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In 2006, Ernst Gombrich’s best-seller The Story of Art, first published in 1950, became available as a pocket edition.¹ This may well mark the highest point of popularisation and commercialisation of an art history survey text to date. However, this phenomenon should not be explained only by the demands of the book market, but rather by the ideals of scholarship underlying the book. Clearly, it was Gombrich’s intention to write a popular book. In the event, it made its author into a celebrity, something he apparently enjoyed.² Moreover, it was this popular book’s tremendous success that boosted the professional career of a poor Austrian-Jewish émigré scholar in post-war Anglo-American academia.³

In its goal of reaching a popular readership, The Story of Art had a striking similarity with another continuing best-seller, The Open Society and Its Enemies authored by his long-term friend, and another Austrian-Jewish émigré, Karl Popper.⁴ According to Gombrich himself, one of the initial titles for this work was ‘A Social Philosophy for Everyman’,⁵ and Popper ‘preferred a good trade publisher to an academic press, so that his message would reach the “common person”’.⁶ First published in 1945, The Open Society had consequences for Popper’s subsequent career, which were similar to those of The Story of Art for Gombrich’s: it transformed Popper ‘from an unknown Viennese philosopher into a founder of Atlantic “Cold War” Liberalism’.⁷ Broadly, both books shared the same message well captured in Gombrich’s description of what he learnt from reading the manuscript of The Open Society: there is no history, only a plurality of constructed histories, an idea that belied Gombrich’s commitment to progress.⁸

Both Popper and Gombrich drew a direct connection between actual political violence and belief in progress, which they denominated historicism. This was apparent in Popper’s dedication to The Poverty of Historicism: ‘In the memory of the countless men, women and children of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny’.⁹ Remarkably, the victims here were not those of political action but of belief. Similarly, Gombrich lamented: ‘I wish it could be shown that it was power that perverted learning and not learning that perverted power’.¹⁰ Both statements imply the politicisation of the theoretical itself. On the one hand, as Herbert Marcuse observed, this entailed the problem of misplaced abstractness which marked a conservative withdrawal from theoretically facing the complex political and economic conditions of learning.¹¹ On the other, this withdrawal was compensated by treating learning as power: ideas, thus, could actually victimise. The domain of ideas became an arena for conservative political struggle, because of the stipulated ‘connection between methodological and political totalitarianism’.¹² Both books, therefore, should

be considered as intellectual weapons of these authors in their war of ideas against ‘totalitarian philosophies’.  

Another Austrian-Jewish émigré in Britain, the conservative neoliberal political economist Friedrich von Hayek, also ‘persistently argued that the battle for ideas was key.’ 14 The manifesto of The Mont Pelerin Society, Hayek’s cold-war initiative to fight all forms of state planning, announced the need for ‘Methods of combating the misuse of history for the furtherance of creeds hostile to liberty’. 15 Being among the founders of the Society in 1947, this was surely Popper’s front of struggle. But there was more to this. Given the differences between Hayek’s neoliberalism and Popper’s ‘reform liberalism’, Hayek actually played an important role in shaping Popper’s critique of historicism. 16 Against the conception of a totalising history governed by general laws, Popper suggested the plurality of particular historical situations constituted by the logic specific to those situations. The latter, in turn, were perceived as determined by tradition-bound individual interests and institutional frameworks. All in all, this was an extension of ‘marginal utility theory’, a central neoliberal economic principle developed in the Austrian School of Political Economy whose most prominent representative was Hayek himself. 17 Unsurprisingly then, Hayek was instrumental in the publication of both The Poverty and The Open Society. The latter, by the way, got published by the combined efforts of Hayek and Gombrich. 18

Gombrich’s The Story of Art took shape at around the same time as the formation of The Mont Pelerin Society and was animated by the same anti-historicist agenda on the art-historical front. Though Gombrich christened ‘Popperian’ the idea of ‘the logic of situation’ and admits he touched on it in the introduction to The Story of Art, he was well aware that it was an economic principle. 19 But this was not a matter of falsification; rather it revealed the complexity of the issue. Gombrich’s use of neoliberal economic methodology was a ‘second-hand’ use, as it was already processed through Popper’s Critical Rationalism and underlined by Popper’s as well as Gombrich’s own unease with Hayek’s neoliberalism. 20 Additionally, it matched well with a specifically art-historical method developed in the Viennese School of Art History by Gombrich’s beloved teacher, Julius von Schlosser. 21

