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Witte, A.

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Wölfflin's *Grundbegriffe* as a psychological palimpsest?

Review of Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. One Hundredth Anniversary Edition*, translated by Jonathan Blower and edited by Evonne Levy and Tristan Weddigen, ix + 357 pp. Los Angeles: Getty Publications 2015. US\$ 34.94, £ 20.00 ISBN 978-1-60606-452-8.

Arnold Witte

In 1915, one year after the start of the First World War, Bruckmann Verlag in Munich published a book that would mark the discipline of art history for an entire century, as it intended to formulate a generally applicable and coherent method of visual analysis. This book was Heinrich Wölfflin's *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. The simplicity of the main title and the structure of the book had been dictated by the circumstances. Wölfflin originally had formulated the title as *Das Problem der Entwicklung in der bildenden Kunst. Eine Erörterung der Grundbegriffe des Stils in der neueren Kunstgeschichte*, which can be translated as 'the problem of development in the visual arts: an explanation of the key concepts of style in early modern art history'. This long-winded title was consonant with those of many other contemporary books that tackled the same issue, but it was turned by the publisher into the concise subtitle *Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (The problem of stylistic development in early modern art).

As Wölfflin stated in the 1915 preface, he had also envisioned a separate volume with images, which the scarcity of paper in those years prevented from coming out just as it had restricted the length of his text. The sales of the first three editions – 19,000 copies in total, all during the First World War – probably made the publisher decide that such an addition would not boost its commercial success, to the contrary. And so, the book has essentially remained unaltered for a hundred years, prescribing the formalist approach to the visual arts and architecture by means of a-temporal categories, and basically presenting an internalist approach to its development in the form of a progression from one type of visual apprehension to another. But the English re-edition of this key text for art history, which recently appeared, makes clear that the historical circumstances had a more profound effect on the book than hitherto assumed.

This new publication is part of the Getty Texts & Documents series and offers both the original text in a new translation by Jonathan Blower, and a discussion of the development of Wölfflin's thinking and its outcome in two introductory essays by Evonne Levy and Tristan Weddigen. The surtitle chosen for the edition (One Hundredth Anniversary Edition) carries a double meaning, as any anniversary is at the same time a celebration of difficulties overcome – and in this case these consist in the many academic discussions over the book's content in the past and present. It is this aspect on which the introduction by Evonne Levy focuses. She places Wölfflin's concepts and ideas into the context of contemporary discussions on art history – identifying elements he had derived from earlier authors such as Adolf Hildebrandt (in particular his psychology of perception) and

Alois Riegl (whose re-evaluation of the Baroque spurred Wölfflin to review his original ideas on seventeenth-century art as noted down in *Renaissance und Barock* of 1888).¹ Wölfflin only admitted these debts half-heartedly, as he generally avoided footnotes and other references to his colleagues. By retracing the academic sources of his work, Levy follows and nuances interpretations of Wölfflin's intellectual background such as those by Joan Hart and Meinhold Lurz.²

But Levy especially opens up an illuminating perspective on the *Grundbegriffe* by discussing its conception in the context of social and national debates of the times – which Wölfflin perennially avoided mentioning in his publications but did discuss in his diaries.³ It is from this point of view, which was first described by Martin Warnke, that the particular reaction to these events by Wölfflin, a Swiss citizen teaching in Munich at the time of writing, becomes apparent. In contrast to his fellow professors, he did not participate in the general optimism towards the first acts of war.⁴ But neither did he express his critical opinions on these (or other contemporary) issues in public. This created Wölfflin's personal Scylla and Charybdis through which he had to steer his subsequent publications – and thus his public persona – at least until he moved back to Switzerland in 1924. The book's content thus balanced two opposing positions with regard to nationalism. On the one hand, national character is mentioned in the 'Conclusion' as an important factor influencing style, while on the other hand, he also expressed his belief in a supra-national understanding. Wölfflin wrote in that same conclusion 'that which binds humanity together is stronger than that which divides it'.⁵ Surely he could not avoid the dominant trend in considering style in the context of nationalism, but at the same time the extreme interpretations of German 'Kultur' with respect to French 'civilisation' in war propaganda must have abhorred him, leading him to present art as a possible means to reconcile with one's enemies. With this in mind, one reads the *Grundbegriffe* with another eye.

The new translation in this edition offers a fresh reading of the original text in concordance with modern day English, thereby updating the translation by Marie D. Hottinger of 1931. It must be noted, however, that this first translation had not only been officially approved by Wölfflin but he had been in regular contact with Hottinger; therefore, some English variations upon the German original were a direct expression of his ideas. Although not expressly acknowledged this has been followed in some instances in this new translation, for example in the phrase 'Baroque or modern art is neither the demise nor an escalation of classical art' – the word 'modern' is lacking in the German original but it was added in the Hottinger version, within brackets, as '(or, let us say, modern)'. On the other hand, with

¹ Andrew Hopkins, 'Riegl Renaissance' in Alois Riegl, *The Origins of Baroque Art in Rome*, A. Hopkins and A. Witte (eds.), Los Angeles 2010, 62

² See for example Meinhold Lurz, *Heinrich Wölfflin: Biographie einer Kunsttheorie*, Worms 1981 and Joan Hart, 'Reinterpreting Wölfflin: Neo-Kantianism and Hermeneutics' in *Art Journal* 42/4 (1982), 292-300

³ These were (partially) published, see Joseph Gantner (ed.), *Heinrich Wölfflin 1864-1945. Autobiographie Tagebücher und Briefe*, Stuttgart 1984

⁴ Martin Warnke, 'Sehgeschichte als Zeitgeschichte: Heinrich Wölfflins »Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe«', *Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken* 46 (1992), 444.

