

COLD-WAR TWINS: MIKHAIL ALPATOV'S A *UNIVERSAL HISTORY OF ARTS* AND ERNST GOMBRICH'S *THE STORY OF ART*¹

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Abstract: This article deals with the “afterlife” of a methodological disagreement in the Vienna School of Art History between the positions of Alois Riegl and Julius von Schlosser in Mikhail Alpatov's and Ernst Gombrich's art history survey texts published during the Cold War on different sides of the Iron Curtain. Though these surveys are methodological antipodes, the difference itself, I argue, is possible only within the framework of the larger art historical discourse they share. In addition, I will draw on the radical ideological critique of Alpatov's survey inside the Soviet Union and the case of the Stalinist survey meant to replace it, in order to address the ideological commonality between Alpatov's and Gombrich's surveys.

Keywords: general art history; Cold War; Vienna School; Alpatov; Gombrich.

In the mid 20th century, during the height of the Cold War, two influential art history survey texts were published on different sides of the Iron Curtain: Soviet-Russian art historian Mikhail Alpatov's *A Universal History of Arts* and Austrian-British art historian Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art*.² Two opposing methodologies that go back to the Vienna School of Art History were functional in shaping these surveys: Rieglian determinist universalism in Alpatov's case, and Schlosserian individualist particularism in Gombrich's case. In his important text on Riegl Otto Pächt has claimed that, “There is indeed no greater contrast conceivable than the one between Riegl's and Schlosser-Croce position” (Pächt 1963, 193). In the 1920s and 1930s Pächt, together with Hans Sedlmayr, was active in reviving Riegl's theory of art history under the banner of the New Vienna School. Thus, Pächt contrasts Riegl's universalism, which does not exclude even “the most modest artifact from the aesthetic community” to Schlosser-Croce's elitist position that only “the highest peaks” should be regarded as *art* (Pächt 1963, 193). He also contrasts Riegl's determinist account of stylistic changes with Schlosser-Croce's position of granting artists “alternatives from which to choose” (Pächt 1963, 193). Interestingly, Pächt

¹ This article is a version of a chapter from my forthcoming book in Armenian *Art Historians on the Ideological Front: General Art History and the Cold War, 1945-1962*. I thank Angela Harutyunyan for commenting on the earlier draft of this article.

² The first and the second volumes of Alpatov's survey were published in 1948 and 1949; the third volume was published, only after the death of Stalin, in 1955. The fourth volume was never published. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* was first published in 1950 and is now available in its 16th edition.

concludes his text with a criticism of Gombrich's Schlosserian critique of Riegl. In turn, Gombrich's critique of Riegl, at least partly, has been directed against the Riegl of the New Vienna School (Gombrich 1996, 259), a school with which Alpatov was affiliated.³

Methodologically, the entire New Vienna School is but a project of rereading and restating Riegl. What Sedlmayr and Pächt share with Riegl is that their scientific advocacy of the "rigorous study of art" is underlined by an idealist understanding of the history of art as an immanent development of an immaterial creative force manifested in what they "rigorously" termed "Struktur". This latter was meant to "update" Riegl's rather vague concept of *Kunstwollen* (Wood 2000, 10-11). Thus, they situated the work of art in idealistically conceived ethno-psychological "determining factors", which should only be identified in the stylistic and formal characteristics of a given work as its *structure*. Art history, therefore, is simply research into this structure, a *Strukturforschung*, as they used to call it. For the practitioners of *Strukturforschung*, therefore, the work of art stood for something essentially "deep", imbued with ethno-racial connotations. Later, the "scientific intuitivism" of the New Vienna School, in the figure of Sedlmayr, would find itself in line with National Socialism (Wood 2000, 12-13).

It was in 1929, at exactly the time when Sedlmayr was proposing his concept of "structure", that Mikhail Alpatov first met him in Vienna (Alpatov 1994, 226).⁴ Alpatov, who by then had rather extensively published in Europe, held high opinions on Sedlmayr and his approach.⁵ Unsurprisingly, in 1933 Alpatov was among the contributors to the second volume of the main periodical of the New Vienna School, *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*. Reviewing this very volume, Meyer Schapiro rightly observed:

The authors often tend to isolate forms from the historical conditions of their development, to propel them by mythical, racial-psychological constants, or to give them an independent, self-evolving career. Entities like race, spirit, will, and idea are substituted in an animistic manner for a real analysis of historical factors (Schapiro 1936, 259).

