

HANS BELTING AND HERMENEUTICS – BETWEEN UNEASE AND AWARENESS

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Abstract

Beginning with an article by Hans Robert Jauss, which detects in Hans Belting some "unease" towards hermeneutics, this paper claims instead that Belting, in his studies, manifests deep hermeneutic awareness, among other things indebted in many respects to Jauss' reception theory itself. Nonetheless, it is still possible to notice some "unease," which emerges in the way Belting considers hermeneutics among the "methods and games" of history of art. In this regard, Belting's analysis – concerning the relationship between iconology and hermeneutics and between philosophical and art historical hermeneutics – appears densely loaded with meaning but also partial. This is due to the fact that he limits himself to critically discussing only one tendency, well represented, in his eyes, by Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Sedlmayr, the latter being the only representative of art historical hermeneutics that Belting takes into account.

Keywords: Hans Belting, Hans Robert Jauss, *Steiner-Belting-Debatte*, reception theory, philosophical hermeneutics, art, historical hermeneutics

The relationship interwoven with hermeneutics by Hans Belting – both from the standpoint of historical research and of theoretical-methodological reflections – can be investigated by taking as a starting point the debate sometimes referred to as the *Steiner-Belting-Debatte* (see e.g. Oelmüller 1994), that is, the discussion in 1990 in Germany, which followed the almost simultaneous publication of one of Belting's most important and well-known works, *Bild und Kult*, and the German translation of George Steiner's *Real Presences*. Within the *Debatte*, it is notably a paper by Hans Robert Jauss, which appeared in 1991 in the journal *Merkur* and was devoted to the relationship between religious and aesthetic experience, that allows us to address these issues (Jauss 1994). Taking up and expanding on the suggestion of Eckhard Nordhofen (1991), who had considered *Bild und Kult* almost a pendant of Steiner's book, Jauss moves from the obser-

vation that, while the former deals with the Christian image during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, considered under the sign of a "History of the Image before the Era of Art" – as the subtitle of the volume states – the latter deals instead with the experience of the "great art," that is, the autonomous, secularized and aestheticized art developed since the Renaissance, and thus after the era of the sacred image.

Born independently of each other, and written from quite distant horizons, the two works thus seem to be linked by a *fil rouge* in so far as the latter begins where the former ends. This splitting of the historical field, however, constitutes only the premise of the comparison. Within the debate, Jauss detects the recognition of a more topic-related point of convergence, consisting in both having a connection with the "presence of an otherness in relation to everyday life" (Jauss 1994, 347); and this can be experienced in the cult of the sacred image, with which Belting's book is concerned, as well as in the "real presence" of the transcendent meaning of the work of art, which is the core of Steiner's discourse.

In terms of the key options of their approaches, the two works – regardless of the profound differences they show – appear instead to Jauss singularly united by their denial of hermeneutics. He equates Steiner with the advocates – who remain unspecified – of an "aesthetics of immediacy and otherness" (*ibid.*, 361). In his view, such advocates would suggest that "the last word of aesthetic experience" consists in immediate evidence, and that therefore the mediation undertaken by hermeneutics through the threefold procedure of "understanding, interpretation and application," though implicitly presupposed, can be avoided (*ibid.*).¹

There is thus manifested some "unease towards hermeneutics," which leads to the paradox that "some feel impelled to disdain hermeneutics en bloc and aloud" (*ibid.*, 359) even though they make use in practice of its procedures. In Jauss' opinion, such unease is palpable in Steiner but is also detectable in

¹ In outlining the hermeneutic task in the terms of "understanding, interpretation, and application" [*Verstehen, Auslegung, Applikation*], Jauss refers, in the wake of Gadamer, to the doctrine of the three *subtilitates* (*intelligendi, explicandi, adplicandi*), which runs through the history of hermeneutics at least since the 18th century (see also Jauss 1981, 461–7 and Jauss 2015, 363–76, where the reference to Gadamer is made explicit).

