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Review of Nikos Daskalothanassis' Ιστορία της τέχνης: Η γέννηση μιας νέας επιστήμης από τον 19ο στον 20ό αιώνα [Art history: the birth of a new discipline from the 19th to 20th centuries]

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**Nikos Daskalothanassis**

***Ιστορία της τέχνης: Η γέννηση μιας νέας επιστήμης από τον 19ο στον 20ό αιώνα***

**[Art history: the birth of a new discipline from the 19th to 20th centuries]**

**Athens: Agra, 2013. 497 pp.**

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**I**

Art history is not as young as social anthropology, or as old as philosophy. It is thus neither marked by a compulsion to be radical through *avant-gardiste* peer pressure from modern artists and psychoanalysts, nor can it rest on its laurels of antique wisdom and refer to Plato or the Stoics as its direct literary fountain of life. This book, whose title translates as *Art History: The Birth of a New Discipline from the 19th to 20th Centuries*, by Nikos Daskalothanassis, addresses how early art history in the German-speaking world kickstarted the processes leading to a self-standing scholarly corpus and determined the further development of the discipline. The book reaffirms the decisive interaction between the institutions of the academy and museum in this formation, and (implicitly as well as, at times, explicitly) argues that art history has always striven for relevance within a humanist project of world history and, at the same time, has been deeply marked by the pressures of market and state.

**II**

A comparison with a book that appeared over 30 years ago might illuminate a few crucial

points about this one. Michael Podro's *The Critical Historians of Art*,<sup>1</sup> featuring much of the material presented in this volume, could offer, one might think by flicking through the table of contents, a parallel discussion of historical methodologies, principles and thematic focal points of early art historians. While Podro's book appears in the bibliography, and certain structural similarities between the two books are perhaps inevitable, Daskalothanassis chooses not to converse with him. This is understandable: there are irreconcilable differences in their orientation. The first concerns Hegel, the "source [Quelle] of modern art history",<sup>2</sup> and also its "father",<sup>3</sup> according to the often anti-Hegelian Ernst Gombrich.

Podro treats Hegel's *Aesthetics*, and the "two central theories" Hegel presents there, as seminal texts of art history that will immediately affect how artworks are discussed (be it by the devout Hegelian Springer or any other). Podro speaks in terms of philosophical breakthroughs and constructs an evolutionary pattern for "aesthetic strategies" and concepts, and thus fully explains his use of Hegel. However, many anthologies, surveys and studies dealing with the history of art history, even when they do not share Podro's philosophical-aesthetic interests, insist on granting Hegel the status of an art historian *avant la lettre*.<sup>4</sup>

In stark contrast, Hegel in this volume is treated as belonging to the prehistory of the discipline. His idea of world history is crucial for understanding the "birth" of art history (a term the author feels compelled to explain in his introduction and defend against the possibly more comfortable, post-structuralist "invention"). Compared to the customary emphasis on Hegel's aesthetic writings on art as proto-art history, positioning Hegel's thought on *Weltgeschichte* at the heart of a discussion

on the origins of art history, as exemplified in Kugler's work, is definitely more convincing.

A second difference between Podro's and Daskalothanassis' studies concerns the motives of the pioneers of art history, as well as their sociopolitical role. For Podro, Karl Schnaase, Gottfried Semper, Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, Anton Springer, Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky were "critical" art historians. For Daskalothanassis, the art historians of the Berlin school were the cultural Trojan horse of Prussian state ideology (69–72); Bernard Berenson (208–229), a connoisseur who for decades signed certificates of authenticity automatically affecting the monetary value of specific artworks while being secretly on a collector's payroll, and the Vienna school art historians were a whole new political and intellectual affair altogether. (To different ends, Riegl is treated by both as a radical thinker, and both dwell extensively on his "Dutch Group Portrait" study. Riegl studies still have a long way to go.)