Specifically in regard to Alpatov's contribution, Schapiro noticed: "The sociological paragraphs are rather sketchy and slight, concrete social factors being neglected and the author

³ It is beyond doubt that both Alpatov and Gombrich knew of each other. Given the strained relationship between Gombrich and the New Vienna School it is not surprising that neither acknowledges nor refers to the other's work. Nevertheless, in his later monograph on Renaissance art, Alpatov makes several references to Gombrich, thus acknowledging his work on Renaissance art (Alpatov 1976). However, and expectedly, Alpatov also expresses his reservations in regard to Gombrich's positions (Alpatov 1976, 82) and methods (Alpatov 1976, 115).

⁴ Alpatov has this to say about his stay in Vienna: "During the seven days that I have been in Vienna, this city has changed me. It is true that I have seen many instructive things in other cities too... But basically only in Vienna, owing to my acquaintance with several people, the continuous conversations on the most burning issues, endless debates and in addition a variety of things that I found out for myself which I had to know—only in Vienna have I felt increasingly thrilled by this culture..." (Alpatov 1994, 86). All the translations from Russian are mine.

⁵ Alpatov met Sedlmayr in 1959 in Munich. After the war Alpatov and Sedlmayr corresponded and Alpatov used to send him his books. Interestingly, Sedlmayr, who at that time was sunk into extreme conservatism, found consolation in Alpatov's work: "Your new book on icons is particularly good in its simplicity and deep clarity. It deals with those sides of art which are denied by many art historians. It is so good that once again I feel myself fascinated by the position that you adopt" (Cited in Alpatov 1994, 226).

attending mainly to Poussin's consciousness of the autonomy of the artist and his national French loyalties" (Schapiro 1936, 265). At another point Schapiro observes that Alpatov's attention "has been given mainly to the study of forms as independent science" (Schapiro 1936, 258) and that the analysis of socio-historical specificities is "disregarded or reduced to a system of analogies between various fields of culture" (Schapiro 1936, 265).

Interestingly, Soviet-Russian art historian Dmitri Sarabianov identified the same formalist methodology in Alpatov as something positive (in contrast to Schapiro) and linked it to Sedlmayr's *Strukturforschung* (Sarabianov 1979, 10):

M. V. Alpatov is chiefly concerned with revealing "the Russian in Russian art." It is developed and manifested as if independent from styles and directions, though it finds its expression in this or that stylistic form... He is looking for "prototypes," "archetypes" that live in people's consciousness from ancient times and rise to the vivid evidences of national distinctiveness (Sarabianov 1979, 8).

In addition to this "nationalist formalism," and again similar to that of Sedlmayr (Schapiro 1936, 259), Alpatov's art historical writing is consciously metaphoric, which brings his art history closer to belletristic poetic practice as it appeals to the taste and aesthetic sensibility of the reader more than analytic skills. For Alpatov art has always been metaphoric (Sarabianov 1979, 11-12) and "immutable in its essence" (Alpatov 1971, 90).

When in the early 1920s the radical avant-garde tendencies in Soviet art history started to give way to a "more 'relevant,' more extrinsic approach" (Bowlt 1989, 546) linking the Pre-Revolutionary traditionalist art history to the new demands for social usefulness, the German tradition of art history with its ideals of the historicity of art and the scientificity of the art historian's work became instrumental in the reorganization of the discipline. For that very purpose the Institute of Art History and Archeology at the Russian Association of Scientific-Research Institutes for Social Sciences was formed, and from 1923 to 1930 Alpatov was affiliated with this institution (Yavorskaia 1987, 17-19). In this light Alpatov's following claim comes as no surprise: "For the study of the art of the past we first of all owe German science" (Alpatov 1994, 131).