Belting. He refers to the distrust expressed in *Bild und Kult* against the possibility of the *Geisteswissenschaften* being suitable for investigating the sacred image: without making any distinction between the individual disciplines, Belting rejects the whole category because it "is repetitive, whether from presumptuousness or its opposite; it believes it can provide the necessary explanations merely by repeating the old arguments" (Belting 1994, 9).²

Jauss opposes this view with the claim that hermeneutics, in its reconstructive task, aims precisely at understanding the "old arguments" within the otherness of the horizon of the past. In his view, Belting, when studying the ancient icons with the help of modern historical methodologies, only "confirms the hermeneutical maxim that the before is much better understood by the after, in so far as the interpreter is ready to revise his preliminary comprehension of the object in order to understand the past in its historical difference" (Jauss 1994, 360).

This extremely limpid synthesis of the hermeneutic procedure fits into a discourse that seems to presuppose a sort of coincidence between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and hermeneutics; the coincidence is readable only between the lines, but, nevertheless, it is expressed in an undoubtedly more decisive way than in Jauss' main works. Thus, here, for example, he appears close to Emilio Betti and his proposal of a "Hermeneutics as a General Methodology of the Sciences of the Spirit" and, certainly, to an epistemological paradigm traditionally based on a clear distinction between the natural sciences and the sciences of the spirit, between *Erklären* and *Verstehen* (see, first of all, Betti 2021).³ By contrast, Belting makes no mention of this coincidence, just as he makes no mention of hermeneutics when he claims to want to reject the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Consequently, Jauss' criticism loses much of its force, unless we wish to go so far as to argue that, if Belting had considered the relationship between the sciences of the spirit and hermeneutics in such a close and interdependent way, he would not have dispensed with the latter without rejecting the former. But the point at issue is precisely this: contrary to what Jauss thinks, Belting is not led to eliminate hermeneutics when he refutes the sciences of the spirit.

² The reference to "modern *Geisteswissenschaften*" is explicit in the original German edition (Belting 1990, 19) – the one Jauss refers to – while in the American translation-revision the term used is "modern criticism" (Belting 1994, 9).

³ As is well known, this is a characterization already present in Dilthey (see e.g. Dilthey 1996), whose conclusions, however, Betti radicalises (see Vargiu 2017, 88–90). For a confirmation *e negativo* in Jauss, see Jauss 2015, 363–76.

Instead, Jauss draws the conclusion that Belting continues to make use of hermeneutics in spite of his alleged rejection of it, even crediting him with "virtuosity" in the way he considers the aesthetic sphere, in the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern age, as a "hermeneutic bridge to the otherness of the religious images" (Jauss 1994, 360), thus allowing for a reinterpretation of images, previously considered and experienced primarily from the perspective of faith and worship, as works of art. At first glance, Belting's historical and thematic contextualization – that is, his reference to the transition from the "Era of Image" to the "Era of Art" and, consequently, to the problem of the new interpretation of sacred figurations – seems not to be mentioned here by Jauss. Thus, he gives the impression of ascribing to it the sense of a constant, as if the aesthetic sphere always plays this role of intermediary between what in the experience of images persists and what is instead lost. Perhaps though, the fact that Jauss adds that Belting does this "as an art historian" (ibid.) at the very least indicates that this is an interpretation conducted in historical contexts, that is, it is precisely within the history of art that Belting identifies for the aesthetic sphere such a "bridging" role.

In the writings devoted to questioning the disciplinary and epistemological status of art historiography and its various methodologies (Belting 1987; 2002; 2003), Belting acknowledges the role Jauss played in deepening and popularizing the themes of reception in the field of literary history, beginning with *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory* in 1967 (see Belting 2002, 165 and 224). At the same time, he extends its main acquisitions to the art historical field, not unlike, for example, the way Wolfgang Kemp (1983; 1992) had moved in the same years from both the historical and the theoretical viewpoint. Belting locates the reason for employing reception theory in a conceptual framework related to an analysis of the artworks focussed on their context and function. In this way, he adopts a perspective in which the production of a work of art and its reception appear as the two sides of the same coin, which only by necessity of analysis are separated. Regarding reception, it is considered in all implications, involving both understanding and effectiveness, both the contemporary audience and the subsequent generations. Focussing on this approach, research can thus open up to such issues as those related to the reconstruction of the "horizon of expectation," in the light of which every innovation is af-

firmed, and within which every reaction – whether an act of imitation or opposition – finds an audience of insiders who can approve or criticize. Another issue is that of competition in artistic creation, which is not only alive in artists of the same era but is also a determining factor in pushing subsequent generations to overcome pre-existing models (Belting 2002, 165; Belting 2003, 161).

