

The criterion of simplicity in interpretation

Giuseppe Barbieri

I would have liked to settle a small and personal debt of gratitude to Ernst Gombrich, but I am unable to return the favour. I had told Paolo Fabbri and Tiziana Migliore that I would try to find a short letter from Gombrich – his reply to my invitation at the end of Eighties – in which he declined to participate in a seminar organized by the Cultural Association Dora Markus. Of course I couldn't find it. It would have been an ideal preamble as it was not just a polite refusal. With his steady hand, during that happy time before electronic mail, Sir Ernst, reminding us of his advanced age, said that it would have been a pleasure to attend, if we had simply asked him to participate in a conference on a familiar topic, one he already had to hand. Instead, the request by Paolo Vidali and myself, was to ask him to answer three questions.

I confess that after such a long time, I am unable to recall this detail either. However, I clearly remember that the questions were, at that time, appropriate for philosophers and scientists, art and literary historians, and semioticians, if only because that was the Association's approach. In any case, these questions dealt with the problem of how we establish a relationship with our deepest levels of knowledge (I think I used the term *symbolic* in the letter sent to him).

Gombrich replied that he found the questions very interesting and not at all straightforward, and in weighing up this matter he decided to refuse our invitation. The end of the Eighties was also the time, thereabouts, when the great scholar was working, together with Didier Eribon, on the detailed self portrait entitled *Ce que l'image nous dit*, which in my opinion is more appealing than *Il linguaggio delle immagini*, as it was translated in the 1994 Einaudi edition.

Whilst looking back on his personal and professional life experiences, relationships and past acquaintances, and his main areas of research, Gombrich emphasized, on more than one occasion, his approach as being far from excessive or theoretically tenacious. Even though, since his training in Vienna under Schlosser, he had always considered that art history must be rational, and clear.¹ This approach, which he chose to follow throughout his research, but above all in *Art and Illusion* (1959), has now been incorporated into historiographic art manuals (schema and variation, schema and correction) and is, of course, a direct consequence of his pursuit of rationality, frequently shown however, in terms of common sense.

¹ Ernst H. Gombrich, *A lifelong interest: conversations on art and science with Didier Eribon*, London, 1993, 39.

When Eribon asked him ‘Would you accept that one might say that you did not construct a method?’ Gombrich replied resolutely ‘I don’t want a method. I just want common sense! This is my only method’.² He had already confirmed this in *Relativism in humanistic disciplines*, the title of his intervention in 1985 at the International Congress of Germanistics: ‘In general it’s obvious that the historian has to use a small amount of common sense’ and must not indulge in ‘explanations which, in reality, explain too much’.³ Even here one must be aware of hitting upon an explanation which really explains too much and would never allow the situation to be remedied.

In this way, Gombrich always maintained a certain distance from the hyper-methodology of Panofsky’s iconology. In fact, during those months, he severely criticized Panofsky’s incunabulum of observations, beginning with the extreme philosophizing in *Idea*.⁴ Previously in an anthology of essays on renaissance art, *Symbolic Images* (1972), the introduction, which functions as a type of analytic assessment, was given an equally significant title: *The Aims and Limits of Iconology*. The essay starts by introducing, and not by chance, Panofsky’s observation that ‘there is admittedly some danger that iconology will behave, not like ethnology as opposed to ethnography, but like astrology as opposed to astrography’⁵ and immediately follows that by dealing with the elusiveness of meaning in works of art. I cannot discuss this text in great detail but I would like, at least, to highlight Gombrich’s initial observation: ‘meaning is a slippery term, especially when applied to images rather than to statements’.⁶ Despite the actual text, verbally and more so, literarily, it can be represented in many different ways. Later on we will see the importance of the text’s role in Gombrich’s research. Nevertheless, this cold shouldered approach did not transform into a radical refusal of the basic research criteria of meaning in figurative art pieces, more of a cautious distance, emerging only in specific cases. The affectionate and sincere obituary, which Gombrich published in the *Burlington Magazine*, after the death of Panofsky in June 1968, suitably emphasizes this attitude. In fact, Sir Ernst was eager to highlight how his oldest colleague’s method was not, or should not be considered, as an end in itself. Most importantly, without it he wouldn’t have been able to find such effective applications if Panofsky hadn’t had that ‘wonderful eye’, which, according to Friedlaender, was the distinguishing feature in his ability as a researcher.