### III

Much like Italian archaeology, history and connoisseurship, which served the state-nation plan of unifying the past by claiming the grandeur and superiority of Roman material culture and Renaissance high art, and, much like the twin pillars of classical archaeology and Byzantine philology in modern Greece that have carried the weight of discourses on national continuity, German and Central European art-historical scholarship from the mid-nineteenth century to at least the Second World War, ensured a sense of aesthetic and ethical integrity, and valorised a unique and persistent national culture for the robust Prussian state, the waning Austro-Hungarian empire, the emerging German republic, as well as the rising Third Reich. Studies of late

Roman and medieval production, and of the works of the "Northern Renaissance", besides a new understanding of early romanticism and the hierarchical appreciation of contemporary folk *Kunstindustrie*, became the bearers of a shift away from the connoisseur's quest for authenticity, the philosopher's aesthetic priorities, or the literary and journalistic musings on, mostly Catholic, canonical masterpieces or Baroque grand masters, towards archival historical research, and an essential broadening of the category of art. This broadening emerged in a new set of universal criteria, formal, stylistic, iconological, cultural and intellectual, which established art history as a resource with a dual character and a double purpose: a natural science and a humanist inquiry at once, an objective-analytical as much as a creative-interpretative tool, art history has preoccupied itself, even in the early systematic endeavours of the Berlin school, with material objects and their forms and meanings, as well as with creative subjects, that is, artists, their intentions, their abilities, and their networks of reception. The more unapologetic French, British and, later, American, imperialisms, more experienced in co-opting other cultures, and possessing revered collections of masterpieces besides a wealth of ethnographic samples, allowed for more pluralist and kaleidoscopic studies of art creativity, and encouraged art criticism, connoisseurship, art psychology and biography, as well as embraced ethnographic studies and world exhibitions, setting the grounds for the analysis of the "art-culture continuum", as James Clifford called the work of "those who invented anthropology and modern art".<sup>5</sup>

As if to underline the well-established fact of the German-speaking origins of art history, the volume relies mostly (with notable exceptions such as those of texts by Heinrich Dilly, Gert Schiff, Jörn Rüsen, Andreas Daum and Wil-

helm Schlink in English translations) on anglophone, secondarily French and some Italian critical readings of the primarily German-language source material. In the longest of his three chapters, that on the Vienna school, the author's main interlocutors are Margaret Olin and Jas' Elsner (on Riegl and Josef Strzygowski), Suzanne Marchand on Strzygowski and Matthew Rampley on Max Dvořák, von Eitelberger and the politics of the Vienna school. It is true that the more internal and introvert discussions in the German-speaking world on the origins of art history also often focus on German art. The author's conscious decision to keep his distance from such self-reflexive inquiries, at the cost of leaving aside interesting surveys that appeared during the revival of this discussion after reunification in 1990,<sup>6</sup> may partly explain the absence of more obvious examples from the first chapter on the origins of art history in the writings of the Berlin school (von Rumohr, Waagen and Kugler), examples exhaustively examined in German art historiography. His insistence on dealing with high-calibre scholarship only, legitimised by today's standards, may be another reason for this absence.

The inclusion of, for instance, Julius Meyer, who succeeded Gustav Waagen as director of the Berlin Gemäldegalerie in 1868, compiled the first volumes of the *Neues allgemeines Künstlerlexikon* and wrote a biography of Correggio, or of the Swiss Hugo von Tschudi, a student of Eitelberger, director of the Berliner Gemäldegalerie from 1896 to 1908 and a modern art enthusiast, might offer a perspective from the art museum, an institution that German academic art history had to create and justify scientifically, rather than just inherit and enjoy – an argument that is carefully followed throughout the volume. Yet even if this point is made in the narrative, and satisfactorily so, without featuring the museum professionals,

it still seems important to refer to cases such as that of the *Gründerzeit* art historian Herman Grimm (son of Wilhelm of the philologist Brothers Grimm), who held the first chair of art history at Berlin University from 1872 to his death in 1901: Grimm's sentimentalism and nationalist hero-cult, as well as his studies of Michelangelo and Raphael, were embedded in the romantic-national canon of art history in Germany that seems to have been important for the broader popular perception of the history of art, and also for the regime after 1933 (so much so that the Nazis encouraged republications of his works). An ardent supporter of archiving photographic reproductions of artworks and using them in art history classes, he was, as Horst Bredekamp has argued,<sup>7</sup> a precursor of Panofsky's iconology and Warburg's *Bildwissenschaft*.

We feel that in the creation of a state-nationalist culture, the necessary interconnection of both mainstream, then digestible and dominant and now redundant, art historical accounts (such as those of Grimm or of his student Alfred Lichtwark, the father of museum education and passionate collector, for the Kunsthalle Hamburg, which he directed, of medieval and German Romantic and Realist art) on the one hand, and opposing, more innovative or critical ones (those of von Rumohr or Waagen) on the other, is not merely a detail. It is a historical fact that challenges the widely accepted liberal prejudice (as exemplified in Ernest Gellner's 1983 *Nations and Nationalism* and Anthony Smith's 1998 *Nationalism and Modernism*, both in numerous university curricula) that the national impetus carried within it enlightened reasoning, an ethical interest in education, and the quest for scientific truth; in other words, that the movement towards the secular nation-state is driven by the socially responsible multidisciplinary mind. The state academy can, and must, incorporate both un-

demanding and sophisticated, elitist and popular approaches, radical and traditional ones, as long as the oppositions are kept under control.