In mentioning these issues, drawn from Jauss, and central since the aforementioned 1967 publication, Belting also shows that he is aware that reception includes a productive aspect, what Jauss calls *poiesis* and which is deployed in the interplay of progressive "concretizations" to which the artwork is subjected in its historical events (see e.g. Jauss 1982, 46–61). An exemplary case of reception is represented by the topic of *Das Bild und sein Publikum*, Belting's 1981 book, devoted to the way a historical form – the icon – acquires a new meaning as a devotional image in a new context, that of late medieval Western Christianity, thus involving the problem of the relationship between the "field" and "the process of adaptation to the new field" (Belting 1981, 200).

In this book Belting shows that he is aware of the existence, already pointed out by Jauss, of a "hermeneutic difference" (Jauss 1970, 19) between the way a certain artwork was understood in the past and the way it is understood in the present. This is the problem that Belting calls "semantic barrier," experienced by the modern observer in his relation to devotional images, in so far as he lacks the "models of understanding" [*Verständnismuster*] of the original audience (Belting 1981, 102). A spontaneous understanding of these images cannot be given – but the discourse is extensible to the image as such – since such an understanding runs the risk of replacing the worshipper of the original context with the present observer, as if the latter were its addressee. It is thus an attitude that presupposes a "key psychological disposition," common to the original and the present observer, but which, in so doing, ignores the "time situatedness" [*Zeitgebundenheit*] of the experience and understanding of images (Belting 1981, 105).

In this regard, Belting continues to be close to Jauss, and, through him, to Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of horizon. In fact, Jauss characterized as "active" his own idea of the determination of understanding based on the horizon of expectation, as opposed to the alleged passivity of the Gadamerian fusion of horizons; nevertheless, he also emphasized that he was still invoking "Gadamer against Gadamer" (Jauss 1982, xxxvi). Such a clarification makes it possible to

presuppose the perspectival character of every hermeneutic situation and, consequently, to acknowledge that every "historical context is always surrounded by the context of our present" (Jauss 1970, 20). Belting follows the same order of ideas. On the one hand, he claims that every analysis cannot avoid considering the dimension of reception and the point of view of the past observer; on the other hand, however, he also recognizes that the terminology and the issues involved cannot be but modern: hence a hermeneutic caution in the way of proceeding, whereas the intention is nonetheless indicated in "deciphering historical images in the broadest possible way, that is, defining the functional layer of their historical form" (Belting 1981, 277–8).

If this is Belting's debt to Jauss' reception theory, Jauss' remarks – leaving aside the question of their persuasiveness – are unexpected, or better still, it is unexpected that such remarks were made by Jauss himself. But despite this, it is perhaps still possible to speak of Belting's unease towards hermeneutics in a different way. In the aforementioned writings where Belting examines the methodologies of history of art, hermeneutics is seen as one of the approaches that have developed since the institutionalization of art historiography as a scientific and academic discipline in the 19th century: those approaches that Belting himself calls "methods and games of an academic discipline" (Belting 2003, 137)⁴. Hermeneutics is thus situated alongside – among others – the history of style, iconology and the social history of art. On closer inspection, this issue is scantily dealt with; however, they are remarkable for their dense and sharp analysis.

It is iconology that is the starting point of Belting's reflections. He observes its rootedness in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, as the decoding of the work of art carried out by iconology is a "hermeneutic act, symmetrically complementing the original, historical encoding" (Belting 1987, 18). Belting does not investigate this issue further; however, just the fact that iconology is understood in this way clearly shows that, in his view, it belongs to the hermeneutic tradition. It also implicitly seems to indicate that iconology owes something to the traditional hermeneutic doctrine which postulates that the interpretative process is to be conceived as inversion of the creative process (see e.g. Schleiermacher 1977, 97; Betti 2021, 12–3).

