

Ian Verstegen  
(Philadelphia)

## *Obscene History. The Two Sedlmayrs*

### Abstract

The following article proposes a new interpretation of Hans Sedlmayr's politics, which thereby achieves a more successful understanding of his work. Seeking to reconcile progressive and totalitarian elements of Sedlmayr's thought, his stance is characterized as «National Bolshevik». Consistent with this view, there are two phases detected in Sedlmayr's outlook, an early cosmopolitan phase and a later more symptomological cultural criticism. Seeking to nuance the complexity of politics in the 1930s, in the end it is nevertheless argued that it is impossible to link tightly Sedlmayr's historical pronouncements with his politics.

a single famished intellectual may be more dangerous [as an anti-Semite] than ten less educated, starving citizens or a hundred hungry workers and peasants.<sup>1</sup>

Anglo-American art history is having difficulty talking about Hans Sedlmayr<sup>2</sup>. With increasing interest in this formerly taboo subject, writers write around him and then produce an obligatory dismissal. Evonne Levy has pointed this out in her recent publication of letters by Sedlmayr to Meyer Schapiro, of shocking openness in their acceptance of fascism and anti-Semitism, which «help us draw the line from his politics to his pre-

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacob Lestschinsky, «The Anti-Jewish Program: Tsarist Russia, the Third Reich, and Independent Poland», *Jewish Social Studies* 3 (1941), 148; cited in William Hagen, «Before the "Final Solution": Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland», *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996), 351-381.

<sup>2</sup> On Sedlmayr, see Eva Frodl-Kraft, «Hans Sedlmayr, 1896-1984», *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 44 (1991), 7-46; and Norbert Schneider, «Hans Sedlmayr, 1896-1984», in H. Dilly (ed.), *Altmeister moderner Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Reimer, 1990), 267-88.

*Anschluss* work in no uncertain terms»<sup>3</sup>. Thus reviewing the earlier and exemplary works of Christopher Wood and Frederick Schwartz, she hints at their clear fascination with Sedlmayr's thought and unfulfilled promise yet somewhat unconvincingly making gestures about how he is unrecoverable (Wood) or lapsed into farce (Schwartz).

The letters published by Levy are the views of a very closed-minded man. But I don't believe they are not so uncertain about demonstrating Sedlmayr's politics. The fact is that the image that emerges from Levy's discussion is historicized somewhat but essentially the same as Binstock's «fanatical» Nazi<sup>4</sup>. This, I think, frankly puts art history behind its peers in general history, because we apparently have no way to parse out the elements of theory and biography over time. In a liberal democratic move, it is simply easier to just essentialize Sedlmayr as a «Nazi art historian», and be done with it.

The sublimely Nazi Sedlmayr reminds me of those Nazis whom Hannah Arendt responded to fifty years ago. They were monsters but we didn't gain anything in understanding them by that act of naming alone. More recently, we might think of what Slavoy Zizek says of labeling something «totalitarianism»: «it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively prevents us from thinking»<sup>5</sup>. If I may turn the Gestalt theory that inspired Sedlmayr, and which he betrayed, against him, we have to understand even for Sedlmayr how «learned sadism» can «restore the Holocaust to the realm of human possibility from which it arose»<sup>6</sup>.

As I will try to argue, Sedlmayr represents something of a perfect storm, where a series of coincidences and retrospective generalizations bar us from getting at the truth. It seems in all this as if there is a whole possibility that has been completely missed: Sedlmayr was an opportunistic bigot! Perhaps the trouble is that he is so seductive, so intelligent, and so it is easier to lump him with the really bad *Germanomanen* like Dagobert Frey. But this will not do. In the interest of moving the debate forward, I propose that there are basically two Sedlmayr's, a brief, cosmopolitan Sedlmayr, and a later, diagnostic and hermeneutic Sedlmayr. He held beliefs in the first phase that he

---

<sup>3</sup> Evonne Levy, «Sedlmayr and Schapiro Correspond, 1930-1935», *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 59 (2010), 235-263, 237.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Binstock, «Springtime for Sedlmayr? The Future of Nazi Art History», *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 53 (2004), 73-86.

<sup>5</sup> Zizek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Henri Zukier, «The Twisted Road to Genocide: On the Psychological Development of Evil during the Holocaust», *Social Research* 61, 423-455.

thought might give later fruit but ultimately found them incompatible. I make a tentative link between the two in a right-left confluence of National Bolshevism. This solves a huge problem in understanding Sedlmayr. Normally, all of his production is lumped together unconvincingly and everything is seen as basically lurking irrationalism, as when Frederic Schwartz writes of Sedlmayr: «it could be argued that physiognomy was a late detour, a final dead end to Sedlmayr's project, but I think, in fact, that it was the very beginning»<sup>7</sup>. What I argue instead is that while he was a NSDAP member in 1930-1932 he was producing cosmopolitan art history. When he turned toward hermeneutics he was appropriately oriented to *Grossdeutschland* but contentedly Austro-fascist and when he realized his Nazi past could help him with the impending *Anschluss*, he jumped ship again. This I believe explains Otto Pächt's comment upon hearing from Meyer Schapiro that Sedlmayr had sent greetings via a student that he wasn't interested in the «psychology of chameleons»<sup>8</sup>.

In the following I will sketch out the «first» and the «second» Sedlmayr, all the while relating the consequences of this division to what has previously been said about the Austrian art historian. I will propose a reading of his thinking that is «National Bolshevik» in some ways. Finally, I will end by reflecting on the idea of biography and ideas and the need to move to a more neutral portrayal of their relation. Sedlmayr is not exonerated but our relation to him is clarified for its complexity.