#### IV

In general, however, this volume actually challenges the view of nationalism as automatic intellectual progress. Especially the discussion, in chapter three, of how the Vienna school refused to settle with given periodisations of antique and medieval artistic production and tried to underline the southern (or, in Strzygowski's case, the eastern) roots of European civilisation, offers a nuanced evaluation of the effects of the *Weltanschauung* of significant scholars on the formation of the discipline. In this respect, *Art History: The Birth* is also an affirmative contribution to the question of the role of the ideology of European cultural primacy in the historical formation of regimes of knowledge. Exploring the state-national and art market background of certain institutional and cognitive-disciplinary breakthroughs, as well as the political function of art history, it also points to art history's contributions to other disciplines, a point that has been overlooked to the point of agnosticism by many (sadly typical) misinterpretations of cultural studies and "the visual turn" from the 1980s to the 2000s. The author himself has commented on this development elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> while in this volume he offers ample argumentation and proof, through rigorous reassessments of seminal art historical texts, that art history not only owes to other disciplines, but has also contributed to the history of culture and the history of ideas, as well as to archaeology, in often unacknowledged instances.

One such instance, where art history lends rather than borrows, in this case to the history of culture, subtly unravels in the first and, then, the third chapter. The first chapter states

that the work of the Swiss Jacob Burckhardt did not actually introduce art history as cultural history, since Burckhardt as the (traditional) art historian of *Cicerone* of 1855 and Burckhardt as the (radical) cultural historian of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* of 1860 develop on parallel lines (146–151). The third chapter examines the works of Riegl in the context of the Vienna school (255–313, 408–430), the cradle of an anti-German focus on *Kunsttopographie*, ethnography and reclaiming the southern and eastern roots of early medieval (Riegl's "late-Roman") arts and crafts. After a discussion of both the concrete meanings and the arbitrary, metaphysical aspects of Riegl's artistic *volition* (289–295), we are finally confronted with the political implication of his fully-fledged *Kulturgeschichte*: Riegl's settled ambition and exquisite ability to study art history as part of broader cultural phenomena and consequently to expand and reformulate the object of art history (notably in his *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* of 1893, as well as his *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*, 1901) was motivated by his refusal to subscribe to the German nationalist tendency to seek the beginnings of medieval art in the north and thus detach it from Greco-Roman antiquity.

#### V

While the whole volume examines the political background and consequences of certain epistemological breaks in early art history, political intentions and effects are not forcedly imposed on the source material. It is clear to the author that Hans Sedlmayr was a Nazi, yet also that it was not his involvement with Gestalt psychology or stylistic art history that led him to this affiliation. Neither does Riegl's social and cultural history place him in some clearly delineated camp of his time or within

some formerly “new”, or “left”, art history. The main ambition of the book is to illustrate a decisive and politically eloquent moment for early art history, that is, the long intellectual battle over the tripartite art historical narrative pattern of Antiquity, Middle Ages and Renaissance and its position within world history (climaxing in Western culture). This battle was fought across a northern–southern axis, at times as a German–Italian affair or as a broader Nordic–southeast European one, and produced a series of scholarly achievements.

In any case, the first decades of the twentieth century seem to mark the end of any direct link between writing ground-breaking art history and “forging the nation” or defending the empire, with anthropology, psychoanalysis, *avant-garde* art and the rise of the revolutionary workers’ movement in Europe and the Americas deeply challenging Western culture and its elite institutions (while these institutions did not cease to spread, for example in the US, and to grow and prosper in Europe). The political meanings of academic research and writing at the outbreak of the First World War have advanced to a new level. However, perhaps the importance of the epistemological leap from art history to cultural history in Riegl’s work and his environment is matched by the political urgency of Warburg’s studies since 1917 and his *Mnemosyne* project (which he started in 1927 and left incomplete), the first programmatic study of art history as the history of images.<sup>9</sup> Warburg’s history of “pictures ... in the broadest sense” is a response to the propaganda of the First World War and to a newly emerging condition of mobilising the reproducibility, legibility and impact of images for the purposes of political persuasion.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Warburg’s motive as a researcher is directly borne of his sense of responsibility as an engaged political agent. With the Vienna school’s epistemological move, from with-

in the discipline, towards cultural history (and secondarily towards the history of ideas), and with the broadening of iconology to become the history of images and also (in Warburg and – from another angle – Walter Benjamin) the history of mass communication, art history completed its first historical cycle as an inherently inter- and multidisciplinary endeavour.

