

Letters to and from Ernst Gombrich regarding *Art and Illusion*, including some comments on his notion of 'schema and correction'*

Veronika Kopecky

On 9 September 1960 Quentin Bell, artist and professor for art history at Leeds University, wrote:

Dear Gombrich,

I have just finished *Art and Illusion* and I must try to thank you for it. I do not think I have ever enjoyed a book on art so much, one felt so convinced, so much illuminated, by an argument of this kind. I really believe that this is the most important and the most permanently valid contribution to the understanding of the visual arts that has been made in our century. My only complaint against you is that, in certain passages, you say things that I should have liked to have said myself and I am not the less inclined to utter an impatient "peveat" because you say them so well. I can forgive your superior scholarship easily enough, for I am not an art historian; but the grace and lucidity of your English is intolerable and most unfair. More seriously, if I were to attempt a criticism it would be that you raise some questions, and in particular some sociological questions, which I should have liked to see developed; but perhaps they will form the subject of a later work. I hope so.¹

When *Art and Illusion* was published early in 1960, almost exactly 50 years ago, Ernst Gombrich was yet again flooded with letters of praise.² The success he had achieved with *The Story of Art* ten years previously now repeated itself with this publication, which was his first book despite some 40 articles and reviews since 1950. He was unanimously applauded for having taken on the bold venture of successfully writing a book about the relationship between art and psychology, being able to pair it with

* The material referred to in this talk was made available to me by the literary executor of the E.H. Gombrich archive, Leonie Gombrich, for which I am very grateful. This paper is based on a talk held at the Warburg Institute on 24 February 2010 and I want to thank Charles Hope, Christopher Ligota, Francois Quiviger and Paul Taylor for their valuable comments. Numbers given in round parenthesis in the text refer to pages in Gombrich's book *Art and Illusion*, first edition of 1960. Information in squared parenthesis in the footnotes refers to the location of the material in the literary estate of Ernst H. Gombrich and will be abbreviated as follows: Warburg Institute Archives (WIA), E.H. Gombrich Archive (EHG) [box, subfolder].

¹ Quentin Bell to E.H. Gombrich, 9 September 1960, WIA, EHG [A&I I, Responses].

² E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Bollingen Series XXXV:5, Pantheon: Princeton and Oxford, , 1960.

suspense and humour and writing with great lucidity. Gombrich had eloquently put into words the subconscious mechanisms of looking at a painting and 'seeing it'. First responses, naturally, came from those authors, colleagues and friends whom Gombrich had quoted or consulted, admired and felt indebted to, and to whom he had sent out first copies. Among the eminent scholars and scientists sending their congratulations to Gombrich were: Leo Steinberg; Julius Held; the philosopher Friedrich August von Hayek; the marine biologist Thomas Alan Stephenson; J.B.S. Haldane, the geneticist and evolutionary biologist; John Zachary Young, the neurophysiologist and zoologist; James Ackerman, the architectural historian and Henrietta Frankfort, the Egyptologist and first wife of Henri Frankfort.

For all the achievements and merits of the book, Gombrich was not surprised to have prompted criticism as well. He was well aware that other books of this kind of interdisciplinary melange existed, but no other art historian had hitherto attempted it. The subject of the psychology of perception was 'in the air', as he put it in the introduction (27). Gombrich, too, had been working on it for far longer than many might have been aware of and he wanted to present his findings supported by recent research results from the field of psychology.

In the two parts of this paper I will first combine a short account of the book's genesis with letters from the pre-*Art and Illusion* period, then move on to the correspondence after the book's publication. Since it is impossible to comment on all issues the book raises, I can only hint at the complexity of the discussion by referring to further literature, which will also be very incomplete. But in the course of presenting these letters from before and after 1960 it will become apparent that in some cases Gombrich considered himself to be unjustly criticized because he had been misinterpreted and misread.

