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Résumé de l'article

Le but de cet article est d'offrir une réévaluation du concept de *Kunstwollen* proposé par Alois Riegl et d'établir sa relation avec la philosophie de Hegel. Cette réévaluation est centrée sur une discussion d'un certain nombre d'idées difficiles à résoudre au sujet du développement dialectique et de la nécessité qui sous-tendent les analyses philosophiques de Hegel sur l'art et l'histoire. On utilise cette discussion pour clarifier le rôle joué par ces idées dans son concept de *Kunstwollen*. En conclusion, on présente un nouveau modèle du *Kunstwollen* qui évite les critiques auxquelles il est généralement en butte.

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Résumé

Le but de cet article est d'offrir une réévaluation du concept de *Kunstwollen* proposé par Aloïs Riegl et d'établir sa relation avec la philosophie de Hegel. Cette réévaluation est centrée sur une discussion d'un certain nombre d'idées difficiles à résoudre au sujet du développement dialectique et de la nécessité qui sous-tendent les

analyses philosophiques de Hegel sur l'art et l'histoire. On utilise cette discussion pour clarifier le rôle joué par ces idées dans son concept de *Kunstwollen*. En conclusion, on présente un nouveau modèle du *Kunstwollen* qui évite les critiques auxquelles il est généralement en butte.

There has been something of a resurgence of interest in the writings of Alois Riegl in the past ten to fifteen years. In good part, Riegl has emerged from obscurity through the positive re-evaluations that he has received from art historians such as Svetlana Alpers, Margaret Iversen, and Margaret Olin.¹ Riegl's work was pushed out of the mainstream of art historical discourse after the Second World War, because many thought that his dependence upon concepts such as "race," "evolution," and "will" indicated that he was at one with the totalitarian doctrines that had shaped German political life. There were of course other art historians who suffered similar fates, but Riegl was marked for special attention. Hans Sedlmayr, a prominent art historian and Nazi sympathizer, wrote an introduction to Riegl's collected essays that attempted to tie Riegl to his vision of national culture and historical destiny. There is no doubt that Sedlmayr succeeded in forging this association, as is evident in this passage on historicism from E.H. Gombrich's influential *Art and Illusion*:

I have discussed elsewhere why this reliance of art history on mythological explanations seems so dangerous to me. By inculcating the habit of talking in terms of collectives, of "mankind," "races," or "ages," it weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind. I do not make these accusations lightly. Indeed I can quote chapter and verse by enumerating the lessons which Hans Sedlmayr wanted the reader to draw from reading Riegl's collected essays, the introduction to which he wrote in 1927.²

We now realize that Riegl did not deserve to be associated with Sedlmayr. Quite the opposite, for as many art historians have recently pointed out, Riegl's approach to the history of art was in a number of respects more open and egalitarian than other models that were dominant in his era. First, Riegl argued against a normative, progressive conception of the history of art that privileged certain media and eras, and offered in its stead a model of constant changes of equal importance and significance. Second, he did not accept the implicit premise behind the idea of artistic progress, that is, the notion that art involves a continuous refinement of the imitation of nature in accordance

with an unchanging norm; this he replaced with the idea that art is an ever-changing transformation of form. Third, he did not support the idea that history is a rational, teleological process, wherein individual works of art are merely instantiations of an a priori scheme; rather, for him a true history of art could only arise from a careful consideration of the qualities of actual art objects. Finally, he militated against any vision of art works that saw them as subordinate to and dependent upon greater historical processes; art history, for Riegl, was an autonomous discipline that investigated an autonomous form of human engagement with the world. Anyone who held these positions could not have been what Sedlmayr said Riegl was.

One of the features that marked Riegl as a potential enemy of humanity was that he spoke with a Hegelian accent. Since the Second World War, especially in North America, it has been assumed that Hegel's philosophy stands as the embodiment of the totalitarian vision of history and culture that underpinned Nazism. As Riegl's Hegelianism appears to run against our rehabilitated vision of him, there has been a tendency to overlook this aspect of his approach to the history of art. But perhaps this is not something that needs to be overlooked. Perhaps the apparent incompatibility has more to do with the conception of Hegel's philosophy that one commonly finds in art history. In the past few decades a number of philosophical works have appeared that have counteracted in different ways some of the stereotypes held by philosophers not well acquainted with Hegel's philosophy.³ Perhaps it is time to take a closer look at some of the stereotypes that continue to circulate in art history.

