

Periodization in the History of Art and its Conundrums. How to tackle them in East-Central Europe

Periodization is not a novel concern, nor is it one specific to art historians. Over the last decades it was, however, subject to revisions, and has been a recurrent topic across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Contributions from sociologists, anthropologists, historians and philosophers approaching this topic – be it indirectly – put their indelible mark on the ways it is understood.¹ So intense was the discussion on periodization in some fields of the humanities during the first decade of this century that an author could coin the term “periodicity”.² In the history of art, an important moment in articulating an understanding of time (and consequently, of its “shaping” through “periods”) at odds with the conventional, established one was George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time* (Kubler, 1962). Published originally in the early ‘60s – and indicating that art history had an early start in a renewed reflection on periodization – it had since several come-backs, during the 80s, when the author himself reflected anew on his book (Kubler, 1982), and again after the start of the 21st century³ (when a new edition was published), a proof of its lasting influence, but also of its “slow fuse”. Despite some enthusiastic responses to the book’s first appearance (some of them from artists), the art historical “establishment” didn’t seem in a hurry to react to its suggestions, or to endorse them: in an intervention at a symposium on Periods in 1970, Meyer Schapiro was still contending that “[i]ndependent of conflicting period concepts and common to all of them as a basic datum and axis of reference is the irreversible order of single works located in time and space”, and despite a nod to Kubler (which occasions, in passing, the remark that “Prehistoric and non-Western art have problems of their own”), and while acknowledging the limitations of the “biological” model of evolution in the history of art, Horst Janson still appears to think that “imputing a quasi-human life to artistic forms has one signal virtue: it postulates that their evolution is irreversible”, whereas Ernst Gombrich, in replying to Janson’s comments, reinforces the divide between Western styles and non-Western ones: “Western art (or large stretches of Western art) differs from, say, tribal art, through its interest in technical progress – an interest it shares, of course, with the Civilization from which it springs”, and concludes that while Western art is amenable to periodization (adding that “there always have been periods and artists even within the Western tradition who were comparatively isolated from this field of force; we call them ‘provincial’ which need not necessarily be a derogatory term”), non-Western arts are not (“we would find it hard to assign a place in its own ‘field of force’ to an Indian bronze or a Persian rug. We may admire its refinement [...], but we cannot see it quite in the way we see a Pontormo or a Seurat. I am not sure that this this is only due to our lack of knowledge of the implied references – there may be none.” (Schapiro; Janson; Gombrich, 1970: 113-125). cursory as it is, this rendering of the opinions of three among the most respected art historians of the time may give an idea about the *status quaestionis* at the beginning of the ‘70s, and would allow us to say – while in no way disputing the value of the contributions of these masters to the history of art – that they tended to espouse a linear (in

¹ See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) [First edition 1983]; Krzysztof Pomian, *L’ordre du temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps. Collective Memories and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003). See also (*inter alia*) *Chronotypes. The Construction of Time*, edited by John Belder and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), with contributions by Cornelius Castoriadis, Johannes Fabian, Dominic LaCapra, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others; or an issue on Periodization in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37:3 (Fall 2007).

² Timothy J. Reiss, “Periodicity: Considerations on the Geography of Histories”, *Modern Language Quarterly* 62:4 (December 2001): 425-452.

³ For instance, in a special issue devoted to Kubler’s *The Shape of Time* by *Art Journal* (Winter, 2009).

conjunction with a biological) and irreversible development of this history, to center it indisputably in the West, to see the distinction between center and periphery as a given, and to look at other areas of artistic endeavor as “radical others”, the encounter with which need not have significant consequences on the ways in which art history is being conceived and practiced in the West.

Though – at least through such contributions as Kubler’s – a sense that the conventional periodizations are in need of revision can be detected earlier, a more pointed reflection on this topic can be noticed after the demise of communism and the dismantling of the colonial system. Present day art history in the West looks quite differently on all these counts, and attempting to describe these changes or to give even a minimum of essential references in order to document them would by far exceed our brief. It seems to us that this is not to the same extent true for art history in East-Central Europe, at any rate not in the sense that different approaches to the ones still in place in the ‘70s would have gained currency and would have become dominant in its teaching, and in its practice. (See, e.g., András, 2003; Pejić, 2003)

In the aftermath of the 1989 events in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe a number of scholars felt the pressing need to reconsider the place of local art histories within the established narratives, and to reflect on how these local histories might fit within the Western canon, or to question its authority. Art historians, critics and curators dealing with modern and contemporary art were particularly sensitive to such questions (and this sensitivity may have also been catalyzed by a number of exhibitions organized in the West, which included contemporary artists from this region, or were focused on it⁴). They spoke about “interrupted” or “missing” histories (Badovinac, 2010), of “interrupted cultures”⁵, or of “impossible histories”⁶, of the necessity of adopting a more complex model of time, of “narratives in the plural”, proposed a “horizontal history” as the expression of a “spatial turn”, and as a way of counteracting established hierarchies (Piotrowski, 2008), in thus challenging – especially with avant-garde, modernist, and contemporary art in mind – the “master narratives”.