I

Art and Illusion was based on the 1956 A.W. Mellon Lectures held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Late in 1954 Gombrich was invited to be the fifth speaker in the acclaimed series and he gave them the title *The Visible World and the Language of Art*. The surviving typescript comes to just under 230 pages, divided into seven lectures: (1) From Light to Paint; (2) Pygmalion's Power; (3) Truth and Stereotype; (4) The Beholder's Share; (5) The tools of visual discovery; (6) The Experiment of Caricature; (7) From Presentation to Expression – all except (4) and (5) would serve as chapter titles in the book.

He presented his research in the psychology of pictorial representation for which material from as early as 1947 still exists in the archive.³ With a letter from March 1947 to Walter Neurath, the founder of Thames and Hudson, Gombrich sends a 7-page 'monster synopsis of a monster book', as he called it. It envisages a book project called *The Realm and Range of the Image* that essentially anticipates *Art and Illusion*. There are chapters called 'How we "read" pictures' or 'How the artist approaches nature'. His part III has evident touches of Warburg, Panofsky and Freud with chapters called 'The magic attitude', 'The modes of interpretation' and 'The unconscious meaning of images'. Recently Charles Hope has given a more detailed

³ EHG, WIA [Early A&I].

account of the project's significance demonstrating how Gombrich's approach to iconography differs from Panofsky's.⁴

In this 1947 synopsis Gombrich's core theory of 'making and matching' already exists, but it is not yet so named. By 1949 this idea had developed further and Gombrich discussed it with American colleagues during his three-month stay in New York. He soon found support for his hypothesis in Rudolf Arnheim, the perceptual psychologist, whom he met during this visit. Arnheim replied enthusiastically to a letter from Gombrich after they were first introduced.

Dear Dr. Gombrich,

I had wanted to tell you immediately how glad I was to receive your letter (...) It is a rare pleasure to meet somebody who transmits on the same wavelength, so that right away one can start to talk about the real things. In the hope that we shall have a chance to talk soon, I will only say that your contention that primitive man does not represent but make his subject seems immediately convincing, bold as it is. For my own part, I have never thought further than to point out that an image always contains part of the object itself (roughly in the sense of Levy-Brühl's participation). What you are saying may possibly have to be applied to art in general. The question would be whether it cannot be asserted that any artist always, to some extent, creates or re-creates the thing itself. Let's call it the Pygmalion-complex. (Obvious relation to magic practices, etc.).⁵

In mentioning the anthropologist Lucien Levy-Brühl, Arnheim referred to his work on primitive cultures. According to Brühl the primitive mind still employs 'mystical thinking' where the same thing may be several entirely different forms of being simultaneously - thus the allusion to Pygmalion.⁶ It can be no coincidence that chapter III of *Art and Illusion* would be called 'Pygmalion's Power' and deals with the magical power of symbols and images. Further discussions were to take place over several lunches during Gombrich's stay in New York, but Arnheim's indicative letter provided important food for thought. Gombrich had partly covered the psychology of fear of images together with Ernst Kris in their joint work on the caricature,⁷ as well as in the chapter on the caricature in *Art and Illusion*. I will return to this further below.

There is more interesting material, which is well worth studying, from 1952, only this time it is addressed to Bela Horovitz, the founder of Phaidon Press. Here Gombrich's focus shifts noticeably towards the functions of representation and for

⁴ Charles Hope, *How Gombrich will be remembered*, Institut für Kunstgeschichte, Vienna, 2009; forthcoming.

⁵ Rudolf Arnheim to Ernst H. Gombrich, 20 November 1949; EHG, WIA [Correspondence Arnheim].

⁶ Lucien Levy-Brühl, *How Natives Think*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1910; Lucien Levy-Brühl, *Primitive Mythology*, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1935; Lucien Levy-Brühl, *The Mystic Experience and Primitive Symbolism*, Paris: F. Alcan, 1938. Gombrich does not refer to Levy-Brühl in *Art and Illusion*, the latter's account of 'primitive man' was outdated by the time of the Mellon lectures. His line of thought was taken up and emended by Claude Levi-Strauss, who Gombrich quotes. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 90.