II

I would like to begin by countering some common misunderstandings about Hegel's conception of historical development. I will then use this discussion to counter some equally common misunderstandings about how these ideas are at work in Riegl's art theory. A good point of entry into Hegel's philosophy is through his evaluation of Kant. Kant's impact was such that after the publication of his three *Critiques* many philosophers thought that there was nothing left to do in philosophy except

fill in the details. Hegel was not so certain. Although Hegel considered Kant to be “the basis and point of departure for modern German philosophy,”⁴ and a philosopher surpassed only by Plato and Aristotle, he had some grave misgivings about Kant’s achievements. One of Kant’s central concerns had been the mutual defence and reconciliation of scientific knowledge and the “practical” values of morality and religion within a single, systematic view of the world. Science and religion had been warring since the Renaissance, with each claiming universal validity at the expense of the other. Kant wanted to reconcile these warring opposites and make it possible for human beings to be committed scientists and responsible Christian citizens; but, because of Hume’s attacks on the foundational principles of both of these realms, he saw that this reconciliation now also required a justification. Hegel appreciated the power and scope of Kant’s new critical or transcendental philosophy and the approach that it took to justifying claims in these two realms; however, in line with Fichte and his one-time friend Schelling, Hegel was not wholly comfortable with what Kant seemed to be offering. Particularly troublesome was the apparent duality of worlds, or duality of selves, that seems to arise within the Kantian framework in the division between the *sensible* world of empirical knowledge, where the categories of the understanding and the forms of intuition constitute experience, and the *intelligible* world of God, freedom, and immortality, which lies beyond the reaches of scientific determinism and the demands of its rules of evidence.

Bound up with this, and equally troublesome for Hegel, was Kant’s distinction between the world of our experience (or the “phenomenal” world) and the world as it is in-itself (or the “noumenal” world). What Hegel, and Fichte and Schelling, found unsatisfactory about Kant’s notion of the noumenal world – the world of “things-in-themselves” – was that it appeared to subvert the accomplishments of what Kant called his Copernican Revolution. The supposed final answer to scepticism seemed to open up a new territory for scepticism by creating what looked like an unbreachable gap between empirical knowledge, which has to do with the objects constituted in experience, and the things-in-themselves, which we cannot know at all. Thus, it once again seemed that we could raise the question of whether we know things as they are. Whether or not Hegel was right, this apparent two-worlds view was unacceptable to him; philosophy had to be the quest for overall unity and comprehensibility, and truth had to be a comprehensive world view in which the order and intelligibility of the various forms of human experience could be established. The only resolution of the two-worlds view was the elimination of the noumenal world and all that went with it; knowledge and practice had to be part of one and the same “system.” Hegel eliminated the things-in-themselves, not by denying that we can know them, but by insisting

that the objects of our experience *are* the things-in-themselves. The question then is not whether our knowledge conforms to things-in-themselves, but whether our knowledge is an adequate set of “determinations” and a comprehensible view of what it is we know.

The stated aim of Hegel’s philosophy – which he makes plain on the very first page of the first section of the “Preface” to *The Phenomenology of Mind* – is Truth, or the True.⁵ But what does Hegel mean by “Truth?” The True for Hegel consists not of the details of life but of a single, all-embracing, self-reflective, philosophical vision. The Truth, then, is that comprehensive world view in which the order and intelligibility of the various forms of human experience can be established. Furthermore, the Truth is not just that which is considered from a theoretical point of view; the Truth is also *practical* (in both the ordinary and Kantian senses): it requires the unity of Kant’s alleged two worlds. It is (to put it in Hegelian language) an all-embracing, harmonious, participatory view of the world – the True is the whole. And this is our lead-in to Hegel’s most well-known and influential work, *The Phenomenology of Mind*.⁶

For Hegel “phenomenology of mind or spirit (*Geist*)” means the study of the forms in which mind manifests itself. In conceiving such a study, Hegel is not talking about, for instance, writing a history of the whole of human thought from his particular philosophical point of view. This kind of approach leads nowhere; it provides only an informed philosophical opinion, which other philosophers might then contest from their own philosophical vantage points. A more profound and demanding form of philosophical exegesis must be engaged in, one that proceeds immanently by mastering each view in the history of thought from the interior, existentially, understanding it better than its proponents. To remain faithful to this approach, Hegel must never condemn any view externally, from a philosophical position outside of it; his criticism must always be internal and consist in taking each view more seriously than its supporters take it. Pushed to its limits as a view of human reality, each position will reveal its limitations, and its place in the development of human spirit. This is, in essence, the dialect of thought that is commonly identified with Hegel’s philosophy.

Hegel’s conception of this kind of phenomenological investigation is notoriously evolutionary, but it is neither as mechanical nor deterministic as the usual caricatures of his philosophy have made out.⁷ Hegel’s discussions of the movement of mind are not at all simple, as we shall see shortly, and he never employs the dreary little three-step model of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis that he has become famous for (it was Fichte who introduced it into German philosophy). Not only does Hegel never employ these terms in this way and in this combination, he openly scorns the idea of such a happy little three-step

Volkstanz performed by the *Weltgeist*. (He does use these terms together on occasion, as for example in his lectures on the history of philosophy, where he reproaches Kant for his rigid architectonic approach, but that is an entirely different matter).

