

# What We Can Do About Art History: The Russian Case

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**Abstract**—The academic discipline of 'science of art', connected with studying and teaching, has a recognisable discourse, different from 'pure research' or 'popular art history, on the other hand. I propose that Russian traditional 'science of art' is one of major problems in humanities we have been facing over the last 100 years. It started to shape at the same time as *Kunstwissenschaft*, as part of a rise in humanities, sciences and culture in Russia but then its development was impeded; and the truth is we can neither go back or skip the stages which we haven't gone through. We are practicing a defensive ideology justifying our ignorance of modern theoretical issues of science of art – the ideology of 'pure art history', based on the ancient myth of positivism. How can we use and transform the situation of our arrested development? Could there be a methodological lesson? We could start our awakening by problematising our degradation as a sign of a more general hermeneutic situation. Paradoxically, even alienation ('we are not like others') together with bragging ('and we don't need others') may actually trigger a meaning-generating process, which would help us to overcome our degradation, – provided that first we would admit to it.

**Keywords:** *epistemological emergency, science of art as discourse, Russian tradition*

## I. INTRODUCTION

My focus here is Russian 'science of art' as an academic discipline taught at university. In this sense, it is an instrument of shaping and institutionalising certain epistemological practices, so as to demonstrate their productivity and disciplinary identity within a wider scholarly paradigm connected with the university tradition. The academic discipline of 'science of art', connected with studying and teaching, has a recognisable discourse, different from, on the one hand, 'pure research' of special research institutes (leftovers of the Soviet context, in our case)<sup>1</sup>, and on the other – from 'popular science' or 'popular art history'<sup>2</sup>. Of course, there are also various forms realised in public lectures – being spoken genres, they may be seen as alternative forms or even deviations.

<sup>1</sup> For example, The State Institute for Art Studies and The Research Institute of the Theory and History of Fine Arts.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1950) would be the best instance [25].

I propose that Russian traditional 'science of art' is one of major problems in humanities we have been facing over the last 100 years. To understand why it is so, let us think about the origins of the European 'science of art', *Kunstwissenschaft*, whose methodological basis was the formal method – a new theory of the artistic form, at certain point [39], [44], [40]. Let us consider the fact that Russian science of art started to shape at the same time, as part of a rise in humanities, sciences and culture in general<sup>3</sup>. In the 20s and 30s, one could still observe attempts at acquiring state-of-the-art methods of science of art, which, actually, weren't necessarily connected with the formal method<sup>4</sup>. So how did it happened that a sort of quasy-formal, or 'lite', formal method confined to 'znatochestvo' (connoisseurship)<sup>5</sup> and stylistic analysis, was preserved for decades as the only option of practising science of art – without being engaged with ideology? In the 80-90s, we were happy to experience a sort of 'new openness'<sup>6</sup>, which, however, revealed detrimental consequences of our previous forced isolation. Russian tradition was stopped forcefully at the stage of uncertainty – and a necessary transition to a new stage never took place.

Thus, here is our major problem: the truth is we can neither go back or skip the stages of methodological development which we haven't gone through. We seem to seek consolation in a compensatory strategy: that is, we tend to ignore the state-of-the-art conceptual diversity of science of art. At the same time, we are practicing a defensive ideology justifying our ignorance of modern theoretical issues of science of art – the ideology of 'pure art history', which is based on the ancient myth of positivism.

Now the questions are: what can we do about this unpleasant truth? How can we transform the situation of our arrested development? Can our marginal position be of any use? Could there be a methodological lesson? In other words, given that we can't 'bridge the gap' because it is located in the

<sup>3</sup> Wölfflin's main texts were translated before 1917.

<sup>4</sup> For example, excellent translations of the most advanced texts on architecture performed by Alpatov, Arkin and Brunov [18].

<sup>5</sup> An important text of Max Friedländer, one of the mean figures in "Kennerschaft", was translated into Russian as early as in 1924 [22].

<sup>6</sup> In particular, a translation from Hans Sedlmayr (by Stepan Vaneyan) was published in 1998.

past, could we perhaps consider ourselves as a case subject to scrutiny, a source of useful information and then – as active participants in the situation of the 'end of art history' [1] 'end of science of art' [37]? Without being jealous, without trying to jump aboard, without trying to convince ourselves and others that we were on this ship from the very beginning. Because in the meantime the captain, the crew and the ship itself have changed many times. Could there possibly be a simple solution: to subject ourselves, our own texts, to critical consideration? Thus, step by step, we would cure our tradition and get rid of it – because sooner or later we will find out that this has been a tradition of prolonged dying, of unconscious preservation of something that has deteriorated or degraded, or simply been lost.