⁷ Ernst Kris and Ernst H. Gombrich, *Caricature*, Harmondsworth: King Penguin Books, 5, 1940.

the first time we come across the terms 'innocent eye' and 'beholder's share'. This early material will have to be dealt with elsewhere, but it supports a statement on the very first page of his preface as well as what has been said here so far, namely that 'the mysterious way in which shapes and marks can be made to signify and suggest other things beyond themselves had intrigued me since my student days'.⁸ The use of the word 'signify' is somewhat unconventional for Gombrich as it is associated with other linguistic terminology. It also suggests that his early research was influenced by Karl Bühler, the German psychologist or psycholinguist, who had a remote association with Gestalt psychology. Bühler had moved to Vienna from Dresden in 1922, and incidentally happened to be the teacher of Karl Popper. He and his book on *Sprachtheorie* from 1934 are not mentioned in *Art and Illusion*, but Egon Brunswick, Bühler's student and assistant in Vienna, is.⁹

When Gombrich held the Ernest Jones Lecture on 'Psychoanalysis and the History of Art' in 1953 at the British Psycho-Analytical Society, he met Anton Ehrenzweig.¹⁰ The trained lawyer cum lecturer in art education had just published his *Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* which, in a nutshell, is an analysis of the layered structure of the unconscious mind. He had discovered its organizing role in any act of creativity and the dynamic mental processes an artist undergoes during the course of invention. In preparation of the Mellon Lectures Gombrich gave an informal talk at the Warburg Institute on *Art History and the Psychology of Perception* at the beginning of June 1955, which Ehrenzweig attended.¹¹ In his letter of 3 June 1955 following the talk, Ehrenzweig complimented Gombrich on his findings regarding the schema:

...I found your lecture extremely significant and helpful for my own thinking. (...) I would have formulated many things in my book differently had I been able to refer to your lecture of yesterday. I can see now clearly that the "schema" consists of two heterogeneous elements: (a) the restricted choice of some of the cues which go into the making of the thing "constancies" [and] (b) the stylistic formulae of a given time.

Ehrenzweig goes on to argue that these two parts are

...an undivided aesthetic phenomenon owing to the great elasticity of [thing] perception which can adjust itself to almost any changes. The aesthetic faculty for accepting symbols as a representation of more complex sense perceptions may be closely connected with that elasticity (...) which you might like to call "aesthetic equivalence" in the specific case of artistic perception. As you discovered in your analysis of the caricature the aesthetic equivalence may be invoked for the symbolic expression of the unconscious (...). This may be the first phase of the oscillation inherent in artistic perception. The second phase (or secondary style) calls in the "aesthetic equivalence" to establish a new style or realism (...). Now, - after your lecture (!), I see clearly that the

⁸ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, x.

⁹ Klaus Lepsky, 'Art and Language: Ernst H. Gombrich and Karl Bühler's theory of language', in: Richard Woodfield ed., *Gombrich on Art and Psychology*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.

¹⁰ Published 1954; see J.B. Trapp, *E.H. Gombrich. A Bibliography*, London: Phaidon, 2000, 26 and 34.

¹¹ Warburg Institute Annual Report 1954-1955, 10.

secondary processes described in my book are better described as different phases in the oscillation of artistic perception between schema and destruction of the schema. Where I don't agree with you is your assertion (...) that the artist does not teach us to see. Certainly he does not improve our so astonishingly efficient & flexible thing perception. But he poses new problems to our perception which owing to the flexible thing "constancies" (or "aesthetic equivalence" if you wish) are soon assimilated.¹²

Gombrich must have felt quite vindicated by this encouraging letter and we must bless him for not letting the psychological terminology affect his written style. What Ehrenzweig comments upon here is described in chapters II and III of *Art and Illusion* – the question of how a schema is recognized and acted upon and that we accept unrelated stand-in-models to represent something very different, like Picasso's bronze in which a VW beetle car becomes the head of a baboon (104, ill. 74).