⁴ This is the title of Chapter 14.

Albeit not fully considering its main tenets, Belting's line of reading is therefore similar to Oskar Bätschmann's (1985; 1991; 2001; 2003), whose starting point consists in considering iconology as part of hermeneutics, to the point of recognizing Erwin Panofsky's well-known tripartite model as *Verstehen-Erklären-Modell* (Bätschmann 1985, 92–6), and then valorising its significance in the art historical interpretation. While Belting only provides a cursory discussion, Bätschmann demonstrates a willingness to debate the issue further, to the extent that his discussion regarding iconology becomes one of the pillars upon which his theory is based. It is therefore unsurprising to find that such divergent interests led the two scholars to postulate opposing judgements about the contribution that iconology gave to the history of art. As lamented by Bätschmann (*ibid.*, 92 and 99), in Belting's view, iconology "cannot claim to be the master discourse in art history and also has no visible connection to the early attempts to write a history of art properly speaking," that is, a history of art that can "explain what this history was and how it may be described in retrospect" (Belting 2003, 142). In other words, Belting follows the traditional interpretation of iconology as a partial approach aimed only at investigating the subject-matter of artworks; therefore, he considers it incapable of giving life to a history of art that can account for the different points of view from which a work of art can be examined. Conversely, Bätschmann aims to promote the contribution that iconology could give within a more general art historical view.

Despite the divergences in the judgement and in the approach, both scholars believe that iconology belongs to the hermeneutic tradition; therefore, their standpoint differs from other approaches, which tend instead to refuse the qualification of hermeneutics to iconology. Just to make an example, we can refer to the Italian philosopher Gianni Carchia, whose reading is close to Belting's in stigmatizing the reduction of iconology to a way of deciphering and cataloguing the historical-cultural patrimony, but then diverges from it in the conclusions. Carchia's viewpoint contemplates two essential elements for the interpretation: the relationship with the current artistic activity and the dialogue with the "critical conscience of the artists," which he considers "the true addressee of the interpretation" (Carchia 1985, 116). Therefore, the program of

iconology, which is merely reconstructive, and which severs the link between artistic production and criticism, cannot be qualified as hermeneutic (*ibid.*).⁵

In a dense essay that aims at reconstructing the art historical scene in Germany and the English-speaking countries, the Polish art historian Mariusz Bryl (1999) identifies hermeneutics as the privileged reference point for the discipline in Germany from the 1970s onwards. This is a revealing sign that, even regarding the German context, it is possible to speak of a "koine" or hermeneutic conjuncture, as was proposed in Italy by Gianni Vattimo (1988) with special reference to the 1980s. This can be implicitly gleaned from Belting's words, when, in the first book devoted to the status and methodologies of the art historical discipline – *The End of the History of Art?*, published in Germany in 1983 – he remarked that he wanted to concentrate on those issues that "in their art historical application became most virulent" (Belting 1987, 20). Interestingly, this comment is no longer to be found in the second book – *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte*, of 1995 – regarded by its author himself as a "revision" of the previous one. This may be due to the fact that such a virulence in Germany had mostly disappeared during the 1990s: a fact that perhaps also shines through in Jauss' complaints about the generalized rejection of hermeneutics that he saw as early as 1991, in the cited article on Belting and Steiner.

In any case, the fact that in the 1983 book Belting talks about these issues – plural – that "in their art historical application became most virulent" and that he adds that he is examining only "a strain of hermeneutical thought," meaning the "idealistic tradition" of the "so-called philosophical hermeneutics," shows that he takes for granted that hermeneutics can fork into numerous tendencies (Belting 1987, 19).