A number of issues closely related, in our view, to periodization, gathered importance as a consequence: the vexing question of “belatedness” or “a-synchronicity” with respect to the West⁷; the equally disturbing one of the relationship between “the center”, or “centers”, and “periphery”; the need to reconsider such concepts as that of “influence”, which had seemed for long to account in a satisfactory manner for the presence of derivative stylistic features at

⁴ And may have precipitated, at the same time, certain common places about them; to indicate one such common place, exhibitions organized by Western specialists during the 90s, and even later, tended to come to terms with its “otherness” by giving this region a distinct identity as “the Balkans”. Among the many exhibitions that were inspired by this view, perhaps the most important are the 2002 exhibition and accompanying publication *In Search of Balkania* at Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, by Roger Conover, Eda Cufer, and Peter Weibel; Harald Szeemann’s 2003 exhibition *Blut und Honig - Zukunft ist am Balkan*, at Essl Museum, or the exhibition shown the same year at Kunsthalle Fredericianum in Kassel, and accompanied by a vast program of events and publications, *In the Gorges of the Balkans*. This is not – far from it – to dismiss or demean such projects, which resulted in captivating exhibitions, and in publications that enriched the reflections on the concept of “Balkans”; merely to note a suggestive phenomenon.

⁵ Krista Kodres, Giedrė Mickūnaitė, and Stella Pelše: “Cultures of Interruption. Art History in the Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” (Matthew Rampley *et al.*, 2012): 249-274.

⁶ Miško Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories* (Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 2003).

⁷ Western scholars have also spoken (perhaps in paying attention to the problems confronting their Eastern colleagues and their sometimes troubled reflections) of “different velocities” (Moxey, 2013).

the “periphery” with respect to “the center”; the need to reconsider (as the center/periphery conundrum requires) the relationship between time *and* space, that is, to reexamine and on occasion retrace the geographies of art in investigating certain local artistic phenomena; that of the relationship between local historical narratives and the “grand narrative”, or the “master narratives” (see Ekins, 2002 and 2005 for an overview of these questions); of the inclusion (or not) in the generally accepted canon(s) (Brzysky, 2007). Such issues – of particular importance and even urgency for Eastern scholars – resonate with topics discussed by Western art historians. Even though they may not provide direct, unmediated answers to local concerns, they can be an inspiration, or at the very least partners in a dialogue.

Though scholars and curators in East-Central Europe working on modern and contemporary art were the first to pay attention to questions of this kind, they gradually became of more general interest, affecting the writing of histories of art of earlier periods. Frictions between the generally accepted periodizations and local trajectories in art became more apparent, making it necessary to reflect on approaches that could address them, and on the instruments art historians may put to use in order to tackle particular case studies. And this, all the more since – as already noted above – East-Central Europe is not a homogenous cultural entity. While in some of its countries (those we usually place – and which place themselves as well – in Central Europe) art during Medieval times, during the Renaissance and in early modern times can be more comfortably positioned and analyzed with reference to Western art and to its conventional periodization, the Eastern part of the continent was subject to pulls coming from other spaces (Byzantium, later on the Ottoman Empire, and the Russian one). This makes both for a variable geography of art in this region, and for a need to examine in what ways different periodizations clash, or whether relationships of some sort between them could be established, and if we would be justified to speak of different regimes of historicity within the region⁸. It is a relatively common view on the Eastern part of the region that there was no Renaissance (with a capital R) to speak of in these territories, even though local scholars have proposed on occasion local “renaissances”⁹, while acknowledging their “belatedness”. Such attempts may be seen as ways of vying with the Renaissance proper (that is, the Western one), and one may also reflect on the extent to which they can be set in the context of nationally-oriented art histories.

As formulated by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood (Nagel and Wood, 2010)¹⁰, who have been using it in studying the Renaissance, “anachronism” could prove an important concept in fostering a more elastic understanding of time, a non-linear one, and consequently a rethinking of periodizations, all the more since its application is not to be confined to the Renaissance. The same holds true for Mieke Bal’s concept of “preposterous history” (Bal,

⁸ See for this question “*Regimes of Historicity*” in *Southeastern and Northern Europe, 1890–1945*, edited by Diana Mishkova, Balázs Trencsényi, and Marja Jalava (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014).