Gombrich did reply to the Ehrenzweig's doubts that the artist does not teach the viewer to see:

Of course the artist does teach us 'to see', that is he provides us with a lot of possible alternatives and makes us aware of alternative equivalents. (...) I (...) think that the true achievement of the artist is the discovery of such fresh equivalents and that this is only possible by breaking down the functioning of what you call 'thing perception' into its components. In other words, [James] Gibson has more or less convinced me that I do not see size and distance but the tree "out there", we do not make "allowance" for illumination but see colour in the light, calculating both without calculating, if you see what I mean. (...) we see a face 'light up' with a smile and do not see the individual muscles shift. (...) Once it was 'discovered' that a reduced face with an upcurved lip appears to laugh or a line of trees getting smaller appears to recede there was a schema on which one could work, moreover the artist's public could verify this observation 'in nature' by matching their memory images of these pictures with 'reality'. In that sense, of course, art does teach us to see - and how! It provides us with fresh and unexpected matches.¹³

The letter is far too long to be quoted here in full, but Gombrich continues by arguing his theory of 'matching' and how – according to him - 'unconscious perception' works. '...the nearer we come to what you call unconscious perception the more physiognomic and synaesthetic reactions come into play', he writes, and the 'conscious perception' of every day works like a sieve or screen and filters off the information less valuable for certain processes. So to see and to hear are, no doubt, two different senses, but really both are indispensable and must work together for a complete experience of the world.

To the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter he writes in 1966:

I remember from my childhood days that I sensed that the room got a little

¹² Anton Ehrenzweig to Ernst H. Gombrich, 3 June 1955; WIA, EHG [Correspondence Ehrenzweig].

¹³ WIA, EHG [RevC&Fr, Corr A&I].

brighter when the sweet course arrived. Not that I disliked the meat course, but it went with darker global sensations. A similar observation is easily tested in a bathroom when you let the water run into the bath and switch the light on and off, when the changed visual environment appears to affect the sound of the water running in, however, slightly.¹⁴

For anyone who would like to make a similar experience can easily test this by closing his or her eyes for several minutes and to notice how the hearing seemingly improves.

The letter to Ehrenzweig goes on to argue that perception only makes use of some information, but this information always stands in relation to something else, something else noticed by your unconscious perception. It is this principle that the artist understands and works with. And in accordance with that, arguing his case that the beholder's share - his expectation - creates illusion Gombrich wrote in *Art and Illusion* (208):

There are obviously two conditions that must be fulfilled if the mechanism of projection is to be set in motion. One is that the beholder must be left in no doubt about the way to close the gap [of knowledge looking at an incomplete object]; secondly that he must be given a "screen", an empty or ill-defined area onto which he can project the expected image.¹⁵

From these quotes it is not difficult to see that Gombrich's account of perception was sometimes claimed to represent an example of Gestalt Theory. Besides Gombrich himself, who states clearly in the introduction (27) that he feels quite ambiguous about Gestalt psychology, for example in the work of Wolfgang Köhler, the reviews of George Boas, Richard Wollheim or Martin Kemp clearly state that Gombrich's term 'schema' is too elastic and his model of perception too eclectic to be claimed easily by one school of thought.¹⁶

We are still in 1957. From June of that year a two-page list survives to illustrate Gombrich's struggle to agree on a suitable title for the book with Bollingen Series, who dealt with all Mellon Lectures publications. Gombrich would have happily stuck with the title of the lectures, *The Visible World and the Language of Art*, but it was regarded as too long. He therefore changed it to 'An Analysis of Vision', but Bollingen considered this too vague and ambiguous and favoured the abbreviated version 'Vision in Art'. Gombrich disagreed and went back to the drawing board. He drew up a list of over 70 options and within two weeks Bollingen accepted the title *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich insisting on the subtitle *A Study in the*

¹⁴ Ernst H. Gombrich to Edmund Carpenter, 22 March 1966; WIA, EHG [RevC&Fr, Corr A&I].

