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AND THE IMAGE

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1.

Hubert Locher

Talking or not talking about ‘Art with a capital A’: Gombrich – Schlosser – Warburg

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It may well be that talking about art, and especially about visual arts, has always been a difficult issue. To find words to describe visual artefacts has been a challenge to intellectuals of very different kinds since antiquity. If, of course, words and notions have been subjected to continuous change in the development of these ‘discourses of the visible’¹, we can identify shorter and longer periods during which some notions have been more important than others. During the past two centuries the concept of a ‘history of art’ has been of major importance since it was used for the first time in the modern sense in Winckelmann’s *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764)². We have seen in the Nineteenth century the formation of a specific scholarly discipline called ‘*Kunstgeschichte*’ or ‘art history’ (rather than ‘history of art’ which desig-

¹ This paper was presented as the introduction to the workshop *Art in the Age of Visual Culture and the Image*, held at the Centro di Studi dell’Università di Milano, Palazzo Feltrinelli, Gargnano del Garda, 7-9 April, 2005. This workshop, organized by Andrea Pinotti, Dipartimento di Filosofia dell’Università di Milano, and myself, was part of a series of workshops funded by the European Science Foundation Strasbourg, ESF, as a research network entitled *Discourses of the Visible. National and International Perspectives*. I want to thank Andrea Pinotti and Matthew Rampley, chair of our ESF-network, for their assistance in transforming my presentation into a printable version.

² See on this H. Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie der Kunst 1750-1950*, Munich 2001, pp. 38-43, 119-122; E. Décultot, *Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Enquête sur la genèse de l’histoire de l’art*, Paris, 2000, pp. 254-256, on Winckelmann’s use of the word ‘*Geschichte*’.

nates the object and not the discipline concerned with it), and its institution-ization, reaching its peak about two decades after the end of World War II, when art history was firmly established in most European countries as well as in the USA.

Taking a closer look at the development of the discipline during the past two or three decades, we realize quickly that shortly after that heyday something has remarkably changed: we find signs of a shifting of perspective in the terminology used in the descriptions of study programmes of universities and art schools in European and non-European countries alike as well as in the titles and content of publications of the last decade. For some time yet, it seems, neither 'history' nor 'art' are any more at the core of the discourse. Many art historians today would no more say that they were trying to write the history of art. Art historians today are doing 'Bildforschung' or 'Iconology', they do research on 'visual communication' or 'Bildkompetenz', if they are working historically at all, they are exploring the 'visual culture' of a nation, of a class or a certain social group (women, black, queer etc.). In a book collecting some twenty essays about 'critical terms' for art history from 'representation' to 'postmodernism / postcolonialism' the term 'art' is not considered as a 'critical term' in its own right, and if at any rate one of the essays discusses the term 'art history' it occurs not as some leading concept but just as one 'history' among others³.

Even definitions of the discipline art history avoid the use of the term 'art'. I may refer to two or three more recent definitions. One is by Paul Duro and Michael Greenhalg from their book *Essential Art History* (1992): «Art history studies the development of and changing in visual culture through history, and seeks to understand its application within different societies». Eric Fernie writes in *Art History and its Methods* (1995): «Art history can be defined as the historical study of those made objects which are presumed to have a visual content, and the task of the art historian as explaining why such objects look the way they do». Possibly the shortest and most general definition is by Donald Preziosi in his anthology *The Art of Art History* (1998). It says: «Art history: Making the visible legible»⁴.

³ R.S. Nelson and R. Shiff (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago, London 1996. See my review of this book: H. Locher, *Postmoderne Kunstgeschichte oder kritische Kunstgeschichte 'american style'?*, in «Kritische Berichte» 4 (1997), pp. 61-69.