Paraphrasing Weidle [20], the only place where nobody asks questions is the morgue. As for us, we must ask questions to make sure we are still alive. We could start our awakening by problematising our degradation as a sign of a more general hermeneutic situation. Indeed, would it be possible to see here a challenge in terms of not only one regional tradition, one national school, but rather 'science of art' / 'art history' / *Kunstwissenschaft* as such? Although caused by hostile external forces, the situation of 'the end of art history' in one country (compare with the idea of communism in one country) is, nevertheless, a strong and potentially productive starting point in terms of hermeneutics. Paradoxically, even alienation ('we are not like others') in tandem with bragging ('and we don't need others') may actually trigger a meaning-generating process, which would help us to overcome our degradation, – provided that first we would admit to it. I would like to suggest some strategies and scenarios, each of which could be tried as an experiment. Finally, I would like to outline an imaginary meta-genre, which may become possible exactly because each participant of Russian science-of-art discourse is free by definition – all connections and relations have been disrupted.

## II. OVERVIEW OF WHAT WAS GOING ON

We owe our key question – What shall we do about art history? – to Hans Belting [37]. However, the question actually emerged together with *Kunstwissenschaft*, though not in this exact form. The project of *Kunstwissenschaft* suggested not only a further development of opportunities for *Kunstgeschichte*. Hegel had already established absolute and unquestionable rights of *Kunstgeschichte*, which, he claimed, replaced art as such. Hegel announced *The Death of Art* at the beginning of the 1830s; in fact, the history of the Berlin school of art history shows a step-by-step realisation of Hegel's teaching. At some point there was a perception that after powerful syntheses of [3] and [4] nothing was left unconsidered – it was only possible to research details of history of styles, biographies and monuments.

But the borders of *Weltgeschichte*, which was supposed to comprise art, were blurred and then crossed thanks to the development of aesthetics and psychology – 'elder sisters' [9] of the future science of art. As a result, there emerged a new discipline having features of both a soft and hard science; as we say now, interdisciplinary by nature, in which the task of

description – the description of a work of art – was part of a major task, that is, of exploration – the exploration of immanent laws of *Formbildung*. In this connection, there was discovered a new object of interpretation, different from 'a work of art' or 'a monument': the beholder's experience (first of all, visual) connected with their perception and understanding of a work of art, a monument. This was the way from Fiedler [7] and Hildebrandt [8] to Wölfflin [16], from Herbart [2] and Zimmermann [5] – to Riegl [10]. And also from Lipps [12] and Robert Vischer [6] – to Schmarsow [13]. This was the method of formal stylistic 'science of art', in which Hegel was 'corrected' by Kant and Schopenhauer [44].

## III. OVERVIEW OF WHAT HAS BEEN DONE

Up to a certain moment, the tradition of Russian art history, which originated before 1917 at about the same time as the German tradition, developed together with it – and thus was part of the common process. It was fed by translations from Hildebrand, Wölfflin and many others. Looking wider, at the beginning of the 20th c. one can observe Russian and German philosophies developing in concert on the common ground of Husserlian phenomenology (which, as we remember, would develop into Heidegger's fundamental ontology [19] and then into Gadamer's new hermeneutics [28]).

The Russian humanitarian catastrophe that started in 1917 and lasted for at least 50 years badly affected Soviet science of art though at first that wasn't obvious. In the 20s, Alpatov and Brunov were still able to visit German universities and Gabrichevskiy, Frankl's student, was developing his ideas [43]. Even in the 30s, translations were published from what seemed most significant in contemporary art history, e.g. Panofsky, Gantner, Sedlmayr [18]. However, there was no true understanding of their activity: what they did was a revision of the newly-shaped science of art. Iconology [21] and structuralism [15] caused a U-turn in science of art before the World War II. Sadly, a reflection on this near-immediate and conscious transformation of the field was impossible in art history locked – gulaged – within the Soviet Union.

What happened then seems both very specific and very typical: for those who survived in the Soviet Union, it was necessary to preserve what had been left after purges, thus turning – albeit unwillingly – a recent and vivid past into kind of relics – an object of veneration. The formal method was given an almost sacred status of *The Method of the Science of Art* – all starting with capital letters. Since that time and up to now this has been a sacred image of any – but especially academic, science of art...

What have we missed? The new views of scientific knowledge Popper [27] and Thomas Kuhn [29]<sup>7</sup>, the new semiotics Eco [32]<sup>8</sup> и Goodman [33]<sup>9</sup>, the new sociology of

<sup>7</sup> Russian translations of these authors appeared in the Soviet period.

