

## The invention of the homogeneity and continuity of peoples. Or the essential ethnicization of art history

Review of:

Eric Michaud, *Les Invasions barbares. Une généalogie de l'histoire de l'art*, nrf essais Gallimard, 2015, 304 pages, 14 b. & w. illus., 23 €, ISBN 978-2-07-012265-3

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Do not be surprised if you leave Eric Michaud's books with a strange feeling of despair: he works on the dark side of art history that not only involves academic purposes but implicates the whole relation of the discipline to humanity. For some art historians, Eric Michaud acts against his own discipline where he has, among other fields, been distinguished for his work on the art of the Third Reich.<sup>1</sup> His critical approach to the mental and discursive structures that underlie art history and express nationalistic and racist conceptions is indeed merciless and at some points brutal. But not as much as that which he is describing and that still needs to be openly reflected upon. When his book came out in 2016, the first reactions which could be witnessed were often more than reserved: the resistance to his work recalling the attitude towards those who were called the 'Nestbeschmutzer' when they started – in the 1990s – to open the ideological files of their academic predecessors, especially from the Nazi era. One year later, his book was on everyone's bookshelf and there was, in French universities, no seminar on the history of art history where his name was not quoted. As Michaud recently retired from the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, a major centre for a committed art history with a strong, critical ideological agenda, the impact of his writings, especially on the younger generation of French art historians, is actually more palpable than ever. In fact, if he is absolutely right in his analysis, commanding respect for the tenacity with which he has tracked and read in depth the texts of art historians from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, it is also true that *Les invasions barbares* is irritating in some aspects for the unilateral reading that he proposes for the whole of art history. As Michaud is, of course, aware of the fact that he shed light on crucial knots while leaving others in the shadow, his book appears as clearly committed to the revelation of unwanted and disturbing material rather than to a balanced overview of the debates and conflicts within the field of art history – and human sciences – where the positions he describes are one – even a major – aspect of a more complex system.

It is not too much to say that the *Invasions barbares* is the result of twenty years of obstinate investigation into the very fundamentals of art history, a discipline strongly rooted in the human sciences. In fact, the first step appears

<sup>1</sup> Eric Michaud, *Un art de l'éternité. L'image et le temps du national-socialisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996; translated as Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, translated by Janet Lloyd, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004.

already in Michaud's work on art and art history during the Nazi Era. The racist and anti-Semitic thesis that gained visibility, official legitimacy and brutal application during this period did not appear *ex nihilo* and Eric Michaud had already to engage in a close reading of eighteenth and nineteenth-century German writings to start an archaeology of these constructions. In 1996, he published his first separate essay on nationalism and racism in art history in the review *Critique*,<sup>2</sup> and it formed the fertile ground from which the present book has grown. When this first article was republished in 2005 in association with four other essays in *Histoire de l'art. Une discipline à ses frontières*, Michaud sketched out a comprehensive ensemble of the ideological counter-effects of the invention of art as an autonomous phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> While the nineteenth century invented the myth of art as a separate activity, with its own time and space, art history, as a new discipline, aimed to build itself as an autonomous field of knowledge with a separated history. Converging with political agendas in a divided Europe, which provided the laboratory for this discipline, 'art history' took the helm of the old 'artist history', operating through new kinds of divisions. As the elaboration of nations was at the core of nineteenth-century Europe, art history became more than a tool in shaping the concepts of nation and race. In the central chapter of this book, 'Nord-Sud. Du nationalisme et du racisme en histoire de l'art' ('North-South. About nationalism and racism in art history'), he came back to major reference points for the discipline, showing how the field has constructed its object as an expression of the genius of a nation, of the people (*peuple*) or of the race across history. The autonomy of art thus appears as the autonomy of this national or racial genius. Michaud exemplifies his thesis by showing how the polarization of North and South has structured the conception of culture and art from the late eighteenth century to become a sort of accepted *topos*, even in the texts of evidently non-racist art historians like André Chastel.<sup>4</sup> The authors that Michaud puts under close reading belong to the respected – mainly German and French – fathers of art history from Karl Schnaase to Viollet-le-Duc, Hippolyte Taine, Louis Courajod, Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin. Scrutinizing their erudite argumentation, Michaud shows how art became the place of essentialist definitions of Latin or Nordic identities (France being alternately either assimilated to or differentiated from the Latin/Italian/Roman culture).

