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Renaissance Theory?*

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Forgive me if I begin my afterword with a sentence which might be perceived as a self-serving humility topos, but it is impossible to offer in a few pages a fair account of the quality, variety and complexity of the arguments so admirably discussed in the essays collected in this volume. The credit for all this most interesting reading goes to the authors as well as to James Elkins' and Robert Williams' brilliant *regia*. If I dare to add my opinion to this very distinguished chorus, it has to do with my own biography, which is characterized by prolonged professional experiences in four completely different geographical areas, namely Italy, the United Kingdom, California, a land with its own distinctive intellectual panorama, and Germany. This fact should not be misinterpreted as a claim to "objectivity"; it means only that I inevitably evaluate certain issues through the filter of my own prejudices and shortcomings, from multiple standpoints. Such a background can be both an asset and a liability. It is an asset in that it has given me a deep respect for different methodological traditions: for example, the great tradition of Italian scholarship devoted to the study of theoretical writing on the arts yet not especially engaged with modern critical theory. It is a liability in that the brilliant array of possibilities it offers me can be overwhelming: seeming

to point to an inevitable and all-consuming relativism, it can induce a kind of aphasia or paralysis.

"Italy", time and space

To judge from the starting points and the speakers invited to the Cork seminar, the organizers have framed the "Renaissance" from an Italian point of view, even if Matt Kavaler and Claire Farago represented, respectively, a European and a global perspective. Many scholars who do research in other countries were later asked to respond to the original essays, but they were "compelled"—so to speak—to confront a body of data and opinion that had developed around the question of the state of Italian Renaissance art historical studies in North America. It makes sense, therefore, to begin my comments by asking what role Italian scholarship plays in this volume. Only one theoretical contribution made by Italian colleagues is mentioned repeatedly in the pages of the seminar, namely Enrico Castelnuovo's and Carlo Ginzburg's very influential essay on center and periphery, even if one encounters along the way and mostly in the footnotes the names of other well-known art historians.[1] Considering that Ginzburg is a scholar who has taught for many years at UCLA, it seems inescapable to conclude that Italian art history is somehow reluctant to address issues of critical theory, and if this is the case, one should try to explain why.

Of course, it all depends on how one defines critical theory in the first place, but it is probably fair to maintain, without running the risk of being contradicted, that Italian art history is more "object"-oriented than theoretical in scope, although Marzia Faietti's "assessment" in these pages combines the two approaches. The simplest explanation for this state of affairs is that in Italy art historians are confronted from the very beginning of their studies with the overwhelming presence of "objects"—I will return to this term—which shape, or should shape, their cultural memory and personal identity, as well as posing urgent problems of their own. Issues of classification and conservation, of cultural property and politics—which were hardly touched upon at the seminar yet are potentially of theoretical concern—therefore take centre stage, even if they tend to be dealt

with in a matter-of-fact way. This is the "view from within", which has its own *raison d'être* but is often myopic and sometimes self-centered.

The authors of the Cork seminar may be interested in knowing that their concerns are instead shared by their German speaking colleagues. The same debate about the lost centrality of Renaissance studies, and of Italian Renaissance studies in particular, is going on in Germany. In this "view from outside"—if this inaccurate and not entirely felicitous expression is permitted—there is a sense of loss which is compensated for by an increasing investment in theoretical issues. It is evident that scholars working in Berlin, Bonn, Munich or in North America, where there is a long tradition of teaching art history in global or at least European terms, have a much broader perspective than their Italian colleagues, almost overwhelmed, as they are, by their obligation to defend a material-cultural heritage constantly under physical threat. Yet, if this fact can help to explain the divergence of orientation and approach, it does not excuse the indifference toward larger methodological issues that one notices in Italy (I am referring to scholars working on Italian soil irrespective of their origins or nationality). The risk of the proliferation of parallel discourses—with the consequent danger of paralysis—is real, but one should not therefore avoid the task of confronting the issues and trying to develop useful proposals. As I will argue at the end of this paper, this difficult intellectual environment does not necessarily represent a deficit; it could also be an added value.

