

# The rigorous and the vague: aesthetics and art history in Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer

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When, at the turn of the twentieth century, art history redefined itself as a science of art, it repudiated the metaphysical discourse that subordinated visual arts to a stable hierarchy of styles. In this paradigm, extending from Hegel to Schopenhauer and Ranke, the value of art historical styles depended on whether they realised a metaphysical idea that became manifest in the limpid naturalism of classicism. The art historians Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin and Wilhelm Worringer rejected this paradigm. They defended four generic points. First, against historicism, Riegl and Wölfflin argued that an art historical style was more than a collection of artworks that expresses the worldview of a given moment in history. Second, art history introduces a diversity and not a hierarchy of art historical styles, each realising its own ideal of beauty. Third, for Riegl and Worringer, art history had to offer an alternative ontology of art that was different from the Semperian model where visual art was the product of technique, material and goal. Four, for Riegl and Wölfflin, art history had to surpass the Herbartian formalism of Robert Zimmermann that reduced visual arts to relations of pure visual forms.

The situation becomes more strenuous when this model of art history dissociates itself from speculative aesthetics. Riegl embraced positivism and rejected metaphysical explanations regarding what determines the *Kunstwollen*. Wölfflin adapted a pure formalism and refuted speculations about the iconological content of art. Worringer turned art history into a rigorous psychology of style and dismissed aesthetics as a science that has a conception of art limited to the organic naturalism of classicist art. Methodologically, the art historical dissociation from aesthetics is a pertinent claim: while art history interprets the work of art, aesthetics accounts for its subjective experience.

This paper addresses the work of Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer through this question: does the ambition to make art the object of a rigorous science dissociate art history from the vague categories of aesthetics? The notion of the 'rigorous' refers to Walter Benjamin's expression employed to designate Riegl and Wölfflin as representatives of a 'rigorous art history' (*strenge Kunstwissenschaft*).<sup>1</sup> Aesthetic

<sup>1</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "Strenge Kunstwissenschaft. Zum ersten Bande der Kunstwissenschaftlichen Forschungen", *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, hrsg. v. Rolf Tiedermann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982. The English version of the essay appeared as "Rigorous Study of Art. On the First Volume of the "Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen", translated by Thomas Y. Levis, *October*, 47, 1988, 84-90. Throughout this paper, the German original texts are provided next to the English versions. This is because of their important conceptual value that often has been lost in the existing translations. Especially the German notions designating aesthetic categories are notoriously difficult to translate even though they fundamentally determine the correct understanding of these art historical texts.

categories are designated as 'vague' and distinguished from the 'rigorous' science of art because aesthetic categories refer to a subjective and affective experience that is not as clearly distinguished as a phenomenological description of an image's structure. While analysing an artwork as a linear structure refers the image to a factual perception, describing an image in terms of moods and drives presupposes a hypothetical procedure. There is a vague line between the intensity of the sublime and the repulsion of the ugly, just as it is difficult to rigorously distinguish between the beautiful and the cute.<sup>2</sup> Images are the object of a rigorous description when they present us with structures that all viewers can perceive; aesthetic categories are vague because they present us with affects that alternate from one viewer to the other. However, as it shall become clear, Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer employ aesthetic categories in order to describe the experience of artworks perceived from a specific perspective, namely as an autonomous visual structure. This regulative distinction between the rigorous and the vague is required in order to comprehend the approach of visual arts as Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer conceived it.

Is the art history of three art historians independent of a theory of taste? This paper answers this question through a different interpretation of their work than the existing historical analyses.<sup>3</sup> First, the polarities that Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer introduced into art theory are interpreted as concepts that presuppose a phenomenological and a structuralist understanding of the image. Each art historical paradigm has a conception of what an image is and in the case of these three formalist art historians, the image is perceived as an autonomous visual entity. This conception of the image realises the phenomenological description of Edmund Husserl's image-consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*). This issue is significant in order to determine which aspect of the work of art that the formalism of Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer actually accounts for. This is not always clear because their theory develops at the crossroads of two opposed scientific paradigms. While in art history the positively given artwork – in its materiality and historical context – is the guarantee for a scientific analysis, phenomenology – developing at the same time – moved beyond the realm of the 'absolute given' and described the underlying acts

<sup>2</sup> See Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The bibliography on these three authors is immense. However, to mention a few significant recent studies see, for Riegl: Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl. Art History and Theory*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993, Diana Graham Reynolds, *Alois Riegl and the Politics of Art History: Intellectual Traditions and Austrian Identity in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, PhD Dissertation, San Diego: University of California, 1997, Andrea Reichenberg, *Riegls "Kunstwollen". Versuch einer Neubetrachtung*, Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2003 and Michael Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface. Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, Detroit: Wayne State University, 2006. For Wölfflin see Joan Hart, *Heinrich Wölfflin: An Intellectual Biography*, PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1981 and Andreas Eckl, *Kategorien der Anschauung: zur transzendentalphilosophischen Bedeutung von Heinrich Wölfflins "Kunstgeschichtlichen Grundbegriffe"*, München: Fink, 1996. For Worringer see Neil Donahue, ed., *Invisible Cathedrals: The Expressionist Art History of Wilhelm Worringer*, University Park: Pennsylvania, 1995, Hannes Böhringer, Beate Söntgen, eds., *Wilhelm Worringers Kunstgeschichte*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002 and Claudia Öhlschläger, ed., *Abstraktionsdrang. Wilhelm Worringer und der Geist der Moderne*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005.

of consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Second, against their rejection of aesthetics from the study of art, this paper shows that the art history of Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer is actually founded on aesthetics. Instead of rejecting aesthetics, they integrate the aesthetic experience into the creative act. Even more, while the aesthetic experience justifies the creative act, aesthetic categories constitute the actual content of the art historical styles.

### 1. The image as 'image object' (*Bildobjekt*)

Riegl and Wölfflin rejected three major paradigms: the speculative metaphysics of Hegel that conceived art as a moment in the realisation of the Spirit, the Herbartian formalism where the artwork appears as a network of formal relations and the Semperian materialism that reduces visual arts to the outcome of technique, material and goal. What are the viable options in such a context? Riegl combined positivism with an explicit formalism that Wölfflin had already initiated.<sup>5</sup> If the iconological content is bracketed, then the artwork is perceived as a purely visual correlate. Arguing with Riegl that the 'actual artistic goal (*Kunstzweck*) is directed only to represent the objects in outline and colour on the plane and in space'<sup>6</sup> recuperates the phenomenological reduction. In this reduction, the materiality of the artwork and its iconological content are bracketed. After the reduction, the remaining correlate is described according to the way in which it appears to consciousness. In this context, this appearance is a structure of lines and colours organised on the plane and in space.

Wölfflin's *Grundbegriffe* describes artworks as the result of forms of intuition, forms of presentation and the phantasy of form (*Anschauungsformen, Darstellungsformen, Formphantasie*). As in the case of Riegl's definition of the artistic goal, these notions determine one specific aspect of artworks, namely their formal

<sup>4</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology: From the Lectures, Winter Semester, 1910-1911*, translated by Ingo Farin and James G. Hart, Dordrecht: Springer, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Iversen and Olin distinguished between Riegl's formalist and Hegelian background. Iversen argues that Riegl takes over Hegel's morphology but not his teleology. The parallelism between art, philosophy and science is of Hegelian inspiration, just like the three ages of art. However, this could equally be a positivist position because the conception of the human evolution in stages appears also in Comte. This position is more viable considering the epistemological context of the time where German idealism had no prominent position in the Viennese philosophy departments. See Willibald Sauerländer, *Alois Riegl und die Entstehung der autonomen Kunstgeschichte am Fin de Siècle in Fin de Siècle. Zu Literatur und Kunst der Jahrhundertwende*, Willibald Sauerländer, ed., Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977, 125-139. Reynolds emphasizes the eclectic sources of Riegl where, next to Robert Zimmermann's formalism, the philosophies of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer were central. Brown affiliates Wölfflin's polarities to the Hegelian dialectics stressing their interdependence and the reliance of each style on its counter-image: 'each style necessarily implies the antithetical style as a negative self-image.' See Marshall Brown, "The Classic is the Baroque: On the Principle of Wölfflin Art History", *Critical Inquiry*, 9: 2, 1982, 385-6. Regardless of this implicit Hegelianism, both art historians bracket all ideal content of the image and describe its visual structure alone. This interpretation of Riegl and Wölfflin considering their eclectic intellectual background is less productive than the potential of their work for a phenomenological understanding of the image, a paradigm that was developing at the same time they were active.

