

Formal values and the essence of art

Review of:

Paul van den Akker, *Looking for Lines. Theories on the Essence of Art and the Problem of Mannerism*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2010, 524 p. b/w ill. 528 pages
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Art history has employed the same or very similar categories and descriptive concepts to organise and characterise the form and style of artworks for an astonishingly long time. Yet in doing so the discipline has sometimes come to opposite results in regard to the same object: Thus for instance Heinrich Wölfflin dismissed 'curves' as the defining feature of mannerist art in 1899, while John Shearman praised them in 1967. Nothing reveals more clearly the cultural specificity and mutability of vision and aesthetic sensibility (as well as our supposedly scientific ideas and debates about art) than such contrary judgements (although Wölfflin was already conscious of this problem of the history of seeing). The criteria of classification and description used in the scholarly analysis of the historical course of art tell us at least as much about the scholars themselves as they do about historic works of art. After all, any scholarly study of art depends on abstract notions of essential characteristics, in order to establish visual and artistic contexts. It was this insight that had already guided Johann Joachim Winckelmann in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* from 1764, which investigated the 'essence of art' in the historic struggle over supposed norms of beauty, rather than seeking to investigate the history of individual artists or works.

The problem of the categorial definition of the nature of art was often regarded the central challenge of art history and at times it still is. Paul van den Akker examines the history of this problem from the eighteenth century to the 1960s. Thus his book addresses 'the essence of art history' altogether. In order to do so, van den Akker uses the extremely contradictory discussions of 'Mannerism' and the use of the line in mannerist art as a relevant case study, and this is supplemented with extensive excursions on historic concepts of 'classical art', of Renaissance painting and how it was thought to have been perfected by Raphael, of medieval art, connoisseurship and so forth. The overall argument of the book starts by outlining the nature of the problem; it begins with Shearman, then touches on Wölfflin and Burckhardt, eventually leading up to Kugler (Part I). Part II then traces the problem back chronologically to Winckelmann and his intellectual context in the eighteenth (and partly the seventeenth) century, and then returns once more, via a number of stopping points in the nineteenth century, to Riegl and his historically relative evaluation of styles, which served as a counter-model to Wölfflin (Part III). Emphasis should here be given to van den Akker's remarks on lesser known authors such as George Turnbull, or Jacques-Nicolas Paillot de Montabert, as well as the many ways he shows the interdependencies of conventions of seeing, connoisseurship, art historical scholarship and the teaching of drawing. In general the greatest achievement of van den Akker's book, however, is to have identified so emphatically the all-encompassing problem of the 'essence of art' as the central concern of the historiography of art history, as well as his demand for a self-reflexive mode of art historical work in the present.

From the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, the problem of the 'essence of art' produced a multitude of texts which were, in part, highly comprehensive, but which were not systematic. The challenge posed by any historiographic enquiry is to distil out of the 'chaos' of historic material the systemic and analytical categories associated with the problem, and then to trace their particular genesis and relevance. In contrast, van den Akker invokes at least five different pairs of categories and treats them as interlocking facets of the same problem; they thereby lose their specific value for interpretation. 1.) Form versus content (or the visual-sensual-anthropological versus the conceptual-spiritual-cultural); 2.) Imitation of nature or 'realism' versus idealization, stylization, even ornamentation or abstraction; 3.) The classical versus the anti-classical; 4.) The challenge of the two-dimensional picture plane versus the illusion of plasticity and space; 5.) Finally, the opacity of the medium (i.e. the self-thematisation and 'self-indexicality' of the artistic process, materials and forms) versus its transparency (i.e. the negation of the artistic medium and all other signs of artificiality for the sake of illusion). In addition, one would like to learn more about the very different forms, perceptual possibilities and ways of conceiving 'lines' in the period under discussion.¹