In 1939, three years after his immigration to Britain, Gombrich published the obituary for Schlosser who died in the year of the Anschluss – the annexation of Austria into Greater Germany by Hitler. 22 This was the point when the death of the teacher – the embodiment of the traditions of Viennese art history for Gombrich – and the end of Austria as an independent political entity coincided, thus ‘objectively’ stipulating a connection between the methodological and the political. This was the actual end of a discourse/place he left behind. From that moment on, Gombrich’s art-historical work can be seen as explicitly engaged in the exilic work of mourning to ‘fight against myth, which blurs and distorts the memory of great masters’. Thus, theoretical work was hyper-activated, as it was to supplement the lost homeland for the displaced: ‘There was and there always will be something called the “Republic of Scholars”. We scientists or scholars, res publica litterarum, stick together and our home is our work. I do not feel myself an Englishman. I feel myself to be exactly what I am: a Central European who works in England’. 23 Thus, scholarship was made a preservation territory of the vanished Central European traditions Gombrich as a member of the Republic of Scholars aimed at reincarnating in England.
Gombrich’s obituary for Schlosser gives a clue to what specifically needed to be restated in England in art-historical terms. This was Schlosser’s conception of the history of style, which appeared to Gombrich as a humanistic light to be kept burning in ‘those overshadowed years’.\textsuperscript{25} Of this Gombrich wrote: ‘research into the formation and change of styles was, however, to him only the propylon to a genuine history of art, dealing with the creative individuals and not with the language of the many’.\textsuperscript{26} And he perceived Schlosser’s individualist theory of style as the ‘genuine history of art’ as opposed to the ‘language of the many’.\textsuperscript{27} From this point on, the individualist critique of holist and historicist theories of style became Gombrich’s art history’s ideological task. Along the lines of Popper’s political philosophy, one may well describe this as a contrast between ‘liberalism’ and ‘totalitarianism’.

But, is it possible to be more specific in describing Gombrich’s art history in political terms? Available accounts in this regard are too general — ‘a liberal’,\textsuperscript{28} a defender of the ‘humanism of western liberal-democratic society’.\textsuperscript{29} What these descriptions fail to capture is a complex mechanism of exilic mourning that underpins Gombrich’s battle of ideas against ‘totalitarian philosophies’. Jean-Werner Müller’s account of what he calls ‘cold-war liberalism’ can be helpful here as it captures some of the crucial nuances underpinning Gombrich’s art history.\textsuperscript{30} Among the latter are the equation of the political with the epistemological, a strategy Müller coins ‘politics of knowledge’. According to Müller, cold-war liberalism is also underlined by a type of fear based on the ‘memory of past humiliation, past cruelty, and exile’.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, to describe a particular sensibility informing cold-war liberalism, Müller proposes the term ‘liberalism of fear’ which he characterises as:

A skeptical liberalism concerned primarily with avoiding the worst, rather than achieving the best. It was concerned with fear in two senses: it was a minimal or negative liberalism, or, as others have put it, a ‘liberalism without illusions’ that was fearful of ambitious programmes advanced by those who felt absolutely certain in their convictions and sure about their political prescriptions. But it also was based on the insight that many political evils and pathologies ultimately originated in fear itself: Popper, for instance, spoke of the typical ‘fear of admitting to ourselves that the responsibility for our ethical decisions is entirely ours and cannot be shifted to anybody else’. This kind of fear was then said to be crucial in motivating the plunge into totalitarian ideology.\textsuperscript{32}

The liberalism of fear, thus, advocated an ethically based piecemeal approach,\textsuperscript{33} which resonated in ‘a world dominated by political passions’.\textsuperscript{34} The same is true for the ideological motivations behind Gombrich’s art history. In 1957, the year of the publication of the book edition of Popper’s \textit{The Poverty of Historical Explanation}, Gombrich delivered an inaugural lecture at University College London, entitled ‘Art and Scholarship’, which could be described as an art-historical manifesto of cold-war liberalism:

\begin{quote}
It would be more comforting, in a way, to think that the streams of adulterated scholarship that poured and pour from the presses of totalitarian countries were and are just the product of fear — fear of starvation, fear of torture even — from which none of us would be free in similar situations. But I think, in thus exonerating our colleagues, past and present, we are in danger of making too light our own responsibility as scholars.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

In order not to plunge into the totalitarianism of ‘adulterated scholarship’, Gombrich pleaded for fearlessness in admitting one’s individual responsibility as a scholar even though in a different political situation. But, obviously, it...
was the British academic bourgeois public sphere that made it possible for Gombrich to be free from ‘similar situations’ and feel himself a member of a republic of scholars, a luxury of which scholars in the Soviet Union were deprived. Interestingly, Müller claims that for cold-war liberals Britain and particularly England, ‘animated by gentle traditions’, was simply the name of the open society. In this light it is not at all ‘too fanciful’ as Jas Elsner puts it, ‘to see England — in the fading twilight of empire — as particularly attractive to the Austro-Hungarian emigre tradition (London as Vienna on the Thames)’.