<sup>6</sup> Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, transl. Rolf Winkes, Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985, 127, translation modified.

appearance without a direct relation to their iconological content. This formal appearance is described through the five famous polarities: the linear vs. the painterly, plane vs. recession, closed vs. open form, multiplicity vs. unity, absolute vs. relative clarity. These categories refer the singular artwork to the formative potential that it realises. Images display clearly differentiated linear outlines on the plane or their recession into deep space. These forms can be organised as distinct multiple entities or as a whole, absolutely or only relatively clear. These polarities do not account for the materiality or the historical context of artworks but merely for their phenomenological appearance. Simply put, the polarities describe the manner in which consciousness perceives visual forms. In this sense, this consciousness pertaining to images brackets, in a first step, the material and the iconological content of artworks. Further, Wölfflin's categories have a transcendental character because they designate, in his own words, the potential 'forms of presentation' (*Darstellungsformen*) that are the conditions of possibility for singular visual presentations in individual artworks. Otherwise said, the polarities provide the iconological content with a visual identity.

Hence, this analysis evinces the parallelism between the art theory of Riegl and Wölfflin and the phenomenological approach. The object that the art histories of Riegl and Wölfflin discuss is a dematerialised artwork, no longer an artefact but a visual appearance. The earlier stages of visual art present objects as rigidly distinguished from each other while employing a linear or haptic outline, consequently repressing the density of visual objects and their integration in deep space. These are 'haptic' devices because the visual potential of the image primarily refers to the sense of touch through indexes of solidity that denote clearly felt boundaries. The later stages of art present objects as interrelated in deep space through a painterly or optical deployment, that is to say, exploiting the transition of objects through effects of colour, shadows and light. These are optical devices because the image intensifies effects that are directed primarily to the sense of sight. The haptic denotes forms as flat surfaces – the optic connotes forms in deep space. While the linear emphasizes the discontinuity, the painterly stresses the continuity between visual elements.

The difference between the two is gradual because there is no purely haptic or optic image. A purely haptic image, like a purely optical image, would be an image with no contrast between foreground and background, an absolute surface, a completely undifferentiated plane. A minimal protuberance of a line already announces the difference between an optical background and a haptic outline. However, as Gottfried Boehm argued, any image involves the 'iconic difference' between an optical background and a haptic outline.<sup>7</sup> This discontinuity has an ontological value because it is the *conditio sine qua non* of the visual appearance. Without a minimal discontinuity between background and outline, the image is a purely virtual appearance because no difference can be perceived. The formation of a visual sense presupposes a minimal differentiation. While in language the difference between terms generates sense, visual sense is the result of the difference

<sup>7</sup> Gottfried Boehm, "Ce qui se montre. De la différence iconique", in Emmanuel Alloa, ed., *Penser l'image*, Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2010, 33-4.

between an optical background and a haptic outline. Therefore, the image produces sense by transferring tactile values in the visual realm.

In this sense, Wölfflin's polarities prefigure an analysis of the image-consciousness as it is known in the phenomenological tradition. Lambert Wiesing has observed this affinity within the context of German formalist aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> He argued that these polarities designate the visual structure of an image taken as an autonomous form of being (as opposed to a merely adherent form of being). While perceiving an apple, its visual aspect is one amongst other possible qualities because one can also taste and feel the fruit. However, the visual presentation of an apple in a painting is an independent quality. The visual is here bracketed as a specific mode pertaining to images and analysed as such. Hence, significant in understanding the value of these categories of art history is the object that they determine. This object is neither the subject matter of an image, nor the material carrier (whether the image is made of paper or stone). This object is not even the singular image, this particular painting by Raphael or by Picasso. As Wiesing often showed, the visual is an autonomous dimension that justifies the production of a sense specific to visual arts.

Writing at the same time with Husserl yet without referring to each other, Wölfflin develops the intuition that Robert Vischer had already formulated, namely that the pertinent criterion for the analysis of an image is its imagery (*Bildmässigkeit*) or its phenomenality (*Phänomenalität*).<sup>9</sup> The object of Wölfflin's art history is the structure of an artwork's pure visual appearance. In this sense, Wölfflin, like Riegl but also Vischer and Husserl, perceive the visual appearance of an image as an autonomous dimension and a specific type of intuition, distinguished from the perception of objects in the flesh.

This bracketing of the materiality of the artwork becomes evident if Wölfflin's *Grundbegriffe* are read parallel to Husserl's *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung* (1898-1925).<sup>10</sup> Husserl distinguished between three constitutive aspects of the image-consciousness: first, the physical aspect, second, the 'image object' (*Bildobjekt*) and third, the 'image subject' (*Bildsujet*). The physical aspect refers to the material that the image consists of, paper, film, stone, etc. The 'image object' is the perceived correlate that appears as form and coloration. Third, the 'image subject' is

<sup>8</sup> Lambert Wiesing, *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes. Geschichte und Perspektiven der formalen Ästhetik*, Reinbek: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Vischer, *Drei Schriften Zum Ästhetischen Formproblem*, Halle, Saale: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927, 53. Vischer described this phenomenological reduction of the image in his writings on the aesthetics of the optical feeling of form collected in this volume. The edition includes the essays *Über das optische Formgefühl. Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik* (1872), *Der ästhetische Akt und die reine Form* (1874) and *Über ästhetische Naturbetrachtung* (1893). Wölfflin knew these writings because they directly influenced his doctoral thesis, the *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* (1886) where he discusses, in the aftermath of Vischer's empathy theory, how it is possible that architectural forms express feelings. It is also worth mentioning that Vischer's *Drei Schriften* are found in Husserl's personal library (now kept in his archives at the KU Leuven) and that he underlined the word "Bildmässigkeit" in the copy he owned. This is significant because this notion of imagery as an autonomous visual dimension of the image influenced Husserl's own conception of the image object, distinguished from the material and the subject of the image.

<sup>10</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung: Zur Phänomenologie der anschaulichen Vergegenwärtigung* (1898-1925), Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1980; *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* (1898-1925), transl. John B. Brough. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005.

the referent of the image object that the image displays. From these three elements, the 'image object' characterises the visual intuition of images because it appears as an entity that is independent from the material or the subject of the image.

What is then the function of this trichotomy? It delineates the specificity of the image as a type of consciousness that differs from an object perceived as present in the flesh. According to Husserl, the perception of an image is different from the perception of an object. The image presents something more and different than a material support (paper, film, stone). It presents a semblance (*Scheinbild*) that is unreal, that is to say, not present in the flesh but merely as a visual appearance. The image object is an appearance inscribed in the material carrier but different from it.<sup>11</sup> This is the specificity of a visual presentation: when I see the image of apple I see a semblance that emerges from a medium (the canvas) and it is different from it. The image on a photo does not exist like an object standing in front of a perceiving subject but appears as a distribution of colours (*Farbenverteilung*) and a 'complex of sensations' (*Komplexion von Empfindungen*) that the subject experiences.<sup>12</sup> Hence, specific to the phenomenological analysis of images is their de-materialisation or, as Wiesing formulated it, their de-realisation.<sup>13</sup> Whereas an object present in the flesh appears through different shadings (*Abschattungen*), an image is perceived as a visual appearance of lines and planes in certain spatial relations.

The polarities of Riegl and Wölfflin designate not the material or (in the first instance) the subject of an image. They determine the 'image object' as a mode of signification specific to images and distinguished from poetry or philosophy. The fact that their concepts refer to this Husserlian conception of the image is traceable in Riegl's definition of the image as a complex of lines and colours on the plane and in space. These four elements clearly dematerialise the artwork and present it as a visual structure with its own identity. In Wölfflin too, the linear and the painterly, surface and depth, closed and open form, multiplicity and unity, absolute and relative clarity, all refer to the visual appearance of artworks distinct from their iconological content or materiality. Hence, following the tradition of Konrad Fiedler, both Riegl and Wölfflin conceive visuality as an autonomous ontological entity. As Wiesing argued, for the formalists, visuality is not an adherent attribute of an object that can be perceived through other senses. To the contrary, visuality transposes other senses (like the sense of touch) into its own independent structure.<sup>14</sup>

The specificity of the formalist paradigm consists in describing this visual structure as the pertinent object of art history. When determining the object of their science of art, Riegl and Wölfflin maintain a regulative distinction between the domain of the visual pleasure and the domain of knowledge. Just like Kant, aesthetics and knowledge are separated and form the object of different analytics. In this sense, the formalists justify the science of art by performing an abstraction: the artefact is a network of relations that includes its historical origin, its materiality, its iconographic and iconological interpretation, and so on. However, the scientific study of art, in this paradigm, entails an initial bracketing of these significant

<sup>11</sup> Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung*, 108-9.

<sup>12</sup> Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung*, 110.

<sup>13</sup> Wiesing, *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes*, 227.

<sup>14</sup> Wiesing, *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes*, 163.

elements in order to describe its specificity as a visual appearance that consciousness perceives. Within this 'image object', Wölfflin distinguishes the linear visuality characterising the Renaissance from the painterly visuality developed during the Baroque. The linear and the painterly are two fundamental modes of visual appearance actualised in a variety of images. Hence, this is the first function of the categories understood as the attributes of a phenomenological understanding of the image. However, next to this phenomenological component, these also polarities intimate a proto-structuralist understanding of the image.