<sup>8</sup> The first translation of Eco has become one of the symbols of Perestroika.

Bourdieu [41] and Luhman [42] and the new psychology – the entire tradition of gestalt analysis (for example, Arnheim [26])<sup>10</sup> and psychoanalysis (for example, Lacan [36]). The new theories of visuality (phenomenology of the image by Merleau-Ponty [23] and mediality McLuhan [30]). Not to mention feminist studies, LGBT studies, post-colonial studies, globalisation issues... And this is a list of omissions rather than losses. These are not losses – these are points which a tradition seeing itself on the ball, on the same level as German and later American traditions, should have considered – but it didn't.

#### IV. THINGS THAT WE COULD START WITH

Little has changed since the end of the Cold War - the ossification of art history within the Russian context still continues. The current state of Russian science of art can be likened to a partly ruined and partly redecorated mnemotop structure<sup>11</sup>, where the word 'Kunstwissenschaft' on the façade is almost illegible. Be it a pathetic view, for us this is a unique opportunity to skip hopeless attempts at catching up with the international scholarly and scientific tradition and begin 'from scratch'<sup>12</sup>.

The starting point could be in summarising the results of the dying – or rather killing - of Russian art of science. It is methodologically important though that we should see this killing as manslaughter rather than homicide. We could even ask a strange question: what if the world's science of art has undergone the same process as Russian, with the same results? Of course, we assume that outside Russia there could have been natural causes – dying of old age, so to speak, – whereas within Russia they were artificial. Yet my main assumption is that we might be observing a process which is multi-leveled and probably immanent to any science so observations could be formulated in a more or less generalised form:

- Any tradition feeding exclusively on external stimuli and impressions needs permanent access to them so it can make borrowings in order to function normally. And in our case, Kunstwissenschaft was an external source by definition because, as Panofsky put it once, it speaks only German.
- Any tradition isolated from international academic communication falls into the state of 'anabiosis' – suspended animation – and chooses to hibernate. Something continues to happen... but it is not exactly creative or heuristic, it does not include critical thinking, as we put it nowadays.
- The main concern of such a tradition becomes reproducing itself and maintaining a certain 'aura' which has a retrospective and quasi-sacred character.

By way of functioning, it takes an idea or a method and uses it; it can only slightly transform something ready-made. Moreover, it demands that the initial conditions of reproduction be preserved.

- Lack of such conditions provokes imitation and simulation (pretence), often in the form of artificially conjured up (and unconsciously maintained by many) 'aura' of past glory. This glory becomes 'our sacred heritage'. For example, take the case of so called 'reverse perspective' in the interpretation of icons: an achievement of German aesthetic thought that was avant-garde back at the beginning of the 20th c. has been granted a sacred character, and questioning it is regarded as bad manners, if not a crime.
- Thus methodology can play a role of a barrier, an impediment – like the Iron Curtain or the Berlin Wall. It may become a kind of security, customs and vet control.

Let us face the truth. The situation in the world has changed radically. What we have here and now is a huge gap that could be filled with anything... like conceptual humanitarian aid of whatever quality – like spam. Shall we promote our consumer rights and adept some new ready-made conceptual/methodological products? Perhaps being more picky this time? Because, being so special, we feel entitled for high-quality treatment? However, the problem is, products ready for consumption are not the same as tools of research. And these are exactly what we need: our own tools of our own research here and now.

Let us focus on potentially productive aspects of our situation. We should ask ourselves a critical question: what happens to any science when it is locked in, isolated, loses reflection, self-criticism and a universal need for self-denial? We can use the negative Soviet experience as an example and an instrument: an example of vulnerability and dependence in terms of knowledge and a tool for its potential transformation.

Again, it would be useful to recognise that not only have we lost the centre [24] and the framing [37] but also the picture itself. The situation of 'a monument (of art)' is not here with us any longer – we have lost both the base and the place. We are in a situation where there are no borders because there is no topos!

#### V. THINGS WE COULD DO NEXT

Massive translation of seminal texts and reviving the ideology of 'to catch up and leave behind' type is not likely to work: time has been lost, we cannot reproduce the context and environment of appropriation, so the status of these texts will be different: exotica, intellectual import. I think we should realise that nothing could be built on the old site: humanitarian ruins – whether artificial or natural – should be left there as, so to speak, epistemological mnemotops, reminding us not only about lost chances but also about prospects of transformation of both 'topica' and 'politica' of science.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, there is no Russian translation of Goodman as yet.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the Russian translation of Arnheim was distorted by the editor. See [45].

<sup>11</sup> About this concept, see [46].

<sup>12</sup> See, however [34].