¹⁵ On Gombrich's and Nelson Goodman's differing views see: John Kulvicki, *Beholder's shares and the languages of art*, talk held at the Gombrich Centennial conference at the Warburg Institute in June 2009, forthcoming.

¹⁶ Wolfgang Iser, 'Gestalt Theory: Gombrich', in: Wolfgang Iser, *How to do theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 43-56; George Boas, 'Review of Art and Illusion', in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1960, 19:2, 229; Martin Kemp, 'Seeing and Signs. E.H. Gombrich in Retrospect. Review of: E.H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye. Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*', in: *Art History*, 7, 1984, 228-243.

Psychology of Pictorial Representation.¹⁷ Neither title nor subtitle were on his list and from many later accounts we learn that Gombrich never actually liked the name. He fretted about agreeing to it. The choice was his, but it was his close friend Karl Popper who tipped the scales towards *Art and Illusion*. On June 21, 1957 Popper wrote:

Dear Ernst, (...)

Many thanks for [sending your list of] titles. (...) I suggest Art and Illusion. This is very brief, answers the demand that Art is in it, and is as descriptive as many of your longer titles. A variant would be Illusion in Art. "Illusion" is less misleading than "likeness". Of the "fancy" titles, I liked "The Conjuring Brush" best; but it has no "Art" in it. Art and Illusion is simple, it creates curiosity; and it is fully justified by the contents: I recommend it warmly, without reservation (...).¹⁸

With 466 pages Gombrich had doubled the volume of the lectures; five chapters were added to the book, as well as 319 illustrations. The placing of the images among the text, on which Gombrich had insisted and which was positively commented upon after publication, were to prove a severe difficulty for the printer in late autumn 1959. When Pantheon books, the publisher, fell quiet two weeks before for the promised publication date, Gombrich got suspicious. On 19 November 1959, Pantheon wrote to tell him that something had gone wrong at the printers: all 10.000 copies of the first print run were flawed. He had just been appointed Director of the Warburg Institute and he had hoped for the book launch to precede the appointment. The disappointment was great, but it was not to be helped. Eventually this mattered little to the success and importance of the book and it was on the market for everyone to read by February 1960. By March the above-mentioned congratulatory letters started to flood in.

II

Gombrich's theory of pictorial representation intrigued many of his colleagues, students and friends. For art history it was the first book of its kind. It is therefore even more astonishing that evaluations predominantly came from psychologists and philosophers, but not art historians (except Lawrence Gowing and Julius Held); and it was not until 1984 that Martin Kemp noted the absence of such responses.¹⁹

With his expression 'making and matching' Gombrich presented an equivalent to Popper's 'trial and error' – a theory arguing the valuable feedback of comparison and adjustment: wanting to paint a tree, the artist does not start by looking at a tree, but by using a given concept or idea of 'tree' (73). It is the smallest unit of agreement between the artist and the viewer's expectation. To actually paint a birch would require the artist to know that there are categories of different trees such

¹⁷ Ernst H. Gombrich to William McGuire of Bollingen Series, 25 June 1957, and return letter, 28 June 1957; WIA, EHG [Early A&I, Bollingen Corr].

¹⁸ Karl Popper to Ernst H. Gombrich, 21 June 1957; WIA, EHG [KRP I].

¹⁹ Kemp, 'Seeing and Signs'.

as birches and beeches, firs, spruces and so on. Only the image which is considered to be a successful representation of a birch will survive the experimental stage. The new accepted depiction of a birch will not eliminate the schema of the tree, but a new and more naturalistic option for depicting a tree has been created.