We are familiar with how Popper’s critical rationalism influenced Gombrich, how ‘he has convinced [him] that neither in the sciences nor in the humanities must

² E. H. Gombrich, *A lifelong interest*, 139.

³ E. H. Gombrich, *Topics of our time: comments on 20th century issues in learning and art*, Berkeley, 1991, 66.

⁴ See E. H. Gombrich, *A lifelong interest*.

⁵ See E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic images*, 2nd Ed., Oxford, 1978; Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the visual arts. Papers in and on art history*, New York, 1955.

⁶ See Ernst H. Gombrich, *Symbolic images*, 2.

we aim at total solutions, but that we still have the right to go on asking and searching, because we can learn from our mistakes'.⁷

Beyond this distrust for 'total solutions', I would like to draw attention to a common feature between Gombrich and Panofsky, which I believe could be pertinent to our theme. The Austrian-English scholar's varied facets of knowledge, of course, cannot be placed under discussion: they duly coincide with his degree of interest, curiosity and research. However, vast fields of knowledge perhaps end up intensifying, in literary production, a problem which is common to the most part of art historians in their approach to works of art during this time. This problem, as we know, comes from the fact that, while works of art are arranged according to an iconic and figurative code by rule, research results are entrusted to a system of writing, which almost inevitably entails, the necessity of interpretation. The latter, very often coincides – and here Gombrich's sense of belonging to the Warburg Institute's methodological matrix clearly emerges – with the characterization of a text, which should be the basis and/or the foundation of a figurative programme. Here, I use the term programme, because it accurately links one of the typical procedures in the Renaissance period, when the buyer's demands were realized together with the artist's intentions.⁸

Gombrich⁹ advises us that the discovery of text often reduces the uncertain narrative margins in historical artistic language and should thus narrow the area of misunderstanding in works of art. The art historian, therefore, does not exist without images but at the same time he cannot exist without using a verbal code. Moreover, according to the scholar, he needs the text in order to improve the understanding of a figurative outcome.

I think that in this continuous interchange of roles, other duplicities may also be included, such as those which characterize the introduction of *Art and Illusion*, sixth edition (2000): for example, the relationships between the psychology of perception and semiotics, considered by Woodfield in this collection of papers, between the signs and images or between representation and imagination. Speaking of which, Gombrich makes a pertinent observation on the latter:

And yet, seeing a tolerable production on the stage still differs from reading. It may not compel our senses in the way the film compels them, but a performance certainly assists our imagination, or, to recall Shakespeare's words, our 'imaginary forces'.¹⁰

The power of imagination is the fundamental requirement in our need for interpretation. Many scholars observed that Gombrich's *Story of Art* (in this case I'm

⁷ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Topics of our time*, 39.

⁸ I use the term in the Baxandall's sense on purpose and later on we will see why.

⁹ See Ernst H. Gombrich, *A lifelong interest*.

¹⁰ Ernst H. Gombrich, 1959, *Art and Illusion. A study in the psychology of pictorial representation, Preface to the sixth edition*, London, 2000.

referring to the 1959 edition), anticipated certain relationships linking the text and the image, which in turn we rediscovered first, in the hypertext and later, in web-sites.

In reality, and equally well-founded, we can instead affirm that Gombrich retrieves the schema used in renaissance literature (in particular, the architectural treatise by Serlio and Palladio), however, at this point it is not relevant.

Although exceptionally gifted in various artistic forms (from music to painting) since childhood, Gombrich has always attributed a high value to the text, and to the programme within his historical artistic research. It is true, these two terms do not characterise one and the same thing, and this is the very feature that distinguishes Sir Ernst from Panofsky, but both terms are accompanied by an intentionally high degree of importance (the 'power of imagination'). What would Gombrich have written *today* when referring to an image to emphasize the difference when reading a text?