There is no reason to be nostalgic for a past grandeur, and for that matter I am not at all certain that the paradigm "Italian Renaissance" was ever really so overwhelmingly dominant as it is often assumed. Ruskin was interested in Gothic forms and modern painters like Turner, Viollet-le-Duc reconstructed medieval churches and walls, Riegl investigated the *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* as well as the group portraiture of the Golden Age in Holland, even Saxl and Panofsky built many of their most influential publications in a diachronic way. Be that as it may, we should all greet with enthusiasm a trend which expands the geographical as well as the temporal limits of our core-subject. It is wonderful that an American institution of higher education is cooperating with the universities of Cordova and

Messina; this reminds me of the project on the exchanges between Mediterranean cultures, in medieval as well as early modern times, fostered by my colleague Gerhard Wolf at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence. Cultural interactions are at the center of these enterprises, and we should not be afraid of the possible tensions between the local and the global. The history of collecting has already shown what is to be gained from such broadly planned research projects, and one should pursue this goal also in a European context.

As far as time is concerned, it is difficult, on the one hand, to avoid disagreement about the chronological limits of the "Renaissance", but on the other hand I am increasingly interested, like Claire Farago, in diachronic work. The book I have just finished deals with the problem of the representation of the wind in the visual arts from Antiquity to the present day. The question is: How can I represent an invisible natural phenomenon, namely air's transparency and movement? This problem posed a challenge to the mimetic qualities and aspirations of Western art, as was well understood by Turner: "One word is sufficient to establish what is the greatest difficulty of the painter's art: to produce wavy air, as some call the wind. [. . .] To give that wind we must give the cause as well as the effect [. . .] with mechanical hints of the strength of nature perpetually trammeled with mechanical shackles".[2] Leonardo and Poussin were also greatly interested in this phenomenon. Originally, therefore, I wanted to concentrate my research on the early modern period, but it soon became clear that such a project would make sense only if treated globally and diachronically: only from such a perspective can the innovations of Alberti and Leonardo be properly appreciated; it thus works to reclaim a central place for "Renaissance" contributions.

The method is not new. As I said before, Saxl and Panofsky—whose scholarship, incidentally, seems to me to be misrepresented in some of the comments made at the Cork seminar—had already conceived their work diachronically, the great book on *Saturn and Melancholy* being only the most venerable example of their highly sophisticated interdisciplinary approach. This does not imply that so-called micro-histories should not be pursued: indeed, Warburg

used to say that God hides in details. But this truth should not discourage us from expanding the geographical and chronological limits of our vision; after all, it did not discourage Warburg from doing so.

One point, however, should be forcefully made: it is not enough to invoke the names of the fathers, Riegl and Warburg; one should also follow their example. This plea should not be interpreted as an invitation to "mimic" their unrivalled scholarship a century later; rather, art history should try to regain a central position in the humanities through the investment in new methods and questions. If I may be allowed to sound a note of dissent, one of the limitations of the Cork seminar was its concentration on "pure" art history: the presence of philosophers, historians, and experts on literature would have been very beneficial. Indeed, it is not enough to discuss the apparent decline of Italian Renaissance studies in art history; one should also reexamine the general premises and goals of our discipline. If art history wants to regain its cutting edge, one should argue in favor of the centrality of the "object" *and* of the "image", a terminology which refers to all artifacts, architecture included, without discarding but instead taking advantage of the valuable insights developed by critical theory over the last few decades.

Begriffe—systematicity

Of course, one cannot avoid invoking Burckhardt's name, as many authors do, when one opens up a debate on the "Renaissance". However, one should not forget that it is a French word, which circulated in that land well before Michelet and which derived from the Italian *rinascita*, a term already used by Giorgio Vasari. One can well sympathize with the organizers of the seminar, if they were reluctant to re-open admittedly worn-out files, but it is unwise to write about a topic or any historical period without doing first an archeology of its concepts. Exemplary in this respect remains the analysis of the word *maniera*, scrutinized by John Shearman in 1961.[3]

The Cork seminar had other, greater ambitions. It was not the place to rehearse well-known historiographical debates. Yet scholars have the duty to define the concepts (*Begriffe*) used in their

analyses: What is the meaning of "rationalism" and "irrationalism", if we mention them in sweeping statements without any theoretical specification? Philosophers would shake their heads in disappointment. And what does "modern" mean? Is it a tautologically "good" thing? Is it good to be "modern"? If we do not define these concepts, they remain vague and meaningless. It is therefore exemplary that Elizabeth Honig tells us very clearly what her definition of style is. Equally commendable is the fact that the most important and innovative concept of the entire seminar, namely *systematicity*, is amply illustrated, explained and discussed in Williams' provocative as well as brilliant essay. "Renaissance theory defines art as a form of knowledge", he writes, adding: "The new conception of art that emerges in the Renaissance is directly related to [a] new sense of the significance of representation; art is redefined as a principle that superintends representation, both as a mental faculty and a social practice. [. . .] Italian Renaissance art is structured by the assumption that *what is properly artistic is a concern with the specifically systematic features of representation* [Williams' emphasis]".