This sounds straightforward enough. This Darwinian view, however, was a complex issue, Gombrich admitted on different occasions²⁰ and the first one to note this was Gertrud Bing, whom Gombrich had asked to read the typescript before going to the publisher. One of her criticisms was that

I do not feel quite happy about your introducing natural selection. After all your 'schema and correction' thesis presuppose[s] a series of deliberate attempts. Otherwise would not 'taste' be subject to 'natural selection'? and if taste why not style? I feel that the memory of Darwin's 'trial and error' might by way of association introduce a metaphysical meaning which you are (happily!) anxious to avoid elsewhere.²¹

A 'pure' Darwinian model would not go well together with Gombrich's notion of the artist's intention. The conscious and directed changes made by artists would not allow for such a model of artistic evolution.²²

Furthermore, Gombrich's definition of the schema posed a considerable challenge. It was too elastic, as I have mentioned above. 'Schema' is the pattern-like model, which is copied by the artist of the middle ages; 'Schema and correction', however, is linked to portrayal after a live model; but it is also related to the acts of vision and the analysis of style, because it changes over time. To give an example for 'schema and correction', there is one passage in *Art and Illusion* where it becomes obvious that the term was not clearly defined. At the beginning of chapter V, Formula and Experience, Gombrich argues that every artist needs schemata to imitate reality. They are necessary to build a repertoire of forms, which could then be recalled and employed. Drawing pattern books, so he explains, demonstrates perfectly that for the mediaeval artist the schema is the image, whereas for the post-mediaeval artist the schema is the starting point for modification. To support his point he quotes from a doctoral thesis in psychology by F.C. Ayer: 'The trained drawer acquires a mass of schemata by which he can produce a schema of an animal, a flower or a house quickly upon paper. This serves as a support for the representation of his memory images and he gradually modifies the schema until it corresponds with that which he would express.' (146f).

Per se nothing in this first sentence is incorrect. Now, is there only a schema for 'house' or do other, smaller schemata form part of 'house', let's say a door, and its

²⁰ E.H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye. Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1982, 239, and e.g. a letter of Ernst H. Gombrich to Robert Grigg, 20 November 1971; WIA, EHG [Early A&I, Corr A&I].

²¹ Gertrud Bing to Ernst H. Gombrich, ca. 1957; WIA, EHG [Early A&I, Corr A&I].

²² Kemp, 'Seeing and Signs', 237. Paul Taylor kindly pointed out that Gombrich – when asked later – denied that he or Karl Popper were ever aware of the fact that their theories of 'trial and error' had similarities with Darwin's ideas. The earliest similarities are, however, already noticeable in Gombrich's 'monster synopsis' for *The Realm and Range of the Image* in 1947, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and although it seems curious Gombrich might simply have forgotten about this later.



Fig 1 Aris Ohandjanians (6), *Fighting Knights*. Green crayon; 21 × 29.7 cm (sheet size). Private Collection Vienna.

handle and hinges, etc.? Consequently, a mere line, too, would be a schema. Surely, this cannot be what Gombrich had meant to say. There is, of course, no such thing as a minimal schema. What he fails to stress here, as was suggested by Martin Kemp and Jeroen Stumpel, is that any definition of a schema must be made in a given context²³.

The drawing of the *Fighting Knights* (Fig. 1) can serve as an example. My 6-year old nephew Aris drew it on Christmas Day 2009. His favourite toys were Playmobil figurines at the time, but he drew these two knights from memory. The young draughtsman has quite a good understanding of the figures' proportions

and their positioning towards each other, and he also distinguishes different kinds of helmets and boots. Particularly impressive is the shield of the figure on the left - who seems to be the attacker - with its spiky surface which is shown perfectly in profile. The same figure also has a well-observed profile face, which I would like to compare with a drawing by Peter Paul Rubens, the *Battle for the Standard*, inspired by Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari* (Fig. 2). The similarity of how the screaming mouth is depicted becomes immediately apparent. In both cases it is but a semi circle, the one by Rubens is slightly more detailed. What is important for our discussion here is that in both cases we have no difficulty accepting a semi circle as the 'schema' or depiction of a mouth in profile.