## 2. The image as the realisation of a structure

The second component that constitutes the art theory of Riegl and Wölfflin concerns the structural function of their polarities. The function of the polarities of Wölfflin and Riegl is regulative and explanatory but not exhaustive. They do not concern each and every single artwork but the visual potential that images can realise. Wölfflin's argument is that, in order to produce a specific visual sense, the artist oscillates between two fundamental types of visual values. Throughout the *Grundbegriffe*, the emphasis falls on general modes of visuality that determine the singular artworks. Wölfflin thus subordinates the diachronic history of artworks to the formative categories that explain each art historical style and each singular artwork. Other than the diachronic art history that links art historical events in a narrative, the categories of art history conceive the singular artwork as the realisation of generative principles of visuality. Following this paradigm, the actual historical event (Botticelli's *Venus*) is subordinated to a virtual structure (the linear Renaissance as opposed to the painterly Baroque). Yet the notion of the linear is a simplifying concept designating the mode of visuality that is realised in the concrete artwork, Botticelli's *Venus*, painted in 1486.

Significant in the structural approach is the mode of explanation: the actual event related to the artist Botticelli and to the year 1486 is subordinated to a virtual structure that the artwork realises. In the case of Wölfflin, Botticelli's *Venus* realises a linear potentiality while differentiating it from the painterly potentiality. Even though structuralism had not yet been formulated at the time, this negative differentiating modality betrays a structuralist methodology because the singular artwork appears as the realisation of a virtual structure where terms define themselves negatively. While the categories of art history represent the deep level structure of the visual, the actual history of artworks represents the surface level structure. In this sense, the history of art is not a diachronic unfolding of events or a taxonomy of artefacts, just like a language is not just a collection of words brought together in a dictionary. To the contrary, the manifest history of art presents us with synchronous realisations of a deep level structure. Hence, reading the history of art from the perspective of Wölfflin's *Grundbegriffe* requires, especially for the art historian, a methodological change: while the canonical art history emphasises the singular artefacts, Wölfflin's categories explain the singular artwork as the realisation of a formative structure.

This subordination of the singular artwork to the constituting visuality appears also in a visual detail of the *Grundbegriffe*, on the level of its referencing

apparatus. Reading this book, the system of referencing the illustrations cannot but surprise the positivist historian of art: while the German (but also the English) editions open with the list of illustrations (omitting the year of the artworks), Wölfflin mentions throughout the text of the book, underneath each illustration, only the artist (in case of painters and sculptors) or the name of the building (in case of architecture). Wölfflin must have intended this type of visual presentation since it makes visible, on the level of the text, how the singular historical signature of each artwork is of minimal importance. The reader sees the illustrations but the artworks are presented as if their precise historical localisation is less important than their formative principles. S. Andrea della Valle is viewed awkwardly, from the left side while it is supposed to illustrate the movement of the Baroque where forms are modulated like dynamic waves.<sup>15</sup> This painterly visuality is more significant than the historical fact that the church was completed around 1650 or that it was designed by Giacomo della Porta and that it was finished by Carlo Maderno. The historical data does not pertain to the analysis that emphasises the Baroque visuality. The singular artwork realises a deep level structure, the polarity plane vs. recession.

In the *Gedanke zur Kunstgeschichte*, Wölfflin argues that his polarities designate only the tendency towards the formation (*Gestaltung*) of beauty and nature.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the polarities surpass the history of singular artworks as the taxonomy of human artefacts. They conceptualise the means through which the world is presented visually. Just like Riegl who, in *Spätrömisch oder Orientalisch* (1902), wrote that one should be able to imagine the form of a Late Roman portrait while seeing the marble head of Marcus Aurelius, Wölfflin argues that one can extract the essence of a style from the drawing of a nostril.<sup>17</sup> But then the notion of style has to be understood, just like in Riegl, as a visual potential realised in singular artworks. The intention of this model of image analysis is not to exhaustively collect artefacts or to read into them the cultural history of an age but to designate the 'formative powers' through which the world becomes visible.<sup>18</sup> Yet this generates a specific understanding of image analysis: just like the 'langue' in the structuralist model of language, the style of an image is an invariable level realised on the level of the 'parole' or the singular instantiations. Otherwise said, the variable artefacts are the realisation of an invariable system of polarities.

In the introduction to the second version of the *Grammatik*, Riegl too compares the historical development of art to the historical development of

<sup>15</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, München: F. Bruckmann, 1929, 77. The previous editions follow the same system of references.

<sup>16</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte, Gedrucktes und Ungedrucktes*. Dritte Auflage. Basel: Benno Schwabe & co Verlag, 20.

<sup>17</sup> Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Marshall Brown, "The Classic is the Baroque: On the Principle of Wölfflin Art History", *Critical Inquiry*, 9: 2, 1982, pp. 380-1. As Ay recently argued, Wölfflin's intellectual model is Goethe who described the 'original phenomena of nature' just as Wölfflin described the 'original phenomena of art'. See Andreas Ay, *Nachts: Göthe lesen. Heinrich Wölfflin und seine Goethe-Rezeption*, Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2010, 26-7.

languages.<sup>19</sup> He argues that the knowledge of this grammar is neither required for the creation nor for the aesthetic enjoyment of art. More importantly, an 'artistic language' (*Kunstsprache*) still implies the difference between art and language. However, the scientific study of art and language requires the determination of why a linguistic or artistic language followed a specific evolution. While Wölfflin emphasized a *structural* conception of artistic languages as the outcome of the famous polarities, Riegl maintained a developmental view of history divided in stages, just like in the positivist paradigm that he followed. The *Grammatik* describes the development of art from the haptic to the optic modes of visual presentation. This development begins with a conception of space consisting of distinct forms and evolves towards a conception of space consisting of forms connected in deep space.

However, this evolutionary view shows discontinuities. In the unpublished manuscripts on the Dutch art from the 17th century, Riegl argues that the art of the 18th and of the first half of the 19th century breaks with the conception of space as a 'connecting element' and returns to the presentation of the individual things in their isolation through local colours and lines. The history of art re-actualises different modes of presentation, it returns to the haptic mode, 'grasping things in their tactile isolation as sharply outlining form and as local colour.'<sup>20</sup> Riegl does not justify this return to an earlier stage of art. However, an alternative would be to substitute the developmental with the structuralist view of art history. In this interpretation, the elements that Riegl presents in his *Grammatik* are realised in different stages regardless of an evolutionary logic. After all, this return of the 18th century art to the haptic mode of presentation is not an exception. The haptic re-emerges also in expressionism and in cubism just like the optic modes of presentation in abstract expressionism no longer abide to this developmental conception of history.

Wölfflin provided pertinent reasons for this proto-structuralist attitude. In *Das Problem des Stils* (1911), he argued that if style is understood as the expression of a culture, this does not explain why artists belonging to different cultures and times employ the same type of outline. But does this not mean that it is counterintuitive to speak of a 'history' of art if the object 'art' does not designate an artefact but a mode of visibility? If invariable modes of visual presentation return in time, how can there be an actual history (in the sense of a necessary diachronic arrangement) of visual modes? According to Wölfflin, style refers to the 'mode of presentation' (*Darstellungsmodus*) and the scientific history of art makes manifest this 'lower level of formal concepts' (*untere Schicht vom Formbegriffe*).<sup>21</sup> There is thus a distinction between, on the one hand, style as a deep level structure of visibility (the "Baroque" as way of seeing in colours and deep space) and, on the other hand, style as a culturally and temporally localised idea of beauty (the "Baroque" as the style of the 17th century). The pertinent object of art history is this deep level structure or, as

<sup>19</sup> Alois Riegl, *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste*. Vorlesungen von 1897-1899. Herausgegeben von Karl M. Swoboda und Otto Pächt, Böhlau: Köln, 1966, 210-11.

<sup>20</sup> Riegl writes in the manuscript *Die holländische Kunst des 17. Jahrhunderts*. 1900-1901 consulted at the Riegl Archives: 'die Dinge in ihrer tastbaren Isolierung als scharf umrissene Form und als Lokalfarbe zu fassen.'

<sup>21</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst" in *Sitzungsberichte der königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaft*. Erster Halbband, Januar bis Juni, 1911, 573.

Wölfflin formulates it, 'the general optical form in which the material forms itself for the intuition.'<sup>22</sup>

Considering these phenomenological and structural components of the polarities of Wölfflin and Riegl, two preliminary conclusions follow. Firstly, within this model, the history of art becomes a typology of visuality. Secondly, even canonical stages of modern art, like expressionism and cubism, confirmed the co-existence of haptic and optic, linear and painterly means of presentation. These polarities can re-emerge at different times if they are understood not as stages in an evolutionary history of art but as structuring principles of visuality. As Benjamin has shown in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seine technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1936), the haptic appears, in a different context, as the Dadaist violent and mechanical impact on the senses.<sup>23</sup> Hence, if different types of visual presentation are simultaneously possible, then art – as pure visuality – does not have a 'history' in the sense of a progressive movement in time. Visual arts realise visual potentialities and what we call an art historical 'style' is not only a moment in a diachronic unfolding of time but the actualisation of a virtual structure of visuality. The movement in time that art actualises is not merely from one epoch to the other but rather that of the individual artwork realising the virtual structure of visuality. The polarities of Wölfflin and Riegl determine precisely this structure.

