

Search for a method: a reassessment of Hegel's dialectic in art history*

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Introduction

Within the context of Anglophone academia, graduate students in art history regularly attend seminars dedicated to critically analysing theoretical approaches in their discipline. They are presented with a multitude of modes of thinking posited as distinctive methodologies: phenomenology, social history, psychoanalysis, feminism, post-structuralism, queer-gender theory and, more recently, speculative realism/materialism. From this, students learn about the basic structure of methods, after which they develop their own orientation in relation to whichever approach they are convinced is pertinent to their research.

As expositions of the history and theory of art history over the last three decades have demonstrated, the discourse on methods in art history constitutes a dynamic field of unresolved problems and possibilities.¹ Yet, this field seldom touches on an unquestioned presupposition: whether or not art history can be said to either have or require a method. This essay offers an analysis of the problem of method within art historical scholarship by isolating a salient moment in the history of its disciplinary crystallisation: the sense that the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel developed a 'dialectical method' that was subject to broad critical appropriation and contestation within the field. As I will show, the historical reception of Hegel's philosophy within art history is marked by a peculiarly underexplored contradiction—namely, that his 'dialectical method' is considered central to the formation of the discipline even though it is not at all clear whether it can be said with full assurance that Hegel constructed a method.

* I would like to thank Kamini Vellodi for her invaluable critical insights and suggestions.

¹ Over the course of the last three decades, there has been a slow and steady flow of publications on art historical methodology. See: Dana Arnold (ed.), *Art History: Contemporary Perspectives on Method*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010; Anne D'Alleva, *How to Write Art History*, London: Laurence King, 2006; Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006; Anne D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History*, London: Laurence King, 2005; Elizabeth Mansfield (ed.), *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002; Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996; and E.C. Fernie, *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, London: Phaidon, 1995.

It is well known that Hegel's philosophy—and, in particular, his *Aesthetics: Lectures on the Philosophy of Fine Art*—is a salient moment in the disciplinary formation of modern academic art history. Foundational art historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl and Erwin Panofsky have all, in some respects, developed art historical practices that are permeated by Hegelian notions of the transformation of socio-historical life and the function of art in relation to that life.² In the post-War period, there was, as I will explore in more detail below, some resistance to the Hegelian character of the beginnings of modern art history. This resistance focused, in large part, on the basic structure and consequences of Hegel's metaphysics and the so-called 'dialectical method' that undergirded it. More recently, however, there has been a renewed interest in the Hegelian mediation of art historical practice. Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville's *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* is of special significance in the recent return to Hegel as it explicitly sets into question the problem of art historical methodology—brought into sharp relief as an obstacle to the potentiality of art historical research due to its reductive conflation with 'theory.'³

For Iversen and Melville, the object or objectivity of art history is not a determined effect of a method elaborated outside of the act of art historical practice. Rather, 'art history is a discipline of texts, integrally informed by practices of reading and writing, and [art history] can find neither its object nor its proper objectivity apart from such practices.'⁴ Accordingly, the emphasis on problems of methodology is shifted to the more complicated issue of the *immanent* formation of the subject-matter (the object or objectivity) of art history. Art historical knowledge is not premised on methods qualified extrinsically to the object of study. Rather, it is internally constituted from out of the processes of knowledge production.⁵ The authors touch on a cornerstone of Hegel's philosophical enterprise here—namely,

² For an exposition of Hegel's dialectical contradiction of art as conditioned by history and essentially irreducible to those conditions within art historical scholarship, see Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982.

³ Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

⁴ Iversen and Melville, *Writing Art History*, 152. There has been a gradual interest in art historical writing over the last three decades. See especially, James Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing*, University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 1997 and Patricia Emison, *The Shaping of Art History: Meditations on a Discipline*, University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 2008.

⁵ The clarification of a method before (and outside) the practice of art history can perhaps be identified as a Neo-Kantian orientation. I take Otto Pächt's reflections on method in *The Practice of Art History* are a paradigmatic example of this Neo-Kantianism. The latter is crystallised in Pächt's allegory of train embarkation as figure of the fundamental problematic in art historical scholarship: 'When we travel, we first make sure we get on the right train.' Otto Pächt, *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*, trans. Christopher S. Wood, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, 19.

that thinking in Hegelian (and post-Hegelian) philosophy is presuppositionless.⁶ Methodology is not structurally sequestered from the mechanisms of disciplinary scholarship. The discipline itself, the movement of its own discourse, produces its own disciplinary character.⁷ The very idea of an immanently self-moving discipline inflects the subject of art history with a profoundly Hegelian motif.

Iversen and Melville develop the immanent self-formation of art historical scholarship by exploring the Hegelian notion of 'plasticity'.⁸ 'Plasticity' is the conceptual abbreviation of the very act of the formation of art history's objectivity. Thus, it is the process itself, the name of the dynamics of the labour of theoretical construction. This is why, for Iversen and Melville, the writing of art history does not 'come essentially after art.'⁹ Rather, art's objectivity is constructed from out of writing and reading. This claim is provocative. So much so, that Iversen and Melville do not give direct expression to the consequences of their formulations: that art historical practice is the scene of the production of art and its history. Thus, art and history are not 'real' in the strong transcendental sense of the term (as the *a priori* condition of concepts of objects in general and not the objects themselves), but they are, rather, fictions understood as the reframing of the conflict between two orders of sense: the ensemble of processes that condition experience (of sensing)—in this case, the practices that determine art historical scholarship—and the act of comprehending that ensemble (of making sense of it).¹⁰

Despite its remarkably novel interpretation of the possible function of plasticity within art history, as well as the crucial underscoring of the Hegelian problematisation of much contemporary art history's reduction of 'theory' to questions of method, Iversen and Melville's reconstruction of Hegel's philosophy, and his negation of method, stops short of the more complex philosophical

⁶ The presuppositionless character of Hegel's philosophy has become an increasingly central problematic in Anglo-American Hegel scholarship. For one of the most detailed and systematic expositions of presuppositionless science from the standpoint of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, see Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic: From Being to Infinity*, Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006. For a broader presentation of Hegel's presuppositionless science, see William Maker, *Philosophy without Foundations: Rethinking Hegel*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994. For a more recent intervention, see Richard Dien Winfield, *From Concept to Objectivity: Thinking Through Hegel's Subjective Logic*, London and New York: Routledge, 2016.

⁷ Iversen and Melville, *Writing Art History*, 6.

⁸ Hegel's concept of 'plasticity' is developed in Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth Doring, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

⁹ Iversen and Melville, *Writing Art History*, 172.

¹⁰ This understanding of 'fiction' as the confluence and conflict of two orders of sense is developed by Jacques Rancière. It names one process of the 'distribution of the sensible.' For a useful breakdown, see Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran, London and New York: Continuum, 2010, 140-141.

consequences that Hegel extracts from out of the exposition of the limits of method.¹¹

Hegel's negation of philosophical methodology is directly connected to a higher-order conception of the subject as the process of its self-formation. As Hegel shows in the 'Introduction' to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—a famous section of the 1807 work that I will reconstruct in this essay—there can be no methodologically grounded separation between a knowing subject and an object known. Method, according to Hegel, is not an instrument through which a cognising agent seizes a thing cognised since *we* are both the subject and object of knowledge. The destruction of method, accordingly, lays the groundwork for Hegel's transition to a conception of speculative philosophy as social ontology. It is this shift from an analysis of the limits of meta-philosophical constructions of philosophical method to the expression of philosophy as the mode of presentation of the life of social being that remains utterly bewildering in Hegel—after all, who and what, exactly, is the 'we' in and of Hegel's philosophy?

