

On the *Philosophical Archaeology* of Art History

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Abstract

Given the different material on which art history as a scientific field has taken shape compared with other historical and philosophical disciplines, this study offers a new historiographical approach to understanding its origin. This approach is explored not in relation to gathering information about the figures and institutions of art history but as an epistemological foundation for understanding the concept of seeing as a deliberate tool of art history. The study argues that the act of seeing, as the *archè* of art history, can be defined as the philosophical archaeology recently proposed by Giorgio Agamben.

Keywords: Giorgio Agamben; philosophical archaeology; seeing; gaze; epistemology of art history; artwork

Aby M. Warburg is well known in the historiography of art history for his comparative explorations of the contexts and subtexts of visual expression in Italian ancient and Renaissance cultures using his concept of the ‘pathos formula’.¹ Using this concept, Warburg researched in these epochs the paradigmatic manifestations of transhistorical meanings that exist beyond historical transformations, only secondarily determining their expression in concrete visual form. In this way, Warburg sought to find ways of expressing basic human emotions as they were depicted in tense gestures across cultures that, while not

necessarily historically related, used similar formal expressions of primary human feelings.²

It is less well known in the historiography of art history that a comparable interest can be identified in Friedrich Nietzsche’s thought, specifically in his conception of the Dionysian aspect of human expression in ancient theatre in the time of Socrates.³ According to Nietzsche, ancient theatre in that moment lost the tragic – or in Nietzsche’s words purely ‘emotional’ – tension that is inherent in the rudimentary emotions of every human.⁴ Nietzsche defined this loss and its replacement by the Apol-

¹ For a very recent survey of the adaptations and interpretations of Warburg’s thought, see *Aby Warburg 150: Work, Legacy, Promise*. Eds.: FREEDBERG, D. – WEDEPOHL, C. Berlin 2024. See also WARBURG, A.: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Leipzig; Berlin 1932. For a general overview of Warburg’s life and thought, see GOMBRICH, E. H.: *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*. London 1970.

² This aspect of Warburg’s work is particularly highlighted by DIDI-HUBERMAN, G.: *L’Image survivante. Histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*. Paris 2002. For a similar theoretical discussion of Warburg’s thoughts, see also MI-CHAUD, P.: *Aby Warburg and the Moving Image*. New York 2004. JOHNSON, Ch.: *Memory, Metaphor and Aby Warburg’s Atlas of Images*. Ithaca 2012.

³ Recently, Christopher Wood explored the role of the early writings of Friedrich Nietzsche in the history of art; however, a substantial exploration of Nietzsche’s thinking for art history is still missing, despite the meticulous work that was done on Nietzsche’s influence in the visual culture of the early 20th century by Beat Wyss. See WOOD, Ch.: *A History of Art History*. New Jersey 2019, pp. 245–256. WYSS, B.: *Der Wille zur Kunst. Zu ästhetischen Mentalität der Moderne*. Köln 1997.

⁴ Nietzsche opened his first book from 1872 with this characterisation. See NIETZSCHE, F.: *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. London 1993, pp. 14–35. This aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy has been researched by the American philosopher Gary Shapiro, who considers Nietzsche, as well as Michel Foucault, to be the first to have researched the

line representation of life as the disappearance of the seriousness of the actors' gestures, as the actor had become a spectator. Or rather, the spectator no longer had, unlike before, the possibility to 'over-see' (übersehen) the tragic play as his own life, since it was performed as life in its mere appearance.⁵ Therefore, the 'pathos of distance' had in Nietzsche's view been the primary force behind the experience of current reality since Euripides.⁶

Walter Benjamin described a similar transformation in the use of the transfiguration of pathos in his 1925 thesis on the Baroque mourning play.⁷ In his thesis, he described the absence of transcendence in the 17th-century concept of tragedy on the grounds that there is no escape for the spectator from the plot of a mourning play, since it is situated in the ordinary world, which has clearly defined boundaries by its staging. The tragedy of the play derives from those boundaries, since there was no other place for the spectator outside his or her present reality. The work of art, Benjamin was convinced, thus had to enter into a non-existent reality outside the present as a 'different(ed) space' from the structures of ordinary space.