Alpatov makes this statement in regard to the publication of the German edition of his survey where his nationalist universalism is at its best. For his goal was to demonstrate the high artistic/national merits of Russian art in the context of a universal history of art, a project informed by the strong cultural "inferiority complex" in relation to Western Europe so embedded in the discourses of Russian nationalism.⁶ The dialectic between "national distinctiveness" and "universalist scheme" is most evident in that written with his "passion for all-inclusiveness" (Alpatov 1994, 227); the last two volumes of the four-volume survey should have covered the history of Russian art only.⁷

Interestingly, Gombrich, while a student in Vienna, like Alpatov in Moscow, absorbed the same art historical tradition and studied using the same principles of art historical education, which combined theory with practice (Gombrich 1996a, 27; Yavorskaia 1987, 17). But unlike

⁶ For these sentiments in Alpatov see his essay characteristically titled "Our Art" (Alpatov 1979, 233-255).

⁷ Alpatov discusses this strategy of his in (Alpatov 1971, 90-91). Ján Bakoš (2004, 86ff) has pointed to the instrumentality of the Vienna School universalism for nationalist causes in the case of the art historians of the Slav countries of Central Europe.

Alpatov, Gombrich was doubtful in regard to the universalizing conceptions of style as an expression of the spirit of an age, nation or race, and leaned towards the “mellow skepticism” of his teacher Schlosser (Gombrich 1963, 112). Fundamentally, Gombrich was skeptical towards the very notion of “Art History” since it already implied two universalist concepts. For Gombrich there was neither “Art” nor “History” independent of the particular conditions within which “living artists” (Gombrich 1963, 118) are engaged in the specific practice of “making and matching” (Gombrich 1960). As Gombrich formulated it, and which ran counter to *Strukturforschung*, his was a shift away from the “metaphysics of history” towards the “social psychology of fashions and movements” (Gombrich 1996a, 411).

On several occasions Gombrich repudiated the practitioners of *Strukturforschung* (Wood 2000, 13). At one point he even called Sedlmayr’s students the “enemies of reason” (Gombrich 1964, 420). But the fact that Pächt’s text on Riegl I referred to above occupies an important place in this debate has been overlooked. Delivered as a lecture at the Courtauld Institute and published a year before Gombrich’s review attacking Sedlmayr’s students, Pächt’s text might have played its role in the harshness of Gombrich’s review. Pächt, himself a Jew like Gombrich, was exiled by the Nazi regime, but unlike Gombrich who was already enjoying his “tremendous success” in England (Gombrich 1993, 65), he never felt at home there. Interestingly, Pächt’s text was delivered and published within a year of his return to Austria, and as such it can be interpreted as Pächt’s discontented farewell to the British context, specifically targeting his younger colleague’s postwar liberal critique of the Continental traditions of art history. Specifically, Pächt targeted Gombrich’s idea of “choice situation”: “The basic premise in this reasoning is plainly that by analogy to *moral* decisions, artistic choices have no value unless they are free” (Pächt 1963, 193). Seen in the context of the cold-war West’s hypertrophic propagation of the idea of individual freedom, Pächt’s critique acquires a political dimension. In contrast to Gombrich, Pächt claimed that “the really creative personality *least of all* has freedom of choice. He has no option to choose at will, it is his very characteristic that he has only the option to take the one course, the right one...” (Pächt 1963, 193).

In Pächt’s view an artist acts by necessity, through a kind of inner creative impulse, whereas Gombrich deprives artists of their inner essences as they are led by specific extrinsic factors such as problems of technique, skill, traditions and the logic of a situation which can be identified and tested rationally. Thus, the artist’s work is necessarily that of trial and error, and as such the idea of art as expression is overcome. Clearly there were political stakes involved in Gombrich’s project, since he saw his anti-expressionism as an alternative to the “totalitarian” ideas of art as an expression of time, race, class or the self (Gombrich 1963, 118-119). Interestingly, Gombrich borrowed the idea of “choice situation” from Karl Popper’s cold-war liberal critique of historicism as totalitarianism (Gombrich 1979, 60-92). But what is more important is that Popper himself borrowed the idea from the theory of the free market economy of Austrian Marginalism (Popper 1976, 117-118). And it is through this neoliberal “methodological individualism” processed through Popper’s political philosophy and the philosophy of science that Gombrich supplemented and politicized Schlosser’s art historical individualism in the context of the Cold War. In this light, the style of a given work appears as a *supply* to the *demands* of taste in a given situation (Gombrich 1989, 127-172). The artist, thus, is not only a kind of noble-craftsman with “skilled hands and great minds” (Gombrich 1963, 119), but a subject whose work is defined by the economy of taste, an entrepreneurial subject, as it were.

