

## Exorcising the demons of collectivism in art history

Review of:

Branko Mitrović, *Rage and Denials. Collectivist Philosophy, Politics, and Art Historiography, 1890-1947*, University Park, Pennsylvania University Press 2015, 242pp. ISBN 978-0-271-06678-3

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Arriving in an elegant op-art dust jacket that seems like a visualisation of the two dichotomous forces explored in its pages, Branko Mitrović's *Rage and Denials* is a highly erudite, intelligent and timely book. It traces the history of collectivist approaches in (art) historiography and debates between the individualist and collectivist positions, with the dominant focus on German-speaking scholarship. The historical survey is then enriched with original hermeneutics through which the source of collectivist historiography is traced to the failures to regulate self-esteem on the part of its main protagonists. Without a single word of explicit mentoring, the author delivers a powerful lesson in the ethic of the historian's work, or – as he states in the preface – a warning against the danger of losing control of one's self-awareness in writing history (xi). This deconstruction of the pathologies of collectivist history writing, infused with such ethical appeal, truly could not be more timely given the massive spread of populism and irrationality and the resurgence of nationalistic, xenophobic, and even racist discourse in the public sphere that we have been witnessing lately. The book, however, is timely for yet another reason, as arguably almost any historical interpretation reflects an implicit stance on the respective role of individualism vs holism in explaining historical facts; the duality thus remains one of the central – albeit not much discussed – concerns of art history. Unfortunately, Mitrović's strongly opinionated exposure of the dangers and pitfalls of essentialist historiographies comes at a price, as it is based on some untenable assumptions and conceptual oversimplifications that compromise the theoretical backbone of the historical survey. These, first and foremost, concern the way individualism and collectivism are presented as irreconcilable positions. It is precisely because I find Mitrović's book so timely and am fully sympathetic to his ethical commitment and warnings against the negative effects of the excesses of collectivist argumentation and dogmatic anti-realism that I feel it appropriate to examine some of the more controversial claims in detail. Before engaging in a discussion of these key points, it is worth providing a brief summary of the content of individual chapters.

The Introduction outlines the conceptual framework of the subsequent discussion, articulating the opposition between collectivism and individualism and the basic tenets of collectivist methodology; further on their pitfalls, such as the propensity for circular explanations, are discussed, along with difficulties posed to collectivist historiographies by the freedom of will and reflexive argument (that is, the fact that if the historian assumes the determining role of the collective in creativity or writing, then he is not exempt from being similarly determined by his own collective horizon). Mitrović then asks whether the dilemma between individualism and collectivism can be reconciled by some form of middle-ground position and replies that from a philosophical perspective

the answer must be negative as they are philosophically inconsistent (54). It is precisely some of this conceptual and theoretical groundwork which requires clarification.

Chapter 1, 'Romantic afflictions', traces the origins of the collectivist worldview up to the Romantic rejection of Kant's universalism, with Herder and Ranke as the main protagonists. Attention then turns to *Methodenstreit* in German historiography in the late 19th century and to the renaissance of cultural history, with a particularly illuminating analysis of Karl Lamprecht's contributions to collective determinism. The author further points out that the discussions of Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen* were central to individualist-collectivist debates in early 20<sup>th</sup> century art theory, before turning to Spengler's *Decline of the West* as the embodiment of a full-scale collectivist position. Chapter 2, 'Geist versus Vernunft', explores how the collectivist historiographic perspective articulated by its founding fathers was further developed and incorporated into narratives that served an explicitly propagandistic function at the time of First World War and during the Weimar years. The focus here is on the now little-known figures of Ernst Troeltsch (and his magnum opus *Historismus und seine Probleme*), and Friederich Meinecke and his work, most notably *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, and on Max Dvořák's *Geistesgeschichte*, which likewise has not received much attention lately outside Central Europe.

The picture gets progressively more ominous as we travel in time, moving into the interwar period in Chapter 3 ('Art and Venom'), when collectivist determinations were increasingly articulated in terms of race and ethnicity and willingly incorporated into chauvinistic, nationalistic and racist narratives serving to legitimise the Nazi regime. The author discusses the various forms of *Geist*- and race-derived determinism and collectivist thinking in key figures such as Pinder, Sedlmayr, Frey or Strzygowski, as well as in many authors that are little known today, such as Kurt Gerstenberg, Karl Eberlein, Hans Günter and Ludwig Woltmann. Halfway through this chapter, the underlying source of this collectivist malady starts to be exposed. Mitrović diagnoses the rhetorical strategies of collectivist historiographies, particularly their more bizarre and irrational claims, as being based on denials and appropriations of the collectives achievements of others. Providing illuminating examples from the writings of both luminaries (Strzygowski, Spengler, Ranke, Wölfflin) and lesser historians, he then most interestingly analyses such denials and appropriations through the spectrum of the psychoanalytical concept of the narcissistic personality – as expressing envy, anxieties and the emotional distress of those who formulated them. This line of argument is then taken further in the concluding chapter. Perhaps surprisingly, given the author's strongly negative view of collectivist views, his analysis of the overtly chauvinistic, nationalist and racist narratives in German (art) historiography in this chapter does not yield a more detailed and more critical picture of these works than previous accounts.<sup>1</sup>

The fourth chapter is devoted to the liberal humanist rejoinder to collectivist historiographies in the work of Erwin Panofsky and Russian architectural historian Vasilyi Zubov. The opening of chapter five ('Renarrativization') provides perhaps the strongest indication of the author's stance on the matter of collectivism when we read that '...after 1945 it became hard not to read, in hindsight, almost the entirety of German