⁴ P. Duro, M. Greenhalg, *Essential Art History*, London 1992, p. 1; E. Fernie (ed.), *Art History and its Methods. A critical Anthology*, London, 1995, pp. 326-327; D. Preziosi, *The Art*

Astonishingly enough we discern a similar tendency to avoid the notion 'art' in the field of contemporary art production and criticism. Artists and art students have for some time stopped saying that they were producing 'art' or 'works of art'. Instead, it has become normal to say that one is doing 'research' or 'investigating' something. More recently, it is fashionable to say that one is 'curating'. Hardly any artist would say any more they had 'completed a work of art'. The result of an artistic process is called a «piece of work» [*Arbeit*] instead. If this indicated that the artist had become a member of the working class [*Arbeiter*] for some time already, one could draw the conclusion that in more recent times he or she wanted to climb the ladder of social distinction and rise to a more distinguished position by declaring themselves to be 'researchers' or even 'scientists'.

One may well take these and other symptoms as evidence for the 'end of art' and for the 'end of art history' as well, which has been announced and discussed for some time yet. More than twenty years ago, Hans Belting asked himself if or not we have to face the 'end of art history'⁵. Many scholars be-

of Art History. A Critical Anthology, Oxford, New York, 1998, p. 13. It would be interesting to compare in detail on an international level the definitions of the object of art history given in the many introductions to the study of the discipline that have been published in the past decades. It is my impression that there is a remarkable change in terminology around 1980, though generalizations are difficult as there might be considerable national particularities. It seems, nevertheless remarkable to me that e.g. Hermann Bauer in his introduction from 1976 devotes a large chapter to the ontological and historical definition of the object of art history that is in his view the *Kunstwerk*: H. Bauer, *Kunsthistorik. Eine kritische Einführung in das Studium der Kunstgeschichte* (1976), München, 1989. A decade later, Martin Warnke defines the object in a very different way but still tries to talk about the notion of art: «Der Gegenstand, dessen Erforschung der Kunstgeschichte obliegt, ist im Namen dieser Fachwissenschaft unklar benannt: die Kunst. 'Kunst' aber ist ein abstrakter Begriff. Ihre konkrete Erscheinungsform ist das Kunstwerk, ein Artefakt, das sich von anderen menschlichen Artefakten dadurch unterscheidet, daß ihm die besondere Eigenschaft, Kunst zu sein, zugesprochen wird. Hierzu genügt es nicht, daß der Hersteller eines solchen Artefakts sich 'Künstler' und sein Produkt 'Kunst' nennt. Es bedarf der Beistimmung einer Reihe befugter Individuen, Gruppen, Interessenten, Institutionen», M. Warnke, *Gegenstandsbereiche der Kunstgeschichte*, in H. Belting, H. Dilly, W. Kemp, W. Sauerländer, and M. Warnke (eds.), *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung*, Berlin 1985, p. 19.

⁵ H. Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?*, München 1983. See his reedition without question mark in the title, Id. *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte. Eine Revision nach zehn Jahren*, München 1995. For a very sharp review of this second text see O.K. Werckmeister, in «Kunstchronik» 51 (1998), pp. 1-9. See now also L. Bradamante, *Hans Belting: Oltre la storia dell'arte verso la Bildwissenschaft*, in «Leitmotiv» 4 (2004), pp. 31-50, esp. pp. 34-37, www.ledonline.it/leitmotiv.

lieve that this end has finally arrived after a new paradigm has come in sight. Traditional art history is in their view now to be replaced by a new discipline called ‘visual culture studies’, or by a general science of the image or *Bildwissenschaft*⁶. Probably these terminological changes point not so much to a crisis of the discipline, as to a crisis in the concept of art, of the notion of ‘Art with a capital A’. Indeed, doubts about the importance of this core concept of art history have been stirred for some time yet.

