalism, his emphasis on a biological basis for perception, his clinging to objective standards of representation and what would now (from a poststructuralist viewpoint) be called the "grand narrative" of naturalism as the telos of western art history – resulting in Gombrich's inability to integrate the art of the 20th century into his historical model. The fact that this critique was formulated primarily within Anglo-American art history can be linked to the key influence exerted by Gombrich (and Panofsky) on the whole field of art history in Britain and the United States – so that the so-called New Art

12 One example of a relativist critique is Dominic Lopes, "Pictures, Styles and Purposes" in *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32, no. 4 (1992), 330-341. In his review of Gombrich's *The Image and the Eye* (*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42, no.1 (1983), 85-89) David Blinder gives an instructive insight into the debates between objectivist and relativist positions on Gombrich's psychology of perception. This debate involves primarily Gombrich himself, Nelson Goodman and J.J. Gibson. In this book (*The Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Oxford 1982) Gombrich underpins his theory of "innate" schemata from *Art and Illusion*, originally based on psychology, with more recent findings from neurology and information science. Among others, he claims (in Blinder's paraphrase) that we are "biologically programmed to react to certain configurations" (Blinder, 86). According to Blinder, Gombrich shifts his argument from physiological mechanisms towards "information-processing systems" (ibid., 87). A very different and essentially uncritical review came from Leslie Cunliffe, "Gombrich on Art: A Social-Constructivist Interpretation of His Work and Its Relevance to Education" in *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 32, no. 4 (1998), 61-77. The philosopher David Carrier was highly critical: "Gombrich on Art Historical Explanations" in *Leonardo* 16, no. 2 (1983), 91-96. Carrier also raises the question of whether geometric perspective is a convention (Goodman) or whether it possesses objective status (Gombrich), highlighting the conflict between the constructivist-relativist approach (Goodman) and Gombrich's objectivization of perception in a concrete example: "Perspective as a Convention: On the Views of Nelson Goodman and Ernst Gombrich" in *Leonardo* 13 (1980), 283-287.

History couldn't help but adopt a critical position with regard to these father figures.

At this point, it is useful to recall what Gombrich's attempted scientification of art history was directed against, which involves shedding light on the historical situation from which he was arguing, eleven years after the end of World War II, when he delivered the lectures that formed the basis for *Art and Illusion*. Gombrich was turning against the post-Hegelian historical determinism in German art history that spoke of zeitgeist and *Kunstwollen* (the will to form), the latter a metaphor used by Riegl which Gombrich calls a "ghost in the machine, driving the wheels of artistic developments according to 'inexorable laws'" (19). Be it *Kunstwollen*, the spirit of an age, race or period, he saw such "mythological explanations" as a danger because "the habit of talking in terms of collectives, of 'mankind', 'races', or 'ages', … weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind" (20). His main witness on this point is a compatriot of his own generation, the former Nazi acolyte Hans Sedlmayr, against whose "meaningful self-movement of the Spirit which results in genuine historical totalities of events" (20) he quotes Popper, who considered such "spirits" to be nothing more than symptoms of a vacuum that was meant to fill sociology with something more sensible such as the analysis of problems arising within a tradition. For Gombrich, styles are elements of such traditions that cannot be explained in terms of supraindividual "spirit" (21). Instead, their history is one of "preferences, of various acts of choice between given alternatives" (21). As pragmatic as this may sound, however, Gombrich's concept of scientificity ultimately requires a considerable degree of normativity. By founding the universality of his model of perception on the scientifically obtained insights of experimental psychology, he believes he is able to replace totalizing mythology with falsifiable results.

This has been argued against not only by constructivist philosophers like Goodman, but also by a younger generation of aesthetic theorists and art historians who criticize determinisms found in Gombrich's approach, be they methodological (borrowing scientific falsifiability for fine art) or theoretical (the holism inherent in a teleological view of attaining painterly life-likeness).

In 1981, Alan Woods argued energetically against equating scientific and artistic problems.[13] More influential was the critique formulated by Norman

13 Alan Woods, "Gombrich's Art and Illusion" in *The Cambridge Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1981), 130-166.

Bryson in his 1983 book *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*.[14] Bryson represented a poststructuralist-semiotic school of art history that shared at least one concern with Gombrich: a critique of the totalizations and great myths of traditional art history, such as the cult of genius. Bryson also disagreed with biological explanations of perception. His position was one of sociocultural constructivism that viewed perception as dependent on culture. Compared to Goodman's ideas, this was a further shift, this time towards a cultural semioticization of perception and representation. In this way, Bryson also shaped the later (rather simplified, one-dimensional) reception of *Art and Illusion* that accused Gombrich of understanding visual representation as being based exclusively on biologically determined perception, i.e. without taking cultural influences into account. But this would be precisely the "innocent eye" that Gombrich specifically opposed – although *Art and Illusion* remains relatively unclear on whether the "schemata" that format seeing might be explainable not only as patterns in the sense of experimental psychology but also as cultural constructions.

In 2000, Christopher Wood edited an anthology of texts by art historians of the Vienna School (Riegl, Sedlmayr, Pächt, Kaschnitz von Weinberg, Novotny).[15] In his extensive introduction, an interesting reading from the viewpoint of the "new" Anglo-American art history, he comments on the "structural analysis" practised by these writers, which he says robs artworks not only of their mimetic reference but of meaning altogether. In contrast to this, he argues, Panofsky and Gombrich tried to "heal" the instability they found in the artworks of the past by injecting them, wherever possible, with some "redeeming universal or humanist content."[16] For Wood, both positions give rise to problems – on which I cannot go into more detail here.

Finally, Gombrich addressed a phenomenon of art history (changes in the pictorial style of representation) not through an art-historical but a scientific approach. Seeing interested him only insofar as it was relevant to the search

14 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven 1983).

15 Christopher S. Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader. Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (New York 2000). Nine years later, Wood widened his overview of the reception of Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, including not only art historians and philosophers but also the literary critic Wolfgang Iser with his narratological approach: see Christopher S. Wood, "Art History Reviewed VI: E.H. Gombrich's 'Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation', 1960" in *The Burlington Magazine* 151 (2009), 836-839.

16 Christopher S. Wood, "Introduction" in *The Vienna School Reader*, 9-72: 51.

for "an explanation for the phenomenon of style. […] Style became one of my worries, one of my problems, because the idea that style is simply the expression of an age seemed to me not only to say very little, but to be rather vacuous in every respect."[17] There is another thing Gombrich shares with the "New Art History" – his low opinion of connoisseurship. But his reasons were different: rather than accusing connoisseurial art history of being partly responsible for the art market, he simply wasn't interested in it at all. History as a factor of change, which had been the main focus of previous art history, was of secondary importance to Gombrich – because history as a discursive practice had often enough been guilty of politically suspect forms of mythologization. As the academic discipline of history in the tradition of the 19th century offered no way out of this dilemma, he looked for one in the "hard" sciences. This in turn meant that in contrast to Panofsky's iconology, his fundamental research gained little influence in art-historical practice.

17 Ernst H. Gombrich, "An Autobiographical Sketch and Discussion" in *Rutgers Art Review* 8 (1987), 123-141.