Had he been much younger he would have spoken about shared files, networks and interactive dynamics. He would have underlined the profound difference between the reading of a text and a multimedia experience which, for its simultaneous manifold state, as opposed to the linear and ribbon-like verbal language, diminishes our ambitions which, over time we have attributed to the power of the written text.

Gombrich, instead, remained faithful to his era. Of course he witnessed the first gradual and then, immensely rapid development of the culture of imagery but he essentially remained in the trajectory of the Gutenberg Galaxy. The journey from text to programme is very well portrayed in particular towards the end of an essay, from 1988, which is entitled *Approaches to the History of Art: three points for discussion*.¹¹ Here, Gombrich effectively summarises his own methodological approach and his contemporary cultural reference points. He once again acknowledged Popper's crucial influences, but also mentioned traditional historical artistic relationships, starting from Pliny the Elder and Vasari (especially in regards to the importance of the technical evolution of the arts). I would like however, to linger for a moment over the first of these arguments, namely the 'problem of explanation', where the scholar remarks on the necessity to avoid irrelevance in our analysis and interpretations. Within this observation, Gombrich also alludes to the so-called 'cupology' seminar:

The word arose because one of us took a teacup which stood on the table and attempted to list the questions you might ask about it (...). Each of these questions might result in an interesting paper, or even in a book. The decision as to which question to ask will always remain with us. We will be guided partly by the tradition of research in these matters, partly also by the chance we perceive of finding out something new. What the

¹¹ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Topics of our time*.

historian needs in such matters is some tact and some flair, what is called 'an eye for a problem'.¹²

The 'cupology' seminar period, given as May 1988 in the bibliographical note at the end of *Topics of our Time*, recalls the 'brief' criterion which Michael Baxandall, recently deceased, included in *Patterns of intention*, 1985 (where, in chapter III he really does speak about a teacup). It would seem, and not only for this reason, that the younger scholar could be considered as a point of departure for Gombrich's research, who was for a short time his teacher. It is sufficient to remember that, according to Baxandall, the *brief* functions as a powerful tool in removing the enigma behind the artistic fact, whilst the objective of both scholars was never to reach a total solution but to establish a solution within the work of art. The verbal code and text in Baxandall's observations also play a significant role. The introduction to the book is entitled 'Language and explanation'.

In the final chapter, dedicated to the *Baptism of Christ* by Piero della Francesca, the author sharply underlines our need to know, comprehend and calibrate the language relative to the period of the work of art or artwork, under consideration. This latter concern is not only fully justified and, in many aspects, extraordinarily valuable, but it also leaves behind a relevant issue. First Gombrich, and then Baxandall, both insist on the fact that over time the eye changes its own way of interpreting the external, and in many cases, the internal reality of the subject; should we then not suppose, this could also happen when reading a text? If a *period eye* exists, could what we may call a *period reading*, also exist? There is a great deal of evidence on the existence of different ways of reading the same text. Meyer Shapiro, in his famous essay from 1973 on *Words and pictures*, proved most convincingly how the representation of a textual passage could change along the course of a millennium and naturally we are allowed to believe that these changes are pertinent to new sensibilities in reading that same text.

Moreover, we can also find some intertextual corroboration. Obviously I don't want to enter into an endless discussion but over the centuries the comments on the texts have suffered many and substantial changes, allowing us to understand how our way of seeing and thus, our way of reading, have also changed. In my opinion, the extraordinary skill of scholars such as Panofsky and Gombrich (the common aspect I referred to previously) and later Baxandall in perceiving the undertones in the meaning of a word over time has not been applied with the same sensibility when assessing the entirety of the ways to read a text. It is not appropriate at this point to proceed with insinuations; it is enough for me to highlight the issue.

Of course, in the fifteenth-century, very often, reading meant the deciphering of profound layers of significance. By the sixteenth-century enjoyment and entertainment were by far the fundamental conditions of reading (particularly in regard to sources such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). Today, we understand so much

¹² Ernst H. Gombrich, *Topics of our time*, 66-67.

more regarding the widespread futility of our current cultural scenario: a small positive consequence in the face of so much sacrifice.

This point of view, nevertheless, often ends up by making iconographical programmes overly 'simple', which we witness in many circles or inside the composition of as many paintings.