In the *Invasions Barbares*, this core analysis goes a step further in transforming this 'North-South' axis into the decisive shift towards modernity. From his point of view, the Barbarian invasion of the Roman Empire, which gives the title to the book, appears as the 'decisive event by which the West had engaged in modernity, that is, in the awareness of its own historicity'. Michaud therefore intimately links the very birth of modern historical thought, of which art history is a manifestation, with this ideological re-reading of an episode that saw the fulfilment of a 'physiological, cultural and political rejuvenation of the peoples of the Empire' (p. 11). Michaud develops this first axiom in the light of another one; that of the

<sup>2</sup> Éric Michaud, 'Nord-Sud (Du nationalisme et du racisme en histoire de l'art. Une anthologie)', *Critique : revue générale des publications françaises et étrangères*, 1996, 163-187.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Michaud, *Histoire de l'art. Une discipline à ses frontières*, Paris: Hazan, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> André Chastel, 'L'art du monde : le problème des "universaux"' in Irving Lavin, ed, *World Art. Themes of Unity in Diversity*, University Park and London, 1989, volume I, 15-18.

anthropological conception, inherited from ancient texts, of a 'homogeneity and continuity of "foreign" peoples' (p. 12). Michaud considers that it is 'on such anthropological models that art history has been built': the idea of homogeneity and continuity that makes it possible 'to describe the objects produced by peoples presumed homogeneous and remaining from century to century always identical to themselves' and in so doing to make 'these objects the irrefutable testimonies of this identity'. Michaud goes so far as to place the cultural re-evaluation of the Barbarian invasion within the continuity of Winckelmann's approach to art history based on the principle of 'automimesis'. According to that principle, each people produced art in its own physical resemblance. For Michaud, the racialization of art that invaded the artistic literature during the next two centuries was elaborated by invoking this principle of 'automimesis' that implied the biological origin of different styles.

In Michaud's eyes, the organic bond between a people and its art constituted by Winckelmann, meant it became customary to apprehend this art no longer as a social activity, in the way of Caylus, but as a natural function of the body of a people, as a kind of secretion of the body of the nation taken as a whole. Only then did a theory of the genetic transmission of styles become possible. All metaphors suggesting that the transmission of forms was not social but genetically hereditary, were borrowed from the model of plant reproduction, and, even more, human reproduction.

In his first chapter Michaud offers an introduction to the genesis of the vocabulary that was used in French artistic literature (school, taste, manner, etc.). Based on extensive citations from Roger de Piles, he makes clear how the difference between 'taste' (*goût*) and 'manner' (*manière*) could lead to initial assertions on the specific qualities of communities, the one being more oriented toward the spiritual, the others more to the manual aspects – taste becoming related to the idea of a civilization's achievement. Classifications of achievement became hierarchies of artistic values between nations while the question of what distinguished the nations could be totally contradictory and interchangeable. At one time, the absence of any specificity could be valued as the expression of the highest achievement in the case of French art (Antoine Pernety) or the British school (David Hume). As Michaud states it, the construction of 'national' characters at that early time of European cosmopolitanism was strongly related to the social categories of the elites. And there was a place for other approaches. Michaud here puts the work of Anne Claude Philippe de Turbieres, count of Caylus, a real 'sociologist of ancient worlds' into the spotlight (p. 39). Caylus turns out to be the perfect counterpart to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, father of the 'history of style' (Jacob Burckhardt, 1845) with which he transformed art history into a branch of the history of civilization. Within the omnipresent discussions on national characters, Caylus appears to have paid attention to the mobility of art works and art qualities. He sees in ancient works the evidence of relations and exchanges, even in a relation of domination or (weak) imitation. But the mixing of 'national tastes' is not deplored here as the loss of original purity: on the contrary it awakes his interest in processes of transmission, adoption and imitation (a sort of prefiguration of what has been at the core of the 'cultural transfers' in the late twentieth century). His empirical approach not only