What makes matters significantly more complicated is the way in which the transition from method to social being renders intelligible the metaphysical ambitions of Hegel's philosophy. The nature of Hegel's metaphysics—or, more precisely put, his speculative philosophy—is difficult to properly ascertain since it is determined by a dialectical contradiction between the critical restrictions placed on objective knowledge (truth) and the collapsing of a nominalist account of truth its reconfiguration as an immanent process of the becoming of social life, of what Hegel calls *Geist* (spirit). To condense this contradiction, one could say that Hegel's speculative philosophy locates truth within untruth. And this truth in untruth is what defines the knowledge of the self-movement of our social life—the 'we' that claims itself as its own subject but only in modes of miscomprehension and misrepresentation.¹²

¹¹ Another problem with Iversen and Melville's book is that it does not explore the manner in which practices of reading and writing are always socio-historically mediated practices—they are activities that contain within themselves processes, effects and pressures of a specific social configuration. For those of us working within the Anglo-American context, the practices of reading and writing constitutive of art history are structurally and ideologically overdetermined by the relations that form academic professionalism (competition amongst academic laborers, the relation of wages, the uneven development of full-time and part-time work, etc.). With this in mind, I believe that there is a deeper question that must be answered before one explores the practices of reading and writing: who is the subject of art historical scholarship? Or, more precisely put, how do individuals become subjects of art historical scholarship—what are the processes of subjectivation?

¹² This is why Theodor W. Adorno refers to Hegel metaphysics as the first to 'dirty its hands.' See his *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993, 35. In a somewhat similar sense, the dialectical contradiction at the core of Hegel's metaphysics is the basis for Jacques Derrida's claim that Hegel is 'the last

It is this contradiction between truth and untruth, played out at a highly sophisticated level of philosophical abstraction within Hegel's dialectical negation of method, that, I believe, underscores Hegel's importance for art history. It is the ambition of this essay to offer a preliminary study of this salience by first providing a critical assessment of the reception of Hegel's so-called 'dialectical method' within art history.

A metaphysical Hegel

It is now well known that Hegel's philosophy was pivotal within the disciplinary formation of European art history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historians inspired by Hegel such as Karl Schnasse, Hyppolite Taine, Franz Theodor Kugler, Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl, Hans Sedlmayr, and Erwin Panofsky, as well as anti-Hegelian scholars such as Karl Friedrich von Rumohr, Johann David Passavant and Otto Pächt were (ostensibly) 'densely engaged' with Hegel's philosophy.¹³ Today, however, Hegel's place in art history is increasingly more peripheral. His work is increasingly seen as part of art history's past rather than a mode of thought still operating at the core of the discipline.

The reasons for the disciplinary distancing from Hegel are grounded on the philosopher's overreaching and overly ambitious sense of the historical meaning and function of speculative metaphysics. The goal of philosophy was to offer a total, systematic science of science—that is, to construct a system of absolute knowledge. Since Ludwig Feuerbach's 1839 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy,' Hegel's speculative project has become increasingly recognised as the epitome of philosophy's self-annihilation. The reason for this was that philosophy posited itself as a teleologically pre-determined *philosophia ultima*—the final metaphysical articulation of the absolute knowledge of reality as such.¹⁴ Or, a kind of 'end of history' project, one that rids thought of its temporal character.¹⁵ All future concepts, phenomena, events, experiences—and, concomitantly, all forms of difference, negativity and chance—will have been folded into absolute knowledge in a way

philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing.' See his *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, 26.

¹³ The expression is Stephen Melville. See Stephen Melville, 'The Temptation of New Perspectives,' in Donald Preziosi (ed.), *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 274-283, 276. For an exposition of the Hegelian legacy of art historical scholarship in the Germanophone context, see Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* and Hatt and Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, 21-39.

¹⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, trans. Zawar Hanfi, London and New York: Verso, 2012, 53-96. On Feuerbach's critique of Hegel's absolute negation of time, see Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London and New York: Verso, 1995, 42-43.

¹⁵ For an explication of the 'end of history' doctrine, see Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

that indiscriminately negates the life of distinctions, unaccountable otherness and that which cannot be rationally calculated. In other words, Hegel's philosophy is a system that relativises all phenomena to mere reflections of an eternal and immutable philosophical *logos*.

This image of Hegel's speculative philosophy is not only frequently posited as an uncritical assumption within art history, but it is also denounced for its overreaching metaphysical claims.¹⁶ The denunciation of Hegel's metaphysics has arguably become a naturalised convention within the discipline since it has been calcified as a self-evident fact through institutional repetition. Hegel's work has been judged by the court of history and scholars can denounce his work only by the force of mere assertion. Consequently, relatively little exposition of Hegel's philosophy at the adequate level of philosophical abstraction is ventured in the discipline. For this reason, one could be excused the rather straightforward question: is the art historical distancing from Hegel well grounded? To offer an answer to this question, I focus on one of the most enduring problematisations of Hegel's philosophy in art history: the structural logic and function of his 'dialectical method.'

A dominant critical interrogation of Hegel's method in art history is located in the work of E.H. Gombrich. In his 1970 *In Search of Cultural History*, the art historian offers a sequence of critical appraisals of significant art historical scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, noting their distinctively Hegelian mediation.¹⁷ Art history, and its broader predecessor *Kulturgeschichte*, are, for Gombrich, in need of rediscovering since it 'has been built, knowingly and unknowingly, on Hegelian foundations which have crumbled.'¹⁸ In other words, the search for cultural history is an open, ongoing intellectual inquiry, one that aims to to reground the understanding of culture—the customs, ideologies and everyday practices of given social formations—without recourse to Hegelian philosophy.

The Hegelian bedrock of cultural history and art history is fragile because it deploys what Gombrich calls an 'exegetic method': the theoretical process of basing different social practices on particular manifestations of symbolic social unity,

¹⁶ For example, see Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1995; Hans Belting, *The End of Art History?* Trans. Christopher S. Wood, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987; Keith Moxey, "Art History's Hegelian Unconscious: Naturalism as Nationalism in the Study of Early Netherlandish Painting" in Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey (eds.), *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; and Beat Wyss, *Hegel's Art History and the Critique of Modernity*, trans. Caroline Dobson Saltzwedel, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

¹⁷ E.H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969. For a useful overview of Gombrich's relation to Hegel, see David Summers, 'E.H. Gombrich and the Tradition of Hegel,' in Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (eds.), *A Companion to Art Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 139-149.

¹⁸ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 6.

namely, a community, cultural collective or nation—or, as Gombrich underlines, of spirit. Consequently, the method reveals how those practices are subordinated 'expressions' of spirit actualising itself.¹⁹ Importantly, the exegetic method is, for Gombrich, premised on a transcendent dialectical method: a frame of interpretation that maps itself onto all historical phenomena in such a way that it traces a univocal developmental formation of a given unity (spirit) by way of a mimetic principle—a 'likeness' that frames social practices as representations of broader historical processes that proceed them.²⁰

According to Gombrich, there are three fundamental problems with the Hegelian method. First, it recodes a strictly Christian notion of providential or teleological history onto social life, thus re-sacralising the profane, mundane world of culture.²¹ Second, knowledge of this providential history is knowledge only in a scholastic sense—an *a priori* deduction premised not on scientific rigour, but on the un-scientific devotion to the belief that all life must be propelled by a principle of sufficient reason.²² Third, this theological speculation on the unity and directionality of history is constituted by a transcendent agent called 'spirit'—an agency that is defined by the mission of its self-realisation; or, spirit as the subject of history that unfolds through 'the continuous Incarnation' of itself.²³ In a strong sense, spirit, as a philosophical reconfiguration of the narrative of God's life in logical form (his self-formation prior to creation, his negation in human form in the figure of Jesus and the negation of that negation in the crucifixion), is what gives sense to the metaphysical-theological conception of history as essentially eschatological.²⁴ Since spirit is absolutely central to the general structure and determination of Hegel's method, it is worth explicating in more detail Gombrich's understanding of this most notorious of Hegelian concepts.