#### *A Confirmed Anti-Liberal, Political Anti-Semite*

In his pioneering Introduction to the *Vienna School Reader* of 2000, Christopher Wood wrote that, «a normalization of Sedlmayr would entail a painful, even obscene “reading through” of his Nazism»<sup>9</sup>. The pain has been provided in a number of subsequent publications where we see Sedlmayr presiding from his chair at the University of Vienna as Jews are dismissed from his very Institute, and of course much worse.

Reading this Nazism is obscene if our intention is to resurrect him wholesale. If, however, our intention is to understand him better, then it is

---

<sup>7</sup> Frederic Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Otto Pächt to Meyer Schapiro, 1 July 1952, Schapiro Papers, Columbia University: «What you wrote me last time about Sedlmayr's friendly gestures does not surprise me at all. There will be, if necessary, a third and a fourth volte face, but I am not interested in the psychology of chameleons»; cited in Alexander, «Otto Pächt», 455.

<sup>9</sup> Wood, «Introduction», 46.

obligatory. Now, with the publication of his correspondence with Meyer Schapiro this continued process is even further advanced and the result is indeed striking. Hans Sedlmayr jumps from the pages of his correspondence with Meyer Schapiro as an angry, alien figure. For the native English speaker, this is even more startling when, as the correspondence began to deteriorate, Sedlmayr switched to English lest he be misunderstood:

What can a man who is an opponent of communism an[d] of jews (as far as they – in consequence of their history and the social structure of that nation – are preparers and allies of communism) – what can a man who believes in peasants, religion and art (see the end of my last letter) be? I am astonished that you could not solve this riddle. He naturally is a “conservative”.<sup>10</sup>

Sedlmayr took for granted the characteristics of Christian Gentiles like him and Jews like Schapiro. Membership in their respective groups gave them different ties to land, different worldviews, and different behaviors. Sedlmayr’s stereotypes of Jews are standard: they are a wandering people whereas Sedlmayr’s ancestors are rooted to the land; Sedlmayr is consequently a conservative while Schapiro’s worldview is compounded by being American and communist.

But there are hazards to writing history moralistically from the point of view of an admitted outlier, Schapiro. It is not that history is not moral but rather that this viewpoint is ahistorical. Anti-Jewish (and of course anti-black) sentiment was rife in America at this time too and Jews had a very tentative foothold even in the academy in America<sup>11</sup>. In 1976, Jewish-American philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum reflected back on Morris Cohen – a figure who had mentored Schapiro’s group in New York – and noted that as late as 1945 he had received a letter as chairman of the philosophy of philosophy at Swarthmore College from another chairman recommending a candidate who, although Jewish, «has none of those unpleasant characteristics which we associate with his race»<sup>12</sup>. This suggests that while Sedlmayr’s are shocking today, they are unfortunately not so shocking historically.

---

<sup>10</sup> Hans Sedlmayr to Meyer Schapiro, 1 November 1934, Schapiro Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>11</sup> Anti-Jewish ideas are amply documented in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The «Objectivity Question» and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Mandelbaum, review of David Hollinger, *Morris R. Cohen and the Scientific Ideal* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1975), *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 12 (1976), 402.

Levy's disappointment is understandable. We are angry that theory – the hallmark of progressiveness – has fallen on the wrong side. As I will argue, this is making too many demands on the cohesiveness of biography and thought and fails to give credit to the independence of ideas. Indeed, the interesting strains that are put on thought, a manuscript begun in the mid-thirties or during the war, underestimate the degree to which writing and fact collection can continue over a long period and the general slant or theoretical framework changes; haven't we all done this?

### *From Marx to Hitler*

A sophisticated historiography of Nazi-era art history has to move to the model found in general history of contextual reality and the treatment of the actors and situations of the time as «foreign». To do so is not to explain away everything, as in the extreme version of functionalist interpretations of the Holocaust, but rather to understand that many things happened in the period for complex reasons. Sometimes bad people did good things and vice versa. The attraction-repulsion to Sedlmayr seems to be due to the implicit belief that we must actually endorse him wholly or not. Of course that is preposterous. We need only understand him and his theories, which are of course different tasks.

In order to gain clarity here I state at the outset that I don't want to resurrect Sedlmayr as a thinker. I do believe that he wrote very intelligent things during his early period and that it is not productive to ignore what he wrote on *any* subject. For example, in post-war Germany he did occupy an important profile as a semi-public intellectual, which simply cannot be overlooked. But I am not interested, for example, in whether or not to endorse his viewpoint in *Die Verlust der Mitte* or *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*. Actually, except to the degree that he began them at an earlier period, they do not interest me at all because they are impediments to the historicization of his early career. Instead I want to be extremely specific about what he did and what he wrote and at very precise times.

Proceeding historically, we have two interesting facts: first, that Sedlmayr emerged from the First World War radicalized, and secondly – after adapting «Jewish» Gestalt theory already in 1925 – he joined the NSDAP. Gombrich, himself, who knew Sedlmayr in Vienna, notes that his elder colleague had returned from fighting during the First World War with leftist tendencies<sup>13</sup>. Whatever conservatism was ingrained in him was compatible with a

---

<sup>13</sup> E. H. Gombrich, interview with Richard Woodfield, 1 January 1990: «on his return

socialist call to more equitably divide opportunity and take away from the dominant capitalist interests.

It is a cliché to say that the axis powers were humiliated by defeat in World War I and the conditions of the Versailles Treaty. Sedlmayr, a veteran of the war, would not have been alone among those who had a hatred for what was perceived to be democracy imposed by the “western” powers. As a Habsburg subject, democracy was alien and coming as a condition of peace was considered an imposition. After the failure of the November Revolution in 1918 and the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht, whatever leftist solution Sedlmayr was interested in was a Leninized «dictatorship of the proletariat». This is the key, I believe, to understanding his later Nazism and indeed all his politics. He accepted a radicalized confluence of left and right that brought Soviet and German authoritarian ideas together against capitalism. In short, he could be classed a «National Bolshevik»<sup>14</sup>.