Gombrich’s cold-war liberal battle of ideas thus had its beginnings in the 1930s, the decade of the rise of totalitarian regimes and of exile. Immediately after 1945, as the Cold War was beginning, Gombrich started to work on The Story of Art. This was his initial grand project of redefining style against his historicist misuses: ‘Style became one of my worries, one of my problems, because the idea that style is simply the expression of an age seemed to me not only to say very little, but to be rather vacuous in every respect’. Gombrich’s attempts to develop an alternative conception of style encapsulate the ways he was engaged in the construction of a discursive homeland through the fusion of academic art-historical methodologies with methodologies taken from Popper’s political philosophy and philosophy of science as well as neoliberal political economy. The triangulation of Popper’s Critical Rationalism and political philosophy, Schlosser’s individualist particularism, and the methodologies of the Austrian School of political economy constitute the framework in which one should situate Gombrich’s politics of art history. Thus, I hope to show that Gombrich was a politically conscious conservative scholar: art-historical practice for him was and had to be animated by a strong sense of political awareness and ethical responsibility as it was always already engaged in ideological battles.

What follows is a reading of a selection of Gombrich’s texts on the theory and methodology of art history, designed to show this triangulation and the process of politicising the theoretical against the politically committed scholarship of totalitarian regimes. I also discuss Gombrich’s concerns about ‘situational analysis’, which reveal the theoretical limits of both Gombrich’s and Popper’s positions and in a larger sense expose the dilemmas of cold-war liberalism from within. I will then return to The Story of Art, in order to discuss one of its important, but apparently ignored, aspects which helps point up its cold-war liberal implications and to a degree explains its enduring success. Finally, I indicate that it was because of the cold-war implications of Gombrich’s art history that during Gorbachev’s Perestroika and especially after the collapse of the USSR his art history, in parallel with the theories of Popper and Hayek, gathered definite momentum in Russia as part of the larger processes of de-sovietisation.

Two Frontal Attacks

Enjoying the tremendous success of The Story of Art, in the early 1950s Gombrich fully entered into the cold-war battle of ideas against the major historicist creed, Hegelianism. Popper called Hegel the father of modern historicism and totalitarianism; Gombrich, in turn, named Hegel the father of art history. Accordingly, a ‘blood relationship’ was drawn between totalitarianism and art history which made it possible for Gombrich to apply the political critique of totalitarianism to art history. This especially broke out with his negative reviews of Arnold Hauser’s Social History of Art and

36. Müller, ‘Fear and Freedom’, p. 54. This highly reductive vision of England was also shared by Hayek. Having in mind England he claimed that ‘Paradoxically as it may appear, it is probably true that a successful free society will always in a large measure be a tradition-bound society’. Hayek, The Constitution of Liberty (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1960), p. 61.
38. Gombrich, ‘An Autobiographical Sketch’, p. 34.
40. As Dan Karlholm rightly observes, ‘We seem to lack a practice for distinguishing between a Hegelian, in the sense of disciple (not just student), to which the German word most often refers, and the more implicit sense, prevalent in Anglo-American discourse. In the latter, Hegelian can refer to almost any kind of phenomenon which betrays an idealist, holist, evolutionist or “historicist” notion of history. Ernst Gombrich bears partial responsibility for this diluted terminological practice within the field of art history...’, in Dan Karlholm, Art of Illusion: The Representation of Art History in Nineteenth-Century Germany and Beyond (Peter Lang: Bern, 2006), p. 23 (n. 21).
On this occasion, Gombrich commented: ‘If Mr. Hauser thus afforded me the opportunity of defining my attitude towards the “Hegelian left” M. Malraux now represents the “Hegelian right”...’

Gombrich believed that the history of the visual arts ‘during this hectic post-war period’ was considered on the continent ‘as the shortest route to the mentality of civilization’. Styles, thus, ‘express’ collective entities determining the history of civilization, be it class situation, in the case of Hauser, or the spirit of an age, in the case of Malraux. Gombrich accused both authors of discrediting the science of history which instead of pursuing the ‘past for its own sake’ created a myth, a ‘notion which has proved so fatal and fatal to our time’. As a consequence of the cold-war liberal ‘politics of knowledge’, art historians were criticised as somehow complicit in political violence of the 1930s. This was almost as serious an ideological critique of art history as the critique of the intellectuals in totalitarian regimes against whom Gombrich was fighting.