This characterisation of the Baroque mourning play corresponds to the post-Renaissance conceptualisation of reality described in 1966 by Michel

Foucault. In his *Order of Things*, the French philosopher described a departure from a 'description of similarities' between reality and its expression in the 16th century toward a definition of individual identities of reality in the 17th century on the basis of their 'described differentiations'.⁸ According to Foucault, until the 16th century, we can find a persistent emphasis on the visible similarity of all representations of the world as 'signatures' of the meaning of reality.⁹ However, since the 17th century, these representations of common reality no longer captured the visibility of the world as 'signs' revealing the nature of their invisible present (meaning for the 16th century the concept of the disappearance of something that is still present), and instead the nature of invisibility itself (meaning invisibility as the essence of the present) was sought to be revealed. According to Foucault, this shift was thematised by Diego Velázquez in his painting *Las Meninas*.

In Foucault's interpretation, Velázquez in his painting from 1656 rendered invisibility in order for the nature of it to be revealed to the viewer's gaze; this painting, according to the French philosopher, is a representation of space that itself cannot be represented except as something else, since it is something other than the space represented. Therefore, in order to draw the viewer's attention to the

archaeology of vision in philosophical inquiry. See SHAPIRO, G.: *Archaeologies of Vision. Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*. Chicago; London 2003. For an overview of seeing in art history, one without any further philosophical investigation of its origin but rather with commentary on historical and cultural circumstances compared with visual studies, see FALKENHAUSEN, S.: *Beyond the Mirror. Seeing in Art History and Visual Culture Studies*. Bonn 2020. For a basic overview of Nietzsche's philosophy and thought, see SAFRANSKI, R.: *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*. New York 2002. For a general overview of Nietzsche's influence on Warburg's art history see RAMPLEY, M.: From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg's Theory of Art. In: *The Art Bulletin*, 79, 1997, No. 1, pp. 41–55.

⁵ SHAPIRO 2003 (see in note 4), p. 151.

⁶ See NIETZSCHE, F.: *Beyond Good and Evil*. New York 1919. p. 197. See also RABATÉ, J.: *The Pathos of Distance: Affects of the Moderns*. New York 2016.

⁷ BENJAMIN, W.: *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Cambridge 2019. Even though Benjamin submitted his thesis for ha-

bilitation at the University of Frankfurt in 1925, it was not published until 1928. Benjamin's thesis was considered unconvincing, and he was forced to withdraw his application, and he was not awarded the *venia docendi* that was needed in order to lecture at the university. See, e.g., WEBER, S.: Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's Origin of the German Mourning Play. In: *MLN*, 106, 1991, No. 3, pp. 465–500. For a recent study of Nietzsche's and Benjamin's philosophical encounters in relation to the problem of (art) history see, WU, Y.: The Historical and Its Discontents: Nietzsche and Benjamin Against "Historicism", in: *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 34, 2020, No. 1, pp. 49–68. In Benjamin's habilitation thesis it is possible to identify the direct influence of Warburg's early texts. See SERGIO, M.: Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, and the Memory of Images. In: *engramma*, 191, 2022, https://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=4432, accessed 22 June 2024.

⁸ See FOUCAULT, M.: *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York 1994, pp. 17–45. See also SHAPIRO 2003 (see in note 4), pp. 233–245.

⁹ SHAPIRO 2003 (see in note 4), pp. 87–100.

virtuality of a space, a different space other than the ordinary one disrupts the representation of common reality, and in this way, it captures the viewer's gaze, revealing not the invisible space, but the invisibility itself. For Foucault this meant that the gaze no longer functioned in the painting as a non-conflicting confirmation of ordinary reality, and that it was a kind of content that took over the space of the painting as the meaning of the re-presented reality. The gaze is therefore, according to Foucault, not a complement to the image, it is not a secondary confirmation of its existence, for the image ceases to be passive in relation to the gaze and subjugates it in order to reveal the obvious invisibility of the structure of what it is depicting, i.e. a reflection of a reality that it is not.