<sup>1</sup> Thomas DaCosta Kaufman, *Toward a Geography of Art*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004, 68-88.

cultural and intellectual history after Kant as the premeditation of the concentration camps' (93). From the standpoint of such a resolute view, any attempt at a more nuanced understanding of holistic thinking is going to be morally suspicious and flawed from the start. The chapter then juxtaposes three different ways of analysing German collectivist thought: Gadamer's attempt – in *Truth and Method* – to defend Romantic collectivism and exonerate the collectivist tradition from complicity in the Third Reich's ideology; the Marxist response to irrationalist collectivism in German thought as presented in Lukács's *Destruction of Reason*; and Ernst von Aster's psychoanalytically informed, brilliant insight into the mechanism which enabled and sustained Nazism.

In the sixth chapter, 'Reverberations', the reader is taken, rather unexpectedly, beyond the time frame suggested in the title of the book (1890-1949) and is presented with Ernst Gombrich's quandary over how to reconcile his constructivist notion of perception with his essentially humanist and individualist position, to live 'with the spectre of antirealist implications which haunted' him in the wake of the constructivist notion of art perception that he annunciated in *Art and Illusion*. Briefly outlining the ancestry of views that insist on cultural/social determinations of perceptions (Frey, Rothacker), the author then traces the rise of collectivist antirealism in English-speaking scholarship (especially Goodman and Bryson). Interestingly he situates the modern debates on the nature of perception within the theological tradition of debates about free will. While I am again sympathetic to Mitrović's criticism of the excesses of social constructivist and relativist approaches to art perception, I feel that his case is substantially weakened by relying on outdated facts and partly misinterpreting available evidence, as detailed below.

Elaborating on ideas introduced in chapter 3, the concluding chapter ('Hubris and Method') elegantly and mercilessly deconstructs those unlikable histories and their more bizarre and irrational claims as akin to products of stereotyping and problems with regulating self-esteem. The salient features of many of the works surveyed, which include denials, tendencies towards self-aggrandising attributions, appropriations and the reduction of subjectivities to mere representatives of groups, are all taken to embody an unempathetic, narcissistic mindset. The appendix then provides a further survey of the individualism-collectivism debate in historical materialism and sociology, with a focus on Marxist classics and the sociological methods of Ludwig Gumplowitz, Emile Durkheim, Frederick Antal, Georg Simmel and Alfred Vierkandt.

With a few exceptions (Gombrich, Zubov), the book presents a panorama of collectivist thinking in German-speaking (art) historiography. However, given the book's subtitle, *Collectivist philosophy, politics, and art historiography, 1890-1947*, one would expect at least a passing reference to other non-German traditions of holistic thinking (and the reflection of such approaches in art historiography). While the extremes of collectivist historiographies were certainly most pronounced in works written in German, they were not limited to such works, and counterparts can be found in French, English and other historiographies.<sup>2</sup> Even while rejecting (and heeding Mitrović's lesson) any collective determination of German authors' collectivist narratives, at least a brief comparison of other contemporaneous approaches to collective psychology/sociology might have set the German tradition into sharper perspective. The survey is not exhaustive and some of the lacunae may raise eyebrows (e.g. in the passage on the intellectual origins of German collectivist thought, Herder and Hegel are discussed, but not Carl Schnaase's *Geschichte*

<sup>2</sup> Kaufman, *Toward a Geography of Art*, 53-57.

*der bildenden Kunst*, arguably the first magnum opus of collectivist art historiography, grounded in notions of *Volksggeist* or *Nationalcharacter*). But it is nonetheless a representative survey and includes many once influential works which are (one suspects) nowadays read by very few students of humanities

Given that the book seeks to analyse a particular intellectual tendency or trajectory and its underlying causes, the focus is understandably on selected examples of scholarship that embody that tendency. But an unintended consequence of this approach is that the reader may occasionally get a somewhat skewed impression of the work and intellectual legacy of a particular scholar. The author himself states that his story is not a nice one, and has 'many negative characters' (19), and says that 'a book on intellectual history is not meant to provide a sympathetic or unsympathetic survey of material'. Yet, in some cases at least, this is precisely what happens. Take the case of Panofsky and Dvořák, who seem to embody the positions of 'good guy' and 'bad guy', respectively. It is one of the great strengths of Mitrović's narrative that he uses his remarkable historical erudition to construct a dynamic portrait of key protagonists' (such as Panofsky's) thinking that reveals how their position on the individualist vs collectivist spectrum evolved over time and in response to changing circumstances. He thus admits to the difficulties of Panofsky's methodological break with collectivism, but asserts that his later works firmly belong in the individualist camp. Panofsky's postwar 'Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism', where, it will be remembered, he posits the existence of 'mental habits' (unconscious schemas of internalised principles that encapsulate the ways of thinking of a particular epoch) and homologues of structure shared by the different intellectual products of a given milieu, are accepted by Mitrović as providing an 'individualist twist to collectivist topic' (82-84). Other scholars, however, agree that the late Panofsky never freed himself of the tendency to postulate supra-individual and specifically national constants in art, and hence he should be – in the author's scheme of things – no less tainted with the collectivist virus than the other authors he critically discusses.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, a reader without first-hand knowledge of relevant texts may easily fall prey to the impression that those historians and works who bear the full brunt of the author's critical blast are nothing more than obsolete historical curiosities, unworthy of further attention. Thus, Max Dvořák is discussed first as an example of faulty collectivist, *Geist*-driven art history (55-58), and then, in reference to his 1919 letter protesting the repatriation of Italian artworks from Viennese museums, as a case of 'narcissistic rage', levelling bizarre and patronising assertions against Italian art and art history (145-46). Dvořák thus emerges as a rather pitiful figure, whose insecurities and narcissism fatally compromised his scholarship.<sup>4</sup> However, is it right to conclude that his work was produced in a haze of narcissistic envy against the Italians? More to the point, while his '*Geist*-driven approach' indeed comes out in '*Idealismus und Naturalismus in der Gotischen Skulptur und Malerei*', as Mitrović persuasively shows, is it correct to insist on Dvořák's 'denial of the relevance of individual creativity' (57)? His positions were