But the alternative understanding of style was not yet articulated and grounded in theoretical terms, something Gombrich was concerned with in ‘Art and Scholarship’. Written while Gombrich was working on his seminal Art and Illusion, this lecture encapsulated the main ideological and methodological concerns of that book; Gombrich’s effort to test his individualist and particularistic approach to style ‘against psychological evidence’. Predictably, in Art and Illusion, Gombrich credited Hayek’s and Popper’s contributions to psychology as the basis for his anti-historicist conception of style. Ideologically informed by cold-war liberalism, Gombrich’s prescriptions in ‘Art and Scholarship’ started to intertwine with the principles of Austrian neoliberalism.

Outlining the Alternative
In ‘Art and Scholarship’ before going deeper into the art-historical problems of style, Gombrich situated his position in an ideological framework. Clearly, his theory of style was a politically conscious art-historical theory, as it was conceived as an alternative to the two poles of ‘perverted learning’ — the explosive of Marxist and Leninist and the Nazi myth. Again, it is in a moralising rhetoric premised on this crude and undifferentiated understanding of Marxism and National Socialism that Gombrich addressed the issue of style. And in order to define the tasks of the ‘real’ art historian, Gombrich reactivated the memory of one of the ‘great masters’, Vasari: ‘The real historian, Vasari claims, will pronounce judgments which are the soul of history; he will discriminate the good from the better and the better from the best and, most of all, he will investigate the causes and roots of styles, le cause radici delle maniere’. For Gombrich, art history was an evaluative etymology of styles especially relevant in ‘those days of fragmentation’. There was thus an implicit tension between the present in which the art historian worked and the past which he or she invoked. The cold-war battle of ideas was underlined by this mnemonic tension.

Apparently, what Gombrich suggested was not a neutral alternative to politically engaged art history. To make this clear, Gombrich spoke against the supposed aloofness of scholarship as against the committed status of science:

While we preach to the scientist to heed the consequences of his work, we believe and make others believe, that we just indulge in a harmless game because it is fun or because such leisurely indulgence produces wisdom where science only produces
gadgets. I see no evidence of that. But I hope we may tell the young that in trying to preserve and recover the memories of the past events, to use Ranke’s famous words, ‘as they actually happened’, we maintain and extend the dykes of reason in an area which is particularly vulnerable to the springtides of myth.53

Another structural tension implied in Gombrich’s art history, thus, was a positivist tension between reason and myth. Both Gombrich and Popper had a strong sympathy towards the methodologies of the natural sciences. For instance, Popper declared that the social sciences need a shift equivalent to the revolution Galileo made in the natural sciences if they want to advance.54 Unsurprisingly, Gombrich literally repeated the same for art history: ‘I think if we are ever to have a more promising science of the causes and roots of style, we shall have to catch up with the Galileian revolution’.55 Nonetheless, Gombrich saw art history as a specific science, a science of memory: ‘The scholar is the guardian of memories’.56 As such the art historian appeared as a mnemonic agent whose task is to construct and guard a story every community insists must be told about its own past.57 The Story of Art can be interpreted as such a founding story for Gombrich’s republic of scholars.

In this light, it comes as no surprise that such a vital task should be fulfilled by a prudent scholarship that is politically conscious and ethically responsible. Accordingly, Gombrich claimed that even though there is a need for an exhaustive theory of style, there cannot be such a thing and that one ‘may find this a discouraging conclusion’.58 However, in obviously Popperian mode and in the spirit of the ‘liberalism of fear’ he continued: ‘The more I become aware of our profound ignorance in this field, the more exciting do I find it. Even to frame the right questions would seem to me eminently worthwhile’.59 But this claim for an art history ‘without illusions’ was an extremely militant one. Plunged into another illusion, the secularist myth of Enlightenment, it saw itself as almost literally engaged in a witch-hunt of the spirits of time, race, class, and so on.

The more we exorcize those spirits which still haunt the history of art, the more we learn to look at the individual and particular work of art as the work of skilled hands and great minds in response to concrete demands, the more will we teach authority that what the artist needs is not more myth or more propaganda, but simply more opportunities, opportunities for experiments, for trial and error, which alone can lead to the emergence of those skills which can meet the ever changing challenge of here and now.60

Gombrich’s alternative to the Hegelian style was thus to bring the work of the artist down from ideological utopianism and ground it in a practical realm of ‘concrete demands’, ‘trial and error’, and ‘opportunities’. On the one hand, this was in tune with Popper’s scientific methodology and political philosophy, but on the other, with the belief in a neoliberal economy in which individuals should be provided with equal competitive opportunities if they are to reach their purposes freely. As such, Gombrich’s prescriptions are at the crossing of Popper’s Critical Rationalism and the Austrian School of political economy.

