

Persistence of vision – *Blind Spots* after ten years

Review of:

Frederic Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany*. Yale University Press, 2005. 300 pp.

Ian Verstegen

Nearly ten years ago, Frederic Schwartz published *Blind Spots*, an important book for both critical theory and art historiography. The book has become a handy reference, opening up surprising links in Weimar German culture and advocating for the role of art history in cultural critique. The initial impetus for this review is the fact that the book, although acknowledged as a sophisticated intervention in critical theory, has not had an adequate impact on art history. Most of the reviews of *Blind Spots* came from German studies,¹ and the one prominent review in art history was in a more theoretically-oriented journal with which Schwartz was affiliated.² Either there was no interest in, or ability to process, Schwartz's insights within art history.

This is less true with regard to studies of the Vienna school where authors, myself included, have used Schwartz's work to discuss figures like Hans Sedlmayr.³ Schwartz's evenhandedness with regard to the problematic Sedlmayr, a Nazi party member, speaks precisely to the value of the book. For it is only with the correlation of art discourse, theory and politics that one can come to understand the strange convergences in Weimar Germany that enabled Walter Benjamin, for example, to read Sedlmayr seriously.

The book is really a series of studies in coordination, how principally left critical theorists said things remarkably like traditional artists and art historians. The critical theorists are historicized, contextualized, while political potential is found in art and art historical approaches. In general, we get to know the theorists better, and perhaps that is why the book has been more appreciated by those interested in the Frankfurt school. We get to understand the mental furniture of a critical theorist as he uses available metaphors for conceiving problems. Thus

¹ See Nickolas Lambrianou, 'Uses and abuses of concepts for politics,' *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 136, March/April 2006, 57-59; P. Betts, *German History*, 2007, 25 (1), 123-124; Daniela Bohde (an art historian), *sehpunkte*, 9, 15.09.2009, URL: <http://www.sehpunkte.de/2009/09/15739.html>.

² Alex Vasudevan, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 31, 2008, 300-304.

³ Evonne Levy, 'Sedlmayr and Schapiro Correspond, 1930-1935', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 59, 2010, 235-263; Ian Verstegen, 'Materializing Strukturforschung', in Dan Adler and Mitchell Frank (eds.) *German Art History and Scientific Thought*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012, 141-160.

Adorno and Horkheimer portray the dialectic of Enlightenment in terms of art historical terms of style and fashion found in art theory, Kracauer looks at the Tanner girls like a Rieglian, Ernst Bloch uses Wilhelm Pinder as a departure point for political action and, again, Walter Benjamin seeks to learn from the latest efforts of the Vienna School. Yet Schwartz's title, *Blind Spots*, reveals the overall intent of his project: to expose overlooked areas, lapses, where in many cases the heroic critical theorists falter.

It is delicate trying to review a book ten years after its publication. Rather than review it in a traditional way, I will revisit its major commitments to see what we have learned from Schwartz and we have still not taken account of. Then I will turn to what I see to be lingering problems in its overall conception, which for me is emblemized in his critique of physiognomy and leads to a series of exaggerated oppositions. In conclusion, I find that some of Schwartz's arguments are too content with making points that in their deconstruction can be allied with a common sense approach closer to liberal democracy than Frankfurt school Marxism. In most cases, this change of viewpoint reflects the shifts in intellectual life in the last ten years. Therefore, reviewing the book becomes an occasion to take account of the tasks of regarding art history and critical theory today.

The Book

Before engaging in a larger discussion of Schwartz's arguments, it pays to summarily review each of the book's chapters. As noted, each chapter is largely an exposition of a central topic through a major personality of the Frankfurt School and related artists and more typically art historians. In the first chapter, Schwartz explored how debates on style and fashion informed the construction of one of the most impressive critiques of mass culture, that of Adorno and Horkheimer.⁴ It is reasonable to assert that anti-capitalistic worries over technology heightened the problem of style for late nineteenth and early twentieth century art historians. Their inability to find consistent styles suggested a negative judgment of the contemporary world for which one could only discern a number of fashions.

One of my persistent, though minor, criticisms is that the gulf separating critical theorists and art historians is too great, and that differences in subject matter need to be taken into account. Indeed, a number of the arguments would benefit from a bit of charity so as to provide a more balanced account. A good example here is Schwartz's criticism of Wölfflin's discussion of trends in shoe fashion during the 1880s. It is true that Wölfflin seeks to find a common motivating force in style. Yet it is not so easy to dismiss Wölfflin as Schwartz does. He goes back to Wölfflin's source, the costume historian Hermann Weiss, to reveal that Wölfflin was not a

⁴ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' in Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (ed.), *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* [1944]. trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

good reader of the very texts he cites.⁵ But the joke is not on Wölfflin, because the section in question only talks about an extreme fashion of extra-long pointed shoes, that indeed was a short fad. However, the pointed shoe in general had a very long life into the fifteenth century.⁶ The point is not that Wölfflin was indeed correct but that the alternative is nothing.

