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## Burckhardt and his Lecture on Rembrandt (1877)

In 1877 Jacob Burckhardt gave a lecture devoted to Rembrandt in the Universitätsaula at Basel. At that time he was known to the learned and polite public of the city mainly as the author of two books: Der Cicerone, an extensive guide-book and an encouragement to relish ("zum Genuß") the art works of Italy, and the famous and endlessly reprinted Kultur der Renaissance in Italien – a masterpiece of nineteenth-century historiography, and still an essential text for anyone interested in the topic. Two other books that increased his fame and stature as a historical thinker, Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen and Griechische Kulturgeschichte, were published posthumously.

Burckhardt rejected a number of prestigious invitations from other universities, including the offer to succeed the great Ranke in the chair of history at Berlin University,<sup>1</sup> and lived the life of a quiet, amiable and somewhat reserved scholar who, as Aby Warburg later put it, "[...] hat die Wellen aus der Region der Vergangenheit empfangen, hat die gefährlichen Erschütterungen gefühlt und dafür gesorgt, dass das Fundament seines

See F. Kaphahn, "Jacob Burckhardt und die Wiederbesetzung von Rankes Geschichtsprofessur an der Universität Berlin," *Historische Zeitschrift* 168 (1943): 113-31. On Burckhardt and Ranke see especially F. Gilbert, *History. Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (Princeton, 1990).

Seismographen gestärkt wurde."<sup>2</sup> He assumed the role of an ascetic scholar deeply immersed in his historical research and his beloved paintings and music – a pose Burckhardt himself sarcastically referred to as a truly philistine style of life.<sup>3</sup> Only from the great variety of his correspondence can one appreciate with what strenuous energy and vitality he responded to the political affairs not of a remote past but of his own times. Nevertheless in Basel Burckhardt was widely esteemed as a born lecturer, and the educated citizenry sat at his feet. Burckhardt made a great impact on the cultural life of Basel and on the taste of his compatriots, a telling testimony to which is his slightly amusing argument with Arnold Böcklin about the frescoes decorating the newly erected Art Museum in the city.

The lecture on Rembrandt was clearly addressed to the general public. It displays an ambivalence that characterizes Burckhardt's attitude as a scholar and as a citizen of Basel, and which expresses itself in a self-deprecating but also strikingly derisive tone. According to contemporaries Burckhardt was a very persuasive lecturer, and yet he always avoided what he called "Aulaexhibitionismus".<sup>4</sup>

It is worth remembering that the art and culture of Holland – or of Northern Europe as a whole – was never as important in Burckhardt's thought as Italian culture. Italy remained a real "classical land" to him, very much as it was to Goethe, the destination of numerous journeys and pilgrimages, his "hiding place"

After E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford, 1986), 254-5.

Cf. W. Hardtwig, "Geschichtsreligion – Wissenschaft als Arbeit – Objektivität. Der Historismus in neuer Sicht," *Historische Zeitschrift* 252 (1991): 1-32. See also F. Jaeger, *Bürgerliche Modernisierungskrise und historische Sinnbildung. Kulturgeschichte bei Droysen, Burckhardt und Max Weber* (Göttingen, 1994).

See the afterword to E. Ziegler, *Jacob Burchhardts Vorlesung über die Geschichte des Revolutionszeitalter in den Nachschriften seiner Zuhörer* (Basel and Stuttgart, 1974).

or last resort, a territory where he retired from the turbulent and hostile world of modern society. One of the earliest trips he made to Italy was motivated by the desire to cut himself off from the diseased and disgusting politics of his time: "You weather-wise fellows vie with each other in getting deeper and deeper into this wretched age - I on the other hand have secretly fallen out with it entirely, and for that reason I am escaping from it to the beautiful, lazy south, where history is dead, and I, who am so tired of the present, will be refreshed by the thrill of antiquity as by some wonderful and peaceful tomb. Yes, I want to get away from them all, from the radicals, the communists, the industrialists, the intellectuals, the praetorians, the reasoners, the abstract, the absolute, the philosophers, the sophists, the state fanatics, the idealists, the 'ists' and 'isms' of every kind - I shall only meet the Jesuits on the other side, and among 'isms' only absolutism; and foreigners can usually avoid both."<sup>5</sup> Burckhardt could surely have said with Robert Browning: "Open my heart and you will see / Graved inside of it, 'Italy'." And obviously it was Italian art that set the criteria of excellence, the norms of aesthetic behavior, so to speak. It was Raphael who held the highest degree in this artistic hierarchy, although when he was getting older Burckhardt was ready to admit that his taste was becoming more and more heretical ("ketzerisch"), giving access to the canon of perfection<sup>6</sup>