⁹ In the 17th-18th centuries in Romania, e.g.; historiography, and art historiography, in Bulgaria has insistently used the term “Vazrazhdane” (Renaissance as well as Revival), in applying it to the period between 1762 and 1878). For Romania see, for instance, Răzvan Theodorescu, *Civilizația românilor între medieval și modern. Orizontul imaginii* (1550-1800), vol. I, and vol. II (Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House: 1987 and 1992); for Bulgaria, e.g. Tchavdar Marinov, Alexander Vezekov, “The Concept of National Revival in Balkan Historiographies”, in Roumen Daskalov and Alexander Vezekov (eds.), *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume Three: Shared Pasts, Disputed Legacies*, (Leiden, Brill, 2015): 406-462.

¹⁰ See also their “Towards a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism”, with comments by Michael Cole, Charles Dempsey, Claire Farago, and the authors’ reply, in *Art Bulletin*, vol. LXXXVII, No. 3 (September 2005): 403-432. It is also fitting to refer here to Christopher Wood’s “Art History’s Normative Renaissance”, in Allen Grieco, Michael Rocke and Fiorella Superbi Gioffredi (eds.), *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century* (Florence: Olschki, 2002): 65-92.

1999), where she moves between contemporary art and the Baroque. According to Hubert Damisch, “in matters of art anachronism seems to be the rule”¹¹. For him, as well as for Georges Didi-Huberman, “anachronism” is not only a concept to work with in applying it to particular instances in art’s history, but also a feature embedded in the history of art as a discipline (Didi-Huberman, 2000; 2002; 2010).

We alluded above to histories of art developing within national confines, and this, despite the dying out of the theories that had originally inspired the idea of a “national art”, or of art as an expression of the nation, but also *because* such theories still have currency in certain academic (and non-academic) circles in the region. This often precludes a larger outlook, and an unprejudiced inquiry into artistic phenomena that could be studied with profit in reference to a cartography which doesn’t coincide with that of the later nation-states, and where one needs to take into account shifting political, then “national” borders, not to mention the fact that in a number of countries in the region a “national” unity (though not necessarily a national homogeneity) was only achieved during the 19th century or at the beginning of the 20th, or that certain states weren’t even in existence until relatively recently, so that confining oneself to a thoroughly parochial understanding of an artistic phenomenon may be blatantly limiting.¹² East-Central Europe is a territory in which “geographies of art” and questions of temporality and periodization intermingle inextricably, and instances when and where this happens are numerous in the region on which we focus.

A reconfigured, variable artistic geography, to which Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and others have given so much thought (Kaufmann, 2010; Kaufmann *et al*, 2005), may prompt art historians to put to test, instead of the concept of “influence” (so aptly and elegantly discussed by Baxandall, 1985), such concepts as “transfers”¹³, or entangled histories”¹⁴, and to explore more distant contacts through that of “circulations”¹⁵, that weaken the polarization between center and periphery, or at least allow for its more complex description. At a conceptual level, Mieke Bal’s “travelling concepts” make place for adaptation and reshaping, rather than mere imitation (Bal, 2002). Most importantly, such approaches challenge an asymmetrical understanding of agency (originating in the “center”), and passive reception (at

¹¹ Hubert Damisch, *The Judgment of Paris*, translated by John Goodman (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996): 143.

¹² See e.g. Matthew Rampley, “The Construction of National Art Histories and the ‘New’ Europe”, (with the sub-chapters “National History after 1945” and “National Art History in the Present”), with a few telling examples (Rampley *et al*, 2012: 237-48).

¹³ See Michel Espagne et Michael Werner (éd.). *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe-XIXe siècles)* (Paris : Editions Recherches sur les Civilisations, 1988); Michel Espagne, „La notion de transfert culturel”, *Revue Sciences/Lettres*, 1 (2013), [En ligne], 1 | 2013, mis en ligne le 01 mai 2012, consulté le 30 septembre 2016. URL : <http://rsl.revues.org/219>.