The necessity that Hegel sees in the dialectic of thought is also not what it is commonly supposed to be. It is a very weak form of necessity, if it should be called necessity at all (it is certainly not some sort of preordained forced march under the tutelage of the *Weltgeist*, as some might believe). Perhaps it should be described as a retrospective study of presupposition, of what had to be the case if certain forms of consciousness were to become possible.⁸ For example, in *The Phenomenology of Mind* the doctrine of scepticism is not seen as the antithesis of stoicism, but rather as the state of mind that is reached when stoicism is taken more seriously than its advocates are willing to take it, when its one-sidedness is explored to its logical conclusions. And what emerges from this – what Hegel calls the “unhappy consciousness” of medieval Christian thought – is not so much a synthesis of what preceded it as the necessary consequence, to use Walter Kaufmann’s fine phrase, “of not allowing the sceptic to hide in bad faith in his halfway house.”⁹ Stoicism is “sublated” (Hegel’s multiply ambiguous term *aufheben*); it is picked up, cancelled, and at the same time preserved in the “unhappy consciousness.” This kind of development is not necessary in the sense that events *had* to work out this way, as it is sometimes claimed, nor should it be seen as a simple tale of normative progress.¹⁰ The dialectic is not unfolding according to a preordained itinerary: to move is not necessarily to follow a predetermined path, and to move to greater levels of complexity is not in-itself an improvement, though Hegel does make that evaluation for other reasons, which will be discussed presently. It must also be said that Hegel does see the movement of mind as having an end. The last stage, the terminus of mind’s odyssey, is the attainment of the Absolute, the True, which is the vantage point attained in philosophy (and which, as it happens, is also coextensive with Hegel’s system of thought). At this stage, consciousness explicates that single, all-embracing, self-reflective philosophical system in which all is comprehended. The framework for this is unfolded in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, which, Hegel claims, is the schema for the movement of mind contained in *The Phenomenology*; the stages of the *Logic* disclose – as Hegel would put it – pure thought, spirit thinking its own essence.

It is also often believed that Hegel holds to an optimistic and normative doctrine of progress, wherein the dialectic moves through history and the lot of humanity continually improves, until the pinnacle of achievement is reached in the Western European civilization of Hegel’s day. But if this is true, it is true in a very qualified fashion. Perhaps an example will make this clearer. It is impossible for a shaman in an early civilization to

see his rites as mere societal conventions, and it is just as impossible for a contemporary mathematician *not* to see axiomatic systems as conventional symbolic orders. The mathematician, unlike the shaman, is working in a modality of meaning that not only allows but also requires her to think about the nature of symbol relations. In the movement from a mythic apprehension of the world to what Hegel would call a philosophical apprehension of the world, we become increasingly better equipped to distance ourselves from our structures of thought and evaluate whether our knowledge is an adequate set of determinations and a more comprehensive view of what it is we know. This is what Hegel takes to be progress, and this is the progressive self-liberation of humankind. Hegel is not in complicity with a nineteenth-century doctrine of the unending, luminous future of Western civilization.¹¹ It is true that Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* appear to have as a central theme the idea that history is the story of the development of human freedom, that the movement of history has led to the realization of the idea in the modern era that “man as man is free,”¹² but what Hegel means by “freedom” here should not be taken in a straightforward social or political sense, as I have tried to indicate. And, contrary to received opinion, it is not a wholly optimistic doctrine. In general, Hegel seems to have a rather bleak view of human existence as a protracted, unmitigated chronicle of misery and suffering (“the slaughter bench of history”).¹³ There is, retrospectively, some reason in the movement of the grim panorama of history, but this is not a simple tale about the life of humanity necessarily progressing, getting better, or obtaining greater happiness.

III

Most of the Hegelian elements in Riegl’s writings come from this model of dialectical development, drawn not so much from *The Phenomenology of Mind* as from the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and, not surprisingly, the *Aesthetics*,¹⁴ the latter apparently having a greater influence in his later work, most notably *The Group Portraiture of Holland*,¹⁵ where Riegl appears to borrow from Hegel’s discussion of the beholder’s apprehension of the art object. Riegl’s earlier writings, especially *Late Roman Art Industry*,¹⁶ seem to borrow mainly from Hegel’s understanding of how mind, how consciousness, develops historically.

In *Late Roman Art Industry* Riegl links stylistic transformation to shifts in how consciousness apprehends the world. He charts these shifts – in ancient Egyptian art, classical Greek art, and late Roman art – on a scale defined by the oppositional terms “haptic” and “optic.” Each era is characterized by a different perceptual relation to the world that is not physiological but attitudinal: the late Roman form of apprehension differs from that of ancient Egypt because it involves an entirely distinct

relation of beholding between consciousness and the objects of experience, and this relation is based on the lived, spatial engagement of the viewer with the viewed.