Chapter 2 explores Walter Benjamin's relationship with the artistic avant-garde of his time. If art historians provided broad interpretive categories with which to propose an idea of the culture industry, commercially oriented artists dealt directly with the new experiential reality of the modern city. New ideas in typography and photography fed into Benjamin's famous idea of distraction. Schwartz well connects Benjamin's ideas to the larger artistic context. In exploring the category of the 'expert,' Schwartz provided a complementary narrative to Benjamin's famous Work of Art essay.

Chapter 3 discusses Ernst Bloch's important idea of 'non-simultaneity' against the backdrop of Wilhelm Pinder's theory of generations.⁷ Pinder had sought to solve the problem of stylistic plurality, basing his argument on the shared training of a particular artistic generation as explaining differing styles. Two styles could co-exist simultaneously because practitioners at the same moment had been trained in different traditions. In this way, he broke from the notion of stylistic homogeneity and unitary *Zeitgeist*. Schwartz's very elegantly explains how Bloch had imported a similar idea into Marxian analysis through a portrayal of the multiplicity of rates of development in the base and superstructure. I will say more about contemporary politics at the end of the review, but Bloch's portrayal of the social forces in 1920s will have a ring of familiarity, when he notes that the right was more successful at blending a number of 'synchronicities' than the left (107).

Of course, the notion of temporalities in, particularly, colonial studies has become standard.⁸ Similarly, in art history, the notion of anachronism has given hope that we might finally extinguish the biases of retrospective knowledge of the classical tradition in, especially, the medieval and late medieval periods.⁹ Schwartz is of course spot on in calling out Pinder, who had argued for asynchronous aesthetic choices and yet endorsed the modernist architectural style as the single, quintessentially German style of the day.

⁵ Heinrich Wölfflin, 'Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur,' (1886), in J. Gantner (ed.), *Kleine Schriften*, Basel: Schwabe, 1946, 45; citing Hermann Weiss, *Kostümkunde*, Stuttgart: Ebner & Seubert, 1864.

⁶ See, for example, Alice Zrebiec, 'With Bells on His Toes,' *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 24, 161-171.

⁷ Wilhelm Pinder, *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunst Europas*, Berlin: Bruckmann, 1926.

⁸ See for example, Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York: 1983.

⁹ Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York: Zone Books, 2010; Christopher Wood, *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Part of Schwartz's goal is to redress the neglect of Bloch, but it is worth pausing for a moment to challenge his lack of redress of Pinder because it again exaggerates the incompatibility of the two thinkers. Schwartz noted that Pinder was a 'has been' around 1930 and that his theory of generations was not of general interest (while still citing Karl Mannheim's important essay that openly acknowledged Pinder).¹⁰ In fact, without even addressing Pinder's politics, it should be noted that he was an intelligent critic who was sought by students at the University of Vienna, including a young Sedlmayr, to replace Dvorak.¹¹ Similarly, it is incorrect to describe *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas* as an anomaly. Apart from its mentions of state, race and body (more on that below), it was simply one of the most up to date contributions to the 'style problem' that preoccupied German-language art history.

Chapter 4 is the longest in the book, and deals with physiognomies of art in the work of Hans Sedlmayr and the Frankfurt figures of Kracauer, Benjamin and Adorno. It begins with a brilliant exposition of *Kunstwissenschaft* around 1925 and the respective approaches of Erwin Panofsky's neo-Kantianism and Sedlmayr's Rieglian anti-positivism. Schwartz handles the troublesome Sedlmayr quite remarkably by creating a list of pros and cons of Sedlmayr's approach: ways in which he did really progressive work, and ways which he clearly stumbled.

Sedlmayr's settling on a physiognomic method in his essay on Brueghel, 'Der Sturz der Blinden,' leads Schwartz to interrogate this method, at once intuitive and irrational, and evasive of normal standards of scholarship.¹² Schwartz finds this kind of knowledge in Balazs, Adorno and Benjamin. All of these authors, and in addition the psychologists Karl Bühler and Heinz Werner, agree on an 'affective decline' in the visual sense, requiring a reconsideration of the priority of discursive knowledge. From Sedlmayr and Kretschmer we pass to Klages and Benjamin. A key here is Helmuth Plessner, whom Schwartz contrasts favourably with Benjamin, as an example of a permissible approach to questions of mimesis and mimicry but in a way that is, as we shall see, for very particular reasons. The question we are left with, and the one that will raise larger questions, is whether the 'physiognomic' is, paraphrasing what Schwartz writes for Sedlmayr, a dead end because a beginning (177), meaning: invalidated completely if a point of departure for art historian or critical theorist.