¹⁴ First proposed by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann in « Penser l'histoire croisée : entre empirie et réflexivité », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* (2003/1): 7-36. In the region this concept has been so far an inspiration to historians, rather than to historians of art. See, e.g. *Manufacturing Middle Ages: Entangled Histories of Medievalism in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Patrick Geary and Gábor Klaniczay (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013); *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume One, National Ideologies and Language Policies*, Edited by Roumen Daskalov and Tchavdar Marinov (Brill, Leiden, 2013); *Volume Two, Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions*, Edited by Roumen Daskalov, Diana Mishkova (Brill, Leiden, 2014); *Volume Three: Shared Pasts, Disputed Legacies*, Roumen Daskalov and Alexander Vezenkov (eds.) (Brill, Leiden, 2015); *Volume Four, Concepts, Approaches, and (Self-) Representations*, Edited by Roumen Daskalov, Diana Mishkova, Tchavdar Marinov, and Alexander Vezenkov (Brill, Leiden, 2017).

¹⁵ As Claire Farago has done in *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). See also, more recently, Kaufmann *et al*, 2015, quite more comprehensive in its ambitions, both geographically, and chronologically.

the “periphery”).¹⁶ This seems of great relevance over a *longue durée* for the countries in the region, which were for the most part perceived as “peripheries”, and to a large extent internalized this view. Concomitantly, though, they can also weaken, or veil relations of power, or dominance, be it “symbolic, as Castelnovo and Ginzburg have put it, which have played such an important role, and have carried such a weight – and still do, despite a completely changed context – in this region.

We repeatedly alluded above to scholars from East-Central Europe engaged in the study of modern and contemporary art as being particularly keen to determine a revision of the periods they were (and are) working on. To the modernists among them, the coining of the expression/concept “multiple modernities”¹⁷, and the writings and discussions around it appeared – when applied to the history of art – as a good starting point in going beyond polarizing views of the origins and spread of modern art, in allowing for multiple origins and different trajectories, in going – once again – against “influence” in favor of local transformations, interpretations, or truly original contributions. Attempts at “decentering Modernism”¹⁸ seemed equally encouraging for those wishing to rewrite Modernism from the “margins”, and with them in mind. One can sense, however, a feeling of despondency, in reading, for instance, this passage from a text by Piotr Piotrowski: “The Other, or – again – the ‘close Other’ looks up to the Master, and not at ‘An-Other’, accepting – often quite unconsciously – the hierarchy of the center to which it has fallen victim. If there is any transfer of values, experience or knowledge, it passes only through the Master (that is, the Western centers) who in this way legitimizes one specific Other in the eyes of ‘An-Other’”.¹⁹ One catches a similar tone in Lolita Jablonskiene: „The market-supported and driven Western canon (the pantheon of celebrated artists and their works) instituted itself gradually. Today one can ignore, deconstruct or attack it, but it is still there. It is probably also possible to add to the canonic structure, but the result will be rather reminiscent of the insertion of several pieces of a jigsaw puzzle into a nearly completed picture. Even if a new piece fits in the place of an eye or a heart, it does not essentially change the totality. The rewriting of the grand history of art is thus doomed to bring more disappointment than joy as it necessarily creates a minor-major relationship and structure.” (Jablonskiene, 2010: 75)²⁰

¹⁶ A questioning of this view is already present in Enrico Castelnovo, Carlo Ginzburg, “Domination symbolique et géographie artistique (dans l’histoire de l’art italien)”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 40, no. 1 (1981): 51-72. See more recently (*inter alia*) Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, „The Uses and Abuses of Peripheries in Art History”, *Art@s Bulletin*, vol. 3, nr. 1 (2014): 4-7, her introduction to a special issue on Peripheries.

¹⁷ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities”, in *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, No. 1 (Winter 2000): 1-29. “Multiple modernities” were not the concern of Eisenstadt alone, though he may have launched the expression. It was quite insistently discussed in intellectual circles during the first decade of this century. Collegium Budapest – the Budapest-based institute for advanced study – hosted in its mid-years a focus group entitled “Multiple Antiquities – Multiple Modernities”, and organized a number of scientific events. One of the outcomes of this initiative was the book edited by Gábor Klaniczay, Otto Gécsér, Michael Werner, *Multiple Antiquities – Multiple Modernities: Ancient Histories in Nineteenth Century European Cultures*, Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2011.

¹⁸ See for instance Mitter, Partha, “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery”, with comments by Rebecca M. Brown, Saloni Mathur, and the reply of the author, *Art Bulletin*, vol. 90, no. 4, (2008): 531-574.

¹⁹ Piotr Piotrowski, “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde”, *European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies*, edited by Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls, vol. 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009): 57.

²⁰ In an understandably less passionate way, and in phrasing it differently, James Elkins seems to share this view in the book he is currently posting on his blog, *The Impending Single History of Art: North Atlantic Art History and Its Alternatives* (available at <http://www.jameselkins.com/index.php/experimental-writing/251-north-atlantic-art-history>, accessed on February 22, 2018).