In a letter to Hermann Schauenburg from 1846. *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, select., ed. and transl. A. Dru (Indianapolis, 2001), 78-9.

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See on this especially M. Sitt, Kriterien der Kunstkritik. Jacob Burckhardts unveröffentliche Ästhetik als Schlüssel seines Rangsystems (Wien, Köln and Weimar, 1992); M. Sitt, "Jacob Burckhardt as an Architect of a New Art History," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 57 (1994): 227-42; D. Jähnig, "Jacob Burckhardts Gedanke des ökumenischen Maβstabs," in Umgang mit Jacob Burckhardt. Zwölf Studien, ed. H. R. Guggisberg (Basel and München, 1994), 263-81; H. Jantzen, "Kunstkritik und Jacob Burckhardt. Wert und Wertung der Kunstwerke," in Festschrift für Kurt Bauch: Kunstgeschichtliche Beiträge zum 25. November 1957, ed. B. Hackelsberger (Bonn, 1957), 9-19. to such masters as Correggio.<sup>7</sup> The North still retained its position of an unavoidable and necessary counterpoint to the art of Italy. The North was, so to speak, another side of modern culture, and Burckhardt was deeply interested in modes of reception of Renaissance Italian culture on the other side of the Alps. He was warily sensible of Netherlandish painting, especially landscape and genre painting, and he lectured on it regularly during art history courses between 1874 and 1893. Dutch genre painting appeared to him to be the salt of the earth, something like the destiny of this culture.<sup>8</sup> He admired in particular the realism of minor masters, seeing in them the ability to transform meticulously rendered details into a general image. Looking at such a picture, the beholder sees not merely a given concrete scene but also a moment in which the wholeness of the world is directly grasped and shown: "als werde nicht sowohl diese oder jene Szene an sich, sondern ein Moment des Weltganzes dargestellt."9

Genre painting in Holland may not have attained the highest level of the world of ideas and the furthest point of idealism – art, conceived as art, remains for Burckhardt "zweite, ideale

J. Burckhardt, *Die Kunst der Betrachtung. Aufsätze und Vorträge*, ed. H. Ritter (Köln, 1997), 355. Shortly before this one reads the following: "Vor allem leitete ein richtiges Gefühl auf einen kleinen Maßstab; man empfand, daß solche Szenen, größer oder gar lebensgroß ausgeführt, viel weniger richtig wirken würden – ohnehin hatten auch die reichsten Besteller wohl eher enge Wohnstuben – daß überhaupt der große Maßstab nur den idealen Gegenständen, das heißt solchen, die das Auge durch Gegenwart der Schönheit beruhigen, und dem Bildnis angemessen sind. Dafür ist bei manchen dieser Maler im kleinen Maßstab so viel Detail der Form mitgegeben, als heute selten an irgend eine Gestalt großen Maßstabes gewandt wird. Es ist ein Mikrokosmos."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Cf. E. Maurer, "Jacob Burckhardts 'Wundermensch' Correggio," Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte 56 (1999): 199-207.

See W. Schlink, "Der Charakter ganzer Nation in den Künsten'. Jacob Burckhardt über das Verhältnis von Volk und Nation zur Kunst," Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte 53 (1996): 307-12.

Schöpfung", "zweite Dasein" – but in spite of this it performs a miracle: without art, we would not be able to conceive and judge the world's significance correctly.

With respect to landscape painting, the paradigm of this branch of art was Jacob van Ruisdael. Burckhardt noticed above all the close, concentrated atmosphere of his pictures, observing that the art of painting became to Ruisdael almost "a religious cult" – "Kultus". Ruisdael's landscapes are distinguished by fine simplicity and precision – and once again Burckhardt extols the painter's skills in rendering the world in its wholeness – "des Weltganzes".