<sup>3</sup> Lavin, 'Introduction', Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1993, 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, excerpts from his published letters and the reminiscences of his students both strongly suggest that Dvořák suffered from what nowadays would be diagnosed as some form of anxiety and from depressive disorders throughout much of his adult life; see Max Dvořák, *Listy o životě a umění. Dopisy Jaroslavu Gollovi, Josefu Pekařovi a Josefu Šustovi*, Jaromír Pečínka, ed., V. Praze: Vysěhrad, 1943.

certainly much more nuanced and were characterised by both an effort to explain artistic phenomena as embodiments of spirit or *Zeitgeist* and a commitment to recognising and analysing achievements of great artistic figures. In his other works, perhaps most notably in his essays on Dürer, Brueghel and El Greco in *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, the elements of *Geist*-driven determinism are more than balanced by Dvořák's insistence on the individual artistic subjectivity and creativity of these masters as a critical source of their crucial artistic innovations.<sup>5</sup> In the end, the difference between Dvořák and Panofsky can be found to be more a matter of emphasis than to derive from some firm commitment to an individualist as opposed to a collectivist position. With these brief observations on the historical survey, I shall now turn to a more detailed discussion of some key assumptions and claims which I find problematic or imprecisely stated.

### **Narcissism and self-esteem regulation as a principle for explaining the faults of collectivist historiographies**

As noted above, the case for self-esteem regulation and narcissism as possibly underlying collectivist narratives and particularly their more bizarre claims is original and persuasively argued. Mitrović astutely forestalls potential objections to the limits of retroactive psychoanalysis of long-dead subjects by arguing that even if it could be established that a certain author were extremely narcissistic, that in itself need not imply that any of his specific statements were narcissistically motivated (141). What matters then is not the psychodiagnosis of individual historical actors as such, but rather the use of a psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism and self-esteem regulation mechanisms to interpret and understand irrational claims that would otherwise remain incomprehensible (142). So far so good. But then he rather curiously notes that alternative explanations for the bewildering and bizarre statements are simply not available (145), while in fact one can think of a number of alternative interpretations for the phenomena he describes. Using art for political ends was a common practice across Europe in the period covered by the book. As has been aptly documented, art and art history were inextricably linked to the projects of national identity and the development of nation-states, and identity construction is always perforce based on differentiation.

The false and bizarre claims of collectivist historiography presented by the author as examples, while transparently absurd now, would have been seemed far less irrational in the specific historical contexts in which they were formulated - irrationality, after all, is a relational construct. More importantly, there are other ways to account for them, albeit they are no more charitable to those who uttered them than a narcissist interpretation is. It hardly needs to be pointed out that erudition and intellectual acumen stand in no relation to morality and personal integrity. Bizarre, false, and fact-defying claims and narratives have always been willingly produced (and not just in totalitarian regimes) because there is an audience and a demand for them, because their authors stand to gain some kind of

<sup>5</sup> Max Dvořák, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte: Studien zur abendändischen Kunstentwicklung*, München: R. Piper, 1924, 191-202; 217-76. For a balanced analysis of Dvořák's approach see Ján Bakoš, 'Max Dvořák – a neglected revisionist', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 2005, Vol. 53, 55-71. Here Bakoš explicitly cites Dvořák's condemnation of national egoism and intolerance, and his warning against the dangers of overestimated national interpretations; Bakoš, 'Max Dvořák – a neglected revisionist', 67.

personal benefit and academic or public recognition from spreading them, and/or out of a fear of consequences from the powers that be had the authors of them not uttered what was expected from them. If we insist on psychological explanations (as indeed we should), then simply careerism, conformism, cowardice (among other unholy personal traits) must have contributed no less than narcissism and self-esteem regulation problems to the spread of those narratives that Mitrović demasks.

### **Kinds and levels of collectivism**

The author's way of contrasting individualism and collectivism (on which more below), allows him to create a panorama of what he calls the 'collectivist paradigm' (58) in German (art) historiography, which seems to be all-inclusive, subsuming rather different kinds of collectivist assumptions, claims and rhetoric. What is missing is some attempt to systemise various shades of the phenomenon. The difference between the ontological and methodological collectivism and the historiographic collectivism that is surveyed in the book is finally briefly acknowledged on the last page of the appendix (162), but the German collectivist historiographic paradigm itself is far from being a homogenous entity. Quite obviously, only some of the holistic approaches surveyed were consciously elaborated into nationalistic and racist narratives, as exemplified most fully by the main proponents of *Blut und Boden* historiography. And some of the texts discussed are devoid of any denials, aggrandizements and false appropriations. Do then Riegl's or Dvořák's writings reflect 'the demonic nature of collectivist intellectual traditions' (93) to a degree equal to that of Stryzygowski's or Frey's works? It is of course perfectly legitimate for Mitrović to insist that all forms of collectivist stance are aberrations, but in his uncompromising zeal he fails to make a proper distinction between the obvious pathologies of the collectivist historiographic paradigm (including its instrumentalisations 'in the delirium of chauvinistic propaganda'), the major conceptual flaws of essentialistic intellectual programmes, and those collectivist arguments that invite serious consideration.