In Belting's view, it is precisely such "idealistic tradition" that seemed to cause the virulence observed in the 1983 book. Belting does not explain why he defines such a tradition as idealistic but limits himself to seeing it represented by Dilthey's, Heidegger's and Gadamer's philosophy (*ibid.*, 19–20). However, the 1995 "revision" does not allude to this tradition, even though Gadamer, Dilthey and Hans Sedlmayr remain the key reference points of his discourse. Indeed, a brief mention of the "normative aesthetics" that was at its peak "in the days of German idealism" contained in the American translation-revision of the

⁵ The analysis in Carchia 1995, 83–4 is different and more nuanced.

latter book (Belting 2003, 143)⁶ perhaps shows a desire to differentiate hermeneutics from this philosophical tradition. Leaving aside Sedlmayr and what we have already observed about iconology, it is interesting to note that Belting does not mention any other art historian or scholar in visual art studies. He limits himself to a few references to the paradigmatic role played by art experience within Gadamer's ontology, which he considers as shaping the theoretical basis of art historical hermeneutics (Belting 1987, 102, endnote 38).

Before turning to the specific field of art history, some general problems are thus examined. By quoting Gadamer in both his books, Belting shows his agreement with the critique that hermeneutics raised against the "positivistic naïveté which lies in the very concept of the 'given'," remarking how hermeneutics is grounded on a "reflection upon the conditions of understanding", which shapes any interpretative act (ibid., 20; Belting 2003, 143).⁷ From this point of view, and referring once again to Gadamer, he affirms that the interpretation task cannot "amount to simply 'reproducing the original production' of meaning and form" (Belting 2003, 143; also Belting 1987, 102 endnote 38):⁸ a stance, as seen above, that Belting finds in iconology. On a level more internal to his discipline, therefore, drawing the consequences from this characterization that foregrounds the limits and conditions of understanding, in his 1983 book Belting affirmed that "every self-reflective art history is grounded in a hermeneutic tradition" (Belting 1987, 20).

Belting's hermeneutic insight is thus testified to once again. It continues to show itself in the following remarks, addressed towards one of the key problems of the relationship between aesthetics and hermeneutics. It is the question regarding the necessity to develop what he calls a "scholarly inquiry" that can account for the aesthetic experience, which is an "essentially pre-scholarly experience" (Belting 1987, 20; Belting 2003, 143). In Belting's view, such an issue had already traced back to the birth of philosophical aesthetics in the late 18th century (Belting 2002, 149), but it became more evident when interpretation itself was put into discussion, along with its aspiration to lead to a "scientifically

⁶ It is a volume that Belting sometimes regards as an autonomous work (See Beltrami 2015).

⁷ Belting refers to Gadamer 1974, 1070.

⁸ Belting refers once again to Gadamer 1974, 1069.

verifiable truth" (Belting 2003, 20). As Belting recalls, this aspiration was professed by Wilhelm Dilthey inasmuch as he conceived the hermeneutic process as a "dialogue between the one who interprets and the work to be interpreted" (ibid., 143). However, by doing so, the interpreter's conscience may run the risk of becoming more important than the object of his/her interpretation. Thus, this conscience will end up simply reaffirming itself and reducing the work of art to a mere "case of application of the interpretative process" (Belting 1987, 20; also Belting 2002, 150).⁹

Belting reaches such conclusions once again drawing on Gadamer. However, he takes on an extreme level Gadamer's critique of Dilthey, which highlights the difficulties encountered by Dilthey to theoretically mediate the "historic conscience" by asserting the truth of science (Gadamer 1974, 1065). Accordingly, Belting detects in Dilthey's theory a *circulus vitiosus* in which "the hermeneutic mind that is left alone is easily tempted to reproduce his own exegesis" (Belting 2003, 143). These claims can certainly find ground in the conceptual shifts that Betti had already found in Dilthey's thought, in consequence of which the interpretative experience ends up being characterized as a *Lebensverständnis*, creating in this way some confusion between experience of the self and understanding of the other (Betti 1990, 242–3).

However, in reasoning in this fashion, Belting's stance seems less incisive even than Gadamer's as he may run the risk of reducing Dilthey's efforts – that he himself acknowledges (Belting 1987, 103 endnote 41) – towards an analysis attentive to the scientific value and objectivity (albeit relative) of the *Geisteswissenschaften*.¹⁰ Nonetheless, he does not discuss this point in detail and does not analyse the puzzling issues that can be found in Dilthey's theory. He simply mentions them before proceeding with his discussion of art historical hermeneutics.