The ability to elevate what is common, ordinary and material to the level of existential meaning, a recognition of the mystery of the epiphany through the commonplace, became a *topos* of the evaluation of Dutch painting.<sup>10</sup>

Rembrandt shows up in the company of Ruisdael in some of Burckhardt's memoranda written earlier than his lecture. Where Ruisdael's painting is marked by accuracy, exactitude and, last but not least, "keine Originalitätshaschen", Burckhardt constructs his image of Rembrandt in strong and vivid contrasts.

These contrasts arise in two ways. Firstly they are based on a wider historical reflection; secondly they allude to elementary differences between artistic personalities. Rembrandt, for Burckhardt, is one of those masters who epitomize the mind of the modern world. It is worth recalling that Burckhardt sought the roots of the modern world not only in the sphere of politics and morality, but also in the changes that the arts went through. A fundamental difference, a line demarcating the world of an ancient artist from the world of a modern artist, lies in their attitude, in their way of conceiving their artistic tasks: a modern

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> On "epiphany" see R. Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," in idem, *The Word from Below. Essays on Modern Literature and Culture* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1987), 33-57. The expression goes back to James Joyce. R. Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford, 1983), 83-5.

artist feels it is his irrevocable duty to approach an artistic task always from a new perspective, to formulate his subject in a completely new manner. It is not a virtue of rhetorical invention – it is an experience that leads ineluctably to revolution and violent change. Burckhardt argues here that revolution is an aim in itself and is of no avail to the arts since it only justifies an artist's desire of self-expression.

So it is a special and exceptional trait of some modern artists that their personality dominates – the personality of a given artist moves to the foreground, leaving behind an artistic task or a problem. It becomes a far more important and even burning duty to manifest a personality than to realize a concrete task and to solve an artistic problem. Burckhardt described the purposes of art history according to his maxim "Kunstgeschichte nach Aufgaben"<sup>11</sup> and was fully aware that it is a dangerous delusion to maintain that it is an artist himself who independently sets his aims. "Künstlerische Aufgabe" is rather a bundle of demands presented by the very subject of an art work – the dignity of a subject, the way of handling it, the intentions of the person who orders the work, the artist's skills and the power (not the burden) of tradition. The artist himself is not able fully to grasp the logic of the situation.

One can risk the claim that Burckhardt defends an objective status of artistic subjects and aims which he tries to oppose at the same time to the subjectivity of the modern artist. As a matter of fact these differences are rooted even deeper. Transforming freely a subject of representation, an artist of the modern

Cf. N. Meier, "Kunstgeschichte und Kulturgeschichte oder Kunstgeschichte nach Aufgaben," in *Kunst und Kunsttheorie 1400-1900*, ed. P. Ganz et al. (Wiesbaden, 1991), 415-37; K. Berger, "Jacob Burckhardt as an Art Historian," in *Jacob Burckhardt and the Renaissance: 100 Years After* (Miscellaneous Publications of the Museum of Art, no 42; University of Kansas, Lawrence, 1960), 38-44; N. Huse, "Anmerkungen zu Burckhardts 'Kunstgeschichte nach Aufgaben'," in *Umgang mit Burckhardt*, 245-61.

era reshapes the classical relationship between means and ends. Artistic means cease to serve an artefact - they are not used to reveal the significance of a subject but exist for themselves only. A subject becomes a mere pretext for displaying those pictorial means as well as for manifesting the mastery of using them. As a consequence we are confronted with a previously unheard-of one-sidedness of the artistic message - the key to the arts now becomes "Who", "What" has been reduced to no more than manipulation. As the subject no longer has meaning and ceases to set rules of decorum or cortesia, the differences between the various branches of art are blurred too: between religious and profane painting, between portrait painting and a genre scene. What is more, the boundary between beauty and ugliness has now been crossed. Rembrandt exhibits his unbelievable mastery of light and shade and suffuses his pictures with the feeling of air, of atmosphere, and what was hitherto considered to be ugly in the domain of classical aesthetics gains now its raison d'être as an act of expression of a painter's self-consciousness and self-confidence in handling his artistic medium. But one would go astray if one thought this to be a romantic exploration of the inner spaces of the artist - it is a display of mastery and proficiency as well as independence.