This thesis can be supported by Foucault's argumentation from his later, 1973 essay on René Magritte's painting from 1929, titled *The Treachery of Images*.¹⁰ In it, Magritte doubled the painting's meaning as a demonstration of the principle of what the painting is not, by using corresponding images of both a pipe and the inscription that it is not a pipe. As Foucault pointed out, the painter set them up in a juxtaposition of mutual reflection, where the image of the pipe and the image of the inscription are doubles of each other since their 'mirror-like correlation' reinforces the meaning of the painting as something that it is not. Even though the painting's mode of representation allows for the object depicted in it to be seen as a similar representation of the same reality, because they exist in different spaces – which we can call the 'discourse of reading' and the 'discourse of seeing' – the principle of the double who does not recognise its own image functions in a similar man-

ner to the mirror image in relationship to the space it mirrors in Velázquez's painting.

This is made clear, according to Foucault, by the placement of the royal couple in the mirror. The couple is located both at the level of the painter's gaze looking at the viewer and next to the entrance in which a figure, at the back of the painting, is standing next to a mirror. Just as this figure, identified as the royal butler,¹¹ is suspended in motion between outer and inner space, the mirror, by similarly capturing the reflection and recasting it as an independent image, reveals the interpenetration between the real and the imaginary space.¹² In this way, Velázquez hides his work from the viewer as a reflection of reality (the hidden canvas in the painting) and shows the obvious invisibility of his work (the painting with the *infanta*), for the painting that the viewer sees is the painting that sees the viewer. *The known and the seen are thereby linked together as the space and the mirror, which means they connect on the verge of the gaze.*

If we follow the point of view suggested by Foucault, the image can reflect more than a discursive concept of knowledge. Building on Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, which Foucault had been developing since 1966, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben argued that the written word can be experienced differently than the seen image, even though both originated in the same space, *mirroring each other in order to differ from each other*. In this sense, Agamben's modification of Foucault's archaeology of knowledge can be applied to research on the epistemological foundations of art history.¹³

At the beginning of our millennium, Agamben defined the archaeology of a work of art in order to identify the meaning of art as knowable in

¹⁰ FOUCAULT, M.: *This is Not a Pipe*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London 2008.

¹¹ See STOICHITA, V.: Imago Regis. Kunsttheorie und königliches Porträt in den Meninas von Velázquez, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 49, 1986, No. 2, pp. 165–189, here p. 184.

¹² When we are looking into the mirror, as Foucault pointed out in his lecture on *Other Spaces* in 1967, the mirror is the edge of heterotopia and utopia: it is the real object in which the real space is reflected and, at the same time, is unreal in the gaze because it disappears the moment we turn and see the real space. See FOUCAULT, M. – MISKOWIEC, J.: *Of Other*

Spaces, in: *Diacritics*, 16, 1986, No. 1, pp. 22–27. In the same way, the painted space does not exist simultaneously with the real space as created in the gaze; rather, in actual reality, there is the mirror *and* the space, but in the gaze, there is the mirror *or* the space.

¹³ Giorgio Agamben pointed out the necessity of examining the signatures of all things as easily overlooked in discursively formulated historical research as crucial fragments of the meaning of historical events that escape us; he deliberately referred his research to Foucault's findings. See AGAMBEN, G.: *The Signature of All Things. On Method*, New York 2009, pp. 92–95.

the artwork through Aristotle's notion of *energeia*, which can be identified in ordinary reality, on the one hand, in the *act* and, on the other hand, in the *work*.¹⁴ The difference between these manifestations of *energeia*, according to Aristotle, was that only if it is an act in the sense of *praxis* (πρᾶξις) is it possible to understand the meaning of the act from the act itself. On the other hand, if it is *poiesis* (ποίησις), it must be assumed that the meaning of the act does not lie in the act itself, as the act has been 'inserted' into reality as something else. Therefore, according to Aristotle, only a manifestation of *energeia* that includes its purpose (*ergon*; ἔργον), which must be known in order to be able to discern the meaning of the manifestation in reality, can be a direct proof of the essence of reality.¹⁵