To do this, Belting refers to those approaches that he considers as applications of Dilthey's philosophy, as they derive from Dilthey the aspiration to be scientific and to elaborate precise and stable rules, which can be organized into a system. Here Belting refers to Sedlmayr and his famous 1931 essay entitled

⁹ Belting refers to Dilthey's works on the imagination of the poet and the rise of hermeneutics (Dilthey 1985 and 1996).

¹⁰ These observations derive respectively from Cacciatore 1976 (Vol. II, 26–7 footnote 28) and Griffero 1988, 93. The references to Dilthey's work are, first of all, to Dilthey 2002.

"Towards a Rigorous Study of Art." In this essay, Sedlmayr proposed a distinction between the work of art, which Belting describes "as a self-referential item of interpretation," and the mere "objet d'art" (*Kunstding*, in Sedlmayr's terminology), which is a simple "raw material" upon which the hermeneutic process is carried out (Belting 2003, 144; also Belting 1987, 21). In Sedlmayr's view, the interpreter becomes a "second artist" (Belting 1987, 21) who "awakens or recreates [the *Kunstding*] as a work of art" (Belting 2003, 144).¹¹

Putting things this way, however, Belting runs the risk of giving a misleading account of art historical hermeneutics, as he considers just Sedlmayr's approach – an approach that Gadamer himself criticizes, albeit for different reasons and purposes (see Gadamer 2004, 119–20). In his 1983 book, Belting's claims appear less marked. He only talks about "less felicitous art historical applications" (Belting 1987, 20), thus implying that more felicitous applications are indeed available, even though he avoids any direct reference. Ten years later, such limitations disappear, and his stance seems to claim a more general validity (Belting 2003, 143–4).

From a reconstructive standpoint, Belting's interpretation of Sedlmayr's approach as the application of Dilthey's hermeneutics does not seem to hold. It is undoubted that both Sedlmayr's and Dilthey's theories strive to scientificity and validity. However, the primary issue remains the relationship that the German historicism had with the Vienna School of art history, and most importantly with the New Viennese School developed by Sedlmayr, Otto Pächt, Guido Kaschnitz von Weinberg, and many others.¹² We therefore struggle to understand whether the latter can be considered as proceeding from the former as far as art historiography is concerned or whether we can simply say that they share some common ground (see e.g. Sedlmayr 1978, 100–2).¹³

¹¹ The distinction between work, or *Kunstgebilde* and *Kunstding* is defined in Sedlmayr 2000, 133–80.

¹² As for the relationship between the German historicism and the Vienna School, the issue seems to be difficult and limited to few elements. For instance, it is worth noting that Hubert Locher (2010, 55–66) does not perceive the influence of Dilthey's approach on the Viennese scholars but mainly on Hans Tietze, or Walter Passarge and Joseph Gantner. See also Sedlmayr 1978, 39 and 48, on some similarities between Alois Riegl and Dilthey; and Schneider 1999, 268, on Max Dvořák and Ernst Troeltsch.

¹³ Here Dilthey is mentioned with reference to the hermeneutic circle and to the concept of *Wirkungszusammenhang*, which Sedlmayr considers close to his own concept of structure.

Secondly, we can acknowledge Belting's intention to primarily investigate one specific hermeneutic tendency, that is, what he had at first called "idealistic tradition." However, this approach results in a less defined picture of the general phenomenon of art historical hermeneutics. Albeit *per summa capita* and limiting the analysis to the German-speaking context, it is important to highlight that the hermeneutic approach within visual arts managed to establish fruitful collaborations not only with Gadamer and Jauss: other more independent approaches that focussed on the issue of validity are to be taken into account. Among those who favoured the former tendency, we can include, with all due caution, Max Imdahl, Gottfried Boehm and Wolfgang Kemp, whereas Bättschmann's work can be subsumed under the latter one (Volkenandt 2019). Interestingly, Belting only mentions Bättschmann in the bibliography of his 1995 book and cursorily refers to a "new approach" that the Swiss art historian has put forward (Belting 2002, 224).¹⁴ No other specific comments or discussions on the structure of this "new approach" can be found. To some extent, it could relate to Betti's and Eric D. Hirsch jr.'s work (Volkenandt 2019, 168), albeit its theoretical basis appears to be far from these thinkers' approaches. This depends mainly on the fact that, as already seen, Bättschmann contends that art historical hermeneutics should be considered as an autonomous disciplinary field.¹⁵