The Story of Art was Gombrich’s first grand project aimed at providing an “anti-totalitarian,” liberal individualist model of the history of art. Not surprisingly, the term

“History” is altogether eliminated from the title of the book as a historicist/totalitarian prejudice and replaced by the somewhat innocent “story”. Apparently, Gombrich would have been glad to omit the very notion of “Art” as well, but then the book’s “story” would have become completely unconceivable. Nonetheless, the very first Schlosserian lines of the Introduction declare: “There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists” (Gombrich 1978, 4). By contrast, in the preface of his survey, Alpatov claims: “It needs to be read not only for the sake of mastering the general theses expressed in it and learning the data that it conveys, but, and in the first place, for an understanding of the main directions of historical development of artistic culture of mankind...” (Alpatov 1948, 3).

Seen from this angle, Gombrich’s and Alpatov’s surveys are methodological antipodes: a Schlosserian methodological individualism informed by Anglo-Saxon liberal individualism on the one hand and a Rieglian universalist historicism informed by Pre-Revolutionary Russian cultural nationalism on the other. However, the political antagonism between the contexts in which these surveys were published, to an extent, annuls this methodological difference and reveals their essential commonality at the level of the *ideology of methodology*. If cold-war Britain was an ideal place for Gombrich’s survey, cold-war Stalinist Russia was perhaps the most inappropriate place for Alpatov’s survey, so much so that during the Stalinist campaign against the latter Alpatov was even thinking of finding another interest in life for himself: “Sport? Nature? Memoirs? Or maybe cars (as a friend of mine did after a series of ordeals)?” (Alpatov 1994, 129).

In fact, Alpatov’s and Gombrich’s surveys have many things in common—an advocacy for realist art, traditionalism in dealing with modern art, a literary style of writing, a special emphasis on visual representations of the works of art.⁸ But what interests me here is a central historiographic principle that they both share and that stems from the formalist traditions of the Vienna School: the history of art as an integral and autonomous evolution. Gombrich states that “the notion of continuity, the endurance of traditions behind the changing facades of period style” is “the underlying theme of *The Story of Art*” (Gombrich 1996a, 38). Alpatov claims that “the first task of someone studying the history of art is to learn to link together individual facts...” (Alpatov 1948, 4).

Alpatov’s survey was commissioned as early as 1939, in a period when the discipline of art history in the Soviet Union had not been fully Stalinized yet. He completed the book in 1941, but it was not published until 1948, in the context of a heightened cold-war confrontation and Stalinist control. If in 1939 Alpatov was chosen by the editor of the influential Soviet art publisher *Iskusstvo* as the one who could be trusted with such a responsible work (Alpatov 1994, 127), after the Stalinization of the sphere, the director of the same publishing house told Alpatov to prepare his “neck for annihilating criticism” (Alpatov 1994, 128). Indeed, Alpatov’s survey became subject to almost two years of harsh and intense public discussion.

In 1950, the year when Gombrich’s survey was published on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in the editorial entitled “The Task of Soviet Art Historians” of the fifth issue of the main Soviet art journal *Iskusstvo*, Alpatov’s survey was severely criticized and Alpatov was provided with a place for self-criticism (Alpatov 1950, 84-88). The editorial claimed:

⁸ Not to say that Gombrich himself was not free from either universalism—in his case a traditional humanist universalism (Gombrich 1987)—or nationalism, a kind of “inverted nationalism” of an exiled British subject who keenly endorses and becomes a defender of the cultural/national traditions of his new homeland (Anderson 1968, 18-20, 38-41; Hemingway 2009).

This book does not meet the requirements that we have the right to demand from a scientific work on the universal history of arts written by a Soviet art historian. The author has not entirely overcome the idealist conceptions of formalists and aesthetes about the history of art. One can only be astonished that, for example, such a toothless and uncritical chapter on Impressionism could remain and that the subsequent artists in the book signed for publication in April 1949, while in the climax of the struggle, our art public (*khudozhestvennaia publika*) has to move to uprooting the remnants of the influences of bourgeois formalism and Impressionism in our art and art history (Editorial 1950, 6).