One has heard art historians say that there is no such thing as ‘Art’ at all, that what everybody once believed to exist under this name never had any real existence but only was a theoretical chimera. You may be astonished that this was proposed more than fifty years ago by an art historian who is commonly believed to be of rather traditional breed namely Sir Ernst Hans Gombrich. In the first sentences of his million-selling *The Story of Art*, published in 1950, Gombrich writes:

There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists. Once these men who took coloured earth and roughed out the forms of a bison on the wall of a cave; today they buy their paints, and design posters for the Underground; they did many things in between. There is no harm in calling all these activities art [this time with a minuscule a] as long as we keep in mind that such a word may mean very different things in different times and places, and as long as we realize that Art with a capital A has no existence. For Art with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish. You may crush an artist by telling him that what he has just done may be quite good in its own way, only it is not ‘Art’. And you may confound anyone enjoying a picture by declaring that what he liked in it was not the Art but something different.⁷

These words deserve to become famous, but they are not to be credited to Gombrich. The first sentence, the expression «There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists» was coined by a now forgotten German writer called Wilhelm Friedrich von Meyern, once known as the author of an ob-

⁶ It has to be remarked here that, though the term is very widely used, there is no clear and agreed definition of *Bildwissenschaft*. One has to discern very clearly the historical and anthropological approach of Hans Belting, the approach based on cultural history and the analysis of form by Horst Bredekamp and the hermeneutical or philosophical approach of Gottfried Boehm, to name only the most prominent protagonists of the discussion within art history. Apart from this there is, of course, the very fashionable and quickly broadening discourse about the image in philosophy, anthropology, neuroscience, etc.

⁷ E.H. Gombrich, *Introduction. On Art and Artists*, in *The Story of Art*, London 1950, p. 5.

scure novel entitled *Dya-na-sore oder die Wanderer* (1787-1789). If it is unlikely that Gombrich knew the text where the quoted sentence is to be found, he surely must have come across an essay by his Viennese teacher Julius von Schlosser entitled '*Stilgeschichte*' und '*Sprachgeschichte*' der bildenden Kunst. Ein Rückblick⁸ where he could not only find an extended quotation of Meyern's sentence but also a sketch of the prehistory of the underlying concept, leading back to Immanuel Kant's words: «Schöne Kunst ist Kunst des Genies»⁹.

Schlosser's essay from 1935 is of central importance for our topic. It is one of the few texts by Schlosser where he reflects, only three years before his death, about the purpose and methodology of art history. As the title indicates Schlosser distinguishes two kinds of art history that, in his view, complement each other. Referring to his much adored contemporary, Benedetto Croce, he underlines the necessity of a sharp distinction between *Kunst* and *Nichtkunst* and he accordingly proposes on one hand a history of Art with a capital A called, rather misleadingly, '*Stilgeschichte der bildenden Kunst*', and on the other hand a '*Sprachgeschichte der bildenden Kunst*'. The distinction is obviously made in analogy to the differentiation between the history of literature and the history of a certain language, which had been proposed earlier by the renowned philologist Karl Vossler, who was Schlosser's friend¹⁰. It may recall, too, aspects of the Saussurian distinction of 'parole' and 'langue'. Schlosser accepts that many artists may execute works of most different kind and quality but only some are innovative and do contribute to the development of art. Only these works of art of the highest degree can be in Schlosser opinion the subject of a '*Stilgeschichte der bildenden Kunst*'. Due to the *Inselhaftigkeit* of the true work of art, an expression he took from the Philosopher Jonas Cohn¹¹, such a '*Stilgeschichte der bildenden Kunst*' was, according to

⁸ J. von Schlosser, '*Stilgeschichte*' und '*Sprachgeschichte*' der bildenden Kunst. Ein Rückblick (Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Abteilung, Jg.), München 1935.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 10-11: «Aber eigentlich sollte man auf eine ganz andere Art sprechen und die falsche Stellung, aus der man jetzt so sehr sich über alles verwirrt, verlassen. Es gibt, um darüber zu reden, keine Kunst, sondern nur Künstler, kein Heldentum, sondern nur Helden, usw.; alle objektiven logischen Theorien sollten durch subjektive historische oder genetische substituiert werden [...]». Schlosser is quoting from: F.W. von Meyern, *Hinterlassene kleine Schriften*, Wien 1842, III, p. 44.

¹⁰ See K. Vossler, *Aufsätze zur Sprachphilosophie*, München, 1923. This book is dedicated to Schlosser.