¹⁰ Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', [1927] in K.H. Wolff (ed.), *From Karl Mannheim* [2nd Edition, with an Introduction by V. Meja and D. Kettler], New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction, 1993, 351-398.

¹¹ Eva Frodl-Kraft, 'Hans Sedlmayr (1896-1984)', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 44, 1991, 11.

¹² Hans Sedlmayr, 'Pieter Bruegel: Der Sturz der Blinden, Paradigma einer Strukturanalyse', *Hefte des kunsthistorischen seminars der Universität München*, vol. 2, 1957, 1-49.

Physiognomy

This last section is a tour de force of intellectual history, drawing together into a single arena protagonists of much different worlds. Its focus on ‘physiognomy’ is the unifying factor, linking art historians (Sedlmayr), psychologists (Bühler, Werner), sociologists (Plessner) and critical theorists (Adorno, Benjamin). While subtle and enlightening, the account is I think liable to lead to frustration because of one simple fact. Schwartz looks upon this issue in a positivistic way, which makes the success of various expressive and mimetic forms of knowledge into – to borrow Hilary Putnam’s discussion of realism in science – a ‘miracle’.¹³

To make things less contentious let me follow Putnam and continue with the example of science. If I am a positivist, I use phenomenal facts to correlate data, without thinking about causation (which is transformed in its meaning due to its dismissal in its classical guise).¹⁴ What is important for the positivist is that data can be explained, subsumed under empirical laws, and lead to predictions. Aspirin is correlated to the relief of a headache and that is enough. But what if we wanted to understand how aspirin might react in different ways with different foods or drugs? We would have to think about the properties of the molecules constituting aspirin and their causal effects with other molecules. Turning back to the simpler case of how aspirin works, the causal realist understands how acetylsalicylic acid affects the nervous system. I submit that when Schwartz discusses sympathetic understanding between two people, he is thinking about the problem in a positivistic way, for which any deep affinity is unknown, a seeming wilful mystification.

This can be seen in Schwartz’s discussion of the definition of physiognomy, derived from the eighteenth century, which he projects into the twentieth century. In John Graham’s summary, Lavater held that ‘all created things in the world are individual and unique’, that everything has within it ‘the nature and character of the whole’ and all things are ‘unities that are indivisible’ (177). Scientists believed this uniformly in the eighteenth century. To believe it in the twentieth, one would have to accept what has been called a ‘God’s eye’ perspective, according to which the world must present itself transparently, and be available to our gaze unproblematically.

In spite of emphasis on spontaneity and intuition, must any discourse involved with the physiognomic make this assumption? I submit that there is no reason we should judge the human sciences and expressive behaviour any differently than the physical sciences, where we now understand aspirin. Positivism

¹³ Hilary Putnam, *Mathematics, Matter and Method: Philosophical Papers*, London: Cambridge University Press 1975, 73.

¹⁴ For positivism, see Roy Bhaskar, ‘Philosophies as Ideologies of Science: A Contribution to the Critique of Positivism’, in *Reclaiming Reality*, New York: Verso, 1989, and the papers in George Steinmetz (ed.), *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and its Epistemological Others*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

is harder to detect in the ideographic human sciences but one need only accept the God's eye presumption if one is a positivist. Coming from the realist viewpoint, one can read Benjamin's statements metaphorically. I understand that he, like an armchair scientist, is hinting at deeper mechanisms he cannot explain fully. His approach can overlap with that of a formal scientist. There can be some valuable material in Ludwig Klages, and other that is laughable. But for Schwartz there is no possible relevance of Ernst Kretschmer's or Klages' research. It appears that for Schwartz, support of an author is an all or nothing proposition. Either he passes 'the tests of legitimacy imposed by the university and related institutions' (192, on Klages) or he does not.