The passage from Piotrowski quoted above suggests by its wording that he was (as are others among the art historians) conversant with postcolonial studies, and found them pertinent to the post-communist world. In this instance, relations of domination and mastery that engage countries and individuals that were not in a relationship of colonizer to colonized seem to be susceptible to the kind of approach developed within postcolonial studies.²¹ It has been equally tempting (or even more so) to resort to such approaches in describing the relationship between the countries of the socialist bloc and the Soviet Union. One may wonder how far these similarities can be stretched, and interrogate the “post” in post-colonialism and in post-communism: are they synonymous?²² But beyond this, postcolonial studies have generated a great repository of ideas from outstanding authors, and it is certain that they can be an inspiration to scholars in other parts of the world, including East-Central Europe.²³ They may adopt from this repository valuable concepts, such as that of “postcolonial constellation”, proposed by Okui Enwezor as a way of characterizing contemporary art “in a state of permanent transition” (Enwezor, 2003). Enwezor is all the more of interest to art historians since he is a distinguished curator. A recent exhibition he curated (*Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965*, Haus der Kunst in Munich, 14.10.16 – 26.03.17)²⁴ opens up our reflections towards world or global art history. One can be interrogative about it²⁵, but one certainly has to take into account the increasingly insistent presence of this term, as an almost unavoidable current companion of art history. How is a region – and the particular region targeted in our project – to situate itself within this global art history? How can one reconcile “localism” with “globalism”? And what of periodizations in this global context? With the exhibitions we mentioned, we are still in the past, even though a recent one. What about very recent art? About the “now”? About “contemporaneity”? Is it susceptible of systematization, if not periodization?²⁶ Perhaps one can conceive of a world (or global) art history in a way that makes periodization a less central concern.²⁷ However, the problem of comparing different velocities, different historic regimes, trajectories that don’t intersect remains. To quote Zdenka Badovinac, “The canonized history of art is based on linear time; consequently, a work of art is ascribed greater quality if it has introduced a novelty chronologically before any other work. In terms of this, Western art has a lead on the art of non-Western spaces, which seemingly primarily follow it from a distance. But as soon

²¹ See on these lines Edit András, “Blind Spot of the New Critical Theory. Notes on the Theory of Self Colonization”, in *La Biennale di Venezia 51. Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte. Romanian Pavilion*, edited by Marius Babias, 2005: 98-112; the Bulgarian scholar Alexandr Kiossev has also repeatedly spoken and written on self-colonization.

²² Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2009; 51 (1):6–34.

²³ Among the many authors we have in mind we will mention here Walter D. Mignolo’s contributions to cultural questions from a colonial/postcolonial perspective. For instance, his *The Darker side of the Renaissance. Literacy, Territoriality & Colonization* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995). See also *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁴ More immediately relevant to our concerns here may be another recent exhibition, *Facing the Future. Art in Europe 1945–1968* at the Center for Art and Media Studies at Karlsruhe (22.10.2016 – 29.01.2017), curated by Peter Weibel, where one of the major ambitions was to bring together neo avant-garde from the East and West, and to show that many new art forms produced after the war that originated in Europe were formulated simultaneously in Western Europe, the USA, Russia and Eastern Europe in parallel developments.

²⁵ As is James Elkins in the book he edited, *Is Art History Global?* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007).

²⁶ Terry Smith has given a lot of thought to contemporaneity, which he describes as the co-existence of multiple temporalities in an interconnected space, where multiple discourses run parallel to each other. Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009). See also Smith, 2011, where he seems skeptical of systematizations. A discussion on “contemporaneity” should of necessity include many other authors, from Walter Benjamin to Giorgio Agamben and beyond.

²⁷ See David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon Press 2003).

as we cease looking at the history of art solely from the perspective of linear progress and innovativeness, the demand for its redefinition becomes also a demand for a different system of historicizing, one that is better suited to the difference of other spaces. [...] The question raised today is, to what extent a global history can avoid a unified system that abstracts time and space. We could say that the existing system of history is based on comparing spaces within a universal understanding of time. To tackle the existing hegemonic model of history and the universal model of big international exhibitions, we must start taking into consideration the lived nonlinear time in relation to linear time.” (Badovinac, 2010: 80-81).

It would seem that we have come full circle from an understanding of time as linear and irreversible to the necessity of playing the linear and a non-linear (or various non-linear) models of time against each other. This suggests how complex the task we have set for ourselves promises to be.

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