Burckhardt saw no need to conceal the fact that masters like Rembrandt were powerful personalities, real "Gewaltmenschen". Their art was so full of energy, so impressive, that one easily succumbs to the idea that their existence was necessary as a kind of a mission that could not be avoided. And yet Burckhardt, an obdurate enemy of the idea of necessary ends in history and of the whole Hegelian philosophy of history, refutes this notion resolutely – since on closer inspection much of this "Schicksalnimbus" disappears.

So Rembrandt is a painter who subordinates everything to primeval elements of "light and air". The real form of a given thing is nothing to him, a phenomenon is all, a phenomenon that gives an opportunity to show a play of lights, shades and

air. Burckhardt does not deny Rembrandt his own greatness but underlines the one-sidedness of his potentialities: "Ereignisse, Gestalten, Gegenstände der Natur sind für Rembrandt nur vorhanden, insofern Luft und Licht ihr wundersames Spiel daran ausüben. Und der Beschauer wird oft völlig mitgerissen und vergißt mit Rembrandt den dargestellten Gegenstand um der Darstellung willen. Ereignisse in freier Landschaft sind umwogt von sanften Strömen des wärmsten Sonnenlichtes; aber auch einem beinah kalten Tageslicht weiß Rembrandt eine ungeahnte Magie abzugewinnen."12 For the Swiss historian, light becomes meaningful to us only when seen in a picture: we are able then to see not only its manifold phenomenal character but also its spiritual significance - "geistbelebt". All of it speaks for Rembrandt's greatness. But other components of his artistic activity testify against him. His "Lichtexperimente" shatter harmony, destroy the beauty of forms and dim the meaning of a representation. In order to display his virtuosity in intensifying optical effects, Rembrandt does not refrain from the bizarre: costly, elegant and exotic dresses, jewels etc. which serve only to display the play of lights and shades. In the Dresden self-portrait with Saskia van Uylenburgh, Saskia seems to be completely lifeless, in an artificial, unrealistic pose, and to every viewer the whole composition at first sight seems incorrect, while the figures are out of proportion. Even the unity of tone and mastery of colour are not enough to veil serious mistakes in perspective and in the construction of the figures.

Burckhardt finds still greater faults in Rembrandt's religious works. To represent what is sacred – "das Heilige" – requires at the least proper forms and some respect for the theme: "gereinigte und unanstößige Formen" – otherwise their effect will be weakened or even annihilated; but in this case too – in opposition to the ideal forms of Italian painters – Rembrandt does not recoil from ugliness. However the real problem is that these forms are

<sup>12</sup> Burckhardt, Kunst der Betrachtung, 387.

not only ugly but also false: there is nothing left except "Lichtvision", no beauty of lines and contours, no harmony in the masses and groupings of figures, no truth in rendering the movement of figures which is absolutely necessary for proper expression. Burckhardt especially abhors a copperplate representing Adam and Eve (Fig. 25): "von wahrhaft abschwellender Bildung mit Gorillaköpfen".

These harsh words, unjust and immoderate as they seem to a contemporary reader, prompted Heinrich Wölfflin, a devoted disciple of Burckhardt, to observe that this was not the kind of criticism we need. At first glance one may suppose that Burckhardt wished to return to classical and academic criteria of beauty and artistic perfection,<sup>13</sup> deduced ultimately from the Neoplatonic aesthetics which were entirely anachronistic at the time of Burckhardt's lecture. Seen from this angle Burckhardt merely assesses Rembrandt's works using critical implements which were incompatible with the aims and intentions of the Dutch master. But his critique of religious painting had a different context: Burckhardt here is criticizing a contemporary aesthetic tendency, a "Kulturprotestantismus" which glorified mystic feelings in biblical themes.<sup>14</sup> In Burckhardt's opinion this approach substituted