Having said this, I don't want to argue that during the sixteenth-century complex figurative texts, in particular, did not exist, I merely want to point out that neither complexity nor enigma are obligatory or binding conditions in guaranteeing a masterpiece. In the few last years I have tried to make some progress in this area, and so far the results have been promising.¹³

In the middle of 1990's, during a lecture at the University of Pavia, Sir Ernst Gombrich underlined the positivist roots of the Warburg way of thinking.¹⁴ To some degree that same positivism was also his own and it has prevented him from drawing on further simplicity in some of his analyses. For this reason he confessed to Eribon that a masterpiece is perceived inside of us, as something that stands between the extremely simple and the extremely difficult.¹⁵

The *fascination of what's difficult*, according to Luigi Meneghello, could have surprising consequences, and not all of them positive.¹⁶ This certainly doesn't invalidate his approach, as stated previously, which always focused on common sense, on individual methodologies, modest instrumentation, discussion, comparison and sharing.

Today however, we are here to remember the first centennial of his birth and as a consequence we must reflect on how many things could change over a century, every century. Furthermore, in this twenty-first century, I systematically suggest to all of my undergraduate students to read a couple of pages by Sir Ernst before they start to write their papers, in order to avoid pompous style and useless acrobatic interpretations. I too should also do this more often.

¹³ See 'Finxit in effigiem moderantum cuncta deorum: un ritratto in sembianze di Prometeo', *Humanistica. An International Journal of Early Renaissance Studies*, 1/2, 2006, 161-183; "Vorrei fare alcune cose ch'io ho lette". Considerazioni sugli approcci iconografici in margine agli affreschi di Girolamo Romanino a Trento', *Arte | Documento*, 22, 2006, 133-143; 'Sui significati della decorazione di Battista Zelotti', in *Villa Emo*, Danilo Gasparini, Lionello Puppi, eds, Vicenza, 2009, 47-77.

¹⁴ See E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg e l'evoluzionismo ottocentesco*, Conference in the Aula Volta at the University of Pavia, May 26, 1994, Department of Literature and Medieval and Modern Art, Quaderni del Seminario di Storia dell'Arte, Pavia, 1994; *Belfagor* 49 (6), 635-49.

¹⁵ E. H. Gombrich, *A lifelong interest*, 171. [This is a paraphrase of the original.]

¹⁶ See Luigi Meneghello, *Trapianti. Dall'inglese al vicentino*, Milano, 2002. In this way the great writer (who lived in England for a good part of his life) translates a few verses of W.B. Yeats (*The fascination of what's difficult/ Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent/ Spontaneous Joy and natural content/ Out of my heart...*):

La me sugà le vene
la passión de 'l difissile,
la me ga tólto 'l contenuto naturale
de le bale...

Giuseppe Barbieri is full professor of History of Modern Art. He was Head of the Department of Art History of Ca' Foscari University (Venice, Italy) until the end of 2010. He currently directs the inter-university graduate school in Art History. He is a member of the scientific committee of the International Centre for Contemporary Art of Punta della Dogana. He is the author and curator of more than thirty books and organised exhibitions, notably in Venice, Vicenza, Milan and Madrid. Among his recent publications: *L'inventore della pittura. Leon Battista Alberti e il mito di Narciso* (Vicenza, 2000), *L'immagine di Vicenza. La città e il territorio in piante, mappe e vedute dal XV al XX secolo* (Treviso, 2003), *'Nella mobilità del tempo'. Una proposta di percorso per l'opera d'arte* (Vicenza, 2004), *In arte Palladio. Tre brevi lezioni e qualche personale ricordo sul maggiore architetto veneto di ogni tempo* (Vicenza, 2008), *G Russie! Memoria/ Mistificazione/Immaginario. Arte russa del 900 dalle collezioni Morgante e Sandretti* (Vicenza, 2010, Exhibition Catalogue, with Silvia Burini).

Professor Giuseppe Barbieri
Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia
Dipartimento di Filosofia e Beni Culturali
Palazzo Malcanton-Marcorà Dorsoduro 3484/d
30123 Venezia

figaro@unive.it