Popper and Gombrich to Austrian Neoliberalism

Methodologically, the marginal utility theory encapsulates the main principles of the Austrian School of Political Economy. According to Hayek, it is the School’s founder Carl Menger’s individualist understanding of value that ‘gave the new
Marginal utility theory entails and is constituted by other important and interrelated principles that taken together constitute the methodological apparatus of Austrian neoliberalism, especially in its later developments, namely: methodological individualism (individuals are the final points for explaining social and economic phenomena), situational logic (individual evaluations are made within the logic of the situation formed in given supply-demand relations), institutional approach (rational individual actions issue in unintended results that are important in the formation of social institutions), and traditionalism (individual actions themselves are part of the traditions of a civilization in which they take place). All these principles were advanced by Hayek in the cold-war context as remedies against socialist, especially Marxist, theories of society and economy and were thus viewed as politically urgent. Interestingly, as Thomas A. Boylan points out:

Popper's contribution to the methodology of the social sciences was centered on the rationality principle and its role within the framework of his situational analysis. This was critically influenced by what Popper perceived as the method of the most advanced theoretical social science, economics. Hayek was clearly a pivotal presence in this, since Popper, on his own admission, "was particularly impressed by Hayek's formulation that economics is the 'logic of choice'". This led Popper to his formulation of the 'logic of the situations'.

Popper himself openly stated that his 'zero method' of analysing the logic of situations was but an introduction of marginal utility theory into the social sciences:

The method of situational analysis, which I first added to The Poverty in 1938, and later explained a little more fully in Chapter 14 of The Open Society, was developed from what I had previously called the 'zero method'. The main point here was an attempt to generalize the method of economic theory (marginal utility theory) so as to become applicable to the other theoretical social sciences. In my later formulations, this method consists of constructing a model of the social situation, including especially the institutional situation, in which an agent is acting, in such a manner as to explain the rationality (the zero character) of his action. Such models, then, are the testable hypothesis of the social sciences; and those models that are 'singular', more especially, are the (in principle testable) singular hypothesis of history. (Popper's emphasis)

Ironically, the three methodological aspects of Popper's influence on Gombrich outlined by Sheldon Richmond were actually neoliberal economic methods. Popper himself borrowed from Hayek and critically elaborated: '(1) We should assume that works of art are the outcome of rational actions (the zero-method). (2) The task of art history should be to explain individual works of art as the work of individual artists with individual aims (methodological individualism). (3) We should assume that the problems of the artist, and his style and techniques are part of traditions (situational logic)'. We can say then that Gombrich's antitoxins to historicist and holist theories of style are neoliberal economic methods processed through...
Popper’s social methodology and yoked to Schlosser’s individualism. This combination of different currents of thought in Gombrich was not, however, unproblematic. The main problem had to do with a possible loss of unchangeable and objective criteria for explaining stylistic changes if the latter are seen as by definition engaged in the ‘ever changing challenge of here and now’. One can interpret this as a methodological consequence of an ideological divergence between Gombrich’s and Popper’s humanist progressivism and Hayek’s market fundamentalism:

He [Gombrich] and Popper felt that Hayek, an established conservative academic, belonged to different social and political circles than their own. But Hayek ended up influencing the direction of Popper’s political philosophy. Popper wrote The Open Society as a non-Marxist socialist, impatient with laissez-faire, but he published it, nearly three years later, as a welfare liberal sensitive to libertarian concerns. In between, in 1943-4, he read Hayek’s methodological essays and The Road to Serfdom. His political shift was not radical, but it was noticeable, and it became pronounced in post war years. Hayek convinced him that both socialism and the enthusiasm for scientific planning could undermine liberty, and he lost some confidence in his progressivism.68

Popper’s libertarian shift had consequences for Gombrich both in terms of his adoption of neoliberal economic methods as alternatives to historicism and the unease he felt towards them. This was made an object of methodological discussion by Gombrich after the publication of Art and Illusion, in an essay not accidentally dedicated to Popper, ‘The Logic of Vanity Fair: Alternatives to Historicism in the Study of Fashions, Style and Taste’.69

Marginal Utility Theory of Art History and Its Discontents

‘The Logic of Vanity Fair’ was Gombrich’s attempt to go beyond the negativist approach of only criticising historicism, towards a positive approach of providing alternatives. This, to an extent, was a move from the ‘liberalism of fear’ to Popper’s ‘modelling’ approach, in itself informed by the marginal utility theory. Remarkably, in the opening lines of the text, Gombrich situated his position vis-à-vis Popper’s critique of historicism that he first heard at Hayek’s seminar when he had just arrived in Britain:

In the spring of 1936 I attended the meeting of Prof. von Hayek’s London Seminar in which Karl Popper (not yet Sir Karl) presented the arguments which he later published under the title The Poverty of Historicism. This deadly analysis of all forms of social determinism derived its urgency from the menace of totalitarian philosophies which nobody at that time could forget for a moment. But it also had a bearing on my own field, the history of art and civilization.70