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Joseph Gantner interpreted Burckhardt's judgment on Rembrandt as an indication of his classical aesthetics, where "der absolute Maβstab der klassisch-griechischen Figur" induced him to accept the undisputable priority of Rubens over Rembrandt, and made him a staunch opponent of any a-classical or anti-classical aesthetics. J. Gantner, "Jacob Burckhardts Urteil über Rembrandt und seine Konzeption des Klassischen," in *Concinnitas. Beiträge zum Problem des Klassischen. Heinrich Wölfflin zum achtizgsten Geburtstag am 21. Juni 1944 zugeeignet* (Basel, 1944), 83-114. See also M. Sitt, "Die antike Künstler als Paradigma für Burckhardts Künstlernorm? Das doppelte Gesicht des Prometheus und seine Folgen für Burckhardts Kunstkritik," in *Jacob Burckhardt und die Antike*, ed. P. Betthausen and M. Kunze (Mainz, 1998), 29-50.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Und endlich pflegt ihn die neuere Ästhetik auch noch zu rühmen wegen eines ganz besondern protestantisch-religiösen Elementes, eines biblischen Gefühles. Wenn sein Christus eine jammervoll widrige Bildung ist, so spricht man von der Knechtgestalt des Menschensohnes;



Fig. 25. Rembrandt van Rijn, Adam and Eve, 1638, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

wenn Christi Umgebung abschreckend pöbelhafte Formen zeigt, so sollen dies die Armen sein, welche in Himmelreich kommen und so weiter." Burckhardt, *Kunst der Betrachtung*, 398. artistic values for religious feelings.<sup>15</sup> He does not deny that Rem-

The interactions of the arts and religion are very complicated - Burckhardt discusses them at length and tries to describe typical modes of relationship in his Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen. Their mutual dependency is very important to the arts because they draw their themes and symbolical energy from religion, which for them is an inexhaustible source of expression. On the other hand the arts must be regarded as treacherous phenomena since they lessen, by unavoidable means of expression which are always in flux, the unanimity, homogeneity and force of religion's message, drawing attention to the free play of imagination in forms, colours, sounds. There is always a tension between the stiffening tendency of religious symbolism and the flexibility of artistic form. Yet it happens sometimes that a given religion has drifted so far from prescriptions of cult and dogmas of belief that one endeavors to restore the religion to its pristine state by returning to a bygone, hieratic style, fit to represent "das Heilige an der Dingen". As a result, according to Burckhardt, the arts detach themselves from the totality of living experience, and this is a great threat to them. Thus Burckhardt was repelled by the works of the Nazarene Brotherhood. See L. Gossmann, Unwilling Moderns. On the Nazarene Artists of the Early Nineteenth Century (available at: http://www.princeton.edu/~lgossmann/Nazarene\_essay. pdf). Burckhardt's judgment on Rembrandt can be seen as a kind of "inverted analogy" to his assessment of German painters from the circle of Nazarenes. As a response to this breaking of links with life Burckhardt proposes a concept of "Existenzbild", primarily used to describe the perfect matching of forms and life and the restoration of the inner harmony of reality in the painting of the Venetian masters; in Der Cicerone one reads the following description of Titian: "Der göttliche Zug in Tizian besteht darin, daß er den Dingen und Menschen diejenige Harmonie des Daseins anfühlt, welche in ihnen nach Anlage ihres Wesens sein sollte oder noch getrübt und unkenntlich in ihnen lebt; was in der Wirklichkeit zerfallen, zerstreut, bedingt ist, das stellt er als ganz, glücklich und frei dar." And then he adapts this notion especially to Dutch genre painting and landscape: "Dieses kleine Feld aber wurde durch höchste Raumwahrheit und durch eine oft unvergleichliche Schönheit des Lichtes und seiner Reflexe, durch Luft und Abtönung verklärt. Dies, verbunden mit einer unendlichen Wahrheit der Gestalten und ihrer Bewegung, bringt jenen Eindruck hervor, ähnlich wie der der Landschaft der großen holländischen Meister: als werde nicht sowohl diese oder jene Szene an sich, sondern ein Moment des Weltganzen dargestellt, welchen der Maler zufällig im Nu fixiert habe und ohne welbrandt is focussing upon a given biblical event and so can arouse religious feelings – but this is a side-effect only, something that happens by chance while the eye, tired of unspeakable ugliness, seeks for relief and concentrates upon the emotions of the figures. In such a case Rembrandt's pictures make an impression similar to Richard Wagner's music: it is so horrible that a listener is forced to hunt out the very few melodious passages.