For Gombrich, spirit is the manifestation of an 'independent supra-individual' entity that guides, in a definitively extrinsic relation to individuals, socio-historical life toward its perfection and fulfilment.²⁵ Spirit is, then, a kind of hidden force, a 'cunning' agent that pulls the strings of life without it being in itself a

¹⁹ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 24.

²⁰ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 10, 32.

²¹ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 8. The reception of Hegel's conception of history (as teleological) will be explored in a separate study. For a strong, yet contentious, elaboration of Hegel's notion of history in art history, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 2005, 46-52.

²² Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 10.

²³ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 6.

²⁴ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 6.

²⁵ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 36. This notion of the 'supra-individual' directly links Hegel's philosophy to 'totalitarian philosophies' (of Nazism and Soviet Communism, especially). Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 36. The reference to Karl Popper's *The Open Society* is clear.

thing *in life*.²⁶ For Gombrich, the work of Erwin Panofsky is a paradigmatic example of an art historian's adherence to this Hegelian orientation. Construed from the standpoint of Gombrich's reflections, one could quite easily recognise the Hegelianism operative in Panofsky's conception of iconological meaning as the scientific attempt to grasp the 'underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion.'²⁷ Spirit is, following Gombrich's analysis, the Hegelian-metaphysical expression of what Panofsky means by 'underlying principles.'

Yet, for Gombrich, spirit is also a *progressing* being—it constitutes, from out of its own power, an ascent of itself into ever higher, more sophisticated manifestations of itself. For this reason, spirit is a movement whose unfolding is located outside the particularities of a given cultural conjunction. As extrinsic, or transcendental, spirit is posited by Gombrich as the 'key cause' (a sort of 'unmoved mover,' to inflect Gombrich's expression with an Aristotelian formulation) of all cultural manifestations and the 'inevitable' (teleological) point toward which all cultural forms find their philosophical explication.²⁸ Thus, all individuated social practices are subordinated reflections of an overarching metaphysical totality—'Hegel's holism,' as Gombrich puts it—which dissolves the singularity of individuals.²⁹

Gombrich recapitulates his polemical interpretation of Hegel's philosophical account of spirit's history, and the method of its exposition, in his famous essay, "The Father of Art History": A Reading of the Lectures on Aesthetics of G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831).³⁰ In this intervention, Gombrich reconfigures his attack on Hegel's speculative historicism by way of an acknowledgement of the philosopher's *Aesthetics* as the 'founding document of the modern study of art.'³¹ The reasons for this valorisation are clear: for Gombrich, Hegel's *Aesthetics* is the first attempt to offer a systematic, singular unity of art and its historical formation in the history of ideas. Hegel proposes a 'Universal history of art.'³² Such a history is premised on the eradication of the contingent character of historical time itself—

²⁶ I am making reference here to the infamous Hegelian thesis of the 'cunning of reason,' which is putatively construed as a kind of 'invisible hand' controlling history. For an alternative conception of the idea, one that explicitly rejects the sense of spirit (the subject of cunning) as instrumentally manipulating individuals, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton, Cambridge: Polity, 2014, 84-87.

²⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, 30.

²⁸ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 21.

²⁹ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 46.

³⁰ E.H. Gombrich, "The Father of Art History": A Reading of the Lectures on Aesthetics of G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), in *Tributes: Interpreters of Our Cultural Tradition*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1984, 51-69.

³¹ Gombrich, *Tributes*, 51.

³² Gombrich, *Tributes*, 52.

what Gombrich refers to as 'chance.'³³ By chance, Gombrich means occurrences that offer counter-proofs to, thus the fallibility of, metaphysical conceptions of history that try to internalise all phenomena to their *a priori* holistic vision. Chance is that point that interrupts systematicity and teleological methodology. It is, for Gombrich, that unknown dimension that disturbs the 'metaphysical optimism, which tries to convince us that ultimately everything is for the best.'³⁴ It is chance that de-sacralises spirit's historical self-actualisation. Moreover, chance dis-unifies spirit's history as an even harmonious totality.

It is clear that Gombrich is highly critical of the metaphysical-Christian conception of social time as providential history, and the concomitant assumption that isolated and localised social practices are directly reflected in broader social processes thus giving historical formation of culture an even, balanced development. That being said, he is also simultaneously cognisant of the essentially ambivalent nature of the mediation of Hegelian philosophy in his own work. Gombrich's 'cultural history,' and its grounding in the limits of a certain (Hegelian) art history, is, in some respects, structurally mediated by Hegel's thought. It is worth noting two important points of mediation.

The first is strategic. Gombrich constructs his own project by retroactively totalising a history of art/cultural history from the standpoint of its idealised unity (as grounded on Hegelian philosophy).³⁵ To reduce the historical development of European (mostly Germanophone) art historical scholarship to an Hegelian or post-Hegelian problematic is highly contentious. So much so, that it strikes the reader as historically and theoretically untenable (there are Kantian, Marxian and Nietzschean mediations, to name a few key thinkers in the modern European philosophical tradition).

The second structural mediation of Hegel's philosophy in Gombrich's reflections on *Kulturgeschichte* is theoretical in nature. The very idea of a cultural history as an aggregation of individual cultural contributions nevertheless always urges toward grasping a totality of sorts—that of the social totality of the 'people' that immediately follow Gombrich's declaration of an alternative (non-Hegelian) cultural history being grounded on individual human beings, and on the historical totality of uneven social development that imagines history not as a linear progress of ever-ascending evaluations of social life but an asymmetrical, internally unequal cultural formation.

³³ Gombrich, *Tributes*, 64.

³⁴ Gombrich, *Tributes*, 64. Gombrich makes note of the correlation between progress and ethical 'right' in *In Search of Cultural History*, 7.

³⁵ A paradigmatic example of historical and theoretical totalisation within the history of Hegel scholarship is found in Georg Lukàcs' overview of neo-Kantianism in the introduction to his *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations Between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, London: Merlin Press, 1975, xiv-xxx.

In relation to the social totality, Gombrich notes, 'I hope and believe cultural history will make progress if it also fixes its attention firmly on the individual human being. Movements, as distinct from periods, are started by people.'³⁶ The 'individual' is the emphasised point. So much so that Gombrich reveals the limit of the liberalist core of his thought by positing individuals as *a priori* free and rational enough to choose ('adopt') the customs of a given cultural movement. Individuals are, then, never ideologically interpellated, to borrow Louis Althusser's important concept.³⁷ They are not, then, threaded through by the ensemble of relational institutions and structures (such as familial, religious, professional, or legal) that determine a social formation. Significantly, these structures are not supra-individual nets that are cast over individuals but, rather, are constituted by our unconscious recognition of their function in society as naturalised mechanisms of our relationships. Moreover, in that they are experienced as wholly natural, individuals socially reproduce their function and power of domination on a daily basis. As interpellated, individuals never simply make autonomous decisions in relation to culture, as Gombrich seems to suggest at one point, but, rather, they appear always in the guise of determinate subjects ('father,' 'Protestant,' 'medical doctor,' 'citizen').³⁸ By stripping his work of a deeper understanding of the ideological formation of individuals within given socio-historical moments, Gombrich's post-ideological, liberal cultural history—a narrative of individuals who make decisions over their cultural productions—is profoundly ideological.