In this formalist model, an art historical style is a visual potential that, to speak with Warburg, has its own *Nachleben*. Styles are recrudescences of the ways in which the world is felt and presented. Having distinguished pure visuality as the pertinent object of art, formalism defuses precisely the evolutionist conception of art history even though Riegl's project for a grammar of visual art is structured as a historical overview. However, the approach of art's history in terms of the potentiality of the visual presentation shows that the polarities of Riegl and Wölfflin are significant for a rigorous phenomenological and structural account of visual arts. The question remains whether this rigorous - if not rigid - formalism can discard speculative aesthetics.

### 3. The rigorous science of art and the vague aesthetic affects

#### 3.1 Wölfflin and the mood (*Stimmung*)

While Riegl and Worringer rejected philosophical aesthetics from their project of art history, Wölfflin embraced a rigorous formalism and remained sceptical about a

<sup>22</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst*, 573.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* in *Gesammelte Schriften I, 2* (Band 2), hrsg. v. Rolf Tiedermann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980. Riegl's concept of the age value (*Alterswert*) as developed in his *Der Moderne Denkmalkultus* (1903) is comparable to Benjamin's notion of the aura. See Karen Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos: On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006, 139. Without mentioning Riegl, Ortega Y Gasset distinguishes in his *The Dehumanization of Art* (1925) realism from a 'will to style'. While realism refers to a naturalistic visual denotation, the 'will to style' conceives style as the object of a visual connotation, an active transformation of the presented exterior correlate within the image. See Ortega Y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1956.

speculative interpretation of visual arts. In *Renaissance and Barok* (1888), Wölfflin dismissed the explanation of stylistic changes as changes in the intellectual environment of a culture. He did not argue this systematically but offered instead a fugacious metaphor: in order to relate stylistic changes to changes in culture one would have to 'find the path that leads from the cell of the scholar to the mason's yard.'<sup>24</sup> This fleeting remark supports his rigorous formalism: since there is no direct relation between the concepts of the philosopher to the visuality of art, one should avoid speculating on the iconological discourse that relates the visual to the conceptual. What is Wölfflin's alternative to this vague speculative approach? Art history becomes a 'history of seeing' (*Sehgeschichte*)<sup>25</sup>, the description of the 'overall physiognomy of an age' (*Gesamtphysiognomie eines Zeitalters*)<sup>26</sup> and of the 'concepts of intuition' (*Anschaubegriffe*) that designate 'formal possibilities' (*Formmöglichkeiten*).<sup>27</sup> These forms are the objects of a formalist art history and they are not directly linked to the conceptual worldview of an epoch. Nevertheless, are these forms devoid of all content?

A close reading of Wölfflin's analyses of styles shows that, while he rejected the conceptual content of artworks, he substituted it with an aesthetic dimension of content. There is no direct relation between visual forms and concepts. However, visual forms directly generate aesthetic experiences. According to Wölfflin, the perception of images integrates the aesthetic experience because the 'forms of presentation' also have a decorative meaning so that, for instance, the linear presents a new 'sensation of beauty' (*Schönheitsempfindung*).<sup>28</sup> Yet beauty entails a subjective aesthetic experience. Hence, along with his rigorous formalism, Wölfflin actually integrates the aesthetic experience in the visual perception of artworks. Because each mode of presentation has a decorative sense, it carries a sensation of beauty. He even identifies the content of images in terms of an affective yet vague notion, the mood (*Stimmung*) of an age.

In *Renaissance und Barock* (1888), Wölfflin abundantly uses this notion to connote the experience of the Baroque style.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the Renaissance which took

<sup>24</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, translation by Kathrin Simon, London: Collins, 1964, 77. The original reads: 'Aber welche soll der Weg sein, der von der Zekke des scholastischen Philosophen in die Bauhütte des Architekten führt.' In Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock. Eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung der Barockstil in Italien*, Vierte Auflage, München: F. Bruckmann, 1925, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 12. This strict formalism was the reason why Walter Benjamin, in *Strenge Kunstwissenschaftlichen Forschungen* (1933) criticises Wölfflin and values Riegl's conception of the image as a monad that exhales the tension between the singular artwork and the broader cultural context. Benjamin appreciated in Riegl two aspects: his ontological justification of art as the outcome of a will understood as an anonymous drive and Riegl's rehabilitation of the so-called periods of decay. On Benjamin's interpretation of Riegl see Michael Steinberg, ed., *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996, Giles Peaker, "Works that Have lasted... Walter Benjamin reading Alois Riegl", Woodfield, ed., *Framing Formalism. Riegl's Work*. Amsterdam: G + B Arts International, 2001 and the aforementioned Karel Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos. On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History*. Lang compares Riegl's notion of 'age value' to Benjamin's notion of 'aura'. See Karen Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 139.

<sup>28</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock*, 26.

pleasure in the integration of the detail into the whole image, the Baroque enjoyed the mood of the entire image. Hence, Wölfflin's rigorous art history emulates the aesthetic pleasure in the perception of all styles. Images do not express a worldview but 'the feeling of an age' (*das Weltgefühl einer Zeit*).<sup>30</sup> Concepts do not determine the singular artwork but the 'fundamental mood' (*Grundstimmung*) of an age.<sup>31</sup> The painterly diffuse colourism is an expression of a mood (*Stimmungs Ausdruck*).<sup>32</sup>

Further, Wölfflin's polarities presuppose the two fundamental dimensions of the aesthetic perception, namely a bodily sensation and the intensity of an effect. Styles are described as visual structures that relate the bodily experience to a specific affective response. The linearity of Classicism depicts 'a new bodily and vital feeling' (*eine neues Körper- und Lebensgefühl*).<sup>33</sup> The emotional correlate of the Renaissance image is the 'quiet being' (*ruhigen Seins*), a 'satisfying beauty' (*befreiende Schönheit*) that feels like a 'general sense of pleasure (*Wohlgefühl*) and a uniform enhancement of vitality' (*Lebenskraft*).<sup>34</sup> Yet pleasure as a feeling of well-being and the affirmation of the vital feeling belong literally to Kant's description of the beautiful as 'calm contemplation' (*ruhiger Kontemplation*).<sup>35</sup> Contrasted to the Renaissance, the Baroque is presented as a series of aggressive affects: it is 'disquieting' (*unruhigspringend*), 'passionate' (*leidenschaftlich*), 'the internal intended dissonance' (*die absichtlich gesuchte Dissonanz*).<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, in the same context, the Baroque alludes to the 'overwhelming' (*überwältigend*) 'violence of the affect' (*der Gewalt des Affekts*), a severe paroxysm comparable to Kant's description of the sublime. In paragraph 27 of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), Kant describes the sublime in analogous terms as an intense movement of the affective capacity (the *Gemüt*), a vibrating simultaneous repulsion and attraction.<sup>37</sup> For Wölfflin, the Baroque is 'excitement, ecstasy, intoxication' (*Aufregung, Ekstase, Berausung*).<sup>38</sup> Hence, arguing that visuality presents this vague 'feeling of an age' (and not a concept), Wölfflin correlates the visual form to the intensity of the aesthetic experience. In this sense, the rigorous formalism of Wölfflin homologates a theory of taste that is immanent to his analysis of art historical styles.

Riegl also refers to the mood, and in quite different contexts. On the one hand, the mood is the content of the modern art,<sup>39</sup> as well as the effective response to the Baroque colourism. On the other hand, the mood designates the Japanese subjectivist chromatic sensation (*stimmungsweckende Farbenreize*),<sup>40</sup> the Venetian

<sup>30</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, 30-1.

<sup>34</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Werkausgabe Band X, herausgegeben von Wilhelm Weischedel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974, 181.

<sup>36</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock*, 72.

<sup>37</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 181.

<sup>38</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Alois Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der Modernen Kunst", *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Augsburg, Wien: Dr. Benno Filser Verlag, 1929.

<sup>40</sup> Alois Riegl, "Objective Aesthetik", *Neue Freie Presse. Literaturblatt*, July, 13, 1902, 35.

group portrait that he distinguished from the Dutch group portrait,<sup>41</sup> and finally the monument's age value that moves the modern viewer.<sup>42</sup> Hence, firstly, associating the mood with such a broad horizon of historical styles turns this notion into a vague aesthetic category, employed in a speculative manner, without the rigour of the positivist science of art that Riegl proclaims. This is not an inconsistency but rather a tendency in Riegl, but also in Wölfflin, to establish as the dimension of content of visual arts, an anonymous affect dissociated from the singularity of the aesthetic experience. Artworks mediate, for Riegl and Wölfflin, an impersonal emotional intensity. Secondly, it is through the aesthetic experience (of the mood) that Riegl explains the image as the mediator of an affect.