This comparison is telling and important because in Burckhardt's eyes Wagner encapsulates the misery of modern art and of the modern world: the music of this "murderer of opera as such" is characterized by ugliness and monotony, and Burckhardt was exceptionally upset by the quasi-religious fervor and sectarianism of his faithful believers.<sup>16</sup>

chen unsere Kunde von der Welt unvolständig ware. Dem Künstler ist der Anblick zur Vision geworden, und diese wirkt dann als Stimmung auf die Stimmung des Beschauers. Man empfindet die ausgezeichnetsten dieser Bilde als Notwendigkeiten. Die Vergegenwärtigung des jedesmaligen Zustandes ist eine wahrhaft zwingende; der höchste Wille dieser Malerei ist das Mitlebenmachen." Burckhardt, Kunst der Betrachtung, 355. "Das Existenzbild" or "Daseinmalerei" becomes a measure of the highest artistic efforts: an artist achieves a balance between visual experience and innermost, intimate sympathy with external things, bringing about as a result a harmony of forms and their expression. It is an artist's task to transform visual experience into inner vision; it is a reward for a viewer if an image draws him inside and brings him to a contemplation of the imagined world through artistic forms that live. In such a sense a work of art, produced as the free act of a self-conscious artist, should be perceived as a product of necessity: necessity of artistic forms causing us to feel the most intimate sympathy with the world in a moment of blissful, joyful contemplation. On "Existenzbild" see L. Gossmann, "The Existenzbild in Burckhardt's Art Historical Writing," Modern Language Notes 114, no. 4 (1999): 879-928. On Burckhardt and religion, see for example Th. A. Howard, Religion and the Rise of Historicism. W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt and the Theological Origins of the Nineteenth Century Historical Consciousness (Cambridge, 2000).

See M. F. Schneider, Die Musik bei Jacob Burckhardt. Eine zeitgemässe Betrachtung (Basel, 1946), 107-20.

No wonder then that Rembrandt becomes for Burckhardt a symbol of the modern world, an introduction to it, and a key to its contradictions. In his painting one can detect all the sins of modern art: the way that it inverts the relationship between means and ends, ignores decorum and the hierarchy of genres, pushes the artist's personality to the fore, and desires change for change's sake. These sins are linked to the modern tendencies to blur the difference between beauty and ugliness and to worship the artist's will as the main factor dictating any artistic situation and choice. Rembrandt does not work in accordance with tradition, he even does not challenge it in any accepted way: he simply brings the tradition to trial in the court of his own abilities and strivings.

It emerges that Rembrandt is a patron of modernity, obviously in a negative sense – the so-called "Rembrandtkultus"<sup>17</sup> was also an apology for the absolute sovereignty of the artist. Rembrandt was supposed to epitomize the independence of art in Northern Europe, freeing itself from Italian influences. Yet Burckhardt fought with the idea that art could be reduced to the level of intellectual concepts - "Gedanke", "Idee des Kunstwerkes" – or to the delimitation of the artist's task to a faithful representation of reality: he understood the problem of art's autonomy in his own way. Rejecting the pan-symbolic interpretation of some of Rembrandt's works, the Swiss scholar tried to protect art's autonomy and argued that it was impossible to translate a given art form into another language: "Die Kunst ist nämlich, abgesehen von der Poesie, derjenige Geist, welcher nicht redet, sondern baut, bildnert und malt; sie ist das Ungesprochene als solches, das was eben deshalb in Formen und Tönen lebt,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> See J. Stückelberger, Rembrandt und die Moderne: Der Dialog mit Rembrandt in der deutschen Kunst um 1900 (München, 1996). A richly detailed analysis, providing extensive historical and cultural context to the problem of "modernity" in Rembrandt, and Burckhardt's attitude toward it, is given by L. Gossmann, Basel in the Age of Burckhardt. A Study in Unseasonable Ideas (Chicago and London, 2002), 396-400.