Too often assimilated to conservatism allied to Nazism, National Bolshevism was strongly socialist and regarded Russia as both a threat and inspiration. If Bolshevism could be directed to a nationalist course of action – of course in contradiction to Marxism – Germany could find a solution appropriate to its own reality. Then Russia would probably cease being an ally and become a threat. Indeed, Sedlmayr’s Catholicism meant that Bolshevism itself could be an enemy, but one that demanded respect. But one must admit how such a worldview, both Germano-centered but collectivist might resonate with Sedlmayr’s absolutist Habsburg framework. Such a view explains sympathy for Ernst Jünger, whose works like *Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt* (1932) – appealed to both conservatives and communists. Furthermore, it shows continuity, *not* from the Nazi to post-war period, but *throughout his entire career*.

---

from Russia, so they say, he was rather very left-wing if not communist – Marxist». I am grateful to Prof. Woodfield for sharing this with me.

<sup>14</sup> The classic study of «the leftists on the Right» (*Linke Leute von rechts*) is Otto Ernst Schüddekopf, *Linke Leute von rechts. Nationalbolschewismus in Deutschland von 1918 bis 1933* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1960); cf. Klemens von Klemperer, «Towards a Fourth Reich? The History of National Bolshevism in Germany», *Review of Politics* 13 (1951), 191-210. For a fascinating discussion of these ideas in relation to Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*, see Anthony Grenville, «Linke Leute von rechts»: Thomas Mann’s Naphta and the Ideological Confluence of Radical Right and Radical Left in the Early Years of the Weimar Republic», in H. R. Vaegert (ed.), *Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain: A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Wilhelm Schlink plausibly suggests that Sedlmayr's chosen pseudonym during his post-war academic exile – Hans Schwarz – could refer to the «young conservative» editor of Moeller van den Bruck. But this is a typical under-specification of ideas and Sedlmayr is left again as a cardboard conservative. Moeller van den Bruck in addition to criticism of Hitler and gestures toward Soviet Russia, was also the German translator of Dostoyevsky's work. Dostoyevsky had an idea of Russia as an «eternal ally» to Germany against the West<sup>15</sup>. Jünger, Dostoyevsky and Berdyaev are the authorities cited by Sedlmayr in *Verlust der Mitte*.

Such a political outlook helps understand why Sedlmayr, in his early period, was in Schlink's words «a rather progressive art critic»<sup>16</sup>. Similarly, it helps explain Sedlmayr's interest in the generally left politics associated with Gestalt theory, which he announced in «Gestaltetes Sehen» and developed further in his seminal introduction to Riegl's collected works, published in 1929, and his «Toward a Rigorous Art History» of 1931<sup>17</sup>.

Without undertaking a full discussion of economics and attitudes toward Jews, it is worthwhile sketching the nature of the student body with Sedlmayr at the University of Vienna. Besides civil service (of which professorship counted), there were no professional possibilities for art historians. Therefore, factoring in persistent anti-semitism resulting in under-employment of Jews in Austrian higher education, those who studied art history were usually nobles or, of the Jews, wealthy professionals. For example, much of Viennese intellectual discussion – the *Geistkreis* which included Friedrich von Hayek and others – was conducted in the salons of the city amongst bankers and government officials, not in academia.

Sedlmayr's collaborators like Otto Pächt and Bruno Fürst were well to do and did not have to think about professional outlets after their graduation. Fürst funded the *Kritische Berichte*, in which Sedlmayr published, as well as the Musil-Gesellschaft, which he founded with Pächt to support the perpetually short of money novelist, Robert Musil. As for the nobles, these

<sup>15</sup> K. von Klemperer, «Towards a Fourth Reich?», 210.

<sup>16</sup> Wilhelm Schlink, «The Gothic Cathedral as Heavenly Jerusalem: A Fiction in German Art History», in Bianca Kühnel (ed.), *The Real and Ideal Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Art: Studies in Honor of Bezalel Narkiss on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1998), 275-285; citing *Darmstädter Gespräch* (1950). *Das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit*, ed. by H. Gerhard Evers (Darmstadt, n.d.), 97; and «Der absolute Städtebau I, Stadtbaupläne von Le Corbusier (ausgestellt im Wiener Künstlerhaus, März-April 1926)», *Die Baupolitik, Zeitschrift für Baumwesen und Städtebau, Siedlungspolitik und Wohnungsfürsorge* (München, 1926/27), 16-21.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, «Gestaltetes Sehen», *Behedere* 10 (1925), 65-73.

included landed counts like Antoine Seilern (1901-1978), who completed a dissertation under Schlosser<sup>18</sup>. Sedlmayr's stringent criticism of Karl von Tolnai (De Tolnay) seems to stem from his resentment of aristocrats. This grouping created a complex mix of students and professors divided by wealth and need of state employment.

Too little is known to draw strong conclusions but it is clear that once Sedlmayr decided not to be a professional architect and pursue art history exclusively, his professional options were very limited. Sedlmayr fits into this as a middle class student who needed to make a living. He was talented but not a noble and not wealthy. This explains why he published early articles in the *Pantheon*, like his «Gestalt des Sehens», which had been founded by the Dorotheum to allow art historians to be remunerated for short articles. He told people in later years that he had wealthy relatives in New York who were constantly inviting him to come to them – but they may either have lost money in the crash of 1929 or were too distant to offer any real help. His fortunes would have to be made in Austria<sup>19</sup>.