⁵ Wölfflin, *Principles*, here 317.

'demise' and 'escalation' Blower chose less literal translations for the words 'Niedergang' and 'Höherführung', which Hottinger had translated as 'decline' and 'rise'. Thereby, the present translation also takes a certain distance from an all-too-literal interpretation of style following biological evolution, which Wölfflin himself stated as too simplistic (but on the other hand also maintained up to a certain degree, as Weddigen rightfully noted).⁶

The one question not answered here, at least not directly, is the relevance and significance of Wölfflin's text for today's audience – except of course for readers specifically interested in the historiography of the discipline, and to whom this edition seems to be primarily directed. In fact, the most recent editions of the book are a Mexican version of 2007, a Russian edition of 2009, a Korean translation of 2009, a Chinese one of 2011 and an Italian edition of 2012. These are, we can assume, key texts for teaching art history to first-year students in which the method is simply (and uncritically) applied to teach students how to observe works of art and determine their style. In the meantime, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* devoted a series of five articles to Wölfflin in its most recent spring issue.⁷ These five contributions were the result of a symposium dedicated to the centenary of the *Grundbegriffe*; and all of these depart from Wölfflin's ideas but decidedly go beyond his framework, adapting and altering it to serve more recent insights in visual culture studies and film history. For example, on the basis of recent insights in philosophical aesthetics, Jason Gaiger reformulates the often-misunderstood contention that 'every artist finds certain visual possibilities before him, to which he is bound' from an absolute restriction as a result of visual perception to a matter of taste and stylistic meaning.⁸

So, what does a reconsideration of the *Grundbegriffe* in this volume bring the more critical reader? Levy and Weddigen have thoroughly contextualized the historical circumstances of its genesis, mainly focusing on the text itself. However, in comparison with the *Grundbegriffe*, his 1888 *Renaissance und Barock* dealt with the same issues but offered a far more extensive historical and cultural context than the *Grundbegriffe*.⁹ Wölfflin's choice to delimit or even erase historical context, together with his diaries of the period around 1915, strongly suggests that when he wrote the *Grundbegriffe* art, interpreted as form and aesthetics, offered its author a refuge from the atrocities of the war. This was shared by others, as becomes clear from a letter cited by Levy, from one of Wölfflin's pupils, Rudolf Kömstedt, who wrote (admittedly when the war had entered quite another phase, in 1918) that the book represented for him 'a great and stable piece of culture that one can hold on to'.¹⁰

⁶ Weddigen in the present volume, 51

⁷ Bence Nanay, Whitney Davis, Jason Gaiger, Michael Newall and David Bordwell, 'Symposium: The 100th Anniversary of Wölfflin's Principles of Art History' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73/2 (2015), 149-188.

⁸ Gaiger in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art History* 2015, 170.

⁹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock. Eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien*, Munich 1888, contained quite a long chapter, 'Gründe der Stilwandlung', in which historical context was used to explain the shift between the architecture of the 16th and 17th centuries.

¹⁰ Levy, p. 23 citing Golo Maurer, *August Grisebach (1881-1950). Kunsthistoriker in Deutschland*, Rupholding 2007, 175.

Unlike Levy and Warnke who regarded Wölfflin's position as a form of implicit (political) resistance, these indications suggest a reading of his behaviour as one of evasion – for by deliberately obfuscating the relation between historical context and art, the latter could become a spiritual refuge.¹¹ The *Grundbegriffe*, therefore, might have functioned as a kind of psychological palimpsest in which Wölfflin used the formal, and thus aesthetic, issues to cover up the displeasing historical circumstances in which he lived, and during which he wrote, the *Grundbegriffe*. And this, in turn, should be an integral part of the way the *Grundbegriffe* are used in teaching first-year students in art history, so that they in turn will become more aware of how the interpretation of art is always based on historical circumstances – either stressing certain elements, or tacitly ignoring them.

Arnold Witte is Director of Studies in Art History at the Royal Netherlandish Institute in Rome, and Associate professor at the University of Amsterdam. He has published on Roman Baroque art and its historiography, amongst which is the translation and edition of Alois Riegl's *Origins of Baroque Art in Rome* (Los Angeles, 2010), together with Andrew Hopkins and Alina Payne.

a.a.witte@uva.nl



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¹¹ See also Evonne Levy, 'The Political Project of Wölfflin's Early Formalism', *October* 139 (2012), 39-58.