However, this manifestation can be recognised not in relation to changes in the history of the discourse of thinking about works of art, but in relation to the archaeology of the work of art. This focuses not on the historical circumstances of the work's creation but on an inherent property of the work of art, which is its visibility. Agamben elaborated this thesis in reference to Kant's assertion in the late 18th century that what is needed to understand the transformation of philosophy is not the historical totality of its statements, but rather an archaeological knowledge of philosophical thought. Therefore, any investigation of the philosophical tradition should seek to separate itself from historical knowledge of philosophical interpretations of the world and should instead seek to interpret the philosophical transition as part of the idea of philosophy in general.¹⁶ The reason for such an archaeological rather than historical investigation of the transformations of philosophy was, in Kant's view, the incompleteness of philosophical thought – he did not see philosophy as

a finished process, since it is constantly building on the ruins of past thought. Thus, according to Kant, in order to know on what foundations the philosophical thinking under investigation was formed, it is necessary to know not the historical totality of its occurrence, but the non-discursive fragments of philosophical thought, since they are part of the constantly forming and constantly disintegrating whole of philosophy.¹⁷ According to Agamben, history can only be written about events that have taken place and not about ideas that are still being thought, so philosophical archaeology is a practice that allows us to understand the transformation of the idea of philosophy, 'which in any historical investigation has to do not with origins but with the moment of a phenomenon's arising and must therefore engage anew the sources and tradition. [...] The moment of arising is objective and subjective at the same time and is indeed situated on a threshold of undecidability between object and subject. It is never the emergence of the fact without at the same time being the emergence of the knowing subject itself: the operation on the origin is at the same time an operation on the subject'.¹⁸

In a similar way, Agamben thought, works of art can be approached as variables of a transitory movement between the discourses of seeing the past and the present. From this standpoint, the idea of the work of art is its visibility, and thus looking at a work of art is the premise of knowing its invisible meaning. That leads us toward the assumption that research on works of art rests on certain archetypes of seeing, the premise being that the '*archè* toward which archaeology regresses is not to be understood in any way as a given locatable in chronology [...]; instead, it is an operative force within history [...] *archè* is not a given or substance, but a field of bipolar

¹⁴ AGAMBEN, G.: *Archaeology of the Work of Art*, in: *Creation and Anarchy. The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, Stanford 2019, pp. 1–13. Originally published as *Archeologia dell'opera*, Mendrisio 2013.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 7–8. To understand the meaning of artistic creation as a manifestation of *energeia*, Aristotle favoured performative expressions such as dance (since it was both an act and its purpose), as opposed to reproductive expressions such as painting (since painting as an act was distinct from its purpose as painting). This positive relationship toward *acting* rather than *doing*

was, according to Agamben, crucial to the European tradition, for it influenced how the relationship between art and the work of art was formulated, where the work was always evidence of art, as can be traced from Christian theology to Italian Renaissance philosophy and to the aesthetics of the 18th century.

¹⁶ AGAMBEN 2009 (see in note 13), p. 81.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

historical currents stretched between anthropogenesis and history, between the moment of arising and becoming, between an archi-past and the present'.¹⁹

From this theoretical standpoint, the pathos formula, the pathos of distance, and the tragedy of a mourning play can be understood as originating not in the discourse of Antiquity, the Renaissance, or the Baroque, but in the early modern way of looking at art, 'over-seeing' the episteme of the time of their production. In other words, it is possible to consider Warburg's, Nietzsche's, and Benjamin's approach to artworks to have been anchored in a subjective reduction of the artwork to a representation of the process of seeing, allowing the hidden structures of the historical reality of the investigated artwork to be revealed. This means that in the early 20th century art history as a scientific discipline considered artworks an expression of the historical transformations of artistic thought in the way they internalised past reality through present perception, which led to the recognition of pictorial reality in its formal representation.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 110. That this type of research of the work of art has its relevance can be supported by the fact that at the same time as Agamben proposed his concept, Horst Bredekamp created a theory of the image as an act (*Bildakt*) with reference to Warburg's pathos formulas in order to bring the *energeia* of the image back into visual art research. Bredekamp developed the investigation of visual art by tracing the history of the incorporation of the image into the medium as a condition for the transformation of the image. He interpreted these transformations in relation to the viewer, who, he argued, defines the meaning of a particular image differently in his or her own space-time. In this way, Bredekamp presented the image as a heterogeneous act of representation by the medium and its audience, and as a constant redefinition of representation, which is newly created in relation to the context of its creation and, at the same time, is newly perceived by the viewer in relation to the context of the viewer's surroundings. In this way, according to Bredekamp, the image creates a space between the activity of representation and the bodily activity of the viewer, and this space constitutes the (historical) *energeia* of the image. Therefore, an image, 'in all its contexts reveals itself as a universal quality, which [...] constitutes the precondition of the capacity to think'. BREDEKAMP, H.: *Image Acts. A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*. Berlin; Boston 2018, pp. 31–33, quoted pp. 278, 282.