One way to systemise the phenomenon under discussion might have been to focus on key concepts used by the German historians discussed, such as the notions of *Zeitgeist*, *Volksgeist*, *einheitliche Seelenleben*, *Gemeingeist*, *Nationalcharacter*, *Stammeseigenart* and *Stammescharakter*, *Psychische Einstellung* etc. These are now mostly discredited and disused ghosts of the past and, with some exceptions (*Kunstwollen*), do not even get much attention from contemporary historiographers. And yet, if analysed as something more than mere symptoms of pathological thinking, some of them might be productively set in relation to other notions of collective cognition that were not tainted by ideological misuse. This is particularly true of the French sociological tradition (of which only Durkheim is briefly mentioned in the appendix), most notably the *Annales* school and its notion of collective consciousness (*mentalite collectif*, *outilage mental*), articulated by Lucien Febvre at the same time as his German counterparts and later extended by Georges Duby, Henry Wallon and others.

### **Individuals and their interactions**

The conceptual framework of the book hinges on essential contrast between individual historical figures versus collectives, such as cultures, nations, ethnic groups, periods, or

various kinds of social and historical contexts. Mitrović summarises collectivist views as essentialistic and deterministic in a strong sense: artists 'were creative in a certain way, the explanation will say, *because* they belonged to a certain group....' Collectives 'were assumed to permeate and determine the creativity of individuals' (2-3, 7). Asking whether a given culture or epoch can be more than the sum of individuals who participate in it (2), he replies in the negative. Mental states are reducible to biochemical processes in individual brains, he explains, and while interaction with other subjects may affect these biochemical processes, it 'leaves no space for an additional causality of collective spirits...' (6). A certain group phenomenon is thus akin to a flu epidemic – one's belonging to and participating in a certain context may trigger certain patterns of brain processes, which, when shared by many individuals, would constitute the belief or attitude of this group. Taking clues from the concept of social interactions used in Simmel's *Soziologie* and Vierkandt's *Gesellschaftslehre* (both of which he cites approvingly) he claims that ultimately, 'There are only individuals and interactions between them and collective influence on a brain can only be a set of individual influences generated by interactions with other individuals' (6, also 161-62).

It is all too unfortunate then that the notion of interactions is left hanging in the air, without any consideration of what are the results of these social interactions. Are they no more than the sum of electrochemical processes in individual brains, as Mitrović seems to imply? This is indeed a crucial point. The effect of culture (or cognition more generally) on mental life never ceased to be a major concern of cultural psychology and anthropology during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has recently been taken up as an important topic in cognitive and cultural neuroscience. An extensive body of empirical research and theoretical debates shows Mitrović's view to be indefensible: there are no collective brains (except in a metaphorical sense), but some interactions between individuals' brains/minds give rise to collective representations in multiple brains, which recursively shape individual minds/brains. The view that sociocultural systems structure the content and process of experiences, thoughts and behaviours is a mainstream position in contemporary psychology and neuroscience. Culture-gene co-evolutionary theory convincingly shows that the environment co-determines gene expression and that the environment is both physical and psychological, and socio-cultural.<sup>6</sup> The question then is not *if* but *how* social information alters brain gene expression and behaviour, how does social experience interact with information preserved in the genome to modulate brain activity.<sup>7</sup>

A vast body of research in the rapidly developing field of cultural neuroscience studies the cultural modulation of brain activity, the effect of cultural priming on the brain, that is, how cultural values, beliefs, and practices shared by a social group influence the functional organisation of the brain and how culture may affect or interact with biochemical processes in individual brains. Using neuroimaging techniques, researchers have demonstrated cross-cultural differences in a number of perceptual and cognitive functions. Generally, culture may influence cognitive processes by providing the priming stimuli that constrain a person's responses, but also by providing the larger

<sup>6</sup> Gene Robinson, Russell Fernald and David Clayton, 'Genes and Social Behaviour', *Science*, 2008, Vol. 322 (5903), 896-900; Cody Ross and Peter Richerson, 'New frontiers in the study of human cultural and genetic evolution', *Current Opinion in Genetics & Development*, 2014, Vol. 29, 103-109.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

context in which such responses occur.<sup>8</sup> An increasing number of experimental studies measuring neural activity in subjects from different cultural groups engaged in some cognitive task suggest that a person's cultural background can influence the neural substrate of not only high-level social cognition, but also low-level perceptual processes.<sup>9</sup> New models are outlining plausible hypotheses about the cycles or loops that mutually constitute individual brains/minds and culture, distinguishing different types of culture-brain interactions and detailing the 'looping effect' by which culture shapes the brain by contextualising behaviour, and the brain fits and modifies culture through behavioural influences.<sup>10</sup> While this research is not without its own methodological problems, so one must be cautious about its findings, it is nonetheless opening up a new perspective on the individual vs collective dilemma.