We must have this background in mind when we arrive at 1930 and his enrollment in the NSDAP. Sedlmayr was a member of the Nazi party from 1930-1932<sup>20</sup>. There is some confusion about this, so it is worth it to clear up the dates. Somehow, the years 1932-3 have been repeated as the dates of his membership, suggesting both attachment to the party before Hitler's election as chancellor and also continuity throughout the austrofascist period, when Nazism was banned<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, it is often wrongly stated

---

<sup>18</sup> Antoine Seilern, *Die venezianischen Voraussetzungen der Deckenmalerei des Peter Paul Rubens*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Vienna, 1939.

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Karl Johns for a long and stimulating correspondence on the socio-economics of the Art History Institute. It is a subject clearly needing more research.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Aurenhammer, «Hans Sedlmayr und die Kunstgeschichte an der Universität Wien: 1938-1945», in J. Held and M. Papenbrock (eds.), *Kunstgeschichte an den Universitäten im Nationalsozialismus, Kunst und Politik, Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* 5 (2003), 139-172; Albert Ottenbacher, «Kunstgeschichte in ihrer Zeit: Hans Sedlmayr» (<http://www.albert-ottenbacher.de/sedlmayr/>); citing Universitätsarchiv Wien, Philosophische Fakultät, Personalakt Hans Sedlmayr, Kopie im Institut für Zeitgeschichte, München.

<sup>21</sup> See Christopher Wood, ed., *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (New York: Verso, 2000); Anthony Vidler, «The Ledoux Effect: Emil Kaufmann and the Claims of Kantian Autonomy», *Perspecta* 33 (2002), 16-29, 22: «[Sedlmayr], who had joined the National Socialist party in 1932, then to become a loyal supporter throughout the occupation and War»; Richard Kimball, «Introduction», *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2006), xiv; «Hans Sedlmayr», <http://www.dictionaryoffarthistorians.org/sedlmayrh.htm>; «In 1932 Sedlmayr joined the Nazi party in Austria (when it was still illegal to do so) and well before other art historians felt pressured to

that the Nazi party was banned at the time of his first inscription in the party<sup>22</sup>. The effect is a long-term, unbroken, indeed «fanatical» (Binstock), affiliation with Nazism when instead Sedlmayr's early connection can be better described as a hopeful trial.

With the election to power in Germany in 1933 Nazism was indeed a viable option. In this atmosphere it was possible to profit. As Bettina Arnold writes of prehistoric archeology, such professors seemed «in 1933, to have everything to gain by an association with the rising Nazi party»<sup>23</sup>. In Austria, however, there was a labor party in power and then, from 1933, a Catholic-fascist party, which was allied with Italy against Nazi Germany; there was no «faustian bargain» to be had<sup>24</sup>. Clearly, Sedlmayr's concerns are more complicated and indeed refer to the confluence of left and right after World War I.

From the point of view of liberal historiography, to be associated with Nazism before Hitler's rise is particularly despicable. However, given his earlier leftist sympathies, it can be seen that Sedlmayr's shift to Nazism shares with revolutionary Marxism a model of popular insurrection. There is no doubt that Sedlmayr was nationalist and pan-German and sought the overturning of the native socialist status quo. But both were offering similar action plans of food, clothing and job training outside the confines of government. In an arena of high fluidity between Nazi and Communist revolutionary practice (if not ideologies), he picked the wrong radical movement for posterity<sup>25</sup>. Less neutrally, however, ethnic politics play a part. Given Sedlmayr's status as a middle class Christian Austrian, he picked the morally weaker stand with a party with vague gestures of anti-semitism<sup>26</sup>.

---

do so in order to retain their teaching positions». Kimball furthermore forgets that Sedlmayr was in fascist Austria, not Nazi Germany, and Jews did not lose their jobs; in Pächt's case, he was not allowed to take it up *in Germany*.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Petropoulos, *Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford), calling Sedlmayr an *Illegal* (169); and the website above.

<sup>23</sup> Bettina Arnold, «The past as propaganda: totalitarian archaeology in Nazi Germany», *Antiquity* 64 (1990): 464-478; cf. «Dealing with the devil: the Faustian bargain of archaeology under dictatorship», in Michael Galaty and Charles Watkinson (eds.), *Archaeology Under Dictatorship* (New York: Kluwer/Plenum, 2004), 191-212.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Petropoulos, *Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany*.

<sup>25</sup> Thus it is possible to stress similarities in practice and differences in theory, as per Slavoj Žižek, «The Two Totalitarianisms», *London Review of Books* 27 (2005), 8.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Barbara Miller Lane and Leila Rupp, *Nazi Ideology before 1933: A Documentation* (University of Texas, 1978), 45: «Jew-baiting and conspiracy hysteria disappear from the writings of most Nazi leaders between 1923 and 1933»; Oded Heilbronner,

Here it is useful to analogize Sedlmayr's position in 1929 or 1930 to the larger picture in Germany, when the party was seeking supporters. In Konrad H. Jarausch's words:

No wonder that the result of such dislocation was a widespread «crisis of professional consciousness». Overcrowding, unemployment, and impoverishment seemed to harried practitioners a betrayal of expectations and values for which not their individual mistakes but the failure of the system, i.e., the Weimar Republic, must be responsible. It hardly helped that the democratic parties were unable to offer any workable remedies, since the Social Democrats suggested spreading the pain among all affected by sharing poverty while the bourgeois Liberals counseled a redoubling of personal efforts to win the sharper competition for the few remaining positions. In this mental confusion over appropriate responses, the previously dismissed radical suggestions of various brands of volkish nationalists gradually began to seem more credible: Could the acute crisis not be overcome by eliminating unwanted competitors such as the newly admitted women, the all too studious Jews, or the often subversive foreigners? In effect, the suffering of the Depression discredited liberal conceptions of professionalism and made harried academics search for more drastic alternatives. Initially reluctant, professionals began to respond to NS appeals due to the electoral break-through of 1930, and to flock in increasing numbers into the party after the seizure of power, when thousands of opportunists joined. Among the various age groups, it was especially the cohort of pre-World War One children, born roughly between 1898 and 1912, who followed Hitler's message, since for them the material crisis was most acute. Protestants were over-represented, Catholics generally proved less willing, and Jews were excluded. Before 1933, interestingly, veterinarians, foresters, and technicians were more likely to enter the party than were the members of the more established professions, perhaps also due to legal prohibitions. Among the jurists, many modestly successful practitioners, many of them with a doctorate, joined the League; among teachers, primary pedagogues and trainees were the most likely Nazis. In spite of the prevalence of nationalist resentment, only a small but growing minority of German profession-

