

*HANS KÖRNER. *Auf der Suche nach der wahren Einheit. Ganzheitsvorstellungen in der französischen Malerei und Kunstliteratur vom mittleren 17. bis zum mittleren 19. Jahrhundert.* München: Fink 1988. DM138.00

Near the end of his book (248), on occasion of criticizing the beloved exercise of treating Delacroix as the predecessor of impressionism, Körner turns against all those teleological models of history which take each historical period as preparatory to the following and the following as fulfilment of the preceding. But, in fact, the author himself did nothing else but follow the model of a step-by-step development from the classical Italian art theory to the romantic aesthetics of genius. The subtitle of the book, "Ganzheitsvorstellungen in der französischen Malerei und Kunstliteratur," describes the project exactly and 'unité' may indeed be the central term of any classical and postclassical art theory to which all further determinations are subordinated. Therefore, a monographical treatment appears to be more than promising.

In the preface, Körner explains his methodological orientation. Against the frequent tendency to stylize a general "organic unity" (whatever that may mean) as a fundamental condition of any kind of aesthetic concretion, Körner postulates the necessity always to ask about the particularity of the

4 Huston Diehl, *An Index of Icons in English Emblem Books 1500-1700.* (Norman/London: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

respective unity concept. With this demand he turns against methods widely spread, especially in art history, in which grids of composition are used to describe varying aesthetic phenomena, without being examined for their historic relevance.

The author then examines the ideas of what should be understood by artistic unity by analyzing both paintings and texts. Yet, the interpretation of texts takes priority, so that non-art historical interests are also responded to. Like almost any other study in classical European art theory, here too the starting point is Alberti. Alberti regards composition, i.e. the level of installment of unity, as the arrangement of human bodies: for the Renaissance, in general, pictorial order is not an abstract quality but the order of the picture objects. In the neoclassical theory of the seventeenth century the author perceives an understanding distinctively oriented towards the entirety of the picture. Félibien, Le Brun, and especially Depiles do not think of pictorial coherence as depending upon single objects but on the overall disposition of the whole. Such a theory appears to respond to developments of painting experience, especially to that of Poussin, who through the modal determination of the picture tends to subtract the power of expression from the figure and its gestic and mimic modulation and transfers it to the overall atmosphere of the picture.

The relativization of the traditional idea of imitation causes the pathos of Diderot's idea of unity. For the enlightened philosopher the model of nature is dissolved into an infinite number of relations. Art's foremost task is to reveal these relations in a transformed form. Due to its limited means art can only be "asymptotic approximation," never a copy. The unity of the work of art becomes a paradoxical form of autonomous reflexion. The relation to the model is no longer established through the objects that constitute unity but lies in unity itself. Here the objects are nothing more than the phenomenal expression of universal relation.

During French Neoclassicism the absolute of unity and the discredit cast upon representationalism lead to a point where unity not only comprehensively emphasizes the pictorial contents, but installs itself as a transfigural scheme. At this point Körner replaces text exegesis with picture exegesis: David constructs pictures into which figures are fitted. Pictorial order becomes all powerfull and restricts the protagonist's activity. The idea of the vivid pictorial organism is dead. As Körner puts it trenchantly, the artist no longer wishes to order objects but to objectize order.

The Romantic movement indeed does without the compulsive character of neoclassical composition, but it takes on and even forces the relativization of figure and object. For once and all the unity of the work of art is kept in the subjectively created autonomy of the pictorial structure and is no longer based on the interaction of objects. With Delacroix, for example, colour

dismisses its function as "signifier" and becomes "significate" that receives all its dignity from the idea of artistic genius.

This short summary, which in an almost hazardous way narrows the width and differentiation of Körner's argumentation, shows clearly that we are by no means dealing with an example of positivistic factual research, but with the large scale attempt of a speculative presentation, that from a certain context of aesthetic theory reconstructs the development from the heterogeneous to the autonomous work of art and from the object-orientated to the picture-oriented artist. My following critique does not relate to the fascinatingly explicated basic postulate — which is unfortunately sometimes cluttered with too many names and texts — but is concentrated on single issues — which, for the sake of the evidential value of the step-by-step development, appear sometimes distorted.

I have no objections against the first Chapter dealing with the step from the arrangement of bodies to pictorial composition. Here Körner claims the idea of a super-representational pictorial totality for the entirety of French Classicism. Going back to the latest comprehensive study of French seventeenth-century art theory (Thomas Puttfarcken, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art* (1985) one would rather tend to see this idea in connection with the first staunch Rubeniste Roger de Piles, whereas theorists like Félibien and Le Brun still interpreted pictures rather in terms of acting protagonists. Körner does indeed qualify his thesis when he claims, for example, for Poussin (30) (in contrast to David, with whom he deals later) that here super-representationality of composition must not be understood as being strange or even opposite to the objects. In spite of that the potential of pictorial autonomy assumed this seems to be clearly overestimated.

Even though the basic thesis that postulates a division of "Bildsumme" and "Bildkörper" is without any doubt correct and may still today need to be stressed, I encounter certain difficulties regarding Körner's interpretation of David. It appears questionable to me whether, in connection with David's pictures, one should indeed speak of an absolutely conclusive overall disposition, to which all figures are subordinated. Certainly, the linear structure Körner ascribes exemplarily to the "Sabines" lacks plausibility. I think one should speak more carefully of a trenchant disintegration of figure and narrative context, of figure and space, in which the classical hierarchical construction of pictorial protagonist and assisting figures is lost. Nevertheless, especially in this chapter on French Neoclassicism it becomes clear that organic unity can be scarcely taken for an aesthetic constant.

The intellectual achievement of Körner's book is only marginally affected by this critique. The connection the author establishes between Diderot and David or between the usually opposed styles of Neoclassicism and Romanticism is sometimes of an originality of the highest order. It reveals

408 / David V. Pugh

a commanding knowledge not only of the practical and theoretical aspects of art but also — and most of all — of the philosophical tradition.
(HUBERTUS KOHLE, RUHR UNIVERSITÄT BOCHUM)