¹¹ J. Cohn, *Allgemeine Ästhetik*, Leipzig, 1901. According to Schlosser «eines der ganz wenigen deutschen Bücher über Ästhetik, die für den Historiker lesenswert und nutzbar sind».

Schlosser, and in this point again he refers to Croce, only to be realized in the critical monographic essay. As key examples he mentions Friedrich Rintelen's book about Giotto (1911), Roberto Longhi's monograph on Piero della Francesca (1928) and finally, as the masterwork of the genre – «als einsam ragender Gipfel» – Heinrich Wölfflin's book on Dürer (1905). Monographs of this kind represent in Schlosser's view the highest achievement of art historical criticism¹². But as he goes on to describe the second kind of art historical studies, the '*Sprachgeschichte der bildenden Kunst*', it becomes apparent that this kind of history of the problems of tradition and development of the language of art could be as interesting and important as the '*philosophisch-historische Kritik*' of the *Stilgeschichte*. In fact Schlosser has given us in his *Geschichte der Porträtmalerei in Wachs* from 1911 one brilliant, even paradigmatic example of a study of this genre¹³.

I can't discuss this further here, but want to come back to Schlosser's pupil Ernst Gombrich. At first sight it seems as if Gombrich in his *The Story of Art* does not share Schlosser's conception. For Schlosser the notion of Art with a capital A is of central importance and not in doubt. By quoting the sentence 'there really is no Art. There are only artists' Schlosser wanted to direct the attention of the reader to the author of the artwork, the original genius, the creator of the monadic work of Art. Gombrich instead explicitly rejects the notion of 'Art with a capital A' as a 'bogy' and a 'fetish'. But I think we can't take him by his word. I think every word of *The Story of Art* gives evidence that Gombrich, too, truly believes in the existence of such a thing. Though, as he goes on to explain what he wants to talk about, he does not call these products of artists 'Art' but just 'pictures'. In doing so he wants to make us believe that he is not really talking about the history of art (or rather 'Art') but about the history of man making pictures, from the beginnings of human culture to the present. If we thus try to apply Schlosser's idea of two complementary histories of visual art Gombrich would probably agree if we would say that he is rather aiming at a '*Sprachgeschichte der bildenden Kunst*'.

Yet, his book tells us this story in a very particular way as it discusses exclusively 'pictures' that every museum of art in the world would be proud to

¹² J. von Schlosser, '*Stilgeschichte*' und '*Sprachgeschichte*' der bildenden Kunst. Ein Rückblick, *loc. cit.*, pp. 20, 22.

¹³ J. von Schlosser, *Geschichte der Porträtmalerei in Wachs. Ein Versuch*, in «Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses» 29 (1910-11), pp. 171-258, now available as J. von Schlosser, *Tote Blicke. Geschichte der Porträtmalerei in Wachs. Ein Versuch*, Berlin 1993.

possess as works of Art. Gombrich's book gives us a history of art as the history of artistic innovations, described by referring to a most conventional selection of what we the art trade calls 'important' works of Art (with a capital A) from the very beginnings of artistic creation to the present. This is, actually, the main purpose of the book: to present and to explain at the same time the canon of western art, or even, to explain what Art with a capital A in the understanding of our western world is about. If this results, of course, in a rather conservative story of art, it nevertheless is in many aspects very convincing – which is not a small achievement. The problem that I see is that Gombrich refuses to address the problem of the historically changing notion of art by just declaring the term as useless (a 'bogey' and 'fetish'). He is giving us a history of the language of pictures by referring to the canonical and therefore most influential works of art without wanting to talk about the process of canonization and the problem of 'influence' etc., in short, without talking about the concept of 'Art with a capital A' at all.