Due to the partial reconstruction of the events and Belting's own explicitly polemical tone, it is not surprising that he concludes by saying that hermeneutics "has left us suggestions for the analysis of works of art but no compelling model of art historiography" (Belting 1987, 21; also Belting 2002, 150). Sedlmayr is once again the target of his criticism and he is blamed for considering the historical analysis merely as "a preparatory stage, an auxiliary discipline beyond which [...] the 'second' art history actually begins" (Belting 1987, 21). It should be borne in mind that Sedlmayr's "second art history" is the second and final stage of the art historical investigation, based on the idea that the hermeneutic process leads to the recreation of the work of art itself (Sedlmayr 2000).

¹⁴ With reference to Bättschmann 2001.

¹⁵ Betti is cursorily mentioned in Bättschmann 2001, 6 footnote 1, where Betti is defined (using a trite expression) as the representative of hermeneutics as a method.

In this light, the main limitation of the hermeneutic approach, which also becomes a real "obstacle for modern research on art" (Belting 2002, 150), can be detected in its inherent contradiction:

This is why establishing universal rules for the study of art is a contradiction in terms as they have to be rethought by each successive generation. Since the process of systematic interpretation also involves the interpreting mind, the hermeneutics of art has never led to a permanent solution (Belting 2003, 144; see also Belting 2002, 150).

Here, once again, Belting adumbrates the existence of a *circulus vitiosus*. Moreover, he seems to implicitly suggest that there is a gap between the more general hermeneutic stances – even if he limits his analysis to the sole so-called "idealistic tendency" – and Sedlmayr's supposed application.

The contradiction mentioned above is evident in Sedlmayr's theory as it is based upon the idea that there is only one way to interpret a work of art, which always proves to be the most effective (Sedlmayr 1978, 112). However, it should be noted that Sedlmayr mitigates his claims when he explains that – as many others had traditionally done – the hermeneutic task is perpetually unfinished and different interpretations can only try to get closer to the right one. Hence, the right interpretation becomes a normative ideal that can never be fully achieved. It is defined as "the asymptote of knowledge" to which real interpretations can only get nearer and nearer (ibid., 113). His stance is, however, decisive: whoever denies the existence of the right interpretation denies the claim of scientificity of the art historical discipline (ibid., 188). Consequently, the possibilities of "polyfocality," as Werner Hofmann (2004, 102) defined them, are abandoned in favour of a "monofocal" approach, which strives to evaluate works of art *ex cathedra*.

Belting's answer, which attempts to oppose such contradictions, is based on hermeneutic premises as well. Drawing on Gadamer, he points out that "since the process of a systematic interpretation also involves the interpreting mind, the hermeneutics of art can never lead to a permanent solution" (Belting 2003, 144; also Belting 1987, 21).¹⁶ Although he did not deny it completely, Sedlmayr certainly tried toning down such a stance. Within Sedlmayr's perspective, method is considered as a set of precise rules that are forever valid and geared

¹⁶ In the latter occurrence the reference to Gadamer 1974, 1069 is explicit.

towards the right interpretation. However, this use of method ends up contradicting that awareness of intrinsic unfinishedness that the interpretative task implies, which Sedlmayr also agrees on, at least on paper.

In conclusion, Belting is persuasive, if not in providing a sound historical reconstruction, certainly in showing the contradictions and limitations of Sedlmayr's theory. However, the fact that he does not take into account the multifaceted aspects of art historical hermeneutics makes his analysis partial, even though – or just because – it is based on a conscious choice to be polemical. Consequently, Belting seems also unable to capture in some approaches proposals that are geared towards that attempt to renovate the disciplinary paradigm that he himself has been pursuing throughout his work.

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