I feel challenged by this very sophisticated analysis because I am not certain that I can do justice to all its important implications. There is no question that art is a form of knowledge in Renaissance theory and practice: Leonardo's anatomical drawings, for example, are not simply illustrations of "scientific" texts, but autonomous cognitive instruments as well as products, and this observation can be extended to other forms of this period's artistic output. The very complex issue of representation needs instead to be further explored and defined in a contextualized form, i.e. in concrete and not generic theoretical terms. Williams' short essay originally published in the journal *Rinascimento* is inevitably assertive and without the cumbersome but necessary evidence which will be surely supplied in his forthcoming book on Raphael. I look forward to its publication because it will not be the traditional descriptive biography of a great master. Michael Cole and Alexander Nagel have already written excellent critical monographs on Cellini and Michelangelo, but the book on Raphael will be equally if not more embedded in theory.

Two points need to be clarified, however. First: Why should

systematicity be an exclusive product of the Italian Renaissance? Is there any reason why Dürer's *Self-portrait* in Munich or Holbein's *Ambassadors* in London should show less "systematicity" than, say, Raphael's *Transfiguration*? Williams is rightly irritated by some claims made by Northern European art-scholarship, which often places the emergence of pictorial "self-awareness" in the works produced by that great cultural tradition, and he points out, therefore, that Masaccio's *Trinity*, Leonardo's *Last Supper* and Raphael's *School of Athens* are also potently self-aware images. His criticism is well justified because it is a healthy reaction against intellectual oversimplifications, but why then follow the same path? Are we positive—and this is the second point—that the ancient world and the Middle Ages did not have their own *systematicity*? Our interpretations should not be tainted by the accidents of survival. Vitruvius' text, for instance, enjoys a status which goes well beyond its real merit because its success was determined by the loss of much more important treatises on architecture. Could it be that such lacunae are the cause of the perceived lack of systematic features of representation in periods preceding the "Renaissance"? It is indeed odd that the Middle Ages were completely erased from the Cork seminar's narrative.

To pursue this line of thought, I would like to challenge the idea that a source must be a written text. Not all visual traditions without texts lack theory: *Gemalte Theorie* is a concept which has been successfully employed by Matthias Winner and Rudolf Preimesberger, among others; a useful category which is echoed in Stephen Campbell's "Starting Points" essay, when he alludes to "practiced theory" [Campbells' inverted commas].[4] I ask myself, therefore, whether Italian Renaissance art was really the first to be concerned with the specifically systematic features of representation. This is not to say that I find Williams' cleverly argued proposal unconvincing: my response is only a *caveat*, an encouragement to persevere, to make the argument even more compelling in his forthcoming book; I would be the first to congratulate him heartily if my present skepticism could be proved wrong.

The open criticism of the "object" and of a social history of art, instead, seems to me untenable. It may be that from a North American perspective the collection and classification of objects can

be interpreted as "a disguised form of bourgeois consumerism", but even if this were true, one should not abandon a necessary and highly difficult *kunstimmanente* analysis of the artifacts. Such a merciless condemnation of the "object" does not take into account the notions of cultural heritage and social memory. Our colleagues who are working with a great spirit of dedication, often at sacrifice to themselves, and for very low salaries in the Soprintendenze, in small provincial museums, and in laboratories di restauro to keep alive and transmit our cultural heritage deal with objects on a daily basis. I cannot imagine an art history without objects.

As far as the social history of art is concerned, it has now become modish to denigrate it, but many colleagues are practicing it even when they seem to dismiss it. For example, the critique of the academy and of other institutional structures—like the seminar at Cork—as well as the history of collecting are forms of a social history of art. One of the greatest books of the twentieth century, Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, carries the undertitle *A primer in the social history of pictorial style*, and the characterization of patronage studies as an opportunistic shift of attention from the artist to the commissioner, a shift which does not really put into question the traditional narrative of the grand masters, is unfair and certainly inaccurate: there are not only studies on the patronage of bankers, popes, and cardinals, but also of social groups and religious orders; they are stories of complex networks which interact with issues of production, reception and theory. It is indeed a great relief that Williams himself takes into account social practices in his definition of representation quoted above.