Gombrich is not an isolated instance. To many art historians from the nineteenth century to the present it seemed inappropriate, unnecessary, inconvenient, impossible or embarrassing to address explicitly the question of Art or even to use the term within their scholarly discourse. Nevertheless, most of them take the existence and possibility of Art, even of the monadic *Kunstwerk* in a very specific sense for granted – and so do many artists even up to our days, which means that 'the story of Art' has by no means come to an end. To understand and explain this situation we need, I think, a critical analysis of the idea of art, or rather of the myth of art, in its lasting effects on material and literary culture of the west – and, most important in these times of globalization, even on other parts of the world. Such a critical history of the western concept of Art would necessarily have to integrate very different discourses. It could not be based, at least not exclusively, on philosophical literature on aesthetics, and neither on scholarly literature about art and its history alone, but it necessarily would have to integrate the 'discourses of the visible'. Yet, I think, it may well be started by analyzing the literature of art, by asking e. g. for the reasons of the tendency to avoid the term Art (with a capital A) in art literature and art production as well, and its being replaced by the term 'image' or 'picture' or 'visual expression' and the like.

To explain what I mean, it may be sufficient, for the moment, to give some very provisional and unconnected suggestions here. Starting with a glance at the most recent history of the discipline one quickly realizes that the discrediting of the notion must have to do with the change of course in

the humanities that has been brought under way during the seventies and eighties. Following Marxist positions, in Germany as well as in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, some younger scholars started to fundamentally interrogate and criticize the traditional authorities and to deconstruct the discourses of power and their symbols. One of these symbols was the notion of Art with a capital A that in the new critical or radical art history was being questioned. One main concern of the so-called New art history was to expose the mechanisms of representation and the construction of value in cultural processes¹⁴. In order to fulfil their task the new art historians had to study the same objects like their predecessors, objects that were traditionally considered and praised as objects of special value. One strategy of the New art history was to treat a work of art just like a more or less ordinary 'picture' in order to destroy the special aura of art and to show how it worked in the profane mechanisms of stabilising and enforcing political power. This degrading of high art was, for example, the aim of the young Horst Bredekamp, as he confirmed recently, when he decided to replace in his dissertation of 1974 the term *Kunst* with the term *Bild*¹⁵. In short, the radical art historians wanted to declare that they were not interested in art or aesthetic experience but in cultural processes that involved pictures.

Many art historians today share this position and prefer to consider themselves as cultural historians involved in the process of political education of the public, and therefore avoid to talk about art with a capital A if nevertheless they are continuously concerned with its interpretation. This ideological explanation for the rejection of discussion of the concept of Art and the artistic within art history does not account for the fact that the notion was rejected a long time before the first radical art historians appeared on the scene by a seemingly rather conservative art historian such as Gombrich. Gombrich is probably the first to do so explicitly, but he was not the first art historian

¹⁴ As an introduction to this with further references see H. Locher, *New Art History and Visual Studies*, in «Kunsthistorische Arbeitsblätter» 5 (2004), pp. 5-12; see also www.kabonline.de.

¹⁵ Bredekamp says in an interview: «Wie viele andere bin ich seit meiner Dissertation von 1974, in der ich statt des Begriffes 'Kunst' den des 'Bildes' verwendet habe, von diesem Konzept ausgegangen [sc. 'alle Bilder innerhalb des Faches Kunstgeschichte unterbringen zu können']». In *Schwarze Legenden, Wucherungen, visuelle Schocks. Der Kunsthistoriker Horst Bredekamp im Gespräch mit Wolfgang Ullrich*, in «Neue Rundschau» 114/3 (2003), pp. 9-25. Thus, Bredekamp is claiming nothing less than to have been one of the pioneers of contemporary *Bildwissenschaft*.

who – most explicitly in his *The Story of Art* – thought it appropriate to distance himself from the concept of Art and in general from aesthetics as the basis of art history¹⁶.

In order to find an explanation for this I should like to make the following – half serious – proposition: We probably have to state a case of disavowal and repression [*Verdrängung*] in the psychoanalytical sense. Repression, according to Sigmund Freud, is a kind of defending process to protect the self from threatening impulses, embarrassing fantasies or insupportable affections. It seems possible to me that the powerful notion of 'Art' is disavowed by artists and art historians, because it is connected with concepts that are felt to be embarrassing or even threatening to them. What could come into consciousness is probably in the first place the fact that they feel attracted to 'the beautiful, the good, the true', which is in western culture inseparably and continuously connected to the notion of art, and, after all to the dimension of transcendence, of God, of magic, of the sacred, which have for a long time been associated with art – but not with science at all. We have reason to believe that the process of repression and disavowal can be dated back to the 'early childhood' of art history, and that it has to do with its problematic status as *Wissenschaft*.