Apropos the totality of uneven cultural development, Gombrich's cultural history aims to give some sense to the principles that lie behind the asymmetrical relation of certain practices (for example, Baroque music or painting) to specific forces in given social formations (for example, the Counter-Reformation).³⁹ This, of course, is an important element in the distinction between *Kulturgeschichte* and *Geistesgeschichte*. Yet, Gombrich does not get very far in explicating how unevenness is a constitutive feature of history as such—and, more importantly, what the historical standpoint that conditions the possibility of this trans-historical judgement is. This, perhaps, is a consequence of his naïve identification of Hegelian philosophy with Marx's materialist conception of history—a conception that, in Marx's mature work, makes important contributions to the understanding of the

³⁶ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 37.

³⁷ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 37. On the function of ideological interpellation, see Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, London and New York: Verso, 2014, 171-207. For Marx's contribution to a theory of interpellation as the social abstraction of individuals into subjects, see his 'The Poverty of Philosophy,' *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels – Volume 6*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975, 159.

³⁸ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 37.

³⁹ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 37-38.

uneven development of capitalist society as an immanent process of its formation and life.⁴⁰

Across *In Search of Cultural History*, Gombrich struggles to resolve the fundamental ambiguity of Hegel's relevance in art history: that to some extent, it simultaneously renders the discipline possible by posing the structural relation of art to the cultural-historical life in which it exists, and initiates its hypostatization as a mode of historical inquiry by constructing a metaphysical conception of history in which all socio-historical transformation is predestined as a soon-to-be subsumed element within spirit's systematic self-actualization.⁴¹ To attempt to resolve this ambiguity, Gombrich aims to rid cultural history of the dialectical and exegetic method—a 'technique...which exerted a tremendous appeal'—since it is method that, in the last instance, constitutes the root of the disintegration of scientific foundation by positing as *a priori* given and known spirit's speculative reason.⁴²

Gombrich's attack on the metaphysical core of Hegel's notion of spirit and its history—which supposedly subsumes art and artists to mere reflections of its life force—has endured in art historical scholarship as the core of Hegel's methodology.⁴³ More recently, however, Gombrich's diagnosis of a speculative hermeneutics of history has been directly challenged.

⁴⁰ For some preliminary remarks on 'uneven development' in Marx's work, See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, London: Penguin, 1993, 109-111. I take Marx's, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy – Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin, 1990, (as well as the other two volumes and the *Theories of Surplus Value*) to be structurally premised on the historical formation of uneven development within capitalist societies. The dialectical relation of the law (state) and the valorisation process (capital) that is central to Marx's prefatory remarks (and is one reason why Marx focuses on England) is, I think, a manifestation of the dynamics of complex uneven social relations.

⁴¹ In temporal terms, this 'soon-to-be' internal to the system' character of Hegel's speculative system can be usefully crystallised by the 'future anterior.' Hegel's philosophy is composed, in part, in this tense. The other tense is the 'present perfect'—that historical moments are always already mediated by the processes that precede them. Hegel's conception of history—which I will explore in a future work—is defined by the contradictory relation of these two temporalities. For a philosophical exposition of the 'future anterior' character of Hegel's philosophy, see Louis Althusser, 'On the Young Marx,' *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, London and New York: Verso, 2007, 51-86.

⁴² Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 13. The 'appeal' of Hegel's 'technique' (method) introduces a highly ambiguous element in Gombrich's condensed diagnosis of cultural and art history: on the one hand, it is the interpretation of Hegel's method in Hegelian art history that reduces it to an infinitely repeatable schema, and on the other, it is only subject to such reduction since it is schematised in Hegel's work.

⁴³ One can detect enduring elements of Gombrich's analysis of Hegel in even some of his most subtle critics. See for example, James Elkins, 'Art History Without Theory,' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Winter 1988: 354-378 and *Stories of Art*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Elkins offers a similar instrumentalised reading of the basic structure of Hegel's philosophy of history (as progress via specific stages of development) to Gombrich.

A non-metaphysical Hegel

In his recent article 'Hegel's Contested Legacy: Rethinking the Relation Between Art History and Philosophy,' Jason Gaiger revivifies Hegel's philosophical exposition of art and its history against Gombrich's one-sided criticism of its metaphysical core.⁴⁴ Gaiger reminds us that Gombrich's critique of Hegel's metaphysics is mediated by Karl Popper's positivist conception of science. The recourse to Popper has wide-ranging theoretical consequences, principal of which being the restriction of art's history—divided into broad geopolitically specific areas and social practices, and separated into self-contained chronological periods—to a history that construes individual artists as subjects of historical transformation.⁴⁵

The positivist does not aim to verify pre-given hypotheses but, rather, is driven by establishing certitude based on the fundamental fallibility of scientific knowledge. Science is science in that it can be contested, corrected, overturned and countered. Hegelian philosophy, according to Popperian positivist science, is that which precisely does not allow for counter-examples that radically transform the system of speculative philosophy. The latter is, *a fortiori*, the absolute manifestation of the eradication of a transformative counter-example. The very systematicity of systematic thought is premised on barring the de-systematising power of fallibility. Yet, Gombrich's Popperian positivism is contradicted by the dissimulated problem

See his *Stories of Art*, 54-55. Vernon Hyde Minor's gloss of Hegel's place in art history is also largely mediated by Gombrich's formulations in so far as they posit spirit as a teleologically determined (and historically deterministic) mind that 'moves through history with an almost providential intention, and speed, so things turn out much the way they're supposed to which in fact is the self-realization of spirit.' See Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History*, Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994, 98. Donald Preziosi reproduces Gombrich's conflation of Hegel and Marx's method in *The Art of Art History*, 580. For Gombrich, Marx is simply an inverted Hegelian. His work, then, reproduces precisely the same problems that Hegel's does. See Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 26. Contemporaneous with Gombrich's lecture, Louis Althusser was developing a highly original structuralist interpretation of Marx's thought—premiered, amongst other things, on an "epistemological break" internal to Marx's work. It is the break that allows Althusser to develop a conception of a Marxian science that is liberated from its Hegelian mediation. The exposition of a Marxian science (of history) finds its most dynamic and contentious articulation in Louis Althusser et al., *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach, London and New York: Verso, 2016. My invocation of Althusser's work functions to show that the collapse of Marx into Hegel at the level of method is not so straightforward. It is, rather, an extremely lively debate in Marx scholarship in the 1960s—one that has by no means been resolved.

⁴⁴ Jason Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy: Rethinking between Art History and Philosophy,' *The Art Bulletin*, 93: 2, June 2011, 178-194.