²⁰ Benjamin elaborated this thesis in his unfinished project *Das Passagen-Werk*, in which he sought to interpret history as

Support for this argument is provided by the fact that Benjamin deemed an essential characteristic of a work of art to be not its origin (*Ursprung*), which from Antiquity to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and up to the late 18th century was sought in a transcendent dimension of the work beyond ordinary reality, but its source (*Quelle*) in an ahistorical dimension.²⁰ He considered the essential characteristics of a work of art to be discoverable only in a moment of insight that can never be historical but is always present.²¹ For this reason, according to Benjamin, a work of art acquires its properties only in the moment in which it is perceived, which creates the precondition for recognising the meaning of the image: its meaning does not exist until it is seen, but, at the same time, its meaning is considered to be already – historically – predefined for the gaze.²² Benjamin considered this dialectic to be a fundamental property of every image.²³

Viennese art historian Hans Sedlmayr was also aware of this problem, and his proposal to solve it by focusing art historical research on the individual

'eidetic variation'. He sought to use material evidence from history, such as not only works of art or literature but also nightclubs, shops, streets, and cafés, to capture the manner and meaning of 19th-century life (the centre of the 19th century for Benjamin was Paris), and in this way to set out his transformative theory of the 20th century. See BENJAMIN, W.: *Das Passagen-Werk. Gesammelte Schriften V-1*. Frankfurt am Main 1991.

²¹ Benjamin was not interested in an objective interpretation of individual events as they occurred in their continuity, but was interested in a view of history as a discontinuous whole. He researched the essence of that which can only be knowable from the position of the present by interpreting particulars such as a work of art or its reproduction or the various forms of psychological evidence discernible in different social forms. In this way, his unfinished project can approach Aby Warburg's unfinished project *Mnemosyne Atlas*. See RAMPLEY, M.: *The Remembrance of Things Past. On Aby M. Warburg and Walter Benjamin*. Göttingen 2000.

²² BENJAMIN 1991 (see in note 20), p. 577.

²³ For the conception of the dialectical image in connection to Paul Klee's 1920 *Angelus Novus* see, CHROSTOWSKA, S. D.: *Angelus Novus, Angst of History*. In: *Diacritics*, 40, 2012, No. 1, pp. 42–68.

work of art seemed to Benjamin the correct way in which to approach it scientifically.²⁴ According to Sedlmayr, it is only in seeing the artwork correctly, rather than in trying to accumulate biographical data about artists or in portraying large historical units through coherent stylistic expressions of art, that it is possible to recognise the defining characteristics of a work of art and thus get closer to the essence of the artwork.²⁵ Otto Pächt, who worked with Sedlmayr in the late 1920s and early 1930s and who co-founded the vision-based method of art history with him, later captured this with the revised biblical dictum that ‘in the beginning was the eye’.²⁶ Both Sedlmayr and Pächt, and to some extent even Benjamin, based their theoretical considerations on art historical research developed by Alois Riegl,²⁷ who at the threshold of modernity in 1899 opened up the problem of the dialectics of seeing in his reflection on the concept of mood as the content of modern art.²⁸

Riegl proposed the theoretical significance of the close-up view (*Nahsicht*) and the distant view (*Fernsicht*) as part of the process of the artistic form gradually acquiring artistic freedom in terms of the existential-anthropological dimension of the gaze. In his opinion, the gaze was transformed as the condition of seeing as the capacity to look in general, which transforms ordinary reality into an artistic possibility that does not copy what is seen

but creates a spectacle of what is understood as seen. Both objects up close and objects at a distance are, according to Riegl, seen in the same way – what changes is the awareness of the seen artwork as a deliberate looking at reality as the very visibility of the world. Lambert Wiesing examined the art history of Riegl as an elaboration of the aesthetics of Robert Zimmermann,²⁹ who was not concerned with questions of ‘beauty’ but with the formal structure of an artwork. According to Wiesing, Riegl adapted Zimmermann’s aesthetics to the needs of art history by focusing on the mutual transitions between forms as parts of the whole in any artwork, and by researching mutual formal transformations within it, which he characterised as the revelation of historical ‘artistic intentions’ (*Kunstwollen*). Thus, according to Wiesing, for Riegl, ‘the theory of style is not a theory of art historical epochs but a *transcendental theory* about possibilities of making something visible’.³⁰