In order to make Riegl's analysis clearer, and better bring out the Hegelian elements in it, let us consider what he says about the Egyptian and the Greek stages, and how one is transformed into the other. In the Egyptian haptic mode of representation objects are represented in a way that stresses to a maximum degree a presentation of them as unified, isolated objects adhering to a plane. Ancient Egyptian paintings and relief sculptures provide the clearest example of this type of art, for they present distinct, hard outlines against an obviously flat, material plane, and even reconfigure the human form so that the relations of its parts are transformed into more planar relations. This mode of representation corresponds to what, for lack of a better term, we might call a more elemental human attitude towards nature; it is, I suppose Riegl would say, the initial human response to the instability of experience. At this time, human beings saw their relation to the world in principally anthropomorphic terms, that is, they perceived themselves as isolated bodies and grasped things external to them as similarly individual and distinct. But, this perception was constantly jeopardized by the flux of experience. So, in an effort to defeat this apparent contradiction, they fashioned works to deny the ever-changing instability of experience, and to conform to a space that was not understood as mathematically continuous, but as the negation of matter. However, to use Hegelian language, the contradiction could not be suppressed, and so when this form of representation was pursued to the limits of its possibilities, it brought about its own transformation, revealing that which it was attempting to negate. Thus, we find in classical Greek art a new mode of representation in which relief elements, though still firmly connected to the ground plane, begin to be prominent enough to cast shadows and create optical modelling, but not so prominent as to undermine the haptic unity of the surface. For the artists of classical Greece, this "haptic-optical" conception of things seemed inescapable because of the subjective determinants that govern perception at its very basis. The creators of such works wanted to affirm the self-containedness of the objects represented, in confirmation of the self-containedness that was revealed to them through touch. Yet touch, which is the most objective of the senses, is itself ultimately subjective, in that subjectivity must be involved in combining the tactile sensations that give one an objective presentation of the object. "In ancient artistic creation there existed from the very beginning a latent inner controversy; one was not able to avoid a subjective blend in spite of the intended basically objective perception of objects."¹⁷ In Hegelian terms, if we recall Hegel's use of the word *aufheben*, the Egyptian haptic mode of representation is picked up, cancelled, and at

the same time preserved in the new relationship that consciousness fashions with the world in the art of classical Greece. A similar Hegelian dialectical transformation leads to the optical world of late Roman art, and its increased recognition of the role of subjectivity in the processes of vision. Now objects come forth in full three-dimensionality and bring with them a new concept of space as a measurable, though not yet infinite and continuous, medium. These objects are still oriented towards a planar presentation but now they no longer have a tactile relation to it:

This plane is no longer tactile because it contains interruptions achieved through deep shadows; it is, on the contrary optical – colourful whereby the objects appear in *Fernsicht* [distant view] to us and whereby they also blur into their environment. The perception of objects characterizing this third phase of ancient art is thus essentially optical and in particular *fern-sichtig* [distant] represented in its purest form through the art of the late Roman Empire.¹⁸

In keeping with the spirit of Riegl's art theory, the entire dialectical development that he describes signifies neither necessity nor progress.

In *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, Riegl replaces the haptic/optic distinction with a broader one, which he calls objective/subjective, that incorporates the characteristics of the earlier distinction into a more complex array of spatial qualities. Once again, Riegl notes three major divisions and unites them in a Hegelian evolutionary schema. As I have already discussed this aspect of Riegl's debt to Hegel, I would like to turn to another Hegelian idea that has a central place in Riegl's account of Dutch group portraiture. In his *Aesthetics* Hegel provides a penetrating analysis of how a painting's composition, especially its two-dimensional character and choice of viewpoint, implicitly involves the viewer's subjectivity, thereby making the fact that it is seen from a certain viewpoint part of its subject: "By displaying what is subjective, the work, in its whole mode of presentation, reveals its purpose as existing *for* the subject, for the spectator and not on its own account. The spectator is, as it were, in it from the beginning, is counted in with it, and the work exists only for this fixed point, i.e., for the individual apprehending it."¹⁹ The idea that the viewer's relation to the work of art is part of its essential characterization is an idea that Riegl takes over from Hegel and develops to account for the unique features of Dutch group portraits. In Riegl's analysis, the psychological relations of attentiveness as depicted in the glances of the figures both amongst themselves and outward to the viewer become integral features of the artwork. Effectively, the viewer's relation to the work becomes a genuine property of it: the communal and respectful Dutch attentiveness, *Aufmerksamkeit*, which for Riegl is so central to the

Dutch *Weltanschauung*, is explicitly bound to the visual constitution of the art form.

Although I have not yet brought Riegl's *Kunstwollen* or Hegel's *Weltgeist* into the discussion, everything that has been said so far goes towards clarifying both notions. I would like now to address them directly and counter an accusation that has often been levelled against both, i.e., that they are anthropomorphizations of trans-historical forces or, in Joan Hart's phrase, that they are "macrocosmic mystical forces."²⁰

The concept of *Kunstwollen*, which sits at the heart of Riegl's mature art theory, beginning with *Late Roman Art Industry*, is without doubt the most perplexing and vexing concept that he formulated.²¹ Within the confines of this essay, it is not possible to provide a complete account of its sense and its role in Riegl's approach to the history of art. However, for the issues that I want to consider, it will be sufficient to set out a few major features of the concept. The first one that should be taken into consideration is negative: Riegl invented the term *Kunstwollen* in order to avoid the word "style," which had come to have no agreed upon use and conflicting senses. Unfortunately, Riegl's term has turned out to be more troublesome than its older relative, and it has created considerable difficulties for his commentators, as is evident when it comes to the question of how to translate *Kunstwollen*: should it be "will-to-form," "artistic volition," "artistic intention," "artistic impulse," "that which wills art," "that which art wills," or one of the other various suggestions that have been made?²² The choice that one makes depends of course on one's interpretation of Riegl's art theory, but that cannot be settled without clarifying why he used the word *Kunstwollen* and not, say, *Kunstwille*. For this and other reasons, it seems best to not translate *Kunstwollen*, but to try instead to secure its sense by examining the uses to which Riegl put it in his art historical studies.