### 3.2 Riegl and the will-to-art (*Kunstwollen*)

In the same vein as Wölfflin, in the final chapter of the *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901) Riegl rejects the poetic or religious iconographic interpretation of images.<sup>43</sup> However, there is a tension in Riegl's rejection of the relation between the iconographic content and the visuality of art. The *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, one of the most significant books of modern art history, is not without argumentative tensions. On the one hand, Riegl argues that iconography determines the poetical and the religious will but not the 'visual artistic will' (*bildkünstlerische Wollens*).<sup>44</sup> Iconographic considerations are an 'antiquarian' and 'auxiliary field' that become significant only if analysis shows how they express the same will as the visual appearance of art.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, later Riegl adds that 'The character of this *Wollen* is always decided by what may be termed the *Weltanschauung* at a given time (again in the widest sense of the term), not only in religion, philosophy, science, but

<sup>41</sup> Aloïs Riegl, *Das Holländische Gruppenporträt*, Wien: Druck und Verlag der Österreichischen Staatsdruckerei, 1931, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Aloïs Riegl, "Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, seine Entstehung" (1903), *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 150. On the same page Riegl argues that the monument's age value is 'an inevitable sensitive substrate to determine in its viewer that affective response' (*ein unvermeidliches sinnfälliges Substrat, um in seinem Beschauer jene Stimmungswirkung hervorzubringen*). See also Riegl's *Die Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom*, Vorlesungen aus 1901-1902. Herausgegeben von A. Burda und M Dvorak. Kunstverlag Anton Schroll: Wien, 1923. On page 36 he argues that the figures on the tomb of Lorenzo de Medici are 'caught in a suffering mood' (*in leidender Stimmung befangen*).

<sup>43</sup> Aloïs Riegl, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, Österreichische Staatsdruckerei: Wien, 1927, 395-395.

<sup>44</sup> Aloïs Riegl, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 389.

<sup>45</sup> Riegl writes: 'The iconographic content is indeed entirely different from the artistic one; the function (directed toward certain notions) which serves the first is external like the utilary function of crafts and architectural works, while the actual artistic function is directed only to represent the objects in outline and colour on the plane and in space in such a manner that they evoke the redeeming appreciation of the beholder. Truly art historical value can iconographic determination just gain at the point when it is demonstrated that it expresses the same *Wollen* which shapes the real *bildkünstlerische* side of the work of art – the material appearance – in that and no other way. There is no doubt that between the notions, which the human being wishes to see visualized, in work of art, and the manner in which the visual media (the figures) are to be perceived, an inner close connection exists.' Aloïs Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, transl. Rolf Winkes. Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985, 128.

also in government and law, where one or the other form of expression mentioned above usually dominates.’<sup>46</sup>

Hence, in 1901, Riegl oscillates between, on the one hand, a generic parallelism between the political or religious worldview of an age and their visual presentation and, on the other hand, a determination of the visual presentation by the worldview. He argues for a parallelism between the worldview and the artwork but he also adds that the *Kunstwollen* ‘is decided’ or determined (*ist beschlossen*) by the worldview. This is a tension because it appears in the same text, the *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*. However, Riegl’s thought undergoes a quick evolution because, in *Eine Neue Kunstgeschichte* (1902)<sup>47</sup>, he abandons the relation of determination or parallelism while arguing for the autonomous analysis of the visual as the pertinent object of art history. There, Riegl claims that an artwork is an autonomous entity approached according to its formative principles. Art historical styles have their own internal development and there is no parallelism between the visual and the spiritual life. This parallelism, when it appears, is nothing but the ‘unconscious presupposition of all our historical thought’ (*die unbewußte Voraussetzung alles unseres historischen Denkens*).<sup>48</sup> Hence, while in *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* the parallelism between art and the worldview justified the analysis of the Late Roman *Kunstwollen*, one year later this parallelism becomes an ‘unconscious presupposition’. The rigorous positivism of Riegl rests thus on a speculative (since unconscious) conviction that there is a relation between the spiritual life and the life of forms. Yet Riegl never thoroughly explained the epistemological ground for the relation between visual forms and their content.

However, how rigorous is Riegl’s analysis of the Late Roman *Kunstwollen* when, after rejecting the vague relation between form and worldview, a few pages later, he induces the Late Roman *Kunstwollen* precisely through a comparison between the religious worldview of the age and its visibility? He would argue that he merely describes a parallelism between the two dimensions. Yet what justifies this parallelism is never clear. The Late Roman art emancipates the ground and the intervals between the figures. The undifferentiated ground that characterises the previous stage of art appears as differentiated and the intervals between the figures are shaped rhythmically.<sup>49</sup> The result is a colourful rhythm that combines dark shadowy intervals with the bright individual forms. However, Riegl surpasses this phenomenological description and relates the Late Roman *Kunstwollen* to the philosophy of St. Augustine. Following the ancient aesthetics, St. Augustine

<sup>46</sup> Aloïs Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 231, translation modified. The original reads: ‘Der Charakter dieses Wollens ist beschlossen in demjenigen, was wir die jeweilige Weltanschauung (abermals im weitesten Sinne des Wortes) nennen: in Religion, Philosophie, Wissenschaft, auch Staat und Recht, wobei in der Regel eine der genannten Ausdrucksformen über alle andern zu überwiegen pflegt. Aloïs Riegl, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 401. The official translation renders ‘ist beschlossen’ as ‘determines’ and this can be confusing because, throughout the entire book, Riegl argues for a ‘parallelism’ between worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and *Kunstwollen*. See the last footnote where Riegl speaks of ‘the parallel between visual arts and the *Weltanschauung*’ (Riegl 1985, 233), ‘die Parallele zwischen bildender Kunst und Weltanschauung.’ Riegl 1927, 405

<sup>47</sup> Aloïs Riegl, “Eine neue Kunstgeschichte”, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 43-51.

<sup>48</sup> Aloïs Riegl, “Eine neue Kunstgeschichte”, 49.

<sup>49</sup> Aloïs Riegl, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 390.

conceived beauty as unity and rhythm of forms, as the 'individual formal closeness of a natural thing' (*die Individuelle Formabgeschlossenheit eines Naturdinges*).<sup>50</sup> Augustine also distinguished between the base material and the higher spiritual unity. In *De Ordine* (lib. II, c. XVII, c.I, cl. 1017), he describes a tree as consisting of the sum of its parts and of the *anima vegetativa* that allows it to grow. For the ancients, the tree consists of the parts and the *anima* as individual substances, existing autonomously. For the moderns, the tree is a collective being consisting of different organisms determined not by one but by different co-determining causes. While the ancient artist wants to present beauty of a thing as its unity, the modern presents beauty as the higher synthesis of the whole. Yet what justifies the parallelism between the scientific worldview and their visual presentation?

In Riegl's interpretation, the numeric aesthetics of Augustine shift from rhetoric to music and architecture where buildings are built according to a serial rhythm as in the contrasting arrangement of the windows in the baths of Diocletian or the basilica of Maxentius. The most speculative moment in Riegl's analysis is when he argues that the emancipation of the intervals is a principle of Augustine's aesthetics but also of his theology because he allows the coexistence of both the good and the evil. This theological principle is homologated to the Late Roman visuality that combines distinguished forms and shapeless appearances. Just like evil is the counterpart of the good in the world, the ugly is the necessary interval between tones and the words in rhetoric but also between forms in visual arts. But there is no absolute ugliness if the entire image is perceived according to a distant view. Each separate form might appear ugly yet, viewed from a distance, the whole is an illuminating beautiful image. Beauty, like the good, is impossible without its opposite, the ugly.<sup>51</sup> In *De Civitate Dei* (lib. XI, cap. 23), Augustine argues that shadows increase the beauty of an image while the eye has to perceive this arrangement as a whole. The world is beautiful even though there are sinners who, if taken individually, disturb its order.

Hence, the description of the Late Roman *Kunstwollen* overcomes the rigorous positivism that Riegl himself announced. In order to provide an epistemological ground for the parallelism between visuality and theology, one has to emphasise the semi-symbolic semiotics on which it is founded. Other than the symbolic relation that conventionally relates a unit with a meaning ('red' means 'stop'), the semi-symbolic relation homologates larger heterogeneous isotopies that ensure the continuity of a culture ('sky' means 'the divine' within the Christian isotopy).<sup>52</sup> In the case of Riegl, heterogeneous domains (the visual and the theological) are equivocated on the plane of expression. God and evil determine the plane of content in the Christian religion. Lights and shadows appear on the plane of expression. The semi-symbolic relation affirms that the combination of lights and shadows symbolise the theological conviction that both good and evil are allowed in the world.

<sup>50</sup> Aloïs Riegl, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 395.

<sup>51</sup> Aloïs Riegl, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 399.