To return to the central issue of what is the result of interactions among individuals, a minimal sketch might look as follows: There are individual humans with their subjective mental representations, underlined by specific patterns of electrochemical processes in their brains. Some of these subjects' interactions give rise to collective mental representations through (i) direct interactions (involving various kinds of synchronisations and attunements and emotional contagions)<sup>11</sup> and (ii) through mental representations that are transformed or 'offloaded' into public (material) representations. These material representations in turn stabilise and disseminate certain mental representations (beliefs, thoughts, intentions) as well as skills, habits and performances in a certain (possibly large) number of people. French anthropologist Dan Sperber provides an insightful model of this 'epidemiology of representation' and what he dubs the causal cognitive chains that instantiate their transmissions.<sup>12</sup> What ultimately matters, for this

<sup>8</sup> Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, 'Cultures and Selves: A Cycle of Mutual Constitution', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2010, Vol. 5, 427; Rebecca Seligman and Ryan Brown, 'Theory and method at the intersection of anthropology and cultural neuroscience', *Social, Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 2010, Vol. 5 (2-3), 130-137; Yan Bao and Ernst Pöppel, 'Anthropological universals and cultural specifics: Conceptual and methodological challenges in cultural neuroscience', *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 2012, Vol. 36 (9), 2143-2146.

<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive up-to-date overview of this research, see Joan Y. Chiao, Shu-Chen Li, Rebecca Seligman and Robert Turner, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Neuroscience*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Markus and Kitayama, 'Cultures and Selves: A Cycle of Mutual Constitution', 420-430; Shihui Han and Yina Ma, 'A Culture-Behavior-Brain Loop Model of Human Development', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2015, Vol. 19 (11), 666-676; Shihui Han, 'Cultural Neuroscience', *Brain Mapping: An Encyclopedic Reference*, 2015, Vol. 3, 217-220

<sup>11</sup> Developing Husserl's phenomenology of intersubjectivity, Frédéric Vandenberghe employs the notion of interaction rituals, which involve the mutual attunement or synchronisation of attention, bodily movements and emotions and the mutual arousal of sentiment (Frédéric Vandenberghe, 'Avatars of the Collective: A Realist Theory of Collective Subjectivities', *Sociological Theory*, 2007, Vol. 25 (4), 296-324). Moreover, new research suggests that sharing certain mental states may be facilitated by an underlying synchronisation of brain activity within a given collective, see, Lauri Nummenmaa et al., 'Emotions promote social interaction by synchronizing brain activity across individuals', *Proceedings of the National Academy Sciences USA*, 2012, Vol. 109 (24), 9599-9604.

<sup>12</sup> Dan Sperber, 'Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epidemiology of Representations', *Man*, March 1985, Vol. 20 (1), 73-89; Dan Sperber, 'Conceptual Tools for a Natural Science of Society and Culture', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 2001, Vol. 1, 297-317; Dan Sperber, 'Why a deep



discussion, is simply that some interactions among individuals in the social space result in the creation and dissemination of collective mental representations, which in turn shape the structure and content of individual consciousness and probably the functional microstructure of individual brains as well.<sup>13</sup> These shared mental representations, habits and practices constitutive of culture are thus in an ontological and explanatory sense evoked by Mitrović (16-17) causal entities. They are not reducible to the sum of individual mental and brain states and they cannot be a priori excluded from accounts of the causes of historical events and aesthetic objects. The implication for art history and theory then is to find a middle ground between strongly deterministic, essentialistic views and the extreme individualism advocated in this book.

### **Antirealism and the cognitive penetrability of perception**

In Chapter 5, Mitrović cites a few works in psychology and cognitive science to substantiate his claim that perception is cognitively impenetrable and – because it largely depends on human biology – it cannot be determined by the perceiver’s belonging to some form of collective entity. Once again, we are presented with a firm opposition between individualism and collectivism: the choice, according to the author, is between a conception of human cognition as predetermined by collective membership or “by the functioning of the eyes or the visual cortex of the brain” (112). In fact, hardly anyone seriously claims nowadays that ‘all beliefs or knowledge that one may have, including the belief that there is a reality, may result from one’s participation in a collective’ (112), that ‘culture determines all we know’ (114) or that ‘all cognition derives from one’s membership in a collective’ (118). More to the point, to categorically claim that human perception is thought-independent (or cognitively impenetrable) is simply to disregard current scientific evidence. Again, we have to make do with an attempt at a minimalist summary of the extensive area of current research.

Whether early vision - the mechanisms by which the essential aspects of a scene, such as lines and edges, movement, colour, binocular disparity and related aspects are detected, that is, an unconscious events occurring in a time scale of up to c. 250 milliseconds, is indeed cognitively impenetrable remains at present an empirically unresolved question. However, there is mounting evidence that top-down processes impact the encoding and recognition of visual stimuli along the entire ventral visual stream, starting in the primary visual cortex.<sup>14</sup> And the most recent research on the temporal dynamics of visual processing suggests that conceptual, semantic processing