The word *Kunstwollen* does occur in Riegl's earlier work *Problems of Style: Foundation for a History of Ornament*,²³ but only infrequently, and not with the same sense that it has in *Late Roman Art Industry* and *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, as one would expect, given the fundamental theoretical shift that occurs in the transition between the earlier and the later books.²⁴ There are, though, two features that link Riegl's use of the word *Kunstwollen* in these works: the first is that in all cases the term is introduced in opposition to the mechanistic and materialistic theory of artistic development that had been advanced by the followers of Gottfried Semper; the second is that *Kunstwollen* is to be understood in relation to the formal constitution of works of art. These two features are connected, and the second leads more directly to what is central to the concept of *Kunstwollen*. Let us begin though with the first.

In his early books, *Altorientalische Teppiche (Antique Oriental Carpets)*²⁵ and *Problems of Style*, Riegl outlined long and

detailed morphological histories that traced ornamental designs over vast periods of time and through diverse cultures. In both works Riegl is interested in tracking evolutionary continuity as an internal artistic development. In *Problems of Style*, his approach is, as Michael Podro aptly summarizes it, "extraordinarily simple in comparison with those of his later work, but its underlying conception is one which he never abandoned; it was that we understand art as initially transforming nature and then as transforming itself from within, out of purposes which are strictly artistic."²⁶ One of the factors that prompted Riegl to write *Problems of Style* was his aversion to the Semperian line on the evolution of styles (in fact, Riegl's title *Stilfragen* was meant as a reference to Gottfried Semper's influential *Der Stil*, i.e., the problems of *Der Stil*).²⁷ Riegl's dissatisfactions were not directed so much at Semper himself as they were at what Riegl called the "sub-Semperians," the enthusiastic disciples of Semper who reduced his theories to formulaic doctrines: "Whereas Semper did suggest that material and technique play a role in the genesis of art forms, the Semperians jumped to the conclusion that all art forms were always the direct product of materials and techniques."²⁸ *Problems of Style* is a sustained argument against the materialistic evolutionism of the sub-Semperians; materials, functions, and techniques do have a role in the development of styles, Riegl concedes, but, as he states in a well-conceived figure of speech, they "no longer have those positive creative roles attributed to them by Semper's theory but rather restraining, negative ones: they are, so to say, the coefficients of friction within the entire product."²⁹ Riegl's refutation of the Semperian position is one of the great tours de force in the art historical literature on stylistic analysis. Beginning with the supposition that the Egyptian lotus motif originated in an artistic transformation of a natural model, Riegl goes on to demonstrate in painstaking detail how 5,000 years of plant ornamentation – from Egypt and the ancient Orient to Classical Greece and Rome and from there to Byzantium and the Islamic countries – can be read as a single, evolutionary process wherein all stylistic changes can be explained as internal, artistically motivated invention. Invention though is not something that can simply be accounted for by appealing to the imaginative intervention of the artisan, for the pressures that moved that formal development are internal to it, and could not have been displaced by individual whim. The individual artisan had as much hope of changing it as an individual speaker has in reorienting the formal constraints of a natural language; in both cases the inherited structure presides over the individual will.

These ideas will continue to ground Riegl's later theory of art, and provide the basis for his concept of *Kunstwollen*. Equally important is the idea that *Kunstwollen* is to be understood in terms of that which is specific to art, which is, as he says in *Late Roman Art Industry*, "Umriss und Farbe in Ebene oder Raum"

(outline and colour, on the plane or in space). This is even stated explicitly in “Naturwerk und Kunstwerk I und II”:

All these non-artistic domains of culture constantly play a part in the history of art insofar as they supply the work of art (which is never without an outside purpose) with its exterior impulsion, its content. It is clear, however, that the art historian will not be able correctly to assess the subject of a particular work of art and the way this subject is conceived until he has understood in what way the will [*Wollen*] that has given the impulse to such a theme is identical with the will that has formed the corresponding figure in outline and color this way and no other.³⁰

This passage is of interest for two main reasons: first, it supports the claim that the idea of *Kunstwollen* is tied to the formal elements of art and that this is what is central and specific to art; and secondly, it reveals at the same time that the formalist direction in Riegl’s thought does not exclude social, cultural, and technical concerns from the study of art history, for they “constantly play a part in the history of art,” though as he says they are subordinate to the visual constitution of the work of art, for this is what the art historian must ultimately be able to address, otherwise he or she might be better described as a cultural historian. Thus, the haptic/optic and objective/subjective oppositions discussed earlier specify a work of art’s *Kunstwollen* by setting out its visual constitution. Explicating a work’s visual constitution, it is important to remember, is not the same as giving a formal analysis of it, for essential to its *Kunstwollen* is the distinct relation of beholding between consciousness and the objects of experience that it embodies.