Fig 1 Peter Paul Rubens, *Battle of the Standard*. Black and red chalk, with grey and brown wash; 41.5 x 52.2 cm. Department of Prints and Drawings. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

²³ Kemp, 'Seeing and Signs', 234; Jeroen Stumpel, 'Pattern and Portrayal. Remarks on the concept of "schema" in Gombrich', talk held at the Gombrich Centennial conference at the Warburg Institute in June 2009, forthcoming.

At the end of 1971 Gombrich wrote to David Carrier, then Richard Wollheim's PhD student in Philosophy. He summarizes his revised interpretation of the 'schema':

I think the main difference between my approach and that of the positivist philosophers is due to a very important divergence. They all ultimately derived from the English empiricists, i.e. ultimately from Locke and his analysis of perception, language, etc. even though they may have introduced numerous 'corrections' to that initial 'schema'. My initial 'schema' is (I believe) biological. I don't think in terms of "the mind" and "ideas" or their associations, I don't ask what the content of consciousness is at any time, I am interested in the reactions of the organism. (...) Now I am convinced that human beings are only very imperfectly able to analyse the so-called stimuli that have given rise to any reaction. What enters our awareness or consciousness is our reaction, not our 'impression'. It is this biological, evolutionist point of view that unites me with Popper and also with Gibson.²⁴

Writing to a fellow art historian in Israel, Gombrich shows quite clearly that he was well aware of the potential dangers of finding a schema - a universal characteristic - in the individual (168). The explanation Gombrich gives also fits the material presented earlier in the context of the psychology of fear and the magic of the image. He envisages a psychological experiment which tests the memory of schemata.

...I have come to suspect that what I called 'schemata' are codes for remembering certain experiences; we can code them in words or in some other notation and this will enable us to recall them at will, something that we can't do easily otherwise (...) It is easy to recall a poem or a tune, in other words symbolic material, it is hard to recall the pattern of the carpet in one's room, unless one has verbalised or copied it. Your famous Stürmer book how to draw a Jewish nose is a way to code and recall it at will. (...) [When] an experience [is] once coded in a certain way is [it] also 'seen' in this way of recognition? This is a subtle and elusive point, but I have little doubt that the code focuses our attention on certain codifiable features, we will scan the new experience (say the new face) for features that fit the code and even squeeze it into the code as long as it does not absolutely resist such squeezing. It seems to me likely that this process is much reinforced when the code is presented as in your case as a way to recognise a certain enemy. If you want to know if someone is a dangerous witch, look at her eyebrows and the way they join together or whatnot. Those who believe this will first look for the eyebrow and will more easily notice joined eyebrows because they are danger signals.²⁵

²⁴ Ernst H. Gombrich to David Carrier, 27 December 1971; WIA, EHG [Early A&I, Corr A&I].

²⁵ Ernst H. Gombrich to Shachar, 14 October 1965; WIA, EHG [RevC&Fr, Corr A&I]. Here Gombrich refers to the book by Ernst Hiemer, *Giftpilz*, Nürnberg: Stürmer Verlag, 1938. In the illustration 'How to tell a Jew' school children are being taught that one identifies 'The Jew' by his nose; see also Margaret Olin, 'Adolph Goldschmidt: Another Jewish Art History for the education of Mankind?', in: Gunnar Brands and Heinrich Dilly, eds, *Adolph Goldschmidt (1863-1944): Normal Art History im 20. Jahrhundert*, Weimar: VDG, 2007, 397-411.