⁴⁵ Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 179-182.

of the 'preconceived idea' that surreptitiously motivates all art historical scholarship as a kind of regulative *a priori*.⁴⁶

Gaiger shows how it is that Gombrich is cognisant of this, but does not explore how it is that the appeal to a unifying, transcendental element that grounds positivist analysis within art history dialectically undoes that positivism. In other words, Gombrich, Gaiger argues, is epistemologically ignorant of the dialectical contradiction that animates his work—namely, that a strictly positivist analysis of individual artists is uncritically presupposed on the abstraction of the cultural and historical relevance of certain artists, their work and their unification through the intellectual labour of art historical scholarship.⁴⁷ For Gaiger, then, Gombrich's work betrays an unconscious Hegelianism in spite of its careful attempt to disassociate itself from that philosophy and its unconscious mediation in art history. In so far as Gombrichian (Popperian) positivist perception of individual facts and counter-facts is threaded through with mediating ideas and concepts, Gombrich's work can be said to recycle, rather than rupture, the Hegelian perspective within art history—thus immanently deconstructing its attempt to establish a non-speculative *Kulturgeschichte*.

In contra-distinction to the one-sided charge of Hegel's metaphysics, which is grounded in an instrumentalised interpretation of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (and, although less prominently, the *Science of Logic*), Gaiger initiates a return to Hegel's analysis of art in the *Aesthetics*. This return is stimulated by the recent philosophical and philological work on the newly translated transcript edition of Hegel's lecture notes, rather than the standard edition that we have become so familiar with—edited by Hegel's student Heinrich Gustav Hotho.⁴⁸ What Hegel's transcripts reveal, contra Hotho's liberal editorial, is a set of experimental, non-teleologically driven and overly schematized reflections on the contradictory relation of art to its social meaning within a particular configuration of culture (or 'ethical substance' as Hegel calls it).⁴⁹ In other words, Hegel's notations disclose a thinking process that can be neither reduced to a one-dimensional metaphysics of history nor premised on a transcendental 'exegetic method' that is mapped onto all artistic and historical forms. It is, alternatively, a thinking that unfolds the subject-matter of art from out of its analysis. Nothing is speculatively pre-determined.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 181.

⁴⁷ Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 181.

⁴⁸ These have been translated into English (including Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert's long introductory essay). See G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art: The Hotho Transcripts of the 1823 Berlin Lectures*, trans. Robert F. Brown, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁴⁹ Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 186.

⁵⁰ It is Hotho who, according to Gethmann-Siefert, maps an extrinsic normative assessment of individual artworks rather than, as Hegel stresses, locating the status of art—their historical development and social function—within the work itself. That is, Hotho presents Hegel's reflections as a dogmatic system. See Gethmann-Siefert's 'Introduction,' *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*, 59. See also Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 186-187.

More specifically, the great merit of Hegel's transcripts of the lectures on the philosophy of art is, according to Gaiger, that it offers readers a set of theoretical coordinates that initiate a defamiliarisation of the two assumptions that govern the 'orthodox picture of Hegel.'⁵¹ The first assumption is the imposition of the *a priori* totality of a system on individual particularities (Gombrich's criticism); and the second concerns Hegel's conservative classicism—which functions as an ideal, normative model of art, whether past, present or future. Against the power of its ostensible timelessness, Gaiger contends that Hegel elaborates an understanding of the classical artistic era that stands in direct opposition to its status as abstract eternal ideality: the Greek aesthetic state is transitory, fully historical and contained within the ethical substance of the Greek *polis*—a social form in which individuals are embodied manifestations of their collective life and, because of this, can realise their totality within the total social form.⁵² This is why, for Hegel, artworks in Greece are works that personify the total aesthetic ideal of the city-state. The true artwork—the work in which all works are located and derive the particularity of their function—is, in other, words, the state itself.⁵³

Gaiger's work on the *Aesthetics* is refreshing when positioned alongside the art historical reception of Hegel's philosophy in the work of figures such as Gombrich. One of its strengths is that it prioritises Hegel's reflections on art rather than his presentation of philosophical history (or logic). Another is its identification of the instrumentalisation of philosophy in art historical practice—that is, of art historians 'using' concepts and idea located in philosophical works so as to comprehend what it is that they do and what it is they are trying to say. As Gaiger correctly notes—paying special attention, like Iversen and Melville, to the central issue of immanence in Hegel—such instrumentalisation provides 'a merely external treatment of philosophical positions and idea.'⁵⁴ In distinction to such treatment, 'art history's concurrence with philosophy must itself be philosophical.'⁵⁵ But in so far as it is philosophical, the concurrence between the two disciplines must be reconnected to the fundamental metaphysical commitment to truth that is constitutive of philosophy—for Hegel, to the systematic self-formation of truth. Without this commitment, philosophy would not be philosophy.

⁵¹ Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 184.

⁵² Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 187. By radically historicising the Greek aesthetic ideal, Hegel offers a critique of J.J. Winkelmann's canonical interpretation of the classical *Kunstperiode*.

⁵³ Hegel's reflections here are indebted to Friedrich Schiller's notion of the 'aesthetic state' as developed in letters 26 and 27 of *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Oxford: Clarendon, 1982, 191-219. For a detailed historical and theoretical exposition of the development of the concept of the aesthetic state, see Josef Chytrý, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

⁵⁴ Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 190.

⁵⁵ Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 190.

It is the appeal to the necessity of philosophical reflection (construed as emphatically philosophical) that undoes Gaiger's contention that within the *Aesthetics* lie a set of theoretical co-ordinates that help us navigate a non-metaphysical reading of Hegel. One example of how the undoing of the non-metaphysical by metaphysics plays out in Gaiger's essay consists in the meaning of the notorious Hegelian concept of *Geist*. According to Gaiger, we should rid the theologically overdetermined sense of 'spirit,' and favour instead 'mind.' The latter rendition is useful since it allows us to perceive that Hegel 'is simply reminding us that the social and cultural world is the product of human decision making and that our character and identity are formed, at least in part, through the institutions that we create.'⁵⁶ Gaiger's definition is not, of course, incorrect. *Geist* is, in part, a configuration of a world by humans; reason is intrinsic to the unfolding of social life—and is not, as Gombrich asserts, a transcendent, supra-individual subject.

Yet, this understanding of *Geist* as human subjectivity and its practices, rather than an elusive *Zeitgeist*, is philosophically inadequate for at least two reasons. First, it uncritically valorises a strictly (restrictive) materialist and anthropological interpretation of *Geist*, one that undoes the specifically speculative, trans-historical nature status Hegel confers it.⁵⁷ Second, it does not account for how it is that 'human decision making' is, for Hegel, a process that renders intelligible *Geist* as the higher-order subject that produces itself and knows itself as its own truth—that is, of its essentially metaphysical charge. *Geist*, for Hegel, is epistemologically and ontologically identical to truth. It is truth because it is the articulation of the 'absolute.' This is a fundamental aspect of *Geist*, one that cannot be spirited away by a non-metaphysical reading. This, of course, implies that Gombrich's analysis touches on an essential dimension of Hegel's work, but it does so only in a highly estranged and misconstrued way since it posits Hegel's sense of metaphysics outside of its explicitly non-metaphysical commitments.

Another limit to Gaiger's non-metaphysical interpretation of Hegel is that it aims to extract theoretical consequences from the experimental, open experience of the lecture hall.⁵⁸ This is all the more problematic since Hegel placed strong emphasis on the mode of presentation of philosophical work and its correspondence to the expression of spirit. The lecture may very well be a space that permits diverse intellectual ventures, but it is only one form of expression of philosophical science—that is to say, a single form of presentation of 'the comprehensive knowledge of the

⁵⁶ Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 180. The 'simply' in Gaiger's remark will turn out to be grossly misleading when we consider Hegel's negation of method in the next two sections.