IV

What then of the accusation that Riegl’s *Kunstwollen*, and Hegel’s *Weltgeist* or World Spirit, are anthropomorphizations of trans-historical or macrocosmic mystical forces? Let us enter this question through two representative passages from Michael Ann Holly’s *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*. The first concerns Hegel’s conception of historical development; the second refers to a section in *Problems of Style* where Riegl discusses the evolution of the tendril ornament:

Postulating an “Infinite Spirit” or “Idea” behind history that works itself out dialectically through time by manipulating human actors caught in its path, Hegel never deviated from characterizing the past as exemplifying a logical, rational process. He recited history not merely as the continuing story of men, women, and events but as the biography of the “World Spirit.”³¹

Things change, but why and how? Does their alteration manifest a grand historical spirit working itself out through history, or does the impetus for this change come from an inexorable law of artistic evolution? The difference between the two may be subtle, but without opting for either one, Riegl leaves his ideas open to a number of questions. Just how is the reader to make sense of a phrase to the effect that the tendril ornament attained a “goal” which “centuries have persistently sought”? Does Riegl mean a goal for which the history of art has striven, or does the goal flash on the distant horizon like a Hegelian star, urging all historical progress ever onward, irrespective of the development exigencies of the artistic situation?³²

It is not clear to me which of the two alternatives in this last passage Holly eventually decides upon, though it hardly matters, as they are both equally remote from Riegl’s art historical project, and from Hegel’s philosophy. Let us look at the passage in *Problems of Style* that prompted Holly’s reflections in the second quotation:

However, anything one might say in this regard will sound unconvincing as long as the technical-materialist theory of the origin of the earliest primeval art forms and ornamental motifs remains unchallenged, even though it has failed to define the precise moment when the spontaneous generation of art ends, and the historical development effected by laws of transmission and acquisition begins.³³

There is no doubt that Riegl often does say such things as the tendril ornament attained a goal which centuries persistently sought. His language does on occasion give the impression that he is attributing agency to abstractions, and that this agency is somehow involved in the development of ornament. The question though is whether such statements concerning laws of transmission and acquisition are best understood in terms of a “grand historical spirit working itself out through history” or “an inexorable law of artistic evolution?” To put it another way, is there any compelling reason to take these kinds of statements so *literally*?

Consider the case of Hegel. When Hegel says something such as “The *Weltgeist* is the spirit of the world as it explicates itself in human consciousness,” have we no choice but to assume that he is speaking about some kind of great spiritual entity directing the development of world history, like a medieval peasant’s vision of the Christian God? None of Hegel’s philosophical commentators today would think so, and for good reason. When philosophers read *The Phenomenology of Mind*, what interests them are the epistemological and metaphysical doctrines that are advanced, and how they are related

to the positions offered by Hegel's predecessors and contemporaries. Evaluating Hegel's doctrines does not require an investigation into the identity of the World Spirit – *The Phenomenology of Mind* is not the philosophical biography of the *Weltgeist*. Hegel's doctrines can be stated and debated without reference to macrocosmic or trans-historical forces. Hegel's writings tell us nothing about the nature of such an entity, but they do tell us about how, for example, his conception of knowledge differs from Kant's. It has been recognized since at least Plato that figurative language plays a role in philosophical discourse. In the history of Western philosophy, the question has always been how to translate the figures of speech into philosophically defensible positions, and this is the approach that has been taken, almost without exception, by contemporary Hegel scholars.

The same approach should be taken to Riegl's writings. There is no reason to insist on a literal interpretation of Riegl's figurative language in *Problems of Style*.³⁴ Riegl's contemporary commentators have no difficulty in stating and evaluating his analysis without recourse to macrocosmic forces.³⁵ The same is true of the concept of *Kunstwollen*, as indeed I have already attempted to show above. Riegl himself certainly did not see the *Kunstwollen* as a macrocosmic mystical force. In fact, he often referred to his approach as not only scientific but positivistic: "There remains the *Kunstwollen* as the only secure datum."³⁶ His detractors might find it difficult not to smile at the apparent ludicrousness of this statement. Riegl, however, was not a positivist in any philosophically strict sense of the term (even though he was living in Vienna at the turn of the century and surrounded by the progenitors of Logical Positivism); for him positivism consisted in not having recourse to metaphysical, i.e., purely speculative, explanations for the development of art. Those who see Riegl as a speculative art historian will likely greet this claim with incredulity, but we should continue to remind ourselves that speaking with a Hegelian accent is not a guarantee that the person who is speaking is resorting to dubious "metaphysical" explanations. The philosopher Ernst Cassirer is a good example of this: his accent was so strong that decades passed before it was realized that he was in fact a structuralist who advocated a functionalist approach to foundational questions.