Once again, along the lines of the ‘politics of knowledge’, Gombrich invoked the menace of totalitarian philosophies and their mnemonic urgency. He then pointed to the bearing of Popper’s political philosophy on his art history and Hayek’s London Seminar as its specific context. This triangulation of Popper’s political critique of historicism, Hayek, and exilic memory was set as a background for his narrative to come. Gombrich then smoothly wove this background with a specifically art-historical problem of contextual references to the works of art he was concerned with back in Vienna: ‘From my student days in Vienna I had shared this concern, but I had become increasingly skeptical of the solutions offered by Neo-Hegelian Geistesgeschichte and Neo-Marxist Sociologism’.71 Thus, rather reductively,
Gombrich identified the ‘totalitarian philosophies’ in the methodologies of art history in the prewar Continent and called for an alternative: ‘Today after thirty years, it is perhaps less the “poverty of historicism” that needs pointing out, than the need for an alternative’.  

Gombrich quoted two passages from The Poverty and The Open Society to illustrate the kind of alternative he had in mind. The first, which he had already used in Art and Illusion, clarified Popper’s ‘modelling’ approach:

We need studies, based on methodological individualism, of the social institutions through which ideas may spread and captivate individuals…our individualistic and institutionalist models of such collective entities as nations, or governments, or markets, will have to be supplemented by models of political situations as well as of social movements such as scientific and industrial progress.  

And in order to specify Popper’s idea, Gombrich presented the second quotation which is nothing but Popper’s example to illustrate the marginal utility theory: ‘If a man wishes to buy a house, we can safely assume that he does not wish to raise the market price of houses. But the very fact that he appears on the market as a buyer will tend to raise the market price’.  

In fact, this passage is from The Open Society’s fourteenth chapter where, as Popper acknowledged, he generalised the marginal utility theory to make it applicable to the social sciences as a whole. Gombrich consciously applied Popper’s elaborations of neoliberal economic methodology to art history as an alternative to historicism. This is most obvious in the second part of the essay characteristically entitled ‘Competition and Inflation’.

Here Gombrich’s discussion of situational logic smoothly brought him to what he called ‘polarising issues’, the theme of the third part of ‘The Logic of Vanity Fair’. By polarising issues Gombrich meant the extra-artistic factors, most importantly political interests, that polarise art world. This subject, to be sure, resonated with the polarising rhetoric of the cold war. So much so that Gombrich chose the cold-war cultural confrontation between abstract art and Socialist Realism as the most relevant example of polarising issues: ‘The most conspicuous polarising issue in contemporary painting is a case in point’. Arguing that artists cannot get out of this polarisation, however much they may want to, Gombrich claimed that ‘by and large, we find that the geographical distribution of the most vocal partisans pro and con abstract art coincides with the cold-war frontiers’.

This also referred to art historians as they too are ‘influenced by fashions’. In his essay ‘Style’, one can already see Gombrich situating his own quest for an alternative theory of style in the cold-war context. Drawing on what he called the ‘change of front’ characteristic of the bipolar world, Gombrich again brought up the example of abstract art. Accordingly, after being hailed in revolutionary Russia, it was then repressed by Stalinism which made it possible ‘for abstract to be used as a subsidiary weapon of the cold war, in which it now has come to stand for freedom of expression’.

Gombrich believed that in such circumstances there are always political stakes involved in the work of an art historian and that there are two lessons the art historian should learn from this. First, is the “feedback” character of social theories: being caught up in the cold-war dialectic of confrontation, critics, and politicians in the West also ‘encourage a political interpretation of stylistic changes’.

The second lesson is that one cannot avoid this dilemma: ‘Once an issue has been raised in this form, once a badge has been adopted and the flag hoisted, it becomes hard, if not impossible, to ignore the social
aspect. However, Gombrich saw this as a dangerous and negative situation that needed to be addressed in order to ‘underline the responsibility’ of interpreting style. Thus, in Gombrich’s hand the example of the cold war functioned as a moral reminder.

But the political stakes involved in polarising issues, to an extent undermined the pluralism implied in situational analysis. From Gombrich’s discussion of these issues in ‘The Logic of Vanity Fair’, it came out that economically defined competitive situations are inseparably connected to polarising political and/or technological issues that are often decisive in determining the choices of individual agents and thus the very logic of situation. Additionally, in order to tackle determinist methodologies, the proponent of situational analysis is in danger of encouraging success-oriented opportunism, something that was implied in Gombrich’s proposal in ‘Art and Scholarship’ to provide artists ‘simply more opportunities’. It is with this dilemma that Gombrich concluded ‘The Logic of Vanity Fair’ and invited Popper to respond:

I certainly would not want them [the results he proposed] to provide ammunition for those who talk of the ‘inevitability’ of any particular development in modern art, nor would I want to cheer the trimmers and opportunist on their way to success. I would therefore not have ventured to draw such dangerous conclusions from the flimsy premises of Vanity Fair if I did not hope that they may provoke Sir Karl Popper to a critical reaction that will restore the independence of art from social pressures and vindicate the objectivity of its values.