Furthermore, Wiesing, in reference to Riegl’s study *Naturwerk und Kunstwerk* from 1901 on the double existence of every object (as separated from reality in the perception of the viewer and as part of the perceived artist’s reality), formulated a parallel between Riegl’s method of art history and the phenomenological thinking of Maurice Merleau-Ponty from his 1961 essay *Eye and Mind*.³¹ According to Wiesing, Merleau-Ponty, in a manner similar to Riegl,

²⁴ See Benjamin’s positive review of the first volume of the journal *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* published by Sedlmayr in 1931. BENJAMIN, W.: *Strenge Kunstwissenschaft. Zum ersten Bande der “Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen”*. In: *Gesammelte Schriften III*. Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 363–374.

²⁵ Sedlmayr outlined his theory in the opening article of the 1931 *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* issue titled as “Zur einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft”. See SEDLMAYR, H.: *Toward a Rigorous Study of Art*. In: *The Vienna School Reader. Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*. Ed.: WOOD, Ch. S. New York 2000, pp. 133–180. For general overview of Sedlmayr’s life and work, see MÄNNIG, M.: *Hans Sedlmayrs Kunstgeschichte. Eine kritische Studie*. Köln; Weimar; Wien 2017.

²⁶ See PÄCHT, O.: *Am Anfang war das Auge*. In: *Kunsthistoriker in eigener Sache*. Ed.: SITT, M. Berlin 1990, pp. 25–62. For a discussion of Pächt’s theory of seeing see FALKENHAUSEN 2020 (see in note 4), pp. 65–74. For a different interpretation with the same aim of highlighting the importance of Pächt’s art history, which to date has been overshadowed

by Sedlmayr’s theory, see VERSTEGEN, I.: *The New Vienna School of Art History. Fulfilling the Promise of Analytic Holism*. Edinburgh 2023, pp. 135–166.

²⁷ See SEDLMAYR, H.: *Die Quintessenz der Lehren Riegls*. In: *Gesammelte Aufsätze*. Ed.: SWOBODA, K. M. – SEDLMAYR, H. Augsburg; Wien 1929, pp. XII–XXXIX.

²⁸ RIEGL, A.: *Mood as the Content of Modern Art*. In: *Grey Room*, 80, 2020, pp. 26–37.

²⁹ WIESING, L.: *The Visibility of the Image. History and Perspectives of Formal Aesthetics*. London; Oxford; New York 2016, p. 40.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 46.

³¹ RIEGL, A.: *Naturwerk und Kunstwerk*. In: *Gesammelte Aufsätze*. Ed.: SWOBODA, K. M. – SEDLMAYR, H. Augsburg; Wien 1929, pp. 51–70. MERLEAU-PONTY, M.: *Eye and Mind*. In: *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetic Reader. Philosophy and Painting*. Ed.: JOHNSON, G. A. Evanston 1993, pp. 121–150.

highlighted the heterogeneous position of the artist in the process of depicting the seen object, which is transposed through the perception of natural reality into pictorial reality. Wiesing concentrated on the problem of the incapability of grasping the external reality as a unity, since it is internalised and revealed as a subjective representation by the perception of the artist, while simultaneously it is problematised through the internalisation of the representation by the subsequent perception of the viewer.³² From a phenomenological standpoint, Wiesing thus showed that an image is objectively unknowable, since mere empirical interpretation is unable to grasp the difference between it and the painted object.³³ It is therefore necessary to see beyond the materiality of the representation: the image is invisible in the intentions of phenomenology and must be revealed as visible by the thought process through the reduction of the material representation created by the artist based on his or her process of (historical) seeing.³⁴