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understanding of cultural evolution is incompatible with shallow psychology’, Nick Enfield and Stephen Levinson, eds., *Roots of Human Sociality*, Oxford: Berg, 2006, 431-449.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Turner and Charles Whitehead, 'How Collective Representations Can Change the Structure of the Brain', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2008, Vol.15 (10-11), 43-57; Shu-Chan Li, 'Biocultural Orchestration of Developmental Plasticity Across Levels: The Interplay of Biology and Culture in Shaping Mind and Behavior Across the Life Span', *Psychological Bulletin*, 2003, Vol. 129 (2), 171-194.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Goldstone, 'Effects of Categorization on Color Perception', *Psychological Science*, 1995, Vol. 6 (5), 298-304; Thorsten Hansen et al., 'Memory Modulates Color Appearance', *Nature Neuroscience*, 2006, Vol. 9 (11), 1367-68; Gary Lupyan et al., 'Conceptual Penetration of Visual Processing', *Psychological Science*, 2010, Vol. 21, 682-691.

starts as quickly as 150ms after stimulus onset.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the innocent eye, evoked by Mitrović, remains truly innocent for a very brief slice of time indeed! What is more important in the present context is the fact that as we move beyond the early vision stages to the level of perceptual-cognitive strategies and processes – such as mechanisms of object identification and classification, patterns of saccadic eye movements and selective visual attention, processes of embodied emotional and emphatic response – and then proceed further upstream to the processes that subserve the complex experience of a work of art, the cognitive and specifically cultural modulation of perception becomes increasingly evident (as has been detailed in the cultural-neuroscience studies mentioned above).<sup>16</sup> What matters, one might argue, after all is not so much the cognitive penetrability of *visual processing* but that of the perceptual *experience* through which we make sense of works of art.<sup>17</sup> Finally, one needs to point out that in contemporary psychology and neuroscience, the not-so-new idea of perception as inference has been formalised into powerful explanatory models, which again point to the crucial importance of top-down factors in perception. According to the predictive coding model of perceptual inference, subjects try to infer the causes of their sensations based on multi-level generative models of the world. Neuronal representations at the higher levels of processing hierarchy generate predictions (or priors), based on information in the memory and from context, about the probable cause of sensory input.<sup>18</sup> Such priors and hyperpriors, constituted at the intersection of biological mechanisms and cultural information, enable and constrain how humans make sense of what they see in perception generally and what they see in works of art specifically.<sup>19</sup> The underlying mechanism of the cultural modulation of perception is perceptual and, specifically, neuronal plasticity.<sup>20</sup> To sum up, to replace the strongly deterministic and constructivist views that see environment and culture as direct causal influences on vision, without bothering to

<sup>15</sup> See Alex Clarke et al., 'From Perception to Conception: How Meaningful Objects are Processed Over Time', *Cerebral Cortex*, 2013, Vol. 23 (1), 187-197; Alex Clarke and Lorraine Tyler, 'Understanding What We See: How We Derive Meaning From Vision', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2015, Vol. 19 (11), 677-687.

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, I have proposed a model which seeks to replace the dichotomy of vision and visuality with a model which seeks to capture the process of vision in its biological and social complexity by articulating four levels, increasingly modulated by cultural influences. Ladislav Kesner, 'Gombrich and the Problem of Relativity of Vision', *Human Affairs*, 2009, Vol. 19 (3), 266-273.

<sup>17</sup> This distinction, along with many other important points are discussed in the vast contemporary philosophical literature on the cognitive penetrability of perception; see, John Zeimbekis and Athanassios Raftopoulos, eds., *The Cognitive Penetrability of Perception: New Philosophical Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Further aspects of culturality of vision, which are germane to Mitrović's arguments are extensively discussed in Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Friston and Stefan Kiebel, 'Predictive coding under the free-energy principle', *Philos. Trans. R. Soc London B Biol. Sci.*, 2009, Vol. 364 (1521), 1211-1221; Andy Clark, 'Whatever next? Predictive brains, situated agents, and the future of cognitive science', *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 2013, Vol. 36 (3), 1-73; 233-244.

<sup>19</sup> Ladislav Kesner, 'The predictive mind and the experience of visual art work', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2014, Vol. 5, [journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01417/full](http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01417/full).

<sup>20</sup> Arne May, 'Experience-dependent structural plasticity in the adult human brain', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2011, Vol. 15 (10), 475-482.

provide an empirical justification for this, with the opposite view insisting on cognitive impenetrability of perception *tout court*, is not a viable alternative.

### Collectivism vs free will

Crucially for his thesis, Mitrović claims that free will – which he takes to be the capacity of historical figures to make decisions on their own (12) - is incompatible with collectivist premises, because if subjects are in possession of free will, they may opt not to act according to collective determinism. He writes: ‘Saying that human acting and thinking are predetermined by one’s membership in a collective implies a firm negative stance in the metaphysical debate about free will: if historical figures’ decisions were predetermined, then they could not have acted freely’ (82); and continues further on: ‘If human beings have free will and are able to make decisions on their own, they must have their own cognitive processes, including perception – if their cognition and perception are predetermined by God, history, or culture, then they are certainly not acting freely’ (124). Once again, however, the opposition between a subject either exercising his/her free will (individualism) or being determined by some type of collective entity is far too crude and coarse-grained to be useful. Free will has been again a topic of immense attention in recent neuroscience and philosophy and two points emerging from this massive theorisation of the term are worth mentioning that seem highly relevant for the purpose of the present discussion. First, the notion of free will in the context of artistic creativity probably cannot be separated from notions of artistic intention and agency.<sup>21</sup> Second, contrary to folk conception, free will is not tantamount to conscious self-control or agency; rather humans possess levels of autonomy even if the processes involved are not entirely accessible to conscious reasoning.<sup>22</sup> Bearing this in mind, we can now briefly consider two scenarios.