<sup>52</sup> For an introduction to semi-symbolic semiotics see Jacques Fontanille, *The Semiotics of Discourse*, trans. Heidi Bostic. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

Yet Riegl defines the *Kunstwollen* as the way in which artists in a certain age want to see things. Hence, the notion refers strictly to the plane of expression, the visual appearance of things. In this sense, it is radically different from a determinate concept, like in Hegel's philosophy of the spirit, because the visual, as shown in the first section of this paper, receives an autonomous status. The *Kunstwollen* designates a virtual construct that relates different values (theological and visual) but exclusively from a visual perspective. All determinations (theological, scientific) about the world are significant only as far as they show a visual continuity. And 'style' for Riegl, like for Wölfflin, interpreted from a semiotic perspective, designates the coherence of the visual plane of expression within a given epoch.<sup>53</sup>

In *Naturwerk und Kunstwerk I* (1901), Riegl introduces the *Kunstwollen* as a rigorous positivistic alternative to vague speculative metaphysics. Positivism concentrates solely on what is given. Applied to art theory, positivism conceives artistic production as an aesthetic drive. Consequently, all metaphysical speculations are rejected: that which determines this drive is an *Ignoramus* and maybe for always an *Ignoramibus*. But is this 'will-to-art' free of speculative metaphysics or of an aesthetic content? This conception of positivism is noteworthy because, for Riegl, positivism conceives artworks as the product of an artistic drive. Yet the notion of a 'drive' – *Drang* and *Triebe* are often used notions<sup>55</sup> – has both Romantic and psychological connotations. 'Instinct' is also the notion that Auguste Comte uses in his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1820-42) to denote all 'spontaneous impulse' directed outwards.<sup>56</sup> The *Kunstwollen* follows the same structure as Freud's notion of the drive. Both include two dimensions: they represent a motion that exteriorises an inner force. And Riegl writes: 'The artistic creation expresses itself merely as an aesthetic drive.'<sup>57</sup>

Yet to argue firstly, that positivism in art history avoids the vagueness of philosophical speculations in order to focus on what is given and, secondly, that what is given is a drive, means to replace one metaphysics with another. This is because the notion of drive, as Vermorel formulated it, combines a 'reductionistic

<sup>53</sup> This is the difference from Panofsky's iconological model where analysis establishes the 'immanent meaning', hence a determinate concept about the artwork. For Riegl, the *Kunstwollen* is an ideal and virtual level that determines merely the visual presentation of an epoch. In this sense, Riegl's project is founded on a phenomenological method that provides the visual with an autonomous type of consciousness.

<sup>55</sup> On the Romantic background of the notion of drive see Madeleine Vermorel, "The Drive (*Triebe*) from Goethe to Freud" in *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 17, 1990, 294-56.

<sup>56</sup> Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive. Tome troisième, La philosophie chimique et la philosophie biologique*. Paris: Bachelier, 1838, 784.

<sup>57</sup> Alois Riegl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 60. The original reads: 'Das Kunstschaffen sich lediglich als ein ästhetischer Drang äussert.' This concerns Emile Du-Bois Reymond's *Über die Grenzen des Naturenkennens* (1872) where it is argued that there is no possibility of reaching insight into the final cause of the physical phenomena. Reichenberger refers to this debate in order to prove the connivance but also distance between Riegl and the other models of art history, like the Semperian and Fechnerian type of scientific research that determined the final cause of art in either technique or the human physiological structure. See Andrea Reichenberger, "Wissenschaft und Kunst: Alois Riegl contra Emil Du-Bois-Reymond", a paper presented at the symposium "Was bleibt von Riegl? Symposium anlässlich des 100. Todestages von Alois Riegl", Vienna, MAK, 2005) See also Jas Elsner, "From Empirical Evidence to the Big Picture: Some Reflections on Riegl's Concept of 'Kunstwollen'", *Critical Inquiry*, 32, 2006, 741-766. The article relates Riegl to the program of the logical positivism.

materialism' with a 'latent content of romanticism',<sup>58</sup> and precisely because of this combination it is vague. The will-to-art also echoes the Nietzschean will understood as the exteriorisation of a force that becomes in Riegl a distinct artistic drive. The notion affiliates also the positivism of Comte - whose stages of human development he recuperates in his *Grammatik* as stages of art - with the metaphysics of the will.

The *Kunstwollen* is one of the most interpreted notions of modern art theory. It has been interpreted as a drive, as a formative principle or as an iconological sense.<sup>59</sup> However, the element that Riegl's readers neglected is the fact this notion explains the creative act as essentially an aesthetic act. From a semiotic perspective, with the *Kunstwollen*, Riegl conceives creativity by opposing 'ability' to 'volition': being able to create is contrasted with wanting to create. Yet, placing desire at the core of the creative act has aesthetic implications because, as Riegl formulates it, the creative act strives towards the 'satisfactory formation' (*Befriedende Gestaltung*) of the world.<sup>60</sup> Wanting to create visual artefacts is intrinsically linked to wanting to be aesthetically satisfied. Originally, Riegl employed the same term that Freud would have used for the fulfilment of the drives, namely 'satisfaction'. However, later Riegl refers to this fulfilment in terms of the Kantian aesthetic 'pleasure', the affective sense of well-being denoted by the untranslatable *Wohlgefallen*. In the manuscripts from 1900, Riegl writes: 'The artistic purpose is: the sensuous appearance of the work (aside from any purpose) shall be liked.'<sup>61</sup> In *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, the presentation of objects as outline and colour on the plane and in space provokes the 'redeeming pleasure of the beholder.'<sup>62</sup>

This ontological definition of the creative act as the exteriorisation of a drive or will-to-art presupposes that humanity, regardless of the level of cultural development, realises an a priori interest in a specifically visual pleasure. This visual pleasure is realised in artworks and it is different from the cognitive interest in the world. In other words, like in Kantian aesthetics, the visual presentation in art and its adjacent aesthetic pleasure have an autonomous status. Art is a generic name

<sup>58</sup> Madeleine Vermorel, "The Drive (*Triebe*) from Goethe to Freud", 251.

<sup>59</sup> The *Kunstwollen* received various interpretations: it has been read as a postulated drive that explains the development of form and the evolution of art. See Anna Plehn, "Neue Stilerklärung", *Die Gegenwart*, LXII: 44, 1902, 280-2, Hans Sedlmayr, "Die Quintessenz der Lehren Riegls", Alois Riegl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Augsburg, Wien: Dr. Benno Filser Verlag, 1929. Lorenz Dittmann, *Stil. Symbol. Struktur. Studien zur Kategorien der Kunstgeschichte*, München: Flink, 1967, Henri Maldiney, *Regard, Parole, Espace*, Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1994, Hubert Damisch's preface of the French translation of the *Stilfragen, Questions de style. Fondements d'une histoire de l'ornement*, traduction de l'allemand par Henri-Alexis Baatsch et Françoise Rolland Hazan, préface de Hubert Damisch, Hazan: Vanves, 2002. Gombrich saw it as a 'ghost in the machine' that determines the movement of art history. See Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London: Phaidon Press, 1977, 15-16. Panofsky interpreted it as the invariable level of an artwork that unites form and content, the 'immanent meaning' (*immanenter Sinn*) and an eidetic object of cognition (*Denkgegenstand*) inherent in artworks. See Erwin Panofsky, "The Concept of Artistic Volition", translation by Kenneth J. Northcott and Joel Snyder, *Critical Inquiry*, 8:1, 1981, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Alois Riegl, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 401.

<sup>61</sup> The original reads: 'Der Kunstzweck aber ist: die sinnliche Erscheinung der Werkes als solche (abgesehen von allem Gebrauchszweck) soll gefallen.' The statement appears in the manuscripts from the Riegl archives entitled *Vorlesungen IX/1. Geschichte der Altchristliche Kunst*. SS 1900.

<sup>62</sup> Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 127, translation modified, the original reads "das erlösende Wohlgefallen des Beschauers".

for all visual creations, regardless of an institutional or conceptual conception of art. In this generic definition the Renaissance is equally creative as the art of Ancient Egypt or the so-called primitive arts – all of them exteriorise a will-to-art. Followers of the theory that relate 'aesthetics' to a specific Western European regime of arts can accuse Riegl of projecting a specific 'aesthetic pleasure' on cultures and periods that did not conceive of one.

However, Riegl's argument is formal and in that sense Kantian: the will-to-art refers to an immanent dimension of human subjectivity. In all epochs and at all times, humanity actualises an immanent aesthetic pleasure even though not all historical epochs are conscious of it. Art is not the name of a historically demarcated regime but a form of visual pleasure constitutive of human subjectivity. It can be realised unconsciously too, like in the ornamentations on a primitive dagger that have no practical need. They too actualise the 'immanent artistic drive' (*immanenter künstlerischer Trieb*).<sup>63</sup> This specific visual pleasure is called 'need for ornament' (*Schmuckbedürfnis*) or 'ornamental drive' (*Schmuckungstrieb*).