So, what could it mean to say "There remains the *Kunstwollen* as the only secure datum"? It means that our dated historical record of artistic motifs and their developmental sequences is the most reliable evidence that we can study in order to discover the laws that govern artistic change. Such a statement presupposes two ideas that we are by now well familiar with. The first is that the formal aspect of art is the most important aspect because it is that which is unique to visual art, and the second is that visual art is an isolatable human activity with its own laws of change (of course if we doubt either of

these the *Kunstwollen* ceases to be a secure datum). We should also note that Riegl's understanding of both of these ideas is indebted to Hegel: art is a fundamental and original human activity through which consciousness fashions self-understanding, and it is for this reason that the study of art has the autonomy it does. However, it is at the same time true that history, as the history of spirit and the progressive realization of Idea, involves other facets of the formative activity of consciousness, and so the *Kunstwollen* is only one manifestation of spirit amongst others in an age, which is what Riegl meant when he said that "The character of this *Wollen* is always determined by what may be termed the conception of the world at a given time [*Weltanschauung*] (again in the widest sense of the term), not only in religion, philosophy, science, but also in government and law."³⁷

I have argued that we are not obliged to think of Riegl's *Kunstwollen* as a macrocosmic mystical force because we can restate his developmental conception of art in ways that do not refer to ultimate goals, final causes, and so forth – there are other ways of understanding how purposive historical development is effected by laws of transmission and acquisition. I would like to conclude by outlining one such way, based on a structuralist analysis of transformation.³⁸

I would like to borrow from Peter Caws the idea of "potentially intelligible structures," which he uses in quite another context for quite other purposes.³⁹ Imagine a set of elements amongst which there are already connecting relations (Riegl's set of motifs from *Problems of Style*, for instance). Within this system there will be structures that could be taken by someone acquainted with the system as incomplete structures, i.e., it would be possible to imagine adding to them in such a way that others familiar with the system would also sense their completion. These are what we will call potentially intelligible structures. The number of ways of completing such structures however will be finite, for not every way will be possible or intelligible, given the elements, relations, and developmental history of the system. As a simple example, take the figure of a square with one side missing, and the desire to close the open side. It is immediately apparent that this simple description rules out a great number of possible ways of completing the figure, e.g., it cannot be completed by making it into a circle, a triangle, etc. Nevertheless, a large number of possibilities remain. And as the system develops elements are transformed and new relations established, in accordance with the choices that have already been made. This gives us a way of understanding Riegl's claims about the developmental impulse interior to art that is charted through the transformation of motifs, and it allows us to explain how individual artists have a role in affecting the process even though the process itself can only be grasped supra-individually. The result of any particular completion is not so much

implied – determined by inexorable historical laws or whatnot – as permitted by the initial arrangement of conditions. No solution for completing a potentially intelligible structure was a necessary outcome that could have been predicted; rather, every choice that was made was one that the system could accommodate. However, when we look back on the development of the system, we have the sense that things were almost destined to turn out this way, because it is such an intelligible pattern of transformation and expansion. We can almost see the end in the beginning; the result in itself seems purposive. And in a sense it is, because it has all been brought about purposively. We might even find ourselves inclined to metaphorical overstatement, and say something such as “the figure attained a goal which was persistently sought.”