---

«German or Nazi Antisemitism», in Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2003), 17: «anti-Semitism did not play a major role in the rise of Nazism before 1933»; Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 10: «From 1928 to mid-1932, when electoral support for Nazi candidates leapt from 2.6 to 37.4 percent, anti-Semitism played little role in attracting voters to Nazism».

als, such as my aunt's brother Hermann Kauba, responded to Hitler before 1933, prompted by the rhetoric of volkish nationalism and the fear of becoming an «academic proletarian».<sup>27</sup>

Jarausch's profile, especially in regard to academic labor issues, is striking in regard to Sedlmayr. Sedlmayr's joining of the Nazi party coincides with the Austrian Nazi resurgence<sup>28</sup>. In particular, Alfred Frauenfeld did much to expand the party around when Sedlmayr apparently became a member. Parkinson writes, «the Nazi vote in Vienna rose from 27,000 in the national parliamentary elections in November 1930 to over 201,000 in April 1932»<sup>29</sup>. Many leftists left the Social Democrat party because of chronic inability to control the economy. They perceived that things were getting worse and worse. It should be pointed out that Sedlmayr's change also coincided with disillusionment by many leftists with Stalin's consolidation of power and «dekulakization» of the country beginning in 1929.

The larger trend is a radicalization of politics after 1928. The level of hopelessness was so high that the moderate center separated and moderate conservatives and socialists who might have otherwise had more in common were polarized to either the Communist or Nazi (or Hugenberg's DNVP) extreme<sup>30</sup>. Conan Fischer noted a striking fluidity back and forth between the membership of the Nazi Storm troopers and Communists where both sides noted shifts in enrollment and popularity (and even returns back to the earlier fold). When the Storm troopers were about to collapse in 1933, Hitler was elected Chancellor and the membership exploded<sup>31</sup>. Sedlmayr clearly got caught up in this radicalization and belief that standard politics was inadequate.

The preceding sketch is, I believe, necessary to give even a bit of sophistication to understanding the period. Needless to say, I have not done so to forgive Sedlmayr but to provide a more accurate picture of National Socialism, one that is in line with mainstream history rather than art history. Now that some of the openness of political commitment has been restored to

---

<sup>27</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, «The Conundrum of Complicity: German Professionals and the Final Solution» (Meyerhoff Lecture, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Bruce F. Pauley, «The Austrian Nazi Party before 1938: Some Recent Revelations», in F. Parkinson (ed.) *Conquering the Past: Austrian Nazism Yesterday and Today* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 34-56.

<sup>29</sup> Pauley, «The Austrian Nazi Party», 38.

<sup>30</sup> Günter Minnerup, review of Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of Hitler*, in *Debatte Review of Contemporary German Affairs* 12 (2004), 167-174.

<sup>31</sup> Conan Fischer, *Stormtroopers: A Social, Economic, and Ideological Analysis, 1929-35* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983).

the early German and Austrian national socialist parties, one can see how Sedlmayr might actually think that Gestalt theory and Nazism were not antithetical, insofar as scholarly commitments and personal politics necessarily need not perfectly align, a point addressed later.

### *The Two Sedlmayrs*

The letters published by Levy give further credence to the evolving idea that Sedlmayr's thinking underwent a fundamental change in the mid 1930s. One must add it to Sedlmayr's own indications, in spite of other suggestions of continuity. In 1958, Hans Sedlmayr reprinted his major essays in the volume *Kunst und Wahrheit*. In the introductory chapter, «Kunstwissenschaft als Wissenschaft», he indicates that around 1950 art history entered a new phase<sup>32</sup>. Whereas the earlier phase in which his *Strukturforschung* had participated dealt with the individual work of art, more recently it was possible to begin a new synthesis. I suggest that we take him at his word; he understood that he had begun a new kind of interpretation that built upon but also departed from earlier work. It was an addition to his earlier theory, which critically damaged it, but one which could also be removed to preserve the original theory.

Dittmann and others had affirmed that Sedlmayr's new approach emerges in the mid thirties. We know that he was working on both *Art in Crisis* as well as the *Entstehung der Kathedrale* during the war. But as noted by Hans Aurenhammer his work seems to have changed even earlier, which the Schapiro correspondence confirms. In a letter from late 1931 to Meyer Schapiro, Sedlmayr hints at the limitations of Gestalt theory. He affirms that it is more than a psychology, applicable for example to physics, but also has limitations:

As you would like it, I am working toward extending the theoretical foundations by incorporating experiences from other fields, from as wide a number of fields as possible. This should remove the appearance of one-sidedness from the approach of «gestalt theory». In spite of this and for this reason, I cannot agree with you completely on this point, since the gestalt theory will continue to assume a particular importance because «whatever our theoretical attitude might be, art is indeed an activity of creating forms [*Kunst ist eben Gestaltung*]». The limits in the importance of gestalt theory are reached when instead of the creation of forms [*Gestaltung*] we begin to study questions of «meaning» for instance. Yet the term gestalt psychology is misleading since it

---

<sup>32</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, «Kunstgeschichte als Wissenschaft», *Kunst und Wahrheit*.

does not deal with specifically psychological facts, but also with others which we can also observe in intellectual life (as well as in physics).<sup>33</sup>

Thus questions of meaning are out of the purview of the Rieglian approach based on formal relations. When Sedlmayr's open anti-Semitism is revealed in 1934, he discloses his evolving ideas on methodology.