Van den Akker's book pursues not only the major lines of dispute and argument. In many cases, the focus lies on an assumed canon of art history: the 'heroic figures' of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century - first of all Caylus, Winckelmann, Hogarth, Burke and Goethe - are flanked by a horde of other thinkers. From the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the contexts and debates suddenly thin out. With this abbreviated treatment (only pages 348-355) one can hardly understand the concerns and significance of experimental aesthetics - of which Gustav Fechner is the sole representative - and the discussions around the concept of form, as they were pursued by Adolf von Hildebrand and Konrad Fiedler.² In the German-speaking field the analysis of this problem should at least have included Hans Sedlmayr's outline of a 'first' and 'second' art history. George Kubler's *The Shape of Time* from 1962, arguably the most important counterpart to Shearman's book on Mannerism, might have been included as a radical 1960s alternative in the understanding of the elements of Mannerist style, and also as an attempt to overcome European viewing patterns and art historical categories with a global perspective, even though Kubler explicitly addressed Mannerism only twice. By and large, one ought to ask whether historic discussions of 'the essence of art' took place mostly within the field of art history (in conjunction with the teaching of drawing), or whether a more general and comprehensive 'history of scholarship and the theory of art' should not be undertaken here.

The 'problem of Mannerism' forms a central theme of *Looking for Lines* because the question of the 'essence of art' crystallises especially clearly in the debates around this period concept between the eighteenth century and the 1960s. It would therefore be misguided to criticise a book that addresses such major issues as the perception of medieval, ancient and all other forms of 'classical' art for failing to take into account one or two contributions on the subject of Mannerism. Yet at least three aspects are not touched upon which would have contributed decisively to the larger issue: Roland Fréart de Chambray, who in his 1662 *Idée de*

¹ See for instance: Werner Busch, 'Die Neudefinition der Umrißzeichnung in Rom am Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts', idem a. Margaret Stufmann, eds, *Zeichnen in Rom 1790-1830*, Cologne, 2001, pp. 11-44; James Elkins, 'Marks, Traces, "Traits", Contours, "Orli", and "Splendores" - Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures', *Critical Inquiry*, 21, 1995, pp. 822-60; Manlio Brusatin, *Storia delle linee*, Turin, 1993.

² Dieter Burdorf, *Poetik der Form. Eine Begriffs- und Problemgeschichte*, Stuttgart/Weimar, 2001; Richard Woodfield, "'Kunstwissenschaft" versus "Ästhetik" - the historian's revolt against aesthetics', Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen and Tony O'Connor, eds, *Rediscovering Aesthetics*, Stanford, 2009, pp. 19-33.

la perfection de la peinture was first to mention the term ‘manieristes’ in relation to a group of artists, lists colour and its application long before the line and contour as the essential feature of mannerism (p. 62): ‘la Fraischeur et la Vaghesse du Coloris, la Franchise du pinceau, les Touches hardies, les Coleurs bien empastés et bien nourriers, le Detachement des Masses, [...] les beaux Contours, [...]’. For van Akker, however, colour plays no role. Second, with regard to the predominantly German-language discourse it would be relevant, in the context of Heinrich Wölfflin’s shaping of discussions of Mannerism, to draw attention to the ‘biologization,’ the ‘pathologization’ and ‘politicization’ of the concept itself in the decades around 1900: Mannerism as a phenomenon of illness, insanity, evolutionary end-point, ‘degeneration’.³ Here we see once more that the horizon of art historical discussion considered by van den Akker is sometimes too narrow. Third, Marco Treves’ article on ‘*Maniera*. The History of a Word’ from 1941 plays a key role.⁴ On the one hand it serves as an excellent example of how ideas developed by art historians like Erwin Panofsky and Walter Friedlaender, who were expelled by the Nazis, were further developed in the USA. On the other, one can see in Treves’s article the level of scholarly historical self-reflection that was already possible two decades before Shearman.