III

I am going to close with another statement from the same letter to David Carrier, but I would like to anticipate my conclusion at this point. *Art and Illusion* is not only a brilliant and rich survey of 'many ideas on the imitation of nature and the function of tradition' (Blurb US edition 2000), but it is, with all its shortcomings still important and unsurpassed in the effort to give an idea of what is involved in painting a picture as well as looking at one. We must not forget that the issues raised were quite new in 1960. True, as pointed out by Charles Hope, in scientific terms Gombrich's theory may be outdated, but I feel that we haven't come such a long way since then to answer the main question Gombrich had asked in the book: 'what are the reasons for the unexpected difficulty which artists encountered who clearly wanted to make their images look like nature' and 'why is there a history of representation at all?'.²⁶

The sceptic, as Gombrich would put it, must remain doubtful if there are final answers to the questions of what a schema, a canon or a convention is, because they are a matter of interpretation, connoisseurship and training, and all these things are influenced by the social and cultural values that we live by. They will be proposed, examined and counter-examined by the community of art historians, historians, psychologists and philosophers, and they will vary in emphasis depending on the interest or specialization of the interpreter, be they the history of ideas, World art or Jewish studies. To my mind one of Gombrich's most valuable contributions is in pointing out that the beholder reads art as he reads maps; that the parts of a picture stand in relation to one another and that every depiction stands in relation to reality (260). What Gombrich discovered was that we react to visual depictions in much the same way we react to the actual object. The image or the painting stimulates the same perceptual resources.²⁷ It goes without saying that this assertion doesn't explain everything in art but nonetheless art historians may live quite well with that definition until a new or better one has been found.

In Spring 1961 a second edition of *Art and Illusion* was under way and Gombrich prepared a new preface to deal with some of the criticism he had received over the past months. In it he deals with 'some philosophical critics from the neopositivist camp[who] have objected to [his] equation of seeing and interpreting'.²⁸ Here he refers in particular to the philosopher Richard Wollheim who had reviewed the book in the *Arts Yearbook* and later again in 1963 in the *British Journal for Aesthetics*. Along with his letter of 13 June 1961 Gombrich sent Wollheim the script for the new preface for the second printing of the book, arguing that their disagreement was mainly a question of linguistics.²⁹ In the aforementioned letter to David Carrier of December 1971 Gombrich explains more clearly why he is not worried about these differences in the use of language: 'As I told you before, and as I have written elsewhere, the analysis of the meaning of words has very little interest for me. To me language is a tool that has evolved in the practical context of living in

²⁶ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, ed. 2000, xlii.

²⁷ Patrick Maynard, *Drawing Distinctions*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005, 97.

²⁸ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, ed. 2000, xlii.

²⁹ Ernst H. Gombrich to Richard Wollheim, 13 June 1961; WIA, EHG [RevC&Fr, Corr A&I].

society, and it does its job very well...'. After giving some examples he goes on to make his point:

I am fond of an old Jewish joke of the man who goes to the doctor to complain, "doctor, when I lift my right upper arm horizontally, and then turn the lower arm back and then stretch the arm and swing it round it hurts fiendishly." – "But why on earth do you perform such a complicated movement?" – "How else would I put on my overcoat?" Looking at pictures is a bit like putting on an overcoat, equally obvious and even more complicated when described in bits.³⁰

Veronika Kopecky has been the archivist of the Ernst H. Gombrich archive since its establishment at the Warburg Institute since 2008. Currently she also works on a project as Assistant Archivist at the Warburg Institute Archive. Publications include: 'Politikerin', in: Uwe Fleckner et al., *Bildhandbuch zur Politischen Ikonographie*, Verlag H.C. Beck, Hamburg [forthcoming]; 'The Battle of the Amazons', in: David Jaffé with Minna Moore Ede, *Rubens: A Master in the Making*, National Gallery London, London 2005, Cat.No. 5, 50-51; *Vorbild Rubens*, Johann Kräftner ed., Liechtenstein Museum Vienna, Vienna 2004.

Veronika Kopecky
E.H. Gombrich Archive
Warburg Institute
Woburn Square
London WC1H 0AB

vkopecky@mac.com

³⁰ Ernst H. Gombrich to David Carrier, 27 December 1971; WIA, EHG [Early A&I, Corr A&I].