Quite a few important art historians of the so-called founding years around 1870 to 1900 programmatically excluded from their research any discussion of the notion of art, of beauty, or of the aesthetic in general¹⁷. One reason was that they felt it necessary to gain distance from philosophical aesthetics to make visible the disciplinary identity of art history. But the main purpose of art historical positivism was clearly to get hold in a rational way of what most art historians just deeply adored. To Moritz Thausing, Anton Springer, Herman Grimm, or Carl Justi it was self-evident that the true work of art was the material appearance of the ideal, of the non-rational, the embodiment of transcendency, of eternal nameless beauty. In order to reach

¹⁶ It is, of course, necessary to do Gombrich justice in mentioning that he did address the problem of the concept of Art several times elsewhere, but to my impression without really accepting that the concept of Art is a problem that needs to be discussed historically and critically within art history because it is of the highest importance in the history of western art. See e.g. E.H. Gombrich, *Ideas and Idols*, Oxford 1979; reprinted there his lecture *Art History and the Social Sciences* (The Romanes Lectures, 22 November 1973), Oxford 1975.

¹⁷ See on this H. Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie der Kunst 1750-1950*, loc. cit., pp. 47-55.

their aim of rationally getting hold of this sphere they developed their specific matter-of-fact-rhetoric. Their strategy was to avoid any aesthetic judgement by concentrating on those activities that art history shares with other historical branches: the study of documents, the narrative of historical events, the description of situations and objects. But at the same time it was necessary to underline that art history differed from general history because of the specific nature of its objects, whose critical study required a specific critical method. This method was 'connoisseurship' that became the trademark of modern art history some time before 1900. Connoisseurship may be defined as the ability to discern visually the true from the false, which means to discern the true work of art from the false. Connoisseurship addresses, even celebrates the work of art, but it does not critically reflect its assumed specific nature¹⁸. Or we might say, connoisseurship is the scholarly ritual to encircle the unspeakable, the '*Je-ne-sais-quoi*' that the work of art represents for the art lover. It is a ritual of adoration and celebration of the beautiful, the good and the true, but as a refined, seemingly rational scholarly practice it 'disavows' what the subject is attracted to.

Connoisseurship has today lost much of its relevance for the discipline. One can deplore this as the loss of 'skills' specific to art history¹⁹. But it may well be that some of these skills aren't needed any more. One could say that traditional connoisseurship as the one core skill of art history died a natural death after a full life of some one hundred and fifty years. Generations of art historians have published their attributions of unidentified paintings and drawings to individual masters in countless articles, catalogues and books. Sooner or later any artist of some importance will have his or her critical catalogue. Moreover, since it has become important for an artist to leave a sign

¹⁸ A early, critical definition of '*Kennerchaft*' can be found already in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*: «Denn die Kennerchaft, und dies ist sodann ihre mangelhafte Seite, kann bei der Kenntnis bloß äußerlicher Seiten, des Technischen, Historischen usf., stehen bleiben und von der wahrhaften Natur des Kunstwerks etwa gar nicht viel ahnen oder gar nichts wissen; ja sie kann selbst von dem Werte tieferer Betrachtung im Vergleich mit den rein positiven, technischen und historischen Kenntnissen geringschätzig urteilen; doch auch dann selbst geht die Kennerchaft, wenn sie nur echter Art ist, wenigstens auf bestimmte Gründe und Kenntnisse und verständiges Urteil, womit denn auch die genauere Unterscheidung der verschiedenen, wenn auch zum Teil äußeren Seiten an einem Kunstwerke und die Wertschätzung derselben verbunden ist» (G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in *Werke in 20 Bänden*, Frankfurt a.M. 1986, Bd. 13, I, p. 56).