questioned 'national' qualities but also the chronology and the scholarly attempt at dating objects (p. 41-42). In opposition to the 'modest spirit and free enquiry' that characterize the *Recueil d'antiquités* by Count Caylus, Michaud sees the immense ambition of Winckelmann with his aim to write a doctrinal system into the history of art in his *History of Ancient Art*. While Caylus had sketched out a horizontal mimetic process, neutralizing the vertical mimesis of the transmission of forms from one generation to the next, Winckelmann inaugurates a new biological conception of style which is strictly vertical and hierarchical. The cause of the diversity of art among nations is explained by the physical diversity of peoples: only the ancient Greeks, favoured by nature, had been able to build their beautiful human anatomy with the gymnasium's physical exercises, mixing *physis* with *paideia* to produce the living ideal models in whose images they made their gods. According to Winckelmann, each people of antiquity had developed a particular style that rose and died with them. And yet, Michaud points out that Winckelmann, all the while claiming that the life of a style was to be entirely identified with the life of its people, nonetheless extolled, in an utterly contradictory way, the atemporality of classical art - a norm set up against the art of his time, which he saw as decadent.

Michaud shows the lasting effect of Winckelmann's model in the conception of 'schools' in the nineteenth century, and its domination of mainstream literature. Symptomatically Hippolyte Fortoul relaunched a fundamental critique of Caylus' approach of diversity when he wrote for the *Encyclopédie nouvelle* in 1841 that his epoch had fortunately repossessed the question of truth when considering schools as like a human being.<sup>5</sup> For Michaud one major catalyst for the idea of the morphologic unity of schools was the spatial organization of museums at the end of the eighteenth century when, as he presents it, an associative way of hanging was replaced by a systematic arrangement of art works by national schools - as was the case in the Louvre. If, of course, a closer look at other French and European museums, private galleries and exhibition spaces in the early nineteenth century would challenge this idea of a radical turn, Michaud is right in saying that the systematic display bore the danger of fossilizing racial if not racist categories. And while retracing the semantic transformations of the school concept during the nineteenth century, he shows how the terms nation, people (*peuple/Volk*) and race were more and more recurrent as well as interchangeable. When the idea of physiological heredity (the people as one body over several generations) was doubled by the idea of psychological heredity, it gave a complete framework to the concept of race - even if fluctuating and contradictory. Eric Michaud underlines here the extent to which Morelli's fundamental works are inhabited by these ideas, with a method of analysis integrating the racial categorizations that will soon lead to the characterization of 'racial' traits such as the 'Jewish nose'.

On the eve of the celebrations for the birth of Winckelmann, Michaud strives to demonstrate that the whole system he invented is not only paradoxical in essence, but that he had above all founded, through his principle of self-mimesis, a racist

<sup>5</sup> Hippolyte Fortoul, 'Peinture', in Pierre Leroux and Jean Reynaud ed, *Encyclopédie nouvelle ou Dictionnaire philosophique, scientifique, littéraire et industriel offrant le tableau des connaissances humaines au XIXe siècle*, t. V-VII, 1841, 357-404, here 374 (quoted in Michaud, 47).

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hierarchy of men and art. The question of imitation is at the heart of Winckelmann's reflection on ancient art, with the preliminary paradox that it would be necessary to imitate the ancients to become inimitable and even more so that the Germans should become Greeks.<sup>6</sup> Michaud returns at length to Winckelmann's idealization of the Greek body, whose sexual dimension is hardly mentioned, even if the ideal of freedom he associates with it is also its expression. Idealism is reversed in naturalism when he believes that gods are forged in the image of men. The hierarchy that results from this naturalized idealism, the geometric perfection reinjected into biological categories, durably informs the perception of the works but also and especially the way of representing men and races as shown by the plates of Virey or Nott where the ancient sculptures are opposed to the figures of black persons or animals.