These notions appear early in Riegl's work, in the *Stilfragen* (1893), and confirm the hypothesis that Riegl interiorises – without justifying – aesthetic pleasure into the creative act itself. Even if the primitive man creates weapons in order to hunt, Riegl's axiom is that the primitive man experiences aesthetic pleasure in their ornamentation. This is a Kantian position: regardless of an institutional or ontological explanation of art, humanity is a priori able to enjoy visual creations. Within the rigorous phenomenological analysis, images are reduced to a combination of lines and colours on the plane and in space.<sup>64</sup> However, the combination of these four elements is significant for the aesthetic impact that they have on the viewer. After all, the will-to-art refers to how people wish or want to see things so that they are felt as pleasurable. If art is the outcome of a will that exteriorizes itself regardless of technological factors, then the essence of the will-to-art is that it generates an affective and satisfactory feeling towards the visually formed world. Hence, art history does not dismiss aesthetics – it actually unconsciously integrates the aesthetic experience in the very justification of the creative act.<sup>65</sup>

At the level of its realisation, this drive-to-form seeks satisfaction in the presentation through images of spatial relations. The image as the realisation of

<sup>63</sup> Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, Mäander: München – Mittenwald, 1977, 20.

<sup>64</sup> Alois Riegl, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 6, 229.

<sup>65</sup> In an impressive eulogy that provides a clear introduction to Riegl's thought, Dvořák reportedly quotes Riegl: 'The best art historian is the one that has no personal taste because art history is about finding objective criteria of the historical development.' (*Der beste Kunsthistoriker ist der, welcher keinem persönlichen Geschmack besitzt, denn es handelt sich in der Kunstgeschichte darum, objektive Kriterien der historischen Entwicklung zu finden*. Dvořák 1905, 262) But then, aesthetics is understood as a subjectivist theory of taste that values all art historical styles according to a classicist canon of taste. Riegl does not reject the subjective moment of taste in the evaluation of art. He rejects the Hegelian model of art history that it generated, namely a hierarchy of art historical styles that values the Greek art above any other styles. Typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism is the reaction against this vague personal taste. The rigorous science of art proposes an objective history where all styles are equally valued. However, this is again a narrow understanding of aesthetics because, at least in the Kantian sense, aesthetics refers to an affective experience of art that is possible precisely without a hierarchy of styles.

spatial relations is also an aesthetic construct because it appeals to the senses: the haptic reduces depth to surfaces and crystallises visual forms (as in Egyptian art), the optic emancipates the relation between the background and the visual forms (as in Late Roman art). In this sense, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* remains a seminal work, not because it rehabilitated what used to be perceived as a period of decay, but because the study introduced the modern viewer - as Benjamin observed - to a 'new feeling of space' (*eine neue Raumgefühl*).<sup>66</sup> Hence, art history does not only document historical styles in an objectivist manner, but also opens up the aesthetic sensibility of the modern viewer who is introduced to different modes of visual presentation. The art historical research has beneficial aesthetic consequences because art historical facts have an impact on the sensibility and not just on the memory or the culture of the viewer.

However, in the opening lines of his *Grammatik*, Riegl argued that aesthetics is a ruin and it is criticised because it did not include all historical discoveries in its original blueprint as a science of art. In order to strengthen the fundament of this science, 'specialised investigations' (*Spezialuntersuchungen*) followed. Yet the disadvantage is that now this building, the science of art, lacks 'connective corners' so that it resembles a ruin. Nevertheless, philosophical aesthetics cannot help and, even though she is dead – *dicit* Riegl – her 'right to existence' (*Existenzberechtigung*) lies rooted in the history of art.<sup>67</sup> The new program for the scientific study of art reverses the nineteenth century status of art history within the humanities: the right to existence or the justification of philosophical aesthetics is subordinated to the discoveries of art historical research. The rigorous history of art vindicates the vague 'ghost' of aesthetics, a 'revenant' haunting only the philosophy auditoria.

Yet it is this 'revenant' – aesthetics – that returns as the very foundation of Riegl's own rigorous science of art. After all, does not Riegl justify artistic creation thorough the will-to-art that seeks aesthetic fulfilment? But then aesthetics no longer refers to a normative philosophical discourse (as Riegl understand it) but to a descriptive reflection on how arts generate a specific type of pleasure. Due to his narrow understanding of aesthetics he fails to see that, in his own *Grammatik*, art history is the outcome of a primordial aesthetic sensibility. However, the point is not to subordinate art history to aesthetics just as it is naïve to subordinate aesthetics to art history. The idea is that the 'education' that the art historical discoveries provides aims both at the augmentation of a factual knowledge of art and at the expansion of the aesthetic sensibility. Just as in Kant where intuitions without concepts are blind, historical facts without aesthetic sensibility remain empty facts. An artefact becomes an artwork when the aesthetic sensibility for that fact has been nurtured.<sup>68</sup> And this is exactly what Riegl does in *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*: the

<sup>66</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Strenge Kunstwissenschaft. Zum ersten Bande der Kunstwissenschaftlichen Forschungen", *Gesammelte Schriften*, 170.

<sup>67</sup> Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of Visual Arts*, translated by Jacqueline E. Jung, New York: Zone Books, 2004, 288.

<sup>68</sup> In this context, it worth mentioning that Riegl's considerations on the value of historical facticity underwent a subtle evolution. In *Spätromisch oder Orientalisch* (1902) he nuances the overestimation of historical facts. He criticises Josef Strzygowski for focusing too much on isolated historical data and argues in a clear Nietzschean tone that 'in the future we will have to ask ourselves in regard to every single reported fact, what the knowledge of this fact is actually worth. Even the historical is not an

architectonic, art industrial and sculptural artefact introduce their beholder to a new visual sensibility. Hence, even though Riegl rejects a narrow understanding of aesthetics in order to vindicate the right of aesthetics to exist, he fails to see that the aesthetic experience justifies the existence of art as such. Read from this perspective, there is no theory of art without a theory of taste, just as there is no history of art without a theory of aesthetic pleasure.

### 3.3. Worringer and the aesthetics of abstraction

Wilhelm Worringer emulated Riegl's *Kunstwollen* in order to formulate a psychological theory of art. From the aesthetics of Theodor Lipps and Robert Vischer he also derived the concept of 'empathy' that he opposed to 'abstraction'. The question for Worringer is: what emotional principles can explain the emergence of forms in art? In this context, he refuted the pertinence of aesthetics, just like Riegl, because of a narrow understanding of this philosophical branch. In *Von Transzendenz und Immanenz in der Kunst* (1908), Worringer argues that aesthetics limits visual art to a 'psychology of the classical artistic sensitivity'.<sup>69</sup> In other words, 'aesthetics' is a speculative discourse that values strictly the classicist type of sensibility.

In *Kritische Gedanken zur Neuen Kunst* (1919), he writes that, traditionally, art is experienced as the pleasurable sensuous experience brought about, as in the Hellenic art, by the perfection of the organic form.<sup>70</sup> According to Worringer, aesthetics reduces art to the reproduction of the naturalist forms. Yet this conception of art depends on an empathic psychic constitution. The subject has to be able to project her/ his vital feeling onto the exterior correlate. Otherwise said, the organic and naturalist visual forms perceived according to the classical sensibility are beautiful because they are felt as an extension of the subject's vital feeling. The predicate 'beautiful' designates the subject's ability to correlate the inherent feeling of life with the visual forms. The apperception of visual naturalist and organic forms is felt as pleasurable because these visual forms precipitate an 'accord' (*Einklang*) with the viewer's vital feeling.<sup>71</sup> Observe the musical metaphor (an 'accord') that Worringer uses to designate the empathic aesthetic experience, a metaphor that echoes Kant's description of the beautiful as the 'attunement' (*Einstimmung*) of the mental faculties.<sup>72</sup>

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absolute category, and for the scholar, not only knowing per se, but also the knowing-how-to-ignore certain facts at the right moment may well have its advantage.' (Alois Riegl, "Late Roman or Oriental", in Gert Schiff, ed., *German Essays on Art History*, New York: Continuum, 1988, 190) The original reads: 'Künftig werden wir uns angesichts jeder einzelnen ermittelten Tatsache zu fragen haben, was sie eigentlich wert sei. Auch das Historische ist nicht das Absolute, und nicht allein das kennen, sondern auch das Ignorieren können an passender Stelle hat seinen Vorteil für den Forscher.' In Alois Riegl, "Spätromisch oder Orientalisch?", *Beiträge zur Allgemeinen Zeitung*, 94, 1902, pp. 164.

<sup>69</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*, München: Fink, 2007, 166.

<sup>70</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Fragen und Gegenfragen. Schriften zum Kunstproblem*. München: Piper, 1956, 86-7.

<sup>71</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, 74-5.

<sup>72</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 127.