Desiderata

A good friend of mine, the late Stefan Germer, told me once, in 1997, that all apocalypses are reactionary or at least conservative. Even if I do not completely share his opinion, I have since become a little wary of institutionalized lament. Is Renaissance scholarship "sunken into a kind of fourth-rate status", as Elkins argues? Can one speak of neglect and oblivion? Does the study of Italian Renaissance art find itself "in something of a backwater within the discipline of art history", as

William maintains? I happen to agree more with Adrian Randolph's "assessment", above all when he praises the intellectual vitality and diversity of the field documented in this book. Ironically, it is the excellent *niveau* of the papers discussed at Cork and of the responses they have triggered that demonstrate the good health enjoyed by Italian Renaissance studies in North America. To be self-critical is always a very positive sign, and the sophisticated level of self-reflexivity reached by the authors is reassuring for the future of the discipline. It can be presumptuous, therefore, to end this short note with three desiderata; yet since they echo important issues raised by the seminar's participants, it seems to me that I am simply summarizing their own conclusions.

To begin with, I hope that James Elkins will write his abandoned book because it is a diachronic project. His planned table of contents shows that he is interested in fundamental art historical issues, but on a more elementary, prosaic level one could add that the artists of the twentieth century have been deeply concerned with (not influenced by!) the art of the Renaissance, and that this exchange is still going on in the twenty-first century. For instance, one cannot understand the work of Duchamp, Beuys, Pasolini, Warhol, Viola, Sugimoto or even Kentridge without referring to Leonardo, Rosso Fiorentino, Pontormo, the *Sacro Monte* in Varallo, Raphael, Holbein and Dürer. Influential contemporary artists seem to be more attracted by Renaissance art than by the monk Maius' or Jacques-Louis David's aesthetically equally ambitious works. The problems implicit in the pairs constructed in Elkins' summary of his abandoned book go, of course, well beyond the superficial issue of direct quotation, appropriation and manipulation of "old works". Nonetheless, the link between modern art and Renaissance models is also a viable way of reinterpreting the latter, of adding a new dimension to the constant process of semiosis which revolves around them.

Second, let us remain unconventional. The multiple points of view presented at the Cork seminar produced a marvelous polyphony which is a good metaphor for the richness of the texture of Renaissance studies in the field of art history. The plea for an even higher argumentative level is certainly worthy of praise, but what is wrong with plurality? Recently a friend of mine rebuked me by saying that

plurality is not a program. I must admit that there is some truth to his statement, and yet we should be proud of our variegated intellectual landscape: "theory" cannot be done without the "objects" and vice versa. We do not need prescriptions; we need flexible instruments to deal successfully with the *iconic turn*.[5]

A last desideratum: To improve the quality of our writing, and of course I speak of myself in the first place. It is perhaps odd to make this point because the level of the narratives presented at the seminar is truly magnificent, and yet it is not representative of the average texts produced by the discipline. One is therefore pleased, amused and at the same time surprised to note how many colleagues have mentioned critically as well as positively the name of Vasari. Like Williams, I also think that his was the most influential book ever written in our field. There are many reasons to explain its importance and success, but one of them is certainly its extraordinary literary value. As many participants have pointed out, one should not be afraid of the disarray in Renaissance art historical studies, but if we are serious when we claim that one of our goals should be the "re-appropriation" of a supposedly lost leadership, one of the ways to reach it passes through the pleasure of writing and reading.

Notes

* I am deeply grateful to Robert Williams for his improvements to my English text and to both editors for their kind invitation to comment on the outstanding results of the Cork seminar.

1. Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginzburg, "Centro e periferia", in *Storia dell'arte italiana. Parte prima*, vol. I, *Questioni e metodi*, ed. Giovanni Previtali (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1979), 283–352.
2. Quoted from Monika Wagner, "Luft sichtbar machen. Neue Konzepte für ein altes künstlerisches Problem", in *Luft*, ed. Bern Busch (Köln: Wienand Verlag & Medien GmbH), p. 85. [pp. 85–94]
3. John Shearman, "*Maniera* as an Aesthetic Ideal", in *The Renaissance and Mannerism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 200–221. Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art, held in New York City September 7–12, 1961.
4. Matthias Winner, "Gemalte Kunsttheorie. Zu Gustave Courbets <<Allégorie réelle>> und der Tradition", in *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 4 (1962), 151–185. Of course, nineteenth-century France is a cultural panorama with a strong theoretical tradition, but in this case the author is

referring to the fact that Courbet's painting is a "text". For the reconstruction of the theory of the Flemish masters of the Quattrocento through their painted works, see e.g. Rudolf Preimesberger, "Zu Jan van Eycks Diptychon der Sammlung Thyssen-Bornemisza", in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 54 (1991), 459–489.

5. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).