All this led art historian Carl Schnaase to write symptomatically in his *Geschichte der bildenden Künste* that 'the finest and most characteristic features of a people's soul can only be known through its artistic creations'.<sup>7</sup> Michaud reminds us of this in the preamble to his shortest and most bitter chapter in this volume, 'A New Barbarian: The Jew without Art'. The title is disturbing because the role of the barbarian is reversed, but what he retraces here is the anti-Semitism that has gradually endorsed the idea of Jews as a people without art. The (relative) religious prohibition on shaping images of the living gives way, particularly in Richard Wagner's writings, to the thesis of a hereditary problem of race, which condemns Jews to no longer be part of (art) history and therefore of humanity. One might have thought that after 1945 it was no longer possible to affirm that race determined the nature and form of artistic objects. The deadly consequences of these theses should, it seems, have discredited them definitively. But Eric Michaud shows in his epilogue that the leitmotif of ethnic permanence reappears very early on after World War II and he cites in particular French examples postulating that a Gallic or Celtic character has characterized French art over the ages. In fact, attempts at ethnic definitions have resurfaced throughout Europe and the United States and the fantasy of a constitutive rivalry between Latin and Germanic culture has been reactivated in various ways (from Pevsner to Rosenblum). In a symptomatic and parallel way, the idea of a resistance by the original savagery against the dominant culture has contributed to reinforcing the idea of an organic unity of art and race over time. After 1945, there were many celebrations of the wild energy of the Barbarians that would have characterized resistance to imperialism of classicism. Michaud concludes his study with the modern invention of indigenous arts and traditions, as in the Inuit or Aboriginal cases, to show the vitality of these fantasies of an art produced by an ethnic group. He reminds us of its economic power in a globalized art market that continues to convey ideological concepts that motivated the beginnings of art history.

Eric Michaud traces the racist and anti-Semitic axioms of art history and it appears that these axioms have informed the very systems of classification and

<sup>6</sup> Here the direct political meaning of this should be emphasized and the question of a confrontation between Greek and Roman legacy more precisely analyzed.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Schnaase, *Geschichte der bildenden Künste*, Düsseldorf: Julius Buddeus, 1843, I, 86-87.

categorization which are still used by most professionals in the field. In this sense, his very didactic approach to key figures from Winckelmann to Wölfflin is salutary. But as necessary as Michaud's work is, it also raises some concerns, particularly about the way in which it relies on authors and quotations, which are used a little too often as an argument of authority, as when he quotes Joseph von Goerres in the introduction: "'This was the image of invasions that remained in people's minds for a long time'" (p. 12). Michaud wrote,

this powerful image [which] carried with it representations of vigorous peoples, overflowing with a creative instinct that was sorely lacking in the peoples who were subject to them [the Romans]. By spreading throughout the Empire, the new blood of the Barbarians had not destroyed anything: it had preserved the old while bringing a new art, necessarily anti-Roman and anti-Classical, whose heritage was still evident throughout Europe fifteen centuries later.

However, this image is intrinsically linked to a very pressing contemporary situation, of a German Empire shaken by Napoleon. Through references to authenticity, the native origin of the Germanic peoples then became a leitmotif of nationalist literature that stylized the French enemy of the time as an imperial Rome that has become decadent and deadly (as can also be seen in Fichte, *Addresses to the German nation*, 1807-1808). Michaud himself insists, a few lines later, on the fact that 'the position of the observer, in time and space, is always decisive in the writing of history' (p. 13). But, if Michaud takes care to evoke the position of current historians who no longer consider that the barbarian peoples were homogeneous (they were instead Burgundians, Saxons, Goths, Vandals, Franks, etc.) - even if some authors still claim to write a 'unified' history of the Germans 'from the entrance of the Germans into the Western world until the reunification of 1990' - he quickly returns to the 'fiction of a common Germanity for these populations' which would have made the thesis of the 'Germans' as 'the source of modern Europe' easy. Michaud is perfectly right to situate the birth of these discursive constructions in 'an anti-French patriotism of the eighteenth century' (which was also directed against the 'romanism' of the Prussian king Frederick II). Quoting excerpts by the Earl of Hertzberg and Herder, Michaud concludes that 'it is such fictions of "racial" unity that enabled the next two centuries to turn barbaric invasions into a decisive episode in the eternal war of the "Germanic races" against what would soon be called the Latin races'. This fiction is very clearly influential and one can even say dominant for the history of European human sciences around 1800.<sup>8</sup> But is it still possible, despite all this obvious weight, to make the authors he cites the moral authorities for a whole history of art, even though among German intellectuals, with Goethe in the lead, this kind of discourse and ideological positioning was contested from the outset? The positions are often presented in context but in such an immobile and