From a phenomenological standpoint as well, the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka in the late 1960s argued that looking at a work of art marked the origin of art history as a scientific discipline.³⁵ According to him, a work of art was a demonstration of the time and space in which it was created, and of the time and space in which it in a new way penetrated the gaze of anyone who looked at it. By this means a work of art reveals the world in which it arose historically as a thematisation of the visible as it became invisible in the present; this process of making the visible imperceptible was, according to Patočka, theorised by art historians such as Riegl.³⁶ Thus, according to

Patočka, in every work of art there is an 'inexpressible presence' that always escapes our vision,³⁷ and for this reason the basic concepts of art history should not be form and content but rather *substance and the world* and the juxtaposition of the two. They intertwine as the interpenetration of vision and form, much like what Riegl thought about the interpenetration of the artwork (*Kunstwerk*) and ordinary world (*Naturwerk*); this, as Wiesing showed, was similar to Merleau-Ponty's view and to what Foucault thought about the relationship between the mirror and space in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*.

Incorporating Patočka's remarks into the argument elaborated above, understanding the creation of art as *energeia* embedded in reality should be the main goal of art historical investigation when an art historian looks at a work of art. This argumentation brings Patočka closer not only to his contemporary Merleau-Ponty, whose texts Patočka knew very well,³⁸ but also to Wiesing's later observations about the connection between the embodiment of the image and its medium, based on Merleau-Ponty's and Riegl's opinions. This similarity may derive from the same source of interest in the ways of seeing elaborated in early 20th-century art history; in 1935, when Sedlmayr, Pächt, and Benjamin were all reflecting on the dialectics of an image, Patočka wrote, 'sight is the original force of the spirit and vision is the primeval image of man's position in the world'.³⁹

Therefore, for Patočka, as well as for Pächt, Sedlmayr, and Benjamin, the theorising about the way of seeing as a practice of art history in the first half of the 20th century was a prerequisite for the forma-

³² WIESING 2016 (see in note 29), pp. 48–49.

³³ Ibidem, p. 162.

³⁴ Ibidem. See also, SEPP, H. R.: *Bild. Phänomenologie der Epoche I*. Würzburg 2012, pp. 224–242.

³⁵ Patočka wrote his essay on the origin of art history at the end of the 1960s for a planned collection of works by art historian Václav Richter.

³⁶ PATOČKA, J.: Problematika filosofie dějin umění u Václava Richtera. In: *Umění a čas II*, Praha 2004, pp. 72–104, here 81.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 82. Patočka understood art history to be about looking at the work of art as a means of seeing it as it is, for 'it was there for its own sake, to give and show itself, and by giving itself up to the gaze to make accessible to our original wonder also everything else that is'. See ibidem, pp. 81–82.

³⁸ Patočka corresponded with Richter about Merleau-Ponty, and in 1968 he presented his lecture *Die Kritik des psychologischen Objektivismus und das Problem der phänomenologischen Psychologie bei Sartre und Merleau-Ponty* in Vienna at the XIV international philosophical congress. See PATOČKA, J.: *Dopisy Václavu Richterovi*. Praha 2001, pp. 81, 83, 85, 175.

³⁹ PATOČKA, J.: Co je vidění? In: *Umění a čas I*. Praha 2004, pp. 11–13, here p. 11.

tion of an approach that considered the properties of a work of art in relation to the bodily experience later explored by Merleau-Ponty and Wiesing. According to these authors, the way of seeing was the precondition for discovering the artwork's meaning, whereby the description of a work of art (whether philosophical or art-historical) not only became verbalised seeing but also generated ever-new takes on the meaning of the artwork in its here-and-now existence. According to these authors, these new meanings were valid, too, even though a work of art was defined by its historical dimension: seeing in the present determined the meaning of the artwork as a transparent boundary between *history* and *art*.