Indeed, this a-topism gives us hope: We could leave point A (disciplinary and discursive identity) and head for point B – a realisation of our needs and wants. The first of these would be a realization of our inability to speak the modern language – and respectively, a necessity to learn the language of dissimilarity, obscurity, dissonance and lack in the fashion of Adorno [38] и Habermas [35].

Talking about discourse, the Russian situation reveals a discourse in transition, in a gap. Historically this might be a shortcoming, even a tragedy but in terms of methodology it is an advantage because it reveals inner hermeneutics of any scholarly or scientific paradigm: it simply must contain zones of doubt, strain, self-denial, self-rejection – and thus self-revelation. Hence, this situation is not specifically Russian: in any tradition there are both zones allowing international communication across borders as well as 'introverted' regional zones – 'national preservation parks' of a past, which probably never happened.

We need to recognize that we are in the stage of post-regionality and post-coloniality of science. The borders of science are transparent. What's more, the scholar/scientist is not a security officer, and humanitarian aid and exchange are tax-free. The only thing we need to do is realise our humanitarian catastrophe first. Then we can explore the structure of practically any science orientated towards historicity. Peripheral areas of 'social sciences' are usually 'borderline zones' closely connected with politics. Science here is in a 'weak' form. Yet we can experiment as long as we admit that there is no sense in sticking with old ways, there is nothing to treasure or to be proud of. Such epistemological modesty, or even penitence, will open new opportunities for building new paradigms and narratives.

Shall we begin to control the situation? Somebody sometime played havoc on our building site. Now we can take ruins for what they are – and change the character of discourse itself: first we might produce manifests and confessions (like I am doing now) – then new constellations (Benjamin [17]) rather than new knowledge. The main sign of truth here – discomfort, even pain, when, in order to see what will happen, it is necessary to mix incompatible or even conflicting elements: probably as a montage or collage.

We could mix not only methods but methods and materials. Whatever has happened, nobody can deprive us of Russian art or forbid us to apply radical or unchecked methods to it. We should feel free to act a-synchronously in principle, to deconstruct exactly the collision between synchronism and diachronism. For example, what if we take modern psychoanalysis together with demythologising exegesis in order to approach Medieval Russian Art? Should these actions be seen as 'an alien invasion' or 'colonial exploitation'? Or could we possibly see them rather as useful investments and experiments?

Maybe what we need is not just new areas of scholarly / scientific activity but rather new social and cognitive genres, congenial to the situation of 'post-science' (however politicised this concept may be in the Brexit context). Maybe instead of art history we need to consider a history of

discourses [47], in which texts will have the same status as works of art. The content of the latter could be derived from the content of theories, either contemporary with the works of art or modern. The ancient genre of 'literature about artists' (Künstlerliteratur)<sup>13</sup> has gone through the stage of 'literature about art' (Kunstliteratur) and is transforming into 'artful / artificial literature (Künstliche Literatur), which could be about anything, most importantly – about 'science of art' itself!

We should build texts as discourses, as direct and explicit subjective utterances dedicated to 'monuments of science of art / art history / Kunstwissenschaft' rather than about 'works of art'. We should discuss methods, directions, interpretative discussions, to which 'conservation status' is not quite applicable.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Summing up, productive 'post-colonial' and 'post-regional' (in the post-Soviet Union sense) thinking can help us to take easier our favourite Russian question: who is to blame? And suggest instead new questions in the shape of not only meta-textual studies but also meta- and para-cognitive investigations. The main warning: let us mind the danger of epistemological and ideological cargo cults and mummifying retro-communications. We should 'notice' not only untouchable ruins but also an abandoned building site, where nothing can be built, not any longer. We should admit that the Russian case is a specific example of a more universal model of arrested development. Once the formal method was used to institutionalise 'science of art' in Russia – and then it was imprisoned – together with scholars / scientists who implemented it. Unlike many of them, the method survived – and its fate exemplifies gradual self-exhaustion of a discipline and discourse, dreaming, in isolation, about purity, autonomy and specificity.

What we need to do is, first, sort out the remnants and get rid of useless structures; second, work out a new language, or rather discourse: not through translating only but rather commenting on texts in detail so as to make them relevant to Russian-speaking art historical community. Third, we should experiment with new hermeneutic constructs, texts and discourses – however, not by way of 'Our Answer to Chamberlain' or 'export produce'. We need to develop 'mature speech' (Mündlichkeit der Mündigkeit)<sup>14</sup> that overcomes any kind of fatigue, notably epistemic / epistemological fatigue. In other words, let us reject the method in favour of explicit truth (Gadamer) – which we can explore openly and directly. No need to search for new ways elsewhere – we can have everything here, now and for free.

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