The struggle that the editorial mentions was apparently the Third Session on the Problems of the Theory and Criticism of Soviet Visual Arts of the Academy of Fine Arts of the USSR. Here Alpatov was criticized for “cosmopolitanism and obsequiousness in front of foreign countries (*zagraniitsa*)” and accused of representing the history of national arts as a “trans-historical, classless (*vneklassovoe*) development of some kind of perennial and forever-given artistic ideas, styles and devices” (Sisoev 1949, 31). At the end of the Session, resolutions were passed, including one against Alpatov’s method: “Turning to the history of Russian art, art historian M. Alpatov often discussed it apolitically, classlessly (*besklassovo*), from the positions of the theory of a ‘unified stream’” (Resolutions 1949, 199).

This was a unique moment in the history of art history: the adoption of a resolution in relation to an art historical method without falsifying it, but correctly, though roughly, identifying the formalist historiographic principle I referred to above. Interestingly, this estimation matches both that of Schapiro’s and Sarabianov’s evaluations. The difference, however, is that the latter is not concerned with identifying the ideology of the methodology in discussion. But even if this was the case, what matters more is the difference in the *social function* of academic work. Thus, even if Schapiro, as a Marxist, had brought his discussion to the level of ideological critique addressing the bourgeois aspects of Alpatov’s approach, at best it would have been yet another voice within the academic public sphere. In contrast, in the Stalinist USSR, in the context of the absence of an academic public sphere, professional critique is simultaneously a political critique entailing dangerous consequences for people’s lives. As such, it inevitably touches upon the issue of ethics. And it was in the name of ethics that Gombrich launched his conservative cold-war liberal “battle of ideas” against the “the streams of adulterated scholarship” of “totalitarian countries” (Gombrich 1963, 107).

The exact same Soviet charges, however, could be made in regard to Gombrich’s survey. Indeed, both Alpatov’s and Gombrich’s surveys are informed by the bourgeois ideals of art appreciation and formalism. They are equally at odds with materialist and sociological interpretations of the history of art and both Gombrich’s “social history of art” and Alpatov’s “cultural history” are “only a further step on the path to formalization” (Wind 1998, 208).⁹ Moreover, Gombrich’s “ethical critique” of totalitarianism is but a defense of bourgeois morality, as was Alpatov’s frustration in relation to the critique of his survey (Alpatov 1994, 128).

An alternative to this type of bourgeois formalist survey was the ambitious Stalinist multivolume that was shaped during the discussions on Alpatov’s survey (Akademia

⁹ Alpatov artificially “injected” Marxist passages into the non- or better still anti-Marxist narrative of his survey in order to satisfy Soviet dicta. What Alpatov usually did with Marxism was to fit it into the scope of his concerns.

khudozhestv SSSR 1956-1966).¹⁰ Planned as a Marxist universal history of arts, it was truly inclusive, systematic, politically conscious and theoretically laden. Nevertheless, its important methodological aspects were undermined by the reactionary nature of Stalinism itself whose “remarkable sneakiness” was in putting revolutionary Soviet Marxism in defense of arch-conservative causes. The way in which Alpatov’s book was meant to be tackled by the Stalinist survey is revealing in terms of Stalinism’s sneaky tactic. Its first volume, published in 1956, came to replace the unpublished fourth volume of Alpatov’s survey reproducing the very same title: *A Universal History of Arts*. As a consequence of this devious appropriation, even now if one requests Alpatov’s survey in the libraries of post-Soviet countries, most likely one will be provided with the Stalinist survey. Indeed, in comparison with this Stalinist model, the Vienna School antagonists by Alpatov and Gombrich appear like cold-war twins.

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¹⁰ James Elkins discusses the Stalinist survey in his *Stories of Art* (Elkins 2002, 89-97). However, by following a typical Stalinist strategy of equating the Soviet Union with Russia, Elkins in his decontextual analysis concerned only with “shapes” of art history erroneously claims that Alpatov’s survey “was written under pressure from the Stalinist regime” (Elkins 2002, 164).

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