I'm not a loner influenced my scientific experiments now in that I – as you suspect correctly – I am not satisfied with a pure formal analysis in the long run. I would consider a trial of a consistent political-sociological history of art as important as anything else – even if it fails on one side. Only I do not see any signs of this, nowhere. But I have my own explanation. Of our present state, the function of art is not quite understandable. It is incomprehensible as magic, religion, or as the farmer – the one misunderstands also either as a small landowners or industrialists. – But this leads to far.<sup>34</sup>

There is in the Sedlmayr of the early 1930s a desire to say something more aggressive about the work of art, to read it symptomatically of the larger world, to engage that larger world.

---

<sup>33</sup> Hans Sedlmayr to Meyer Schapiro, 13 November 1931, Meyer Schapiro Papers, Columbia University; quoted in Levy, «Sedlmayr and Schapiro Correspond», 240: «Ich arbeite in dem Sinn, wie Sie es sich wünschen, an einer Verbreiterung des theoretischen Unterbaus durch Erfahrungen aus anderen und möglichst vielen Kreisen. Das wird der scheinbaren einseitigen Orientierung an der "Gestalttheorie" ihr Übergewicht nehmen. Trotzdem – und deshalb kann ich Ihnen in diesem Punkt nicht ganz zustimmen – wird die Gestalttheorie auch dann eine besondere Stellung behaupten, denn "Kunst ist eben, wo man auch theoretisch stehen mag, Gestaltung". Die Wichtigkeit der Gestalttheorie hört auf, wo man statt der Gestaltung zum Beispiel die Probleme der "Bedeutung" untersucht. Abgesehen davon, dass der terminus Gestaltpsychologie irreführt, denn es handelt sich nicht um psychologische Sachverhalte im engeren Sinn, sondern um solche, die auch im geistigen (wie anderseits im physischen Bereich) wiederkehren». Karl Johns kindly translated this, for which I am grateful.

<sup>34</sup> Hans Sedlmayr to Meyer Schapiro, 7 October 1934, Meyer Schapiro Papers, Columbia University; quoted in Levy, «Sedlmayr and Schapiro Correspond», 249: «Dass ich kein Einzlgänger bin, beeinflusst meine wissenschaftlichen Versuche nun insofern als ich – wie Sie richtig vermuten – mit einer puren Formalanalyse auf die Dauer nicht zufrieden bin. Ich würde einen Versuch einer konsequent politisch-soziologischen Kunstgeschichte für so wichtig halten, wie nichts anderes – selbst wenn er einseitig ausfällt. Nur sehe ich gar keine Ansätze dazu, nirgends. Dafür habe ich meine eigene Erklärung. Von unserem heutigen Zustand ist die Funktion der Kunst nicht mehr recht verständlich. Sie ist unverständlich wie Magie, Religion oder wie der Bauer – den man auch entweder als einen kleinen Grossgrundbesitzer oder Industriellen missversteht. – Aber das führt zu weit».

In this context, I want to take a closer look at Sedlmayr's paper on Pieter Brueghel, «Brueghel's Macchia», published in 1934<sup>35</sup>. In it, Sedlmayr relents to his desire to incorporate symptomatic criticism within his writing, drawing a lesson for European civilization as a whole from Brueghel's painting. He sees in Brueghel's patches (*macchie*) a kind of inhumanity; a substitution of irrational blobs for the intelligibly human. The first things we must say about this essay is the striking absence of any reference to Otto Pächt's discussion of «national constants», and in particular his understanding of the structural principles of southern Netherlandish painting<sup>36</sup>.

Pächt's was a structural problem but Sedlmayr's was hermeneutic. Some further evidence that this usage of the idea of «Strukturanalyse» moves beyond Gestalt ideas may be found in Daniela Bohde's analysis, in which she shows Sedlmayr's debt to the Gestalt psychologist Johannes von Allesch's analysis of Brueghel<sup>37</sup>. Where Sedlmayr finds signs of alienation, von Allesch sees within these works an impression of «freshness, simplicity and liveliness»; for von Allesch the paintings show: «das Ganze ist wie eine lustig und kräftig blühende Wiese»<sup>38</sup>. Here then we have to take seriously what Schwartz says, that Sedlmayr, «dropped the potentially very promising gestaltist approach to the work of art»<sup>39</sup>.

Ever the opportunist, was Sedlmayr here kow-towing to Schlosser in seeking his job? Schlosser, we recall, was not beholden to Riegl like Dvorak. Sedlmayr followed his lead to Croce. Croce's idealism was amenable to his turn to symptomatic criticism. It is ironic that Walter Benjamin's criticism of the first volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* may have led, in Frederic Schwartz's words, away from the «deductive use of gestalt principles». This is not just a rejection of psychology but an embrace of potential Messianism. This is another example of a left-right confluence.

<sup>35</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, «Die "Macchia" Bruegels», *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 8 (1934), 137-59; Eng. Trans. «Brueghel's Macchia», in Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader*, 322-376.

<sup>36</sup> Otto Pächt, «Gestaltungsprinzipien der westlichen Malerei des 15. Jahrhunderts», in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* 2 (1933), 75-100; «Design Principles of Fifteenth-Century Northern Painting», in Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader*, 243-321.

<sup>37</sup> Daniela Bohde, «Pieter Bruegels Macchia und Hans Sedlmayrs physiognomisches Sehen – Psychologische Interpretationsmodelle von Hans Sedlmayr», *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 57 (2008), 239-262, esp. 242-244.