Opposed to this empathic constitution that emulates the organic and life-affirming character of nature, the primitive drive to abstraction reduces naturalist forms to geometric points of rest that show absolute values.<sup>73</sup> Hence, empathy and abstraction are two drives that determine two different types of art. The aesthetic pleasure experienced as an affirmation of the vital feeling is determined as the drive to empathy. The aesthetic experience of abstraction opposes this empathic relation. Pyramids and Byzantine mosaics are determined by a drive that 'tries to repress' (*zu unterdrücken sucht*) that which provides satisfaction (*Befriedigung*) to empathy. In other words, Worringer's psychology of art entails that two different types of mental state produce two different types of visual art. This presupposes the extension of the psychological onto the visual domain. Even more, the visual is fundamentally nothing more than a manifestation of psychological drives. The advantage of this homologation is that different historical styles are explained according to one generic principle: the Gothic is on the same plane with Egyptian art. However, this transposition of the psychological into the visual is insufficiently argued for. How does a psychological type become a type of visual presentation?

Worringer reserves the experience of beauty as aesthetic pleasure to the domain of empathy. However, even though it is opposed to empathy, abstraction is also designed to bring about aesthetic pleasure. Hence the question: is aesthetic pleasure the response towards only one aesthetic regime, i.e. empathy, or is it in fact presupposed by both abstraction and empathy? While first distinguishing the satisfying beauty of the empathy from the intensity of abstraction, there are also instances where Worringer describes the experience of abstraction in the same terms as empathy. Under the regime of abstraction people have 'an immense need for tranquillity' (*ein ungeheures Ruhebedürfnis*)<sup>74</sup> provided by geometrical abstract forms that bring about 'happiness' (*Beglückung*). This is an interesting inconsistency: even though they determine two generic types of art, the promise of happiness characterises both empathy and abstraction. Yet the inconsistency betrays Worringer's narrow understanding of aesthetics. Instead of understanding beauty as a subjective feeling that both empathy and abstraction realise, Worringer reduces beauty to the classicist regime of empathy. It shows the transformation that appears when aesthetic categories like 'beauty' are conceived as objective qualities of the artwork. As with Riegl's notion of the mood, abstraction and empathy become affective intensities conceived as independent of their subjective realisation by the viewer. The psychology of art history becomes, in this sense, a map of the generic evolution of human sensibility.

Generally, the aesthetic experience in the case of abstraction is closer to the experience of the sublime: a distressing psychical tension is released and finds pleasure in these regular geometric forms. This pleasure originating in a prior displeasure appears in Worringer's own formulation: 'in the contemplation of abstract regularity man would be, as it were, delivered from this tension (*von dieser Spannung erlöst*) and at rest from his differentiation in the enjoyment (*Genusse*) of his

<sup>73</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, 83.

<sup>74</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, 83.

simplest formula, of his ultimate morphological law.<sup>75</sup> Like in Kant's analysis, the pleasure felt in the case of the sublime originates in the reconciliation that reason provides when confronted with the too powerful intensity of the perceived correlate.

Hence, Worringer's psychological art history appeals constantly to aesthetic categories. Due to the confusing perception of exterior sensations, the 'urge to abstraction' (*Abstraktionsdrang*) prompts the subject to respond with a 'spiritual dread of space.'<sup>76</sup> Hence, the life-denying and inorganic forms of abstraction are contrasted to the organic forms that correspond to the 'need of empathy' (*Einfühlungsbedürfnis*). Further, the notion of abstraction explains the creative act as driven by a constitutional aesthetic encounter with the world. In the semiotics of affectivity, the 'phoric' is a category that designates the affective impact of an image on a viewer. This affective impact oscillates between the euphoric and the dysphoric, i.e. between pleasure and displeasure. Applied to Worringer's polarity of abstraction vs. empathy, the image is the external (*exophoric*) dimension of an internal (*egophoric*) experience.<sup>77</sup>

Like in Wölfflin and Riegl, the artwork does not mediate a conceptual but a pre-conceptual, affective disposition. Worringer himself takes this dematerialisation of the image to the extreme and argues that the formal value of a style is the expression of inner affective values to the point that the distinction between form and content collapses.<sup>78</sup> The rejection of the canonical distinction between visual form and iconological content turns the image into a correlate that provokes an aesthetic experience. Hence, Worringer's psychology of styles does not refute aesthetics. To the contrary, just like in Riegl's *Kunstwollen*, the aesthetic experience justifies Worringer's history of art. Simply formulated, images crystallise affects, they show how we feel about the world from a visual point of view. If so, then the promise of happiness, tranquillity and satisfaction that characterises both empathy and abstraction is the prerequisite of Worringer's theory of art. In this sense, Volkelt's critique remains valuable: empathy is a generic term for the active investment of the correlate with the feeling of one's own vitality.<sup>79</sup> It is the affect corresponding to a general emotional balance. Like in the cases of Riegl and Wölfflin, Worringer explains the history of art as the realisation of fundamentally aesthetic experiences. Their rejection of aesthetics returns in their own practice of a rigorous art historical research. All three historians rehabilitate the art historical styles that they describe as new affective encounters with new presentations of the visual space. Whilst distancing themselves from aesthetics, Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer assimilate the aesthetic experience and its vague affective categories in their rigorous science of art.

<sup>75</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, translated by Michael Bullock, New York: International University Press, 1953, 36.

<sup>76</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, 82.

<sup>77</sup> Claude Zilberberg performed a rigorous semiotic analysis of the work of Wölfflin. See Claude Zilberberg, "Présence de Wölfflin", Limoges: Pulin, 1992.

<sup>78</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, München: Piper, 1920, 5.

<sup>79</sup> See Johannes Volkelt, *Das ästhetische Bewusstsein. Prinzipienfragen der Ästhetik*, München: Beck, 1920.

## Conclusions

The polarities of Riegl and Wölfflin describe artworks from a phenomenological and structuralist perspective. Firstly, the phenomenological aspect consists in the perception of artworks purely as visual appearances distinct from the material medium on which they are inscribed or from their iconological content. This pure visuality, divested of all materiality is designated as the pertinent object of art history. The polarities that describe this image-object present the viewer with spatial relations between forms and colours. The linear and the haptic describe the felt discontinuity of visual forms in a closed space, like in Renaissance art.

Contrastingly, the painterly and the optic account for the seen continuity of visual forms in deep space, like in Baroque art. The aesthetic significance of this simplification of art history is that images are conceived on the basis of an aesthetic of space because – on a phenomenological level – images cultivate spatial relations.

Secondly, the structuralist aspect is traceable in the perception of the singular artwork as the realisation of an anonymous visual and emotional structure, the linear vs. the painterly, the haptic vs. the optic, empathy vs. abstraction. These polarities denote undifferentiated deep level structures that are differentiated in the singular artworks. In this interpretation, contrary to the diachronic conception of history that Riegl and Wölfflin manifest, these polarities evince that art knows no historical evolution (in the sense of a chronological chain of events) but a series of synchronic permutations of these anonymous visual structures designated as the haptic or the linear. This is a line of thought that Riegl intimated in 1902, both in *Spätromisch oder Orientalisch* and in *Eine neue Kunstgeschichte*, yet, due to his early death, never developed. Even though they are undifferentiated structures, the linear and the painterly, the concepts that correspond to Riegl's the haptic and the optic, are differentiated in the analysis of the singular works: there is the linearity of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, an Egyptian relief from the 14<sup>th</sup> century BA and the linearity of Dürer's *Adam and Even* (1507).

Thirdly, Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer distance themselves from the narrowness of philosophical aesthetics. However, they had an equally narrow understanding of aesthetics as a normative discourse that reduces art to the classicist naturalist presentation. Against the dissatisfaction with this conception of aesthetics, their rigorous history of art is founded on vague aesthetic categories: the mood, the vital feeling or the drive to abstraction. These affects are designated as vague in the Latin sense of 'vagus'; they are 'wandering' - the mood, abstraction and empathy are not localised, they represent anonymous affective states. The mood appears in the Baroque (for Wölfflin) but also in modern art or in the perception of monumental ruins (for Riegl). According to Worringer, abstraction characterises the primitive but also the Gothic art and even expressionism. Aesthetic affects are vague in the art history that employs them as generic types of undifferentiated emotional intensities.

Even more, their theory of visual presentation presupposes the aesthetic experience as essentially an affective (as opposed to a conceptual) perception of the world. This interpretation of their theory shows that the history of art is embedded

in a theory of taste. It is no longer a normative theory of taste but a fundamental epistemological presupposition that visual arts mediate aesthetic affects. The positivism of Riegl, the formalism of Wölfflin and the psychologism of Worringer fostered an art historical discourse where aesthetic pleasure is immanent to the creative act. Artworks represent a feeling about the world that is experienced as pleasurable (*Wohlgefallen*). Hence, the alternative to the rejected classicist aesthetics is an art history embedded in a pathematology, a description of artworks as carriers of anonymous affects. With Riegl, Wölfflin and Worringer, the rigorous science of art integrates the aesthetic experience when it approaches the domain of the visual as the realisation of vague affects.

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