

Ruhe & Fernsicht: the prospect of a painting

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Some time in the spring of 1899, the famous art historian Alois Riegl, then curator of the Museum for Art and Industry in Vienna, was sitting on a rock in the Alps, peacefully contemplating the panoramic landscape below, unfolding into the distance. Suddenly, his reverie was interrupted by a mountain goat rushing by, pursued, moments later, by a predator. Riegl managed to fight the animal back with his stick. Still, despite his heroic deed (for any predator chasing a goat is potentially also dangerous for man), he regretted the dissolution of that special state of mind created by his absorption in the distant view. He analysed this in an essay published later that year, “Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst”: Mood as the Content of Modern Art. He defined the ingredients of this *Stimmung* as *Ruhe*: stillness, and *Fernsicht*: a view from afar – which, for the human eye, is most readily achieved from an elevated viewpoint –, and argued that this mood was a key characteristic of modern painting.¹ Riegl identified Impressionist landscape paintings (either of mountains or of the sea) as the best examples of *Stimmungsmalerei*.² This word became a general term for landscapes with a certain type of glowing evening light, evoking a dreamlike or even sublime experience of nature. Riegl’s “goat experience” in the Alps was thus the starting point for a theory of modern painting based on *Ruhe* and *Fernsicht* that would dominate Western thinking at least until the 1960s.

It seems quite easy for us to relate to Riegl’s idea of *Stimmung*: are we not trained to look at art in a contemplative, even meditative way? Museums of modern art worldwide, with their white cube interiors, provide the necessary stillness to facilitate this way of looking. Here, too, it is considered an affront to run across another visitor’s field of vision. Many people today would still agree with Riegl’s argument that the purpose of art is to offer the occasion for contemplation and repose from the bustle of daily life. But, as we have seen, Riegl argued not only that stillness and distance offered the best “framework” for looking at painting but that *Stimmung* was itself the *content* of modern art. And with this, he had something quite specific in mind.

The scientific worldview underlying Riegl’s notion of *Stimmung* – a worldview that we no longer share – was based on the idea that human beings are governed by the laws of nature. At the end of the nineteenth century, these laws were largely determined

by Charles Darwin's ideas on natural selection and the survival of the fittest. Interestingly, the "goat anecdote" also allowed Riegl to connect the daily struggle for existence with a specific type of close-up vision: in his description of the hunt for the mountain goat, the art historian observed that the predator looked eager to bring the prey within reach of its "organs of touch." With reference to notions that were current in the theory of vision among art historians of the late nineteenth-century, Riegl called this type of looking "tactile." Its opposite, the calm and contemplative view from afar, he called "optical." The struggle for existence demanded immediate, "tactile" vision. "Optical" vision, on the contrary, allowed the beholder to step back from everyday struggle and to observe the "scientific" truth governing it, that is, the system of underlying "universal" laws determining life on earth. This system of universal natural laws Riegl called "World Harmony." He even went so far as to say that modern man needed to feel harmony. Modern painting, according to Riegl, was thus actually connected to the latest "scientific" insights. This is something we no longer realize when looking at *Stimmungsmalerei*. To us, the soft and harmonious colour palette might evoke a poetic mood, but it certainly doesn't call forth an image of scientific progress.

Because the scientific worldview at the core of Riegl's way of looking at painting is no longer valid, his idea that modern art should express the "harmony" of the laws governing the natural world is no longer relevant. But the *dispositif* distinguishing *Fernsicht* from *Nahsicht* has had a significant impact on theories of modern painting, in particular on Walter Benjamin and Clement Greenberg.³ Consider for a moment what happens when viewing a landscape from above. Looking in the distance, outlines become vague and everything seems to be connected to everything else (Riegl interpreted this connection as a manifestation of "World Harmony"). This kind of vision places all things on the same level and eliminates the hierarchy between figure and ground and between the different forms and figures on the picture plane. Writing about abstract painting in the 1950s and 1960s, the influential American art critic Clement Greenberg took up the notion of "opticality" and called it one of the key characteristics of modern art in the twentieth century. He argued that this non-hierarchic way of looking (as if from a distance, as in a mountain landscape) was a key force behind the development in modern painting towards an ever-greater *flatness* of the picture surface. He even described the experience of looking at an abstract painting (for example by Jackson Pollock) in terms derived from the contemplation of a landscape from afar, writing that:

The Old Masters created an illusion of space in depth that one could imagine oneself walking into, but the analogous illusion created by the Modernist painter can only be seen into; can be travelled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye.⁴

The "flatness" of the modern painting's surface would thus still include an illusion of shallow space, to be explored *like a landscape* but "only with the eye." Riegl certainly contributed to this theory of "flatness." His introduction of a non-hierarchic way of looking at things contributed to the emancipation of the ground in modern painting, that is, of the space between objects or forms.⁵ But, perhaps inadvertently, both Riegl's

mountain anecdote and Greenberg's description of "flat" modernist painting convey the impression that the ideal viewing situation for modern painting is that of a gigantic eye without a body.

However, such a conclusion would not do justice to the thoughts on vision formulated by Riegl slightly later. For while the absence of hierarchy in *Fernsicht* prioritizes a utopian, purely spiritual vision, Riegl remarked that touch provides us with the "knowledge of the impenetrability of the physical boundaries of the individual."⁶ *Nahsicht* thus offers a necessary "tactile object"⁷ corrective to an "optical-utopian" vision.⁷ For Riegl, the work of art ultimately invites us to look at it with a double vision (*Doppelblick*) combining an image of the world with direct, physical experience.

¹ Riegl, Alois (1899). "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst." *Graphische Künste*, XXII, 47-56.

² Bart Verschaffel (2002), "De wereld van het landschap," *De Witte Raaf*, 95, n. p. Retrieved from <http://www.dewitterraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/2416>; see also; Thomas, Kerstin (ed.), *Stimmung. Ästhetische Kategorie und künstlerische Praxis*. Munich/Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010.

³ Benjamin, Walter (1936). *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Reprinted in Benjamin, W. (1974). *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 1.2*, Tiedemann, R., Schweppenhäuser, H. (eds.), Frankfurt am Main, 431-469. Kemp, Wolfgang (1973). "Walter Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft. Teil 1: Benjamin's Beziehungen zur Wiener Schule," *Kritische Berichte* 1/3, 30-50; Arburg, Hans-Georg Von (2010). "Ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit." Zur theoretischen Konstitution von 'Stimmung' (1900) by Alois Riegl und Hugo von Hofmannsthal. In: Thomas (2010), 13-30 (as in note 2).

⁴ Greenberg, Clement (1960), "Modernist Painting," *Forum Lectures (Voices of America)*, Washington D.C. Reprinted in John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 85-91.

⁵ Hofmann, Werner, "Riegl, der Emanzipator (Die Gämse und das Alpenpanorama)," in Noever, Peter, Rosenauer, Artur, Vasold, Georg (eds.), *Alois Riegl Revisited*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008, 13-20.

⁶ Riegl, Alois, *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie*. Vienna: Staatsdruckerei, 1901, 17.

⁷ Riegl, A. Über antike und moderne Kunstfreunde. In Riegl, A., *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Augsburg/Vienna: Filser, 1929, 206.