As Gombrich first of all owed the situational analysis to Popper, naturally the latter became the addressee of his concerns. But even though this was ‘a most formidable challenge’ for Popper, he nonetheless contended that ‘Gombrich is not wholly serious in his last paragraph’. And apparently not to hurt Gombrich, Popper partly based his answer on Gombrich’s own text, ‘Art and Self-Transcendence’ as it ‘contains what I now suspect he wanted me to say in reply to his contribution to the present volume’. With all the theoretical considerations contained in Popper’s reply, it was evidently intended to encourage Gombrich not to lose optimism in fighting ‘arrogant and clever stupidities of historicism, and of modernism’.

While elaborating on Gombrich’s challenge, Popper brought in his conception of World 3, which is neither the world of things or facts (World 1), nor the world of subjective feelings (World 2), but the world of ‘objective contents of thought’. What was especially important for Popper in World 3 in this regard was that it could empower the individual to transcend the self by ‘taking the work itself, and the standards which it represents, as more significant than our own feelings and ambitions’. As such World 3 has ‘its own non arbitrary domain of autonomy’. Art for Popper is a World 3 phenomenon and together with Gombrich he believed that artists are engaged in the process of problem solving posed by the medium and traditions of art itself, which is nothing but the constellation of ‘great old standards’.

But, this conservative perspective, in which the contemporary art world appeared as debilitating and bound to decline, did not meet Gombrich’s challenge as it ‘transcended’ the problem of polarising issues. And Popper admitted that ‘we cannot “restore the independence of art” or free it of “social pressures”’. Instead, Popper’s prescription was the same ethically informed cold-war liberal plea for minimal action that Gombrich found outdated in post-war context:
But as long as we can fight them with good reasons, there is no need for despair. We may succeed in showing that these mistaken intellectualist theories of art, both that of art as the expression of the age and that of art as self-expression, are intellectually empty; and we can hope that there will arise again young artists...gifted and sane enough to be deaf to the preaching of their fashionable teachers and critics.95

This was a strategy of ‘moral-political psychologizing’ so characteristic of cold-war liberalism.96 It shifted the heart of the problem from the logic of the situation to the moral position of an agent who should be able to understand this logic and fight it in a battle of ideas. Gombrich apparently expected Popper to say more than this, but Popper only reaffirmed the ‘guardian of memories’ status of scholars whose task was not to show the poverty of historicism.

Schlosser’s ‘Afterlife’ and the Politics of Writing

According to Gombrich and Popper, scholarship also belonged to the World 3. The scholar was positioned in the schism within contemporaneity and acted as its conservative critic. Conscious anachronism, thus, became a moral-political imperative and an exilic strategy fulfilling the work of mourning which ‘validates death in the present while preserving the life of the past’.97 Most importantly this had to be the past of one’s own scholarly traditions, whose autonomy and integrity should be preserved in order not to become literally homeless. Therefore, any art-historical use of non art-historical method, such as situational analysis, should not transgress one’s own academic discourse but keep alive and improve its ‘great old standards’. For Gombrich, these were of course the traditions of Viennese School of Art History and specifically Schlosser’s art history:

My development, therefore, intellectually moved away from the approach I had learned from Max Dvořák [history of art as the history of Spirit]. This move was certainly encouraged by Schlosser, although he would never have said a word against a former colleague...He was really steeped in the past and disliked any stereotypes of this kind, without specifically condemning them.98

In the face of the menace of totalitarian philosophies and the cold-war battle of ideas, Gombrich in fact did condemn ‘stereotypes of this kind’. Being merged with Popper’s Critical Rationalism and political philosophy, as well as neoliberal economic methodologies, Schlosser’s art-historical individualism acquired a moral-political urgency during the cold war. In 1957, in ‘Art and Scholarship’, Gombrich stated that even though his sympathies were divided in his student years, now he believed that ‘Schlosser’s mellow scepticism was justified’.99