Let us imagine a contemporary artist A, who is self-consciously pursuing the modernist ideal of a ‘free’ creative individual, unconstrained by commitment to any ideology or economic incentives and stubbornly pursuing her creative vision. Even such an (ideal) artist, however, is not creating in a vacuum; rather, her artistic intentions are ultimately willy-nilly modulated and constrained by various pressures and expectations exercised by the art market, critics, and theorists, and by some of the tacit assumptions shared and perpetuated by the discourses and values of the contemporary art world. Now, such discourse and values are definitely more diffuse and heterogeneous than the essentialist notions of *Volksgeist* or *Nationalcharacter*, but they are collectivist nonetheless, in that they represent some collective mental representations (as defined above) shared by those who inhabit the art world. By exercising her artistic activity in such a context, our artist is thus subject to some form of modulation (even determination?) by these collective representations - hence hers would not be an exercise of free will as Mitrović understands it.

<sup>21</sup> See, Alfred R. Mele, *Effective Intentions: The Power of Conscious Will*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> See, Sam Harris, *Free Will*, New York: Free Press, 2012; Gregory Bonn, 'Re-conceptualizing free will for the 21st century: acting independently with a limited role for consciousness', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2013, Vol. 4, [journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00920/full](http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00920/full).

Let us then consider the example of artist B, who, like artist A, can be said to be minimally affected by a conscious commitment to any form of collective ideology, values or shared mental representations - his artistic intentions appear to be an act of exercising his free will. Taking a clue from a recent conceptualisation of intention in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind, one might decompose his intentions into distal and prospective, or even more precisely into (i) distal (ii) proximal or immediate, and (iii) micro or motor intentions.<sup>23</sup> Now, let us suppose that his distal and proximal intentions are again totally unaffected by any form of constraint, let alone determinism, from the social and cultural context, that he is 'making his own decisions' at every stage in consciously thinking about, planning and executing his work. However, at the level of microintentions - the minimal communicative intention - or motor intentions,<sup>24</sup> which transpire in the actual course of image making, the situation is different. These (largely unconscious) perceptual, cognitive and motor acts through which the work comes into existence are certainly to some extent cognitively and culturally penetrable; in other words, such microintentions are formed not just by epigenetic factors and the individual experience of that particular individual, but also by his belonging to a certain cultural and social world. This, however, does not invalidate the freedom of artist B to exercise his conscious artistic intention. Free (artistic) will is thus not incompatible with a moderate, realist version of collectivism.

### **Why the debate about collectivism *vs* individualism in art history matters so much**

There is a rather puzzling sense in which Mitrović's story seems to imply that aberrations of essentialist thinking in art and culture are things of the past, no longer important for discourse in humanities or art writing and that the individualist vs collectivist debates have been settled for good, with the collectivist views proved wrong. He argues that since Gombrich's time, advances in psychology and the cognitive sciences have radically undermined the social constructivist case and collectivist antirealism is in retreat (128-30). But in fact, there is much evidence that his claim of the demise of collectivist antirealism is only wishful thinking and that rampant essentialism pervades much recent writing on art and culture. Although perhaps not as extreme as in the works surveyed in this book, concerns with ethnic and /or national determinations of symbolic forms, including art, are deeply entrenched and have not ceased to exert their influence on art history.<sup>25</sup> They may in fact have been revived, as observed by Irvin Lavin, by current preoccupation with multiculturalism.<sup>26</sup> In recent art history and visual studies, a few assumptions are as

<sup>23</sup> See, Elisabeth Pacherie, 'The content of intentions', *Mind Language*, 2000, Vol. 15 (4), 400-432; Elisabeth Pacherie, 'The phenomenology of action: A conceptual framework', *Cognition*, 2008, Vol. 107 (1), 179-217; Elisabeth Pacherie and Patrick Haggard, 'What are intentions?', Lyn Nadel and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, eds., *Conscious Will and Responsibility: A Tribute to Benjamin Libet*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 70-84.

<sup>24</sup> For a notion of microintentions, see Mark Rollins, 'What Monet Meant: Intention and Attention in Understanding Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2004, Vol. 62 (2), 175-188.

<sup>25</sup> See, Jonathan Alexander, 'Medieval Art and Modern Nationalism', Gale Owen-Crocker and Timothy Graham, eds., *Medieval Art: Recent Perspectives: A Memorial Tribute to C. R. Dodwell*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998, 206-23.

<sup>26</sup> Lavin 'Introduction', *Three Essays on Style*, 205; Kaufman, *Toward a Geography of Art*, 101-102.

widely accepted as the notion that vision is conventional and socially and culturally constructed and determined. Most such notions ('Mesopotamian visual experience', 'late antique period eye', 'early medieval vision', 'early Netherlandish visuality', 'Chinese visuality of the Ming period', or 'Mayan visual habits and visual tradition') assume the apriori determination of modes of perception and cognition, which, however, cannot be supported by empirical findings since the cultural groups in questions no longer exist and are mostly retroactively inferred from surviving objects.