⁵⁷ The most philosophically sophisticated anthropological readings of Hegel are still, to my mind, Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* and Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974.

⁵⁸ Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy,' 187.

absolute spirit.’⁵⁹ The latter, for Hegel, means that science ‘is grasped in the *form* of the concept, everything alien in knowledge is sublated and knowing has attained a complete equality with itself. It is the concept which has itself. It is the concept which has itself for content and comprehends itself.’⁶⁰

It is the form of the concept, its self-movement, that most adequately captures the sense of the science, which of course means, the structure and meaning of truth itself. This is because philosophical science is not the method of discovery the truth—as if it were a dissimulated thing out in the world—but, rather, it is the truth itself: ‘science does not *seek* truth but *is* in the truth and is the truth itself.’⁶¹ Moreover, it is because truth is the result of the process of spirit’s knowledge of itself as truth. The lecture is an inadequate form of presentation of truth since it lacks the capacity to capture the ‘comprehensive knowledge’—or, the totality—of spirit in its act of self-comprehension. This is because it does not know how to retroactively express the necessity of its experimental openness within the formation of a complete system. Put another way, the lecture is only one stage in the construction of a comprehensive knowledge of art. It is, then, integral to the process of the system but irrevocably inadequate to the form of spirit’s self-expression—the latter is, of course, the system.

In so far as the system of philosophical science, the highest mode of spirit’s articulation, is, for Hegel, truth itself, the issue of method is significantly complicated. It is unfortunate that Gaiger does not pause on the problem of method in Hegel. His essay gives the impression that a ‘non-metaphysical’ interpretation offers an alternative Hegelian method, one that rejects teleological metaphysics and systematicity and prioritizes a tarrying with the unresolvable contradictory status of certain social phenomena within given historical conjunctions (in this case, art as both distinctive social practice and mediated by the totality of social practices in a given conjunction—or, art as a practice that simultaneously urges toward its autonomy and comprehension of its ineluctable heteronomy).⁶² The basic problem of the confluence of Hegel and art historical scholarship is that of the nature and place of methodology.

As I will now explicate, Hegel developed a remarkably sophisticated analysis of method, one that suspends and complicates the assumption that there is such a thing as a ‘Hegelian method.’ To understand Hegel’s relation to

⁵⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophical Propaedeutic*, trans. A.V. Miller, eds. Michael George and Andrew Ciment, London: Blackwell, 1986, 169.

⁶⁰ Hegel, *Philosophical Propaedeutic*, 169.

⁶¹ Hegel, *Philosophical Propaedeutic*, 77.

⁶² In this sense, Gaiger’s reading of Hegel’s Aesthetics is indebted to Podro’s presentation of the dialectical contradiction of art (it’s two-fold nature) in Hegel—namely, that it is simultaneously irreducible to its historical conditions and yet absolutely inextricable from them. See Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, xviii-xx.

philosophical methodology, one needs to exit the *Philosophy of History* and the *Aesthetics*, and consider instead the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Methodology and dialectical movement

Hegel's problematisation of methodology takes as its point of departure some basic assumptions that define philosophical method within modern European philosophy. The most important contribution to the discourse of philosophical method—one no longer grounded on the authoritarianism of scholastic dogmatism but based on rigorous analysis—is René Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*.⁶³ As is well known, Descartes tried to ascertain the certainty of reason by first submitting his thought to radical doubt. It is only through doubt that one can establish what is most indubitable for knowledge.

The orientation of generalised scepticism became a central dimension of modern epistemologies and theories of methodological exactitude (to some extent, contravening an important foundational aspect of Descartes' project).⁶⁴ Philosophical method became understood as the necessary analysis of how to cognise the truth of what is prior to carrying out the knowledge of that truth. In other words, philosophy became internally bifurcated: philosophy had to first know knowing before it could produce philosophical knowledge—objective knowledge of the truth of things-in-themselves. Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy radicalised this bifurcation, giving it its most sophisticated theoretical articulation. Critical philosophy became a theoretical method that investigated the conditions of possibility of the synthetic unity of *a priori* knowledge of concepts of objects—or, more simply put, of the nature and limits, thus legitimacy, of the cognition of the concepts that we use to make sense of the world.⁶⁵

⁶³ René Descartes, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 20-56 and 73-122. The English philosopher Francis Bacon also developed a line of epistemologically grounded philosophical reflection (based on empirical observation and positioned in direct contradiction to scholastic speculation) in the early seventeenth century. See his 'The Advancement of Learning,' *The Major Works*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 120-299. For Hegel, the history of philosophy radically changes with Cartesian philosophy. It finds itself on 'its own proper soil.' See G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Volume 3*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, London: Routledge, 1955, 217.

⁶⁴ As Descartes makes clear in his *Discourse on the Method*, the orientation developed therein does not aim 'to teach the method which everyone must follow in order to direct his reason correctly, but only to reveal how I have tried to direct my own.' Descartes, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 21. In other words, Cartesian method was never designed to be universalised.

⁶⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

With the neutralisation of Kantian philosophy within the academic context of the 1790s and through the 1800s, however, the critical method became understood as fundamentally extrinsic to the speculative knowledge of things-in-themselves. Critical philosophy was converted into a schematic second-order reflection on the impossibility of metaphysics and, therefore, the latter was structurally precluded (thus perverting the philosophical core of Kant's critical project).⁶⁶ It is the problem of the externalisation of method from the object of analysis—what Hegel consistently referred to as 'philosophising' (*Philosophieren*)—that is philosophically explored after the Swabian moved to the city of Jena in the first year of the nineteenth century.⁶⁷

In an entry from his so-called 'Wastebook'—a collection of unsystematic notes and memoranda composed between the years 1803-1806—Hegel reflects on the distinctive limits of Kantian philosophy: 'Kant is quoted with admiration as having said that he taught philosophizing and not philosophy—as if someone could teach carpentry but not how to build a table, a chair, a door, a cabinet, etc.'⁶⁸ To learn how to carry an activity out, one must work through the activity itself, rather than try to ascertain its rules and regulations from a distance. To do the latter is, according to Hegel, an absurdity. Decades later, Hegel offers a different metaphor for understanding the separation between philosophical methodology and philosophical knowledge, but one that recapitulates the problem of the division: Kantian philosophising is akin to 'refusing to enter the water until you have learnt to swim.'⁶⁹ How is philosophy meant to know modes of cognition (or 'forms of thought') without actually always already being caught in some kind of process of knowing? Hegel offered the most sophisticated and condensed exposition of the separation of critical methodology and philosophical knowledge in his 'Introduction' to the *Phenomenology*.

The 'Introduction' (not to be confused with the long 'Preface') begins with an analysis of the basic presupposition of modern theories of cognition, theories that rest on the 'natural assumption' that 'before we start to deal with [philosophy's]

⁶⁶ Kant's critical philosophy was designed to re-ground speculative science by a momentary *suspension* of its standard mode of intellectual production—or, as Kant puts it, by way of an 'antecedent critique' of the principles of metaphysics. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 119. The preclusion of speculative science (metaphysics) is an essentially anti-Kantian gesture.

⁶⁷ For example, see G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H.S. Harris, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977 and G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. H.S. Harris, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977.

⁶⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Miscellaneous Writings of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. Jon Stewart, Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002, 252. For Kant's notion of learning to philosophise see Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 694.