¹⁹ R. Krauss, *Der Tod der Fachkenntnisse und Kunstfertigkeiten*, in «*Texte zur Kunst*» 5/20 (1995), pp. 61-67.

of his or her authorship, questions of attribution have become less and less a matter of debate. Connoisseurship, which was once necessary to discern and categorize works of art, has thus become a secondary skill, or even an attitude reserved for art dealers and art lovers. What once was a critical approach has become a jargon and a ritual of art appreciation.

While connoisseurship was still an important issue, some art historians have tried to develop critical methods to discern works of art visually with the similar objective of rationally getting hold of the aesthetic, if not so much to identify a certain author. One is, of course, the so-called formalist approach in the line of Riegl and Wölfflin, which should be called more accurately the phenomenological approach. This approach addresses the work of art as a purely visual object and tries to get hold of it by describing its effect without giving an explanation why we should do this or why a picture or a work of art does attract us. But, at least, these formalists are trying to talk about what they believe to be specific about a work of visual art, and thus, it is not by chance that for Schlosser Wölfflin's book about Dürer was the prime example of a *'Stilgeschichte der bildenden Kunst'*.

We have to mention a third approach that is quite the contrary of the just mentioned phenomenological one, and is therefore more important as an prime example of avoiding to critically talk about the difference between a picture and a work of 'Art'. This is the strategy to develop a critical art historical method by trying to eliminate the problem of the sensual aesthetic attraction and interest in concentrating on the exploration of the communicative function and content of a work of art. I am talking, of course, about iconology, about Aby Warburg and his followers. Warburg can in many aspects rightly be called a *'Bildforscher'*, and thus he may be one of the most important ancestors of modern 'visual culture studies'. Indeed, he was interested in the function and content of pictures, in the historical processes that produced complex images, generally in pictures as a kind of method to store and communicate social values etc. Moreover, he studied not only works of high art, but also took into consideration pictures that were used in the context of everyday life. Nevertheless, I am quite sure that Warburg was deeply convinced that a work of art is not just an ordinary picture. Its assumed special nature, its aesthetic power, was, I think, a real problem for him, and he therefore tried to repress it before he finally came to terms with it. In this case, as often, the negation of a problem gives evidence of its existence. In his later years, Warburg distanced himself aggressively from what he called 'aesthetisizing art history'. In his lecture on serpent ritual from 1923 he recalls from his memory that he

used to have felt a 'true disgust' towards this kind of art history [*daß er vor der ästhetisierenden Kunstgeschichte einen aufrichtigen Ekel bekommen*]. Elsewhere he pronounced in his untranslatable words that the past was in his opinion no «meadow for singing halleluja in the easter holidays and no romantic ruin with gloomy hiding-places for tired raffinés» [*keine Hallelujawiese für die Osterferien oder eine romantische Ruine für müde Raffinés mit helldunklen Schlupfwinkeln*]²⁰. Such utterances of disgust and contempt seem to me to point to a considerable awkwardness of his. Indeed, it is obvious that Warburg himself was deeply affected by the aestheticism of his time: He studied art history instead of becoming the director of the Warburg-bank. He wrote his doctoral thesis about the two most important paintings of Botticelli on the heyday of the fin-de-siècle Botticelli-mania. He married an artist, and lived for several years with his wife and family in Florence, a town that to aesthetes and connoisseurs of the time around 1900 was a truly Arcadian place²¹. We can easily imagine that his Jewish family could hardly have approved of Aby rejecting the family inheritance in order to live his lust for art, beauty and – pictures. Thus, we may interpret Warburg's efforts to do real scientific art historical research in the so beautiful and charming town of Florence as very personally motivated efforts to come to terms rationally with his passion for the aesthetic. Thus, I would like to explain Warburg's dedication to studying books and writing articles about works of art as an effort to distance himself from his own inclination towards an oblivious enjoyment of those aspects of pure sensuality that he perceived in the aesthetic world of dreams of turn of the century Renaissance-Florence. And of course, this supposed emotional distress was, in my view, caused by the attraction of the beauty of pictures that he for himself definitely classified as Art with a capital A.