## VI

For a softer landing, a few technical comments might be in order. The book’s handsome cover and layout make it a wonderful read, though the publishers’ customary use of the polytonic script, as well as the editorial choices to begin anew the numbering of footnotes with every page, and also to enrich (rather than to complement) the text with a generous number of indicative images, might not necessarily enhance comprehensibility.

The author’s very act of publishing this erudite study in Greek is praiseworthy. It is a labour of trust in a growing readership that is already familiar with, and passionate about, broad epistemological issues, the tradition proper of art history, the study of images, and the study of seeing. This highly skilled readership of scholars and students, in command of a necessarily polylingual bibliography and also in contact with collections and archives in Europe and beyond, will carry this discussion across what are still “the barriers of language”.

## VII

Let us conclude on a celebratory note for this felicitous intellectual gesture. *Art History: The Birth* is an anti-essentialist narrative deconstructing and demystifying certain fundamental myths of European art history *within and as* world history. At the same time, reading the book we sense a deep attraction to a Hegelian

urge to speak of the historical “birth” of a discipline as the “realisation into the world” of systematic thought on art as an aspect of human creativity. This is the founding dialectics of the book: it is an idealist critique of idealism. What a fecund contradiction.

## NOTES

- 1 Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).
- 2 Quoted from Gombrich’s February 1977 speech upon being awarded the Hegel Prize of the city of Stuttgart, reproduced in Demetri Porphyrios, *On the Methodology of Architectural History* (London: Architectural Design/ New York: St Martin’s Press, 1982), 3, and also discussed by Sokratis Georgiadis in “Hegels Falle: Voyeurismus in der Architekturgeschichte,” in *Hoch 4: Jahrbuch des Fachbereiches Architektur der Universität Hannover*, ed. Jos Bosman (Hannover: Internationalismus, 2004). The text is available at [http://www.ac.abk-stuttgart.de/downloads\\_g/hegels.pdf](http://www.ac.abk-stuttgart.de/downloads_g/hegels.pdf), accessed 5 May 2015.
- 3 Ernst Gombrich. “The Father of Art History: A Reading of the Lectures on Aesthetics of G.W. Hegel (1770-1831),” in *Tributes: Interpreters of our Cultural Tradition* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1984), 51–69.
- 4 See, for instance, Donald Preziosi’s excellent anthology *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), and also the textbooks by Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Grant Pooke and Diana Newall, *Art History: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2007) and, more recently and more ambitiously, by Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), which dedicates the eighth of nine chapters to “Plasticity: The Hegelian Writing of Art”, which treats Hegel as the founding founder of art history.
- 5 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 6 To name only much discussed examples: Heinrich Klotz and Martin Warnke, *Geschichte der deutschen Kunst*, 3 vols (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999 and 2003) and Hans Belting, *Identität im Zweifel: Ansichten der deutschen Kunst* (Cologne: DuMont, 1999).
- 7 Horst Bredekamp. “A Neglected Tradition? Art History as *Bildwissenschaft*,” *Critical Inquiry* 29/3 (2003): 418–428, here 422–423.
- 8 See Nikos Daskalothanassis. “Νέα ιστορία της τέχνης και πολιτιστικές σπουδές: Ένα βήμα μπρος δύο βήματα πίσω,” [New art history and cultural studies: one step forward, two steps back?] in *Μουσεία 06: Διαλέξεις και μελέτες για τις πολιτισμικές σπουδές και τις εικαστικές τέχνες* [Lectures and papers on cultural studies and visual art], ed. Lia Yoka, 40–45 (Thessaloniki: Zitis, 2012).
- 9 Aby M. Warburg. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol 2/1: *Der Bilderatlas: Mnemosyne*, eds. Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink (Berlin: Akademie, 2008).
- 10 Bredekamp. “A Neglected Tradition?” 423–424. See also Oliver Grau, “Media Art’s Challenge for Our Societies,” in *Imagery in the 21st Century*, eds. Oliver Grau with Thomas Veigl, 349–374 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 352.