weil es im Worte nicht leben könnte.<sup>\*18</sup> And yet such a formula does not lead to a cult of pure form; the "aesthetic detachment" so masterfully analyzed by Edgar Wind<sup>19</sup> would be a denial of Burckhardt's intentions. Art stays in touch with nature in its myriad aspects and if it is a creative art worthy of its name it becomes a form of life and a form of culture attached in various ways to the spheres of religion and politics. It is no accident that Aby Warburg declared himself to be Burckhardt's pupil and heir.<sup>20</sup>

Burckhardt, then, always sought for a balance between tradition, life and vitality of artistic form. Rembrandt's one-sidedness manifests itself not only in the blindness with which he uses artistic means for their own sake, but also in the way that he lacks harmony, unity and versatility of personality. It is clear that Rembrandt and the wonderful figure of Rubens are polar opposites.

It is interesting how Burckhardt tries to give a new dimension to the old dichotomy of Rubens and Rembrandt, which was well anchored in artistic historiography. Rubens was to him one of the most accomplished and harmonious artistic personalities that ever lived.<sup>21</sup> Burckhardt used to compare his narrative skills to the achievement of Homer. Rubens freely and spontaneously expressed himself in all kinds of painting, perfectly blending creative energy and a bold consistency of conduct while building the structure of a picture: "In momentan sehr mächtigen Kompositionen des Rubens genieβt der Beschauer, zunächst unbewuβt, neben der stärksten dramatischen Bewegung eine geheimnisvolle optische Beruhigung, bis er inne wird, daβ die einzelnen Elemente jener nach Kräften verhehlten Symmetrie, ja einer mathematische Figur untertan sind. Gewiβ hat mit dieser Rubens seine

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Burckhardt, Kunst der Betrachtung, 188.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> E. Wind, Art and Anarchy (London, 1963).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> See B. Roeck, "Aby Warburgs Seminarübungen über Jacob Burckhardt im Sommersemester 1927," *Idea. Werke – Theorien – Dokumente. Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle* 10 (1991): 65-89.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> See E. Maurer, Jacob Burckhardt und Rubens (Basel, 1951).

Arbeit nicht begonnen, sondern in einer Vision wird sie sich von selbst mit eingesstellt haben und samt dem übrigen in seinem Innern gewachsen sein."22 Rubens does not calculate coldly, his art is a perfect unity of hand, eye and intuition. Burckhardt tries to explain his unifying power of sight, expression and formal order by means of a notion of "optical equivalents": Rubens was exceptionally aware of how to place accents in an image, no matter how large its size and format, and these accents acted as optical equivalents of the material appearance of the world and its moral or religious meaning. These equivalents exert their impact on the external and internal sense of sight, on informing the viewer's imagination directly as to the intended meaning and structure of an image. Form and meaning, medium and expression cannot be separated here - they overlap completely and allow artistic qualities to be enjoyed for their own sake - "optisch Wirkende". Each work of Rubens' hands is a self-sustaining autonomous organism that attracts us because it sharpens our sensibility to previously unnoticed aspects of the real world. The conflict of interests -"Interesse gegen Interesse" - is here carefully and successfully reconciled: art and reality reinforce each other, preserving their autonomous although mutually dependent realms.

This theory of "optical equivalents", "optical effects", betrays undoubtedly, as Martin Gosebruch notes,<sup>23</sup> a developed consciousness of modern artistic problems. And it would be easy to dismiss Burckhardt's critique as unjustified or as a confirmation of the trivial truth that looking at old pictures is determined by modern problems. But it seems that Burckhardt, tried to face the same modernity<sup>24</sup> and to recuperate the lost past world of his-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Burckhardt, *Kunst der Betrachtung*, 454.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> See M. Gosebruch, Ch. Wolters and W. Wiora, "Methoden der Kunst – und Musikwissenschaft," in *Enzyklopädie der geisteswissenschaftlichen Arbeitsmethoden*, ed. M. Theil, vol. 6 (Munich and Vienna, 1970).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> The literature on Burckhardt's attitude to the modern world and modernity is immense. See for example H. Bächtold, "Der Geist des modernen Wirtschaftslebens im Urteil Jacob Burckhardts", *Schweizerische* 