⁶⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences: Logic*, trans. William Wallace, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 66. This same point is made in the lectures on the history of philosophy. See Hegel, *History of Philosophy: Volume 3*, 428.

proper subject-matter, viz. the actual cognition of what in truth is, one must first of all come to an understanding about cognition, which is regarded either as the instrument to possess the absolute, or as the medium through which one discovers it.⁷⁰ In other words, philosophical practice, if it is to follow the correct path of correct philosophical reflection, must first know the mode of cognition most adequate for cognising 'what truly is' (or the absolute).⁷¹

This task is presupposed, according to Hegel, on a fundamental division between, on the one hand, a transcendental subject, a pure knowing mind liberated from socio-historical particularity, that tries to epistemologically ascertain cognition itself, and on the other hand, an object that awaits its understanding by the subject. The corollary to this spatialized division between subject and object (the subject is fundamentally *outside* the object) is that cognition is reduced to a methodological means, either an instrument that misshapes the absolute or a medium that refracts the experience of it.⁷² The manipulation of the truth of the absolute rests on the position of the method to truth itself: a philosophical method premised on the separation of subject and object is topologically reduced to a position extrinsic to the subject-matter at hand. According to Hegel, there are two problems with the externalization of method:

First, it assumes that cognition, and the process of methodologically elaborating the correct mode of cognition for grasping the truth of the absolute, is something that stands outside of truth itself. This division of cognition from truth is an absurdity since the attempt to establish cognitive certitude—of the *correct* and most *adequate* mode of cognition for knowing truth—means to establish the *true* cognition.

Second, to spatially separate the subject of knowing and the object known on the presupposition that the former is a 'transcendental' entity is to ignore the sense in which a subject is always socio-historically specific, a particular subject caught in a configuration of life. Moreover, for Hegel this subject is never a singular entity (the 'I' of Cartesian rationality) but is, rather, a decisively social entity. At the beginning of the introductory reflections of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel is quick to identify this social subject as nothing less than 'ourselves.'⁷³ The subject of philosophy is us, not a

⁷⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 46. Hegel begins his philosophical critique of methodology in philosophy in his earliest Jena writings, especially in the critique of K.L. Reinhold. See Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, 174-195.

⁷¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 46.

⁷² Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 46. It is striking that Gombrich does not draw attention to Hegel's immanent dialectical negation of instrumentalised methodology even though the art historian identifies the instrumentalisation of Hegel's so-called 'dialectical method' in cultural and art history (its 'tremendous appeal').

⁷³ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 47.

transcendental 'I.' Knowledge of truth is, then, knowledge of ourselves. We ourselves are the subject of truth.⁷⁴

If there is a method in Hegel, it is the complex movement of our social being. This, of course, is a very peculiar conception of philosophical methodology, one that is neither pre-determined in advance of the object of analysis nor is it possible to schematise into an instrument that can be applied to any object whatsoever.⁷⁵ As a social ontology, method and object collapse into one another, yielding a conception of truth that Hegel defines as the 'dialectical movement' of 'experience' at the end of the introductory passages of the *Phenomenology*.⁷⁶

Truth as process

Hegel tries to show that the imposition of an extrinsically posed philosophical method is negated by a conception of the immanent self-movement of social being as the dialectical contradiction of subject and object. The identification of the truth of the absolute with ourselves is why, for Hegel, truth is not something to be possessed by way of an ingenious method but is, rather, to be grasped in its own 'self-movement': we are a processual subject, thus a temporal entity. We are determined by our capacity to transform ourselves. The knowledge of truth, then, is knowledge of the truth of our becoming, which is a rather strange paradoxical demand since the truth of becoming suggests the suspension of that which becomes, or, the very unchanging essence, or ontology, of transformation.

This paradox introduces a uniquely Hegelian category into philosophy: untruth.⁷⁷ Untruth is a moment that marks the transitional nature of transformation—but in an estranged form. Transformation is, from the standpoint of comprehension of its truth, the truth miscomprehended as a moment of untruth. To understand this better it is important to note that untruth does not signify falsity since it is immanent to the process of truth's self-movement, whereas error is premised on an epistemological separation of the subject of knowing and the object

⁷⁴ For some of the most salient readings of Hegel's social ontology in the Continental tradition, see Martin Heidegger, 'Hegel's Concept of Experience,' *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 86-156; Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: 1. Hegel*, trans. David Fernbach, London: Merlin Press, 1998; Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller, Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 76-79; and Étienne Balibar, 'Ich, das Wir, und Wir, das Ich ist: Spirit's Dictum,' *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Steven Miller, New York: Fordham University Press, 2017, 133-142.

⁷⁵ The problem of the methodological status of dialectics as a method that can be 'applied' is assumed by Arnold Hauser in his *The Philosophy of Art History*, Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985, vi.

⁷⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 55.

⁷⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 48.

cognised, a separation that adjudicates over the correct (and not erroneous) mode of cognition for comprehending truth (it is the task of methodology to establish in advance error from certainty).⁷⁸ Against this, Hegel's philosophical enterprise consists of the production of knowledge of the peculiar paradox of the self-movement of truth as the unity of itself and untruth.

Thus, to speak of a 'dialectical method' in Hegel is misleading since truth is not a thing to be seized by a tool but is, rather, a process of self-formation—one in which negation (what gives sense to *un-truth* as the negativity immanent to truth) is the central operation. Hegel's philosophical project is not structurally presupposed by the primacy of the separation of subject and object but is, rather, formed out of thinking through the primacy of the dialectical contradiction of the subject-object relation constitutive of the truth of spirit—spirit understood, as Hegel famously puts it, 'not only as *substance*, but equally as *subject*.'⁷⁹ Phenomenological science carries out this comprehension of spirit by way of descriptions of the dialectical movement of truth at specific points of manifestation of its untruth (the necessary negation of truth immanent to truth itself). In other words, the *Phenomenology* is a history of the philosophical comprehension of miscomprehended forms of grasping the absolute.⁸⁰

Through the course of their experience, each form of consciousness—sense-certainty, perception and understanding, to name the first three Hegel analyses—is understood as putting forward an untrue articulation of the absolute/truth. What the reader of the *Phenomenology* attains through this process is knowledge of the strange dialectical movement of the unearthing of untrue forms of our philosophical consciousness. Put another way, the reader comes to know that we have hitherto misconstrued the truth of the absolute and for precisely this reason—not in spite of it—we have made actual progress in philosophical knowledge. Thus, the positivity of progress in Hegelian phenomenology is overwhelmingly negative.

The distinctively negative comprehension of progress—that thought moves forward only by moving backward—gives Hegelian history a peculiar shape. It does not consist, as is usually assumed, of a seamless, linear, teleological evolution of ever more perfect and refined forms of philosophical consciousness.⁸¹ The dialectical

⁷⁸ Hegel's famous declaration that the 'fear of error' is the 'fear of truth' is premised on this higher-order conception of truth. See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 47.

⁷⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 10.

⁸⁰ For two distinct expositions of the structure of the *Phenomenology* as dialectical comprehension of miscomprehended modes of philosophical consciousness, see Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, London and New York: Verso, 2009, 72-78 and Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, London and New York: Verso, 2008, 103-109.