This approach can be seen in Schwartz's positive assessment of Helmut Plessner's discussion of mimicry and the psychophysical problem, which is opposed to Walter Benjamin's more speculative and less careful formulation.¹⁵ Schwartz believes that Plessner is acceptable because he has arrived at a kind of phenomenological bracketing, with no purchase on reality. This is a 'non-metaphysical' solution, because:

He turns centuries of speculation into mere examples of a certain kind of behaviour, voiding the field of physiognomy of its claims to truth in order to focus attention on the embodied organ of interpretation. He is not positing the ability to understand the other self, but rather simply asserting that this sort of interpretation happens, empirically, right or wrong, every day, every time a child takes his or her first step. This direct intuition might even be reasonably reliable, but it certainly can be mistaken (208).

So examples of mimicry, mimetic behaviour, are acceptable when taken as simply examples with no purchase on reality. It's like saying that all preceding examples of pain relief had no relation to the aspirin actually first prepared by Charles Frederic Gerhardt in 1853. But realism is fallible. It is only in this way that one could understand the secondary use of evolutionary mechanisms of mimicry in art.

Physiognomy cannot be an obfuscating term, which by its mere invocation discounts a theory. Physiognomy in its guise leading from pseudo-Aristotle through to the phrenologists, is a form of direct understanding of the nature of an organism through its morphology. Clearly this strict sense is largely absent from many of the writers considered by Schwartz. When Bela Balasz states that, 'Man will become visible again,' Schwartz responds that 'this is of course physiognomy' (180). Yet Balasz' writing waiver between expressiveness and old Lavater style physiognomy (i.e. inferring inhering character directly through visual appearance). A major shift in how one conceives of physiognomy is needed to approach the period on its own terms. Without it, even human psychologists like Heinz Werner, whose work is

¹⁵ Hellmuth Plessner, 'Die Deutung des mimischen Ausdrucks: Ein Beitrag zur Lehre vom Bewusstsein des anderen Ich', *Philosophischer Anzeiger*, vol. 1, 1925, 72-126.

enjoying a major renaissance, is made to be so much arcana extracted from the vault of ridiculous theories.¹⁶ Schwartz follows, at the very end, Adorno's separation of *Ausdruck* from expression (235-42), but ultimately rejects it as an unfortunate bit of 'opacity' due to the influence of Benjamin. Left as it is, one would believe that the study of the expressiveness of forms, or of the body, has been superseded.¹⁷

Oppositions

Because of the beliefs I have tried to identify, a critic like Schwartz comes to scare easily when reading about concepts that are not unproblematic to a common sense reading. Here, I want to stress the consequences this fact has for exaggerating the differences between thinkers. For example, for Schwartz it is something of an embarrassment or at least mystery how Bloch could find value in Pinder. Schwartz seems to say that, apart from the generational proclivity to view art history philosophically and systematically, they have little in common. I believe that it is most parsimonious to assume that each group has a different job to do and that differences should be sought there first, before invoking substantive theoretical or ideological differences.

For example, Mannheim believed that Dvorak was his contemporary doing some of the most interesting things in art history and took for granted that his tasks were discrete from Dvorak's. Looked at in this light, it is precisely the differences of tasks that can lead to new insights. Indeed, it is probable that the very discontinuity of works of art, their autonomy and separateness from life, in contrast to the political history Bloch might be used to studying, would actually be a boon to Pinder for being able to shed adequate light on the idea of non-simultaneity.¹⁸

When Schwartz was writing it was not so clear how broadly deconstructive projects such as this might be indistinguishable from general empiricist common sense. Today however, with the re-opened 'Communist horizon' (to use a phrase of Jodi Dean), and the various new brands of Marxism of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek push for a distinction in the direction of critique.¹⁹ It is interesting that Schwartz notes Bloch's (a radically Utopian figure) critique of *Neue Sachlichkeit* in

¹⁶ See, e.g., Jaan Valsiner, (ed.), *Heinz Werner and Developmental Science*, New York: Kluwer Scientific/Plenum Publishers, 2005.

¹⁷ For a review of person perception, see Leslie Zebrowitz, *Reading Faces: Window to the Soul?* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997. For recent discussions of the expressiveness of shapes, see Martin Lindauer, *The Expressiveness of Perceptual Experience: Physiognomy Reconsidered*, Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013, and Giulia Parovel, *Le qualità espressive: Fenomenologia sperimentale e percezione visiva*, Milan: Mimesis, 2012.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the discontinuity of cultural objects, which provides special tasks for cultural disciplines like art history, see my *A Realist Theory of Art History*.

¹⁹ See Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, London: Verso, 2012, and Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (eds.) *The Idea of Communism*, London: Verso, 2010.

architecture and equation of social democracy with fascism as ‘uncomfortable to us’ (124). It is precisely less uncomfortable today.