It seems indicative that Gombrich wrote of himself as a scholar almost exactly what he had written about Schlosser: ‘The only strange and astonishing fact about my long life is that in a period which was full of dangers, of horrors which were grim indeed, I managed by and large to lead what is known as the life of cloistered scholar’.100 While this was almost the first line with which Gombrich started his autobiography, in 1939, still young, he concluded Schlosser’s obituary in the following way: ‘In times like ours he chose to be an “anachronism” in the very best sense of the word’.101 Thus, it is as if his own life as a scholar was the ‘afterlife’ of his teacher and the Viennese traditions he left behind. The Story of Art inspired by the ‘Household Gods’ of Vienna is the first major outcome of this exilic strategy of
mourning: ‘though the book was written in England and in English, the context is still that of the Vienna of my youth’. 102

Since the rise of the New Art History, The Story of Art has been criticised for formalism,103 patriarchalism,104 and eurocentrism105 as well as defended by sympathetic commentators.106 But perhaps the most important aspect of The Story of Art, which explains its ideological motivations and enduring success, is apparently ignored. I mean the very first precondition Gombrich set before himself in its preface: to write in the plainest language possible.107 The clarity of language was not a matter of a simple writing technique but rather a moral-political imperative that, firstly, would insure the unaltered ‘afterlife’ of the past traditions, and secondly, would be a decisive weapon in the cold-war battle of ideas against totalitarian art histories that contemporise the past to satisfy the present. Not surprisingly, Gombrich criticised both Hauser and Malraux for using what he saw as scientific jargon.108 Thus, it is a moral responsibility of an art historian to discuss the history of art plainly in opposition to ‘those who misuse “scientific” language not to enlighten but to impress the reader, who are “talking down” to us – from the clouds’.109

Interestingly, the clarity standard referred not only to the use of language, but also to the language used: English was seen as an alternative to what was perceived as the obscurity of German art-historical writing. Discussing Erwin Panofsky’s immigration to the USA, Gombrich noted that Panofsky: ‘dissociates himself from the “unnecessary recondite and downright imprecise” language in German art-historical writing. He had meanwhile learned to present these complexities lucidly and correctly in his adopted language’.110 One can see this as a linguistic dimension of their geographic immigration.

The plea for the clarity of theoretical language was also of a piece with Gombrich’s and Popper’s positivist inclination for bringing humanities closer to the ideals of preciseness in sciences, so strong in the traditions of British liberal political philosophy.111 Popper was perfectly clear about the immediate moral-political stakes involved in the task of a scientist to keep his or her language clear:

This, I believe, is one of the greatest and most urgent responsibilities of scientists. It may be the greatest. For this task is closely linked with the survival of an open society and of democracy. An open society (that is, a society based on ideas of not merely tolerating dissenting opinions but respecting them) and democracy (that is, a form of government devoted to the protection of an open society) cannot flourish if science becomes the exclusive possession of a closed set of specialists.112

The enduring success of both The Story of Art and The Open Society is to be explained by precisely this urge to popularise the ideals of the ‘open society’ in the cold-war battle of ideas. The Story of Art should be considered as Gombrich’s most important contribution to this battle.

On the Other Side of the Iron Curtain

The cold-war battle of ideas also had consequences after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Immediately after the fall of the USSR, Popper’s and Hayek’s seminal works were published in Russian.113 The activities of numerous branches of the Open Society Institute in ex-Soviet republics were instrumental in spreading the ideas of individual freedom and the open society as compelling antitoxins to Soviet Marxism. Since Gorbachev’s Perestroika, Gombrich’s art history was also gathering momentum there.
Those aspects of Gombrich’s art history that ran counter to Soviet Marxism were particularly attractive to former Soviet-Russian art historians, namely value pluralism, scepticism and Gombrich’s intellectual friendship with Popper.\textsuperscript{114} In 1998, *The Story of Art* was published in Russian.\textsuperscript{115} This enthusiasm for Gombrich’s art history in Russia peaked in the early 2000s with the publications of Soviet-Russian art historian Viacheslav Shestakov.\textsuperscript{116} Shestakov provided a vignette that can give us some remarkable insight into the cold-war stakes involved in Gombrich’s art history inside the former Soviet Union:

The attempts to publish E. Gombrich’s books failed over the course of many years, as they were countered by a hidden, but persistent unwillingness of the authorities to provide the Soviet reader access to his works. I personally had to write reports repeatedly to the Presidium of the Academy of Fine Arts of USSR with the proposal to choose Gombrich as an honorary academician or to invite him to Moscow, for which I had Gombrich’s agreement. But I came to negative results.\textsuperscript{117}

Given this art-historical enthusiasm for Gombrich in post-Soviet Russia, it is not by chance that the first ever intellectual biography of Gombrich is now available in Russian and authored by Shestakov himself.\textsuperscript{118} Published in ‘post-cold war’ Russia in 2006, it nicely coincided with the publication of the pocket edition of *The Story of Art* in the ‘post-cold war’ West.

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