⁸¹ Dialectical evolutionism is an invention of European Hegelian Marxism of the late nineteenth century—Friedrich Engels, Georgi Plekhanov and Antonio Labriola being three of its most prominent exponents. Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, ed. Sankar Srinivassan, LeoPard Books India, 2016; Georgi V. Plekhanov, *The Materialist Conception of*

movement of experience as presented in the *Phenomenology* articulates downward transitions into ever more internally complex forms of the paradox of understanding misunderstandings. The infamous 'way of despair' that Hegel underlines at the beginning of the *Phenomenology* gives sense to this downward journey into miscomprehension. There is no proverbial 'light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel' in the work. There is only deeper descent into the paradox. What one gains from this strange negative progress is that the paradox of the comprehension of the absolute is one manifestation of the processual nature of the truth of the absolute (of the process of who and what *we* are); it is not a purely logical problem to be resolved by a more precise or adequate conception.

To repeat, dialectical movement is not a method. It is the abbreviated philosophical name for the dynamic process of the thing itself—or, as Hegel puts it, the subject-matter itself (*die Sache selbst*) in its experience.⁸² Thus, Gombrich's claim that Hegel employs an 'exegetic method' that is applied supra-individually completely overlooks the crucial philosophical problem of Hegel's speculative social ontology as non-methodological movement of the truth in its appearance of untruth. Put another way, Gombrich fails to grasp the sense in which the dialectical movement of spirit (ourselves) is social life as articulated processually in a particular social formation. The latter point is crucial. It means that counter-examples such as historical 'chance' are an immanent part of the formation of spirit understood as our social being. The arbitrary, the contingent and the aleatory—the elements of social life that cannot be known prior to their historical appearance—constitute the very substance of spirit. History is another name for the relations that define our social being, which is to say, which define who and what we are. To put it more provocatively: *we are history, history is us*.

Conclusion

History, trans. A. Fineberg, Cabin John MD: Wildside, 2008; Antonio Labriola, *Essays on the Materialist Conception of History*, trans. Charles H. Kerr, New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005. Importantly, the division of Hegel into a system and a method finds its most insistent articulation in Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, . In the context of art history, it is the work of Heinrich Wölfflin that gives us a model of dialectical evolutionism—of a 'step by step' development of style as a 'linear' sequence—a model that, I believe, is erroneously attributed to an influence by Hegel's philosophy. See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, München: Hugo Bruckmann, 1920, vii. The structure of evolution as a narrative structure of historical formation precedes the dialectical sense of evolution by a few hundred years. The scholastic sense of the movement of the 'great chain of being' is incorporated within the context of early modern art history by Antonio Manetti in his biography of Filippo Brunelleschi, *The Life of Brunelleschi*, trans. Howard Saalman, University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 1970. 1976

⁸² Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 46.

As I have tried to show in this essay, the reception of Hegel's philosophy in art history – within the Anglophone context, especially – proposes inadequate understandings of the method of the philosopher's work. What art history fails to appreciate is that, according to the opening philosophical manoeuvre of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel proposes a powerful dialectical negation of the very injunction to elaborate a method that comes before recognition that thought is always already in the movement of philosophical knowledge. In this sense, Hegel has no method, at least not in any strict theoretical sense of the term (the axiomatic rules and regulations that allow a subject to perceive and know an object). Rather, the philosopher develops a speculative social ontology that articulates the movement of being and its truth – in other words, a profoundly metaphysical endeavour, but one in which metaphysics is fully mediated by non-metaphysical processes.

Perhaps, then, art history should neither turn to Hegel's *Philosophy of History* nor his *Aesthetics* – each one offering the discipline a model for thinking the two terms that render it intelligible (history and art) but should, rather, turn to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* when considering issues of methodology. The great lesson of the latter work is the experience of the immanence of the subject-matter. For art historical scholarship, it is, in the last instance, the artwork that articulates the subject-matter. It is, then, the artwork that articulates both the trans-historical experience that the discourse on art experiences (that artworks continues to live in our cultural imaginary, enough to be subjects of our research) and the historicity of the art – its historical dynamics as an element in the social conjunction from out of which it emerged.

Although I am sympathetic to Michael Podro's Hegelian interpretation of the two-sided nature of the artwork (as irreducible to historical conditions and inextricable from them), I think that Podro misses a deeper Hegelian point: that the artwork is inextricable from its historical conditions but also that it is a subject (admittedly, a strange kind of subject) that produces historical conditions – or, as T.J. Clark once put, art as 'part of the historical process.'⁸³ In other words, the

⁸³ T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, 10. Clark's work has been hitherto omitted as a point of reference in this essay. This is down to a number of reasons, principal of which being that a faithful interrogation of his work, its focus on social being and both its Hegelian and Marxian character, would require a much longer consideration, one that exceeds the scope of this essay. That being said, it suffices to say here that Clark's relation to Hegel's philosophy is highly ambiguous and mediated. More importantly, it seldom offers a clear interrogation with its Hegelian mediations. Instead, Hegel is posited by Clark as a sign of a future project: a social history of art in which the 'structure of the whole,' 'history of mediations,' and 'dialectical thinking,' to take some of the most salient Hegelian motifs, are revived as central problems to art historical scholarship. See Clark, *Image of the People*, 10, 13. For this reason, Clark never philosophically attended to Hegel's thought according to its philosophical core. Of course, this is not really a problem for Clark as he was committed to

artwork is analogous to spirit if by the latter we mean a social ontological process of self-formation from out of moments of miscomprehension, misrepresentation and misrecognition (the movement of its immanent negation). It is my hope that my exposition of Hegel's insight into the limits of method put pressure on the issue of art historical methodologies and its critical discourse in the increasingly sequestered sub-disciplinary field of art historiography — of the latter as an increasingly isolated discourse on how art history is practiced.

I want to echo, once again, my agreement with Iversen and Melville's fundamental (Hegelian) insight into the distinction between art historical method and the problem of art history's objectivity. That being said, 'objectivity' is, if construed from the standpoint of its Hegelian exposition, is, as we have seen, another term (an estranged or miscomprehended one, perhaps) for *Geist* since objectivity is the movement of a being in and for itself and not a pre-given object to be methodological circumscribed by fixed criteria of identification and judgement. Objectivity, in other words, is a subject. The question that art historians should consider, then, is what the subject of art history is rather than which method is best suited for their intellectual work, but what are the epistemological, ontological and hermeneutical consequences of understanding the artwork as subject of art history? What would it mean to the discipline that the artwork *as subject* (construed in this strong Hegelian sense of the process of socio-historical life) constituted its absolute point of art historical scholarship?

Another way of saying this is: what is art's historicity, its agency as a transformative subject of history? It is the inquiry into the subject of art history that will yield the structure and orientation of its thought. Thus, methodology is a determined effect of tarrying with the experience of art and the social ontology it crystallises. Method is always comprehended retroactively as an inadequate schema of making sense of the subject (since the subject is in the method as a permeating ensemble of conditions). To grasp this, Hegel is indispensable.

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revitalising a certain art history marked by a 'Hegelian legacy' (the heroic first generation of mostly Germanophone art historians) rather than tarrying with Hegel's philosophy and how that philosophy could problematise certain fundamental structural issues of art historical scholarship (such as methodology). See T.J. Clark, 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1974, 561-562. Reprinted in Fernie, *Art History and its Methods*, 248-253. The Hegelian core of early academic art history was, for Clark, its dialectical thinking. This modality of thought allows historians to explore, Clark insists, art history's most fundamental question: what are the conditions of artistic creation? But this question required a turn to Marx's since what concerned Clark was the materialist theory of art's conjunctural conditionality. It is the mediation of Marx's work that distinguishes Clark's work from his illustrious predecessors.

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Search for a method: a reassessment of Hegel's
dialectic in art history*

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