As a result, Schwartz’s arguments leave us with a somewhat grainy idea of what is acceptable in historical thinking. I have already glossed the problematic of ‘physiognomy,’ and it can be seen to be one example of a larger issue of false oppositions. For example, in Schwartz’s presentation, the critique of traditional art history (Wölfflin, Riegl) is that it is idealist and presumes the unity of culture. As noted, scholarship has continued since Schwartz’s book and if written today some things would have to be revisited. Most importantly, the Riegl industry has continued to question Riegl’s idealism. Gubser began this trend in earnest with his work of 2005, too late perhaps to be considered in Schwartz’s. Cordileone especially emphasizes the Austrian, materialist, non-idealist strands of thinking in Riegl.²⁰ At the same time, indications against the water-tight totality of a period is found already in Riegl’s recognition of numerous competing *Kunstwollen* in the same culture, e.g. the seventeenth century Dutch Republic.

The constant critique of the idealism and teleology of some of the art historians’ thinking begins to sound a lot like E. H. Gombrich’s critique of post-Hegelian historiography and its ‘Hegelianism without metaphysics.’²¹ Indeed, in his discussion of Sedlmayr, Schwartz cites Gombrich’s ‘physiognomic fallacy’ as the error committed by the former’s invocation of constitution-psychology.²² The reduction to absurdity of such an argument risks, from the implicit Marxian position of Schwartz’s Frankfurt school thinkers, the dismissal of vigorous social explanation in general. As I have argued in this journal, we need to consider such early theories as social scientific hypotheses rather than fill out their contents as apparently unrecoverable concepts.²³

There are consequences of such allergies to more speculative thinking. By implicitly arguing that art historians, psychologists and sociologists are, generally, conservative, and that theorists are progressive, the result is that the progressive critical theorists are made a bit mundane by adopting traditional art historical/psychological/sociological ideas. Turning from Sedlmayr to a leftist intellectual like Balazs, or from Klages to Adorno, the implications of such running together can be seen. If we presume that an idea is illicit, then find it also in a traditionally appreciated critical theorist, we must then dismiss the critical theorist as well. Because *Blind Spots* is a critical endeavour and not a reconstructive one, if we fault a critical theorist for using physiognomy, we are left with nothing. I think this blunts their force. For those interested in left politics, this is not very attractive.

²⁰ Diana Reynolds Cordileone, *Alois Riegl in Vienna 1875-1905: An Institutional Biography*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.

²¹ E. H. Gombrich, *The Idea of Progress and its Influence on the Arts*, New York: Cooper Union, 1971.

²² E. H. Gombrich, ‘On Physiognomic Perception’, in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, London: Phaidon, 1963.

²³ Ian Verstegen, ‘The Second Vienna School as Social Science’, *This Journal*, 7 December 12.

To be honest, I fear that Schwartz gives conservative thinkers tools to dismiss much of the Frankfurt school *tout court*.

I think today we are more apt to read charitably the way earlier writers dealt with the material problem of how culture is constituted. Today, it is easier to see that *Blind Spots* still represents what has been called in political theory ‘weak ontology’, a tacit postmodern assumption of minimalism. At the same time, more aggressive defences of the party, Communism, and Marx in general have become commonplace. Frankfurt school figures today are not so much contextualized as repurposed.²⁴

That leads to my last impression of the book. If, as I have argued, some of the motivation to expand discourses has emerged, there are indications that a vigilant eye is still called for. Since *Blind Spots* was published, the Deleuzian notion of affect has gained in wide popularity, as the discovery of mirror neurons has pushed forward the idea of a neuroarthistory.²⁵ A reviewer such as myself, who clearly is interested in the viability of questions of visible expressions, does not rejoice however. In an uncomfortable way, these new ideas posit kinds of unmediated knowledge that were a short time ago presented carefully, in a circumspect way, in an atmosphere of scepticism. In addressing this new trend, Schwartz would be a great resource in turning his attention to discovering new ‘blind spots.’

Ian Verstegen is Associate Director of Visual Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of, most recently, *Cognitive Iconology: How and When Psychology Explains Art* (Rodopi, 2014) and editor (with Allan Ceen) of *Giambattista Nolli and Rome: Mapping the City before and after the Pianta Grande* (Studium Urbis, 2014).

ianverstegen@yahoo.com



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²⁴ For an example, see Morton Schoolman, ‘The Reconciliation Image in Art’, *Theory & Event*, 16, 2013, 1-28.

²⁵ For critical reviews of both, see Ruth Leys, ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique,’ *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, 2011, 434-472; and Lucia Pizzo Russo, *So quell che senti. Neuroni specchio, arte ed empatia*, Pisa: ETS, 2009.