Apart from his personal motives, we may interpret Warburg's scientific approach to study works of art as an effort to rationalize the aesthetic as the genuinely modern appearance of magic and transcendence, which brought him, in the end of the day, to develop his special kind of *Bildforschung* that aimed not so much at the exploration of material pictures but rather of mental images appearing in material pictures of different kinds. It seems to have been his aim to explain the psychic effect that a work of art had on him not

²⁰ I am quoting this passage after K. Hoffmann, in H. Bredekamp, M. Diers und Ch. Schoell-Glass (eds.) *Angst und Methode nach Warburg: Erinnerung als Veränderung*, in *Aby Warburg. Akten des internationalen Symposions Hamburg 1990*, Berlin 1991, pp. 261-267.

²¹ See on this B. Roeck, *Florenz 1900. Die Suche nach Arkadien*, Munich 2001.

as the effect of magic (i.e. aesthetic beauty) but as the intentional employment of image-formulas by an artist who managed to express and communicate certain elementary feelings. Which means, that Warburg actually was talking about Art with a capital A in order to come to terms with the fact that some images of a special kind attracted not only him more than others. Aby Warburg was at first interested in the act of 'aesthetic empathy', in 'psychological aesthetics' and he was interested, to quote Jacob Burckhardt, in the 'transition from life to art' that could be detected in the public feasts in their higher forms (*«im Festwesen in seiner höheren Cultum»*)²². Warburg was interested in the «connection between the culture of the citizens and artistic culture» [Zusammenhang zwischen bürgerlicher und künstlerischer Kultur]²³ and he was interested in the explanation of works of art by detecting their causalities. Even in his late plea for a «methodical opening of the borders of our science of art» [*methodische Grenzerweiterung unserer Kunstwissenschaft*] he discerned very well between the spheres of 'liberal and applied arts' [*freiester und angewandter Kunst*] but he also demanded that art history should put its material at the disposal of a yet «unwritten historical psychology of human expression» [*der noch ungeschriebenen historischen Psychologie des menschlichen Ausdrucks*]²⁴.

In conclusion, I would say that Warburgs programme sums up many important aspects of a modern 'cultural history of images' [*Bildwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*], but I think it has not much to do with what is by some scholars propagated under the name of 'visual culture studies'²⁵. I could imagine that it would be more rewarding to pursue the way that has been shown by Aby Warburg. In my opinion this would have to include exploring Art (with a capital A) as a very specific product in its historical development and cultural function. This project could neither be called 'visual culture studies' nor 'image studies' or '*Bildwissenschaft*', but probably «studies in aesthetic culture» [*Erforschung der ästhetischen Kultur*]. It would include the analysis of the aesthetic object itself – the 'picture' – but necessarily it would have to include as well a critical study of its reception, its material, institutional and ideological contexts and therefore a critical analysis, too, of what has been said to be

²² A. Warburg, *Sandro Botticellis 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling'*, Hamburg 1893, p. 33.

²³ A. Warburg, *Bildkunst und florentinisches Bürgertum*, Leipzig 1902, p. 6.

²⁴ A. Warburg, *Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoia zu Ferrara*, in *Atti del X congresso internazionale di storia dell'arte in Roma* [1912], Roma 1922, pp. 179-193.

²⁵ No wonder that Warburg's name doesn't occur in Nicholas Mirzoeff's *Visual Culture Reader*, neither among those texts reprinted as 'plug-in theory' nor in the index N. Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, London, New York 2002.

its 'nature' in different times. In this sense, the history of the idea of Art with a capital A in western culture still is, in my opinion, an topic that deserves to be studied further, not so much as a philosophical problem but as a historically developing notion. This myth of art was powerful in the past and is, obviously still alive and well, even if it constantly changes its appearance. In order to understand our own visual culture it is necessary to reflect what kind of idea or myth of art an artist adhered to or followed to distinguish his or her 'pictures' from other pictures of a different kind, and it is of equal importance to reflect what our own position in this tradition is.