<sup>8</sup> No need to say that I am convinced of this: France Nerlich, 'Latinité vs. Germanité : un fantasme identitaire de l'histoire de l'art allemande', *Lendemains. Zeitschrift für Frankreichforschung*, 133:1, 2009, 162-176

uncontrasted manner that there seem to be no flow between the texts, no fluctuations, no possibilities of nuances and transformations, even in the very positions of the authors he invokes. There are not many ways out of such dense coherence. This is probably what causes the despair evoked at the beginning, the impression of suffocating in this discipline. While divergent and critical proposals appear almost immediately, and while the art works themselves breach the stereotypes and hierarchies, there seem to be no way out of this very sinister system. However it would have been worth highlighting here the alternatives and oppositions to the system he describes. The tension between Caylus and Winckelmann resonated throughout the nineteenth century, as did other voices worried and sickened about totalizing and nationalistic speeches. If Caylus is challenged in the nineteenth century, it might be an argument for his still vivid presence in discussion. And isn't there a sort of line leading from Caylus to Warburg in the conviction that the migration of peoples and images was inherent to the very production of art? One would like to multiply the examples cited with, among others, those by Michela Passini in her brilliant works on the history of art history, like the short article by Warburg responding to the exhibition of the French Primitives in 1904 noting that Florentine painting was missing from the narrative.<sup>9</sup>

Since his 2005 book, Eric Michaud has had a profound impact on a whole generation of French art historians who have been researching cultural transfers over the years. His books have made the need to deconstruct the 'authorities' more urgent, but in response, researchers have also examined the flaws and twists and turns of his multiple layered discourses, in and around the scholarly and academic circles. In a recently completed and remarkable thesis on the art critic Julius Meier-Graefe, Victor Claass shows the inner paradoxes of the critic's positions, but also his lifelong struggle against the too narrow and stifling contours of a Germanness invented against the South.<sup>10</sup> As Eric Michaud himself says 'Art History is the history of collective expectations that are inscribed in certain objects made to quench or satisfy them' (2005). And the divergence of expectations also challenges those he describes and analyses so well.

Michaud's work is necessary, as are all those who critically question the ideological foundations of our discipline. While some of its arguments would benefit from being better anchored in a specific context that would allow a more precise understanding of who is speaking when and for what purpose, its analysis is nevertheless essential. Its purpose is not to demonstrate that art history was a more racist discipline than others. It was (it is) as much so as others, as long as it aimed, like the other social sciences, to classify, organize and prioritize peoples according to physiological and psychological characteristics. However, this reflex of associating a work with the expression of an ethnic group, a collective desire or a biological origin is still alive and it is one of the most widespread commonplaces to want to detect in

<sup>9</sup> Aby Warburg, "Per un quadro fiorentino che manca all'esposizione dei Primitivi francesi" in *Revista d'arte*, 5, 1904, 84-86. See the books by Michela Passini, in particular *La fabrique de l'art national : le nationalisme et les origines de l'histoire de l'art en France et en Allemagne, 1870 - 1933*, Paris: Éd. de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Victor Claass, *Julius Meier-Graefe contre l'impressionnisme*, PhD thesis, Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2017.

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a work the expression of a people's genius. In this way, these discourses convey not only the idea that culture is *in* nature but also that it *proceeds* from nature. No need to say, that in that perspective, this book is an indispensable antidote.

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