tory, both of which opened his eyes to Rembrandt's and Rubens' paintings. His attitude toward history reveals his judgment on contemporary issues, which in their turn could not fully be understood except by the study of history. To manage modernity Burckhardt needed historical tools. Rembrandt surely deserved a better, more balanced and fair judgment. But he is more a central element forming a myth of modern crisis than a real historical figure. The contrast between Rubens and Rembrandt brings out a critical symmetry between a reconstruction of the historical conditions of Rubens' creativity and a construction of Rembrandt's one-sidedness as an index of the turmoil and chaos

Monatshefte für Politik und Kultur 3 (1923): 321-34; D. Cross, "Jacob Burckhardt and the Critique of Mass Society," European Studies Review 8 (1978): 393-410; E. Dürr, Freiheit und Macht bei Jacob Burckhardt (Basel, 1918); V. Gitermann, Jacob Burckhardt als politischer Denker (Wiesbaden, 1957); H. R. Guggisberg, "Burckhardt und Huizinga: Zwei Historiker in der Krise ihrer Zeit," in Umgang mit Burckhardt, 191-213; W. Hardtwig, Geschichtsschreibung zwischen Alteuropa und moderner Welt. Jacob Burckhardt in seiner Zeit (Göttingen, 1974); W. Hardtwig, "Trieb und Geist – die neue Konzeption von Kultur," in Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft um 1900, ed. N. Hammerstein (Stuttgart, 1988), 97-112; idem, "Jacob Burckhardt und Max Weber: Zur Genese und Pathologie der modernen Welt," in Umgang mit Burckhardt, 159-90; J. R. Hinde, Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity (Montreal and Kingston, 2000); D. S. Kahan, Aristocratic Liberalism. The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John S. Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville (New York, 1992); K. Löwith, Jacob Burckhardt (Stuttgartt, 1984); Th. Noll, Vom Gluck des Gelehrten: Ein Versuch über Jacob Burckhardt (Göttingen, 1997); O. Rubitschon, Elemente der philosopischen Anthropologie bei Jacob Burckhardt (Basel, 1977); E. Schulin, Burckhardts Potenzen – und Sturmlehre. Zu seiner Vorlesung über das Studium der Geschichte (Heidelberg, 1983); J. Wenzel, Jacob Burckhardt in der Krise seiner Zeit (Berlin, 1967); E. W. Zeeden, "Zeitkritik und Gegenwartsvertändnis in Jacob Burckhardts Briefen aus den Jahren der Reichsgründung (1859-1872)," in Geschichte und Gegenwartsbewußtsein – Historische Betrachtungen und Untersuchungen. Festschrift für Hans Rothfels zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. W. Besson and F. Hiller von Gaertringen (Göttingen, 1963), 86-105. The books by Hardtwig and Löwith are of particular value.

of the modern world. What was commonly regarded as an index of the freedom of the modern artist became for Burckhardt a sign of deprivation. Even if Rembrandt, as his admirers insisted, pointed to the future, this future did not bring new hope, but only a pretext for mediocre imitators.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> "Die moderne Überschätzung, bis zum »Janus« der Chiffre  $\Re$  R: Raffael und Rembrandt = Vergangenheit und Zukunft = fleur et racine, ist ganz charakteristisch für die vorwiegende Tendenz heutiger Kunst, welche, der höhern Ziele bar geworden, sich einbildet, die Erscheinung im Lichte sei alles. Zuletzt denken die Bewunderer wie Rembrandt selbst. Die Strafe dafür ist, daß sie den Rembrandt eben hierin doch nie erreichen. Wenn Licht und Farbe gar alles sein dürfen, so vermissen sie nichts mehr. Er ist der Abgott der genialen und der nichtgenialen Schmierer und Skizzisten." Burckhardt, *Kunst der Betrachtung*, 352. Burckhardt opposes here a very important trend of the modern aesthetics of painting that tends to think of a sketch as a fully developed, accomplished work of art.