<sup>38</sup> This same acceptance of a common method but opposite moral reading is replayed in Fritz Novotny, *Die Monatsbilder Pieter Bruegels des Älteren* (Vienna: Deuticke, 1948), as pointed out by Agnes Blaha, «Fritz Novotny and the New Vienna School of Art History – An Ambiguous Relationship», *Journal of Art Historiography* 1 (2009).

<sup>39</sup> Schwartz, *Blind Spots*, 163.

Consequently, if Sedlmayr uses «Gestalt» ideas, he expands them considerably. As I have pointed out elsewhere, he moves from orthodox Berlin theory (and the highly complementary approach of Heinz Werner) to more holistic, impressionistic varieties of *Ganzheitstheorie*, for example the Leipzig school of Sander and Krueger or the *Gestaltanalyse* of Ferdinand Weinhandl. Further proof may be found especially in «Der Sturz der Blinden», begun during, but published after, the war<sup>40</sup>. Not citing psychological authorities, he expounds on a fanciful experiment concerning “microgenesis” (*Aktualgenese*) of a work of Brueghel without acknowledging that microgenesis – the dynamic temporal existence of percepts – was denied by the Berliner Gestalt psychologists<sup>41</sup>. It is clear that Sedlmayr was closely reading the Leipzig authors Friedrich Krueger and Friedrich Sander, although he never acknowledges them. Krueger and Sander are the “Germanic” counterparts to the “Austrian” thinking of Gestalt theory and phenomenology.

Consequently his scale changes. Where before his «disintegrative formalism» allowed him to see a work of art to pieces, now he reads works of art as wholes, whose lack of wholeness can point to the disintegration of society (Brueghel). He continues to discuss parts and wholes, but it is clear that the works that he valorizes have an unanalyzable fullness that does not require analysis. Only those lacking it ask for analysis, of the larger social context<sup>42</sup>.

This change was noted by Sedlmayr’s contemporaries. In his *Methodisches zur Kunstgeschichte*, Sedlmayr’s former colleague and collaborator Otto Pächt called the former in the context of his paper on Vermeer a «convert to iconology» and Martin Gosebruch mildly calls this work an example of

---

<sup>40</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, «Pieter Bruegel: Der Sturz der Blinden, Paradigma einer Struktur-analyse», *Hefte des kunsthistorischen seminars der Universität München* 2 (1957), 1-49.

<sup>41</sup> Sedlmayr was clearly reading works like F. Sander, «Experimentelle Ergebnisse der Gestaltpsychologie», *Berichte über den 10. Kongress für Experimentelle Psychologie* (Jena, 1928), 23-88. For a discussion of Sedlmayr’s “experiments”, see Schwartz, *Blind Spots*, 173-175; and Bohde, «Pieter Bruegels Macchia». As Bohde points out, Sedlmayr made later reference to Klaus Conrad, whose work is experiencing a revival; Peter Uhlhaas and Aaron Mishara, «Perceptual Anomalies in Schizophrenia: Integrating Phenomenology and Cognitive Neuroscience», *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 33 (2007), 142-156. I do not criticize microgenesis per se (recent work has greatly expanded this question beyond where the Gestaltists left it). What is objectionable is the way in which Sander and Krueger forced the issue at this stage of psychology’s development. By focusing on such details, they reveal that – like Sedlmayr during this period – they were more interested in romantic developmental analogies than the basic facts of perception.

<sup>42</sup> Luca Vargiu, *Incroci ermeneutici: Betti, Sedlmayr e l’interpretazione dell’opera d’arte* (Palermo: Centro Internazionale Studi di Estetica, 2008).

«Sedlmayrs Ikonologie»<sup>43</sup>. Sedlmayr's own student, Hermann Bauer, felt that Sedlmayr belonged with Dvorak in describing his later method within his manual of methodology, a form of «Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte»<sup>44</sup>. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the subtitle of *Die Verlust der Mitte*, «the visual arts of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a symbol of their time». A former proponent (and developer) of *Strukturforschung*, Sedlmayr had disfigured his “rigorous” project and, in some interpretations, betrayed it. It was this to which Kurt Badt was perhaps reacting when he published a book-length *Streitschrift* against Sedlmayr in his *Modell und Maler von Jan Vermeer*<sup>45</sup>.

What this means is that not only had Sedlmayr appeared to have left formalism, he himself understood this as such. Indeed, Sedlmayr began to rely increasingly on what can best be called a «physiognomic» approach to interpretation, in which characteristics of the whole are divined by traces of its appearance<sup>46</sup>. While this method grew out of formalism, it is important to mention its grafting upon the «iconological», exegetic model<sup>47</sup>. Basic Christian interpretive principles *in concert* with visual interpretive faculties allow one to intuit the state of civilization.

While the first paper definitely stretches the limits of *Strukturforschung*, the second does so positively. It is subtitled «Paradigma einer Struktur-analyse», yet introduced the very «Ikonologie» mentioned above, for there Sedlmayr lays out the exegetical model presumed in his analysis of Vermeer.

---

<sup>43</sup> Otto Pächt, *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*, translated by David Britt (New York: Harvey Miller, 1999), 71; Martin Gosebruch, *Methoden der Kunst- und Musikwissenschaft* (München: Oldenbourg, 1970), 57. See, further, Arisawa Yoko [«Studien zur Strukturanalyse von Prof. Sedlmayr»] (in Japanese), *Japanese Journal for Aesthetics* 13 (1962), 23-27], who calls his post-1948 period «Synthetisch»: «Formales Verstehen+Bedeutung (Ikonologie unter der Epochenbetrachtung» (from the abstract) and more recently Daniela Bohde, «Kulturhistorische und Ikonographische Ansätze in der Kunstgeschichte im Nationalsozialismus».

<sup>44</sup> Hermann Bauer, *Kunsthistorik. Eine kritische Einführung in das Studium der Kunstgeschichte* (Munich: Beck, 1976).