More importantly, new and highly virulent versions of essentialism and antirealism affected humanities in the last few decades, often with clear genetic links to those German predecessors surveyed in the book under review. Bryson's work on the social determination of perception discussed by Mitrović, while once influential, is by far not the most extreme articulation of the widespread views forwarded by poststructuralist, postcolonial, feminist and other thinkers, that perception (and art creation) are socially and discursively determined. For many voices in art history and visual studies, the commonly shared biological basis of human cognition is certainly not 'an elementary fact' (130), and one suspects that for some theorists, human nature is a dirty word. At their most extreme formulations, this discourse presents claims as irrational and bizarre as the essentialist claims of the German historians surveyed by Mitrović. The pervasive influence that strongly constructivist views implying cognition and perception are determined by one's class, political, gender or sexual identity have had on writing about art and culture over recent decades hardly needs elaboration, and although the heydays of these ideologies and their influence on current disciplinary practice in art history and theory might be finally over, it would be certainly premature to declare their demise. The psychological, social and cognitive essentialism that pervades much postmodern theorising about art may be more subtle but it is equally misleading and in need of dismantling as that of its German predecessors.

Art history indeed cannot avoid questions about the actual creative agent, whether it is the individual artist or some collective entity, as noted by Mitrović (63). It seems all the more imperative then to seek new ways of thinking about the mutual co-constitution of creating and perceiving individuals and the cultures in which they are embedded, ones which would avoid the dogmatic determinism found in much of the German historiographic tradition and postmodern theory, but would not disregard collective entities as explanatory phenomena. The fascinating and challenging problem then lies in specifying the precise nature of cultural and social modulations on the perception, cognition and action involved in the creation and perception of works of art. This is, of course, not a new programme, because the sociology of culture and art, from Dilthey and Mannheim to Baxandall, Geertz and Bourdieu, has, in one way or another, sought to identify the nature of the interrelationship between artistic (cultural) phenomena and the socio-cultural practices and structures of experience both on the macro and the micro level. The abovementioned developments in the cognitive sciences and cultural neuroscience may provide a critical window of opportunity to take up such problems with a new vigour. Two closely related conceptual challenges stand out.

First, to develop an analytical construct that is well suited to examining the relationship between individual creativity and the reception of cultural artefacts and the supra-individual effects of society and culture. This might involve reconsidering (in the light of new insights into human cognition) the explanatory potential of such collectivist constructs as Wilhelm Dilthey's 'acquired mental nexus' and 'effective context', Karl

Mannheim's notion of *Gesamtwollen* (the overall tendency of cultural formation),<sup>27</sup> along with Geertz's notion of sensibility, Bourdieu's habitus, Zerubavel's optical community and Baxandall's period eye.<sup>28</sup> There is certainly an opportunity for art history and historiography to avail itself of recent developments in those disciplines that are wrestling with the problems of individual-collective co-determination. Realist theories of social collectives in contemporary sociological theory, which suggest how various forms of collectives condition but do not determine, in any strong sense, individual actors offer instructive frameworks,<sup>29</sup> and the same can be said of the concepts of cultural models, schemas and scripts, used in cultural psychology and cognitive sociology.<sup>30</sup> Analogous concerns pervade efforts within cultural neuroscience to move away from static, rigid and essentialist notions of culture towards more dynamic views which operationalise cultures on a different basis – for example, according to a set of competences (such as language), practices or beliefs.<sup>31</sup> The second and related challenge concerns the need to define the explanatory collective vis-à-vis the particular historical phenomenon the historian is interested. The obvious problem has to do with the fact that people are constituted by belonging to multiple collectives simultaneously. National, racial or gender characteristics likely affect cognition much less than one's belonging to a certain professional or status group at the micro-historical level. Admittedly, specifying the actual dynamics involved in the mutual interaction (looping effect) between the individual brains/minds that are perceiving and creating works of art and the collectives to which they belong remains a difficult proposition, as it cannot rely on any empirical data in the case of dead subjects.

Branko Mitrović's book puts the problem of individualism vs collectivism back at the centre of the theoretical agenda of philosophy of art and art historiography, and with its strongly expressed position provides an indispensable point of reference for future debates. This alone makes it essential reading for a broad audience, interested in the

<sup>27</sup> For a penetrating analysis of Mannheim's sociology of culture, see Jeremy Tanner, 'Karl Mannheim and Alois Riegl: from Art History to the Sociology of Culture', *Art History*, 2009, Vol. 32 (4), 755-784; and for a discussion of further sociological concepts of collective subjectivity developed by German thinkers, such as 'mental set', see Ian Verstegen, 'The "Second" Vienna School as Social Science', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2012, Vol. 7; and Ian Verstegen, 'Materializing Strukturforschung', Mitchell Frank and Daniel Adler, eds., *German Art History and Scientific Thought*, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2012, 141-160.

<sup>28</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'Art as a Cultural System', *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books, 1983; Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1998; Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

<sup>29</sup> For an elaborate ontology of social worlds, see Frédéric Vandenberghe, 'Avatars of the Collective: A Realist Theory of Collective Subjectivities'.

<sup>30</sup> Examples of contributions from cultural psychology include Roy D'Andrade, 'Some propositions about the relationship between culture and human cognition', James Stigler, Richard Shweder and G. Herdt, eds., *Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Michael Cole, *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline*, Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap Press (Harvard University Press), 1998; Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes*; Karen Cerulo, *Culture in Mind: Toward a Sociology of Culture and Cognition*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Kai Vogeley and Andreas Roepstorff, 'Contextualizing culture and social cognition', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2009, Vol. 13 (12), 511-516.

theory and philosophy of both art history and history. There are many lessons to be taken from his exposition of the perils of essentialism and even those readers who find his exorcism of collectivist thoughts too radical should heed his passionately argued warnings against the intellectual and moral failures of their excesses.

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