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Notes

- 1 Svetlana Alpers, “Style is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again,” in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Philadelphia, 1979), 95–117; Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, 1993); Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl’s Theory of Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1992); Richard Woodfield, ed., *Framing Formalism: Riegl’s Work*, (Amsterdam, 2001).
- 2 E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Bollingen Series XXXV, 5, 2nd edn (Princeton, 1961), 20.
- 3 See, for example, Jacques D’Hondt, *Hegel in his Time*, trans. John Burbidge (Lewiston, New York, 1988); H. S. Harris, *Hegel’s Development* (Oxford, 1972); Jon Stewart, ed., *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, (Chicago, 1996); Michael J. Inwood, *Hegel* (New York, 2002); Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (New York, 1966); Paul Redding, *Hegel’s Hermeneutics* (Ithaca, 1996); Robert Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel* (Oxford, 1983); Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge, 1975).
- 4 G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London, 1969), 61.
- 5 G.W.F. Hegel, “Preface” to *The Phenomenology of Mind*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *Hegel: Texts and Commentary* (New York, 1966), 6.
- 6 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (London, 1949).
- 7 It would require a short book to make a philosophically defensible case for this claim. As others have already written chapters in that book, I refer the reader to their writings: Joseph C. Flay, *Hegel’s Quest for Certainty* (Albany, 1984), 1–29; Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation*, 57–63; Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, 203–10; Robert Stern, *Hegel* (London, 2002), 15–29.
- 8 Joseph C. Flay’s *Hegel’s Quest for Certainty* not only argues for such an interpretation, it reconstructs the argument of the entire *The Phenomenology of Mind* in these terms. See, as well, Michael Rosen’s *Hegel’s Dialectic and its Criticism* (Cambridge, 1982), 23–54.
- 9 Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation*, 254.
- 10 See, for instance, Flay, *Hegel’s Quest for Certainty*, 1–29; Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, 203–10; Stern, *Hegel*, 15–29.
- 11 Hegel the man has also suffered from unfortunate misrepresentations. Those who have believed that Hegel’s philosophy is mechanistic, deterministic, and totalitarian have also usually seen Hegel as a conservative, servile, court philosopher brought to Berlin to legitimate the absolute monarchy of King Frederick William III. The apparent justification for this evaluation is typically derived from certain passages in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, which was published in 1821, three years after Hegel’s appointment to the prestigious post of professor of philosophy at the University of Berlin. There is so much that can be said to counter this portrait of Hegel. All of it can be found in Jacques D’Hondt’s *Hegel in his Time*, in which D’Hondt systematically and meticulously demolishes this characterization of Hegel the man.
- 12 G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T.M. Knox and A.V. Miller (Oxford, 1985), 75.
- 13 G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York, 1953), 27.
- 14 G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, 1975).
- 15 Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, trans. Evelyn Kain and David Britt (Los Angeles, 1999).
- 16 Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome, 1985).
- 17 Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 22.
- 18 Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 26–27.
- 19 Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics*, 806.
- 20 Joan Hart, “Some Reflections on Wölfflin and the Vienna School,” in *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, ed. Leopold D. Ettlinger, Stefan Kann, and Martina Pippal (Vienna, 1984), 59.
- 21 Margaret Olin has pointed out in *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl’s Theory of Art* (p. 72) that Riegl’s *Kunstwollen* is not without precedent. The phrase *künstlerischen Wollens* had a certain currency in his era, and, in art historical use, can be traced back to Rumohr’s *Italianische Forschungen*. Riegl condensed the phrase into *Kunstwollen* and turned it to his own ends.
- 22 Riegl still used the word “style” (*stil*) when discussing issues with which it had been associated.
- 23 Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundation for a History of Ornament*, trans. Evelyn Kain (Princeton, 1992).
- 24 When he wrote *Problems of Style* Riegl had not yet come under the influence of Adolf Hildebrand’s *The Problem of Form* and its inven-

- rive use of Konrad Fiedler's art theory. Here is a representative passage from *Problems of Style*: "It may seem paradoxical that so many practising artists also joined the extreme faction of art materialism. They were, of course, not acting in the spirit of Gottfried Semper, who would never have agreed to exchanging free and creative artistic impulse (?) [*Kunstwollen*] for an essentially mechanical and materialist drive to imitate," 4.
- 25 Alois Riegl, *Altorientalische Teppiche* (Leipzig, 1969). Originally published in 1891.
- 26 Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, 1986), 71.
- 27 Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main, 1863).
- 28 Riegl, *Problems of Style*, 4.
- 29 Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 9.
- 30 Alois Riegl, "Naturwerk und Kunstwerk, I und II," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Vienna, 1929), 64. For the English translation I have chosen Henri Zerner's from "Alois Riegl: Art, Value, and Historicism," *Daedalus* 105 (Winter 1976), 182.
- 31 Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca, 1984), 28.
- 32 Holly, *Panofsky*, 72.
- 33 Riegl, *Problems of Style*, 5. In her text Holly cites only part of this passage, which she translates as: "Still it always remains uncertain in such a case where the domain of that spontaneous process by which art is created stops and the historical law of inheritance and gain comes into play." The German original, with her editing, is:
- "Bleibt es doch in solchem Falle ewig zweifelhaft, wo der Bereich jener spontanen Kunstzeugung aufhört und das historische Gesetz vor Vererbung und Erwerbung in Kraft zu treten . . . beginnt."
- 34 If I say that Holly's wilfully literal reading of such figurative phrases reveals the same positivistic spirit that Panofsky encountered when he arrived in the United States, am I really saying that Panofsky was greeted by a spirit who represented positivism when his ship docked in New York?
- 35 See again, Svetlana Alpers, "Style is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again"; Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*; Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art*; and the relevant essays in *Framing Formalism: Riegl's Work*, Woodfield, ed.
- 36 Riegl, "Naturwerk und Kunstwerk, I und II," 60.
- 37 Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 231.
- 38 It is not unusual to come across remarks about an affinity between Riegl's art history and structuralism. However, it is rare to find a developed discussion of the connection. The two most cited papers that do discuss the connection are Margaret Iversen's "Style as Structure: Alois Riegl's Historiography," *Art History* 2 (March 1977), 62–71, and Sheldon Nodelman's "Structural Analysis in Art and Anthropology," *Yale French Studies* 36 and 37 (October 1966), 89–103. Neither of these papers discusses this affinity in depth.
- 39 Peter Caws, *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible* (Atlantic Highlands, 1988), 204–8.