Van den Akkers’ historiography of art history is exclusively based on texts. His book comprises more than 150 illustrations, half of which are images of books and their illustrations themselves – varying from different kinds of prints to photography. None of them, however, is actually considered for its specific visual value. Yet the numerous copperplate engravings in particular demonstrate how radically this technique has to alter the object being illustrated and thus how the employment of ‘lines’ differs in intention and effect. One would also hardly guess, based on the unfortunate excerpts from his publications, that Wölfflin attached the utmost importance to the photographic layout of his books, in order to provide evidence for the antitheses that were central to his argument. Even though van Akker points to the ‘picturing of art history’ – he has hardly anything to say on the matter.⁵

The ‘Epilogue: Visual Order in Figurative Art’ finally leads back to issues from the first pages of the book, where he announced ‘the story of a complex, unfinished history. A history of how, for a very long time, art historians have approached the works of Old Masters from a modern point of view’ (page 13). The impression gained there is that art historians today could pursue their research unaffected by the historic and cultural specificities of vision, aesthetic sensibility and adequate verbal representation. No matter how hard we attempt the historical and critical reconstruction of the ‘period eye’ of a particular time, this is completely impossible. Instead, it can only ever be a hermeneutic ‘fusion of horizons’ in Gadamer’s sense, a contextualisation and reflection of historic

³ Horst Bredekamp, ‘Der Manierismus. Zur Problematik einer kunsthistorischen Erfindung’, Wolfgang Braungart, ed, *Manier und Manierismus*, Tübingen, 2000, pp. 109-29; Roland Kanz, ‘Kunstgeschichte als “geisteswissenschaftliche Biologie”’. Wilhelm Pinders Pathologisierung des Manierismus und Ernst Kretschmers Typenlehre’, Tobias Kunz, ed, *“Nicht die Bibliothek, sondern das Auge”*. Westeuropäische Skulptur und Malerei an der Wende zur Neuzeit, Petersberg, 2008, pp. 325-33. – In the Soviet Union, interest in Mannerism was in 1951 understood as a western, bourgeois attempt to disavow the Renaissance, see: Uwe Hartmann, ‘Die “Verteidigung” der Renaissance. Zur Auseinandersetzung sowjetischer Kunsthistoriker mit der “bürgerlichen” Kunstwissenschaft zu Beginn des Kalten Krieges’, Tatjana Bartsch a. Jörg Meiner, eds, *Kunst : Kontext: Geschichte. Festgabe für Hubert Faensen zum 75. Geburtstag*, Berlin, 2003, pp. 294-309.

⁴ In: *Marsyas* 1, 1941, pp. 69-88. Cf: Ursula Link-Heer, ‘Manier / manieristisch / Manierismus’, Karlheinz Barck a.o., eds, *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, v. 3, Stuttgart/Weimar, 2001, pp. 790-864.

⁵ See for instance: Ingrid R. Vermeulen, *Picturing Art History. The Rise of the Illustrated History of Art in the Eighteenth Century*, Amsterdam, 2010.

scholarship against the horizon of current interest and challenges. In this sense it would have been interesting if van den Akker had been more explicit about his own position; this would have made it clearer where his ideas were based on current research, and where he was going beyond it.

In contrast, the author sketches out a view of future scholarship on Mannerism that draws on insights from the cognitive sciences and the anthropological foundations of human perception: the visual hierarchies, symmetries and other ways of structuring perception that have been detected there seem applicable to the composition of Mannerist images as well. For the latter, van den Akker argues, allow the beholder to recognise the composition clearly despite the plethora of visual details. As such, it is not only the 'purely decorative or aesthetic effects' (page 412) that are at stake, but also the meaning of the representations. The relevance of such general claims to Mannerist images in the sixteenth century remains to be determined; it is hardly possible, however, to describe van den Akker's illustrations 7 and 9 of Parmigianino or Perino del Vaga adequately on this basis. Instead it might be worth considering whether early modern theories of the categories and topics of knowledge and theories of invention might not present a historical framework for the structures and the endlessly and highly artificial variations of individual elements of Mannerist art (quasi the *loci* of topics).⁶ Equally significant would be the dynamics arising from the new level of artistic self-reflection and the increased dissemination of literature on art during the course of the sixteenth century. Understood in this way, 'Mannerism' is not only a challenge to subsequent reflection and scholarly research on art that was to follow, but was also, at least partly, a product of the novel reflections on art of the sixteenth century.

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(Translation: Christiane Hille assisted by Matthew Rampley)

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⁶ See: Werner Hofmann, 'Ars combinatoria', *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen*, 21, 1976, pp. 7-30.