Thus, in *art history* – as formulated in its foundations at the beginning of the 20th century – works of art were *a priori* understood as featureless until they were defined by the gaze, since each work of art was inevitably anchored by the presence of its own description.⁴⁰ As a result, every work of art gained and simultaneously lost its significance in a pervasive plane of vision that revealed those meanings of the work of art that could have been understood as meaningful. This is what Nietzsche was thinking as early as the mid-1870s, and Warburg and Riegl a few years later, about the significance of the relationship between *history* and *presence*. They, like both Benjamin and Sedlmayr later on, emphasised the impossibility of objective historical interpretation, since they were convinced that in order to know the past, each person is required to have an 'artistic vision'. That made it possible to fulfil the condition formulated by Nietzsche that '*if you are to venture to interpret the past you can do so only out of the fullest exertion of the vigour*

of the present: only when you put forth your noblest qualities in all their strength will you divine what is worth knowing and preserving in the past'.⁴¹

In the light of such a conclusion, we could ask not only what it meant to see in the history of art at the beginning of the 20th century, but also what it means to see in art history in general. Today, when the natural view of the world is gradually being lost and replaced by a digital view,⁴² a *reproduced vision* as *seeing itself* renders our gaze much like what Riegl described as the relationship between *Naturwerk* and *Kunstwerk*, what Warburg called research on the *Pathosformeln*, or what Nietzsche understood as the impact of *Distanzpathos*; the contemporary way of seeing, just like a hundred years ago, shows us that it is possible to know meaning beyond discourse, since the origin of meaning lies in the determining element of one's entry into the world upon seeing the work of art, regardless of the medium re-presenting the world for our gaze. The realisation of the origin of art history in the new conceptualisation of the gaze upon the work of art, therefore, can reveal for our contemporary way of seeing the discursive permutation of the visible world as simultaneously created by the invisible principles of seeing itself, beyond the discursive boundaries of knowledge.⁴³ For such realisation, the further elaboration of the *philosophical archaeology of art history* might be useful for our future reflections on history and art, since, "the moment of arising, the *archè* of archaeology is what will take place, what will become accessible and present, only when archaeological inquiry has completed its operation. It therefore has the form of a past in the future, that is, a *future anterior*".⁴⁴

⁴⁰ This line of argument – with Riegl as one of the founders of such an approach – was taken up via literary theory in the 1980s by KEMP, W.: *Der Anteil des Betrachters. Rezeptionsästhetische Studien zur Malerei des 19. Jahrhunderts*. München 1983. See also KEMP, W.: *Der Betrachter ist im Bild. Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik*. Berlin 1992.

⁴¹ NIETZSCHE, F.: On the uses and disadvantages of history for life. In: *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 57–124, here p. 94, emphasis original.

⁴² This question has been partly researched by PINOTTI, A.: *Alla soglia dell'immagine. Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale*. Torino 2021.

⁴³ This paper is an extended version of the lecture *Manifesto for an Archaeology of the Gaze, or (back) to Philosophical Research of Art History* given at XXV World Congress of Philosophy in Rome, discussing the contemporary issues of aesthetics and philosophies of art.

⁴⁴ AGAMBEN 2009 (see in note 13), pp. 105–106. *This work has been supported by Charles University Research Centre program No. UNCE/24/SSH/026*.

O filosofické archeologii dějin umění

Resumé

Studie se zabývá významem vidění, jak jej na přelomu 19. a 20. století teoretizovali například Aby Warburg či Alois Riegl v době, kdy byly formulovány metodologické základy dějin umění jako vědecké disciplíny. Studie se však nepokouší rekonstruovat biografické, institucionální či jiné materiálově založené základy dějin umění jako samostatného vědního oboru, ale snaží se identifikovat epistemologická východiska dějin umění optikou filosofické archeologie, což je přístup, který recentně formuloval italský filosof Giorgio Agamben. Jeho metoda je v této studii adaptována

s cílem pochopit význam hlavního nástroje historika či historičky umění – aktu vidění uměleckého díla. Studie ukazuje, že pohled historika umění lze definovat s ohledem na epistemologické proměny nediskurzivní povahy, což je v souladu s Agambenovým přehodnocením diskurzivní analýzy minulosti rozpracované Michelelem Foucaultem. Cílem studie je tedy ukázat, jak lze dějiny umění chápat jako vizuálně utvářený myšlenkový diskurz, který leží mimo běžně uvažované epistemologické roviny, jejichž interpretace se opírají o psané slovo a jeho struktury poznání.

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