<sup>45</sup> Kurt Badt, *Modell und Maler von Jan Vermeer: Probleme der Interpretation. Eine Streitschrift gegen Hans Sedlmayr* (Cologne: du Mont, 1961).

<sup>46</sup> Daniela Bohde, «The Physiognomics of Architecture Heinrich Wölfflin, Hans Sedlmayr and Paul Schultze-Naumburg», in Mitchell Frank and Dan Adler (eds.), *Beyond Formalism: Art History and «Scientific» Thought* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); cf. G. Gurisatti, *Dizionario fisiognomico. Il volto, le forme, l'espressione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2006), 364-67.

<sup>47</sup> For iconological (as opposed to stylistic) divination, see Georges Didi-Huberman, «Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the Symptom Paradigm», *Art History* 24 (2003), 621-645.

In spite of this ambiguity, Sedlmayr's own «Ruhm der Malkunst» was not reprinted in *Kunst und Wahrheit* as a structural analysis but instead is presented simply, as would befit an iconological study, under the heading of «Zwei Beispiele zur Interpretation»<sup>48</sup>. Although they discuss formal properties of the paintings and buildings under discussion, these analyses do not engage in careful structural analysis. Put another way, their analysis has lost its naturalistic basis, the building-up of meaning from fundamentals.

Interestingly, when Otto Pächt reviews Vermeer's painting, he stresses the affinities between Sedlmayr and Panofsky. Instead of viewing the painting as a studio piece, Sedlmayr builds it into a «consistently worked-out allegory of painting itself». In this, Pächt objects to the way in which Sedlmayr would have the artist's intentions, just as Panofsky, «deliberately and consciously secreted in the work» and goes on to invert the early Riegl-inspired Panofsky against Sedlmayr, by citing from the former's 1920 paper on *Kunstwollen*<sup>49</sup>. Panofsky becomes the Vienna formalist and Sedlmayr the Hamburg iconologist! Indeed, Sedlmayr remarkably cites Gombrich – whom Pächt in 1963 would deride for resisting Riegl's historicism – calling his «Icones Symbolicae» «excellent» (*vorzüglich*)<sup>50</sup>.

I believe that we need to take the preceding arguments into account when noticing Sedlmayr's new method. Thus the intoxicating «trickery» which Baxandall wanted to imitate but with «honesty», and the notion that Sedlmayr was an «evil twin» of Panofsky (Wood) or «Riegl's Lucifer (or Judas)» (Binstock), has a definite originary context in a new kind of enterprise moving beyond *Strukturforschung*.

### *Scholarship and Biography*

I do not need or care to follow Sedlmayr in his distasteful and opportunistic re-inscription in the Nazi party that made him an *Illegaler* after the war, or review the laying off of Jewish colleagues at the University of Vienna after the *Anschluss* or surmise what he knew of their fates (and indeed of the

---

<sup>48</sup> In addition to the Vermeer essay is another, «Die Schauseite der Karlskirche in Wien». Interestingly, Bauer (*Kunsthistorik*) underscores this iconological reading by stressing the polysemous nature of both works of art.

<sup>49</sup> Pächt, *The Practice of Art History*, 76-77; citing Erwin Panofsky, «Der Begriff des Kunstwollens», *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 14 (1920), 321-329; «The Concept of Artistic Volition», trans. Kenneth J. Northcott and Joel Snyder, *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981), 17-33.

<sup>50</sup> Sedlmayr, «Analogie, Kunstgeschichte und Kunst», *Studium Generale* 8 (1955), 697-703, 698; citing E. H. Gombrich, «Icones Symbolicae. The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought», *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 11 (1948), 163-92.

mounting Final Solution). But one may view his preemptive inscription in the Nazi party before the entry of German troops into Austria in the same opportunistic manner I have been outlining. Evidence about it comes from a perhaps unlikely source, Gombrich, but his comments throw into relief the fact that for Gombrich, Sedlmayr's *ideas* were dangerous, not his person.

I already remarked on the «Jewish» connotations that Gestalt theory held in the 1920s and 1930s. In addition to this, Sedlmayr's friendships with Jewish colleagues also put him under suspicion. Sedlmayr in effect took advantage of his earlier membership in the Nazi party, and sought a way to head Nazism off at the pass. As Gombrich recounted in an oral interview, «When the Nazis came he sported a big swastika and shouted Heil Hitler because he was worried what would happen to him he had so many Jewish friends. Not a very endearing attitude. But I think that's what it was»<sup>51</sup>. In any case, I do believe that it is not helpful, or historical, to believe that Sedlmayr and Pächt broke because the former was «a Nazi». Sedlmayr, in embracing political anti-Semitism, betrayed the principle of free and unprejudiced thought that is a hallmark of enlightened life.

I have tried to show that far from a simple dichotomy of progressives and reactionaries, the period in-between the wars was much more complicated. Although Sedlmayr was indeed an early (Austrian) Nazi and held bigoted, closed-minded beliefs, these are consistent with many conservative thinkers. Sedlmayr's ability to adapt himself to each new regime – Austro-fascist, Nazi, post-war – is the real story. Sedlmayr was extremely, overly opportunistic. He did not change his theories but expanded their meaning in a fluid way to represent a generic conservatism.

That is why I am still uncomfortable concluding with Levy that he must have written to Meyer Schapiro as a probable Nazi in 1934, when the party was outlawed by the Austrofascists. Indeed, two of the letters she cites seem to ironize Nazis in critiquing Stryzowski. In a letter of November 1, Sedlmayr explains his conservatism in English to Schapiro, and declares their irreconcilable worldviews. In the same letter, referring to an unknown critique by someone in the Stryzowski group, Sedlmayr says that in such a framework, «art history turns to be a history (or mythos) of form-types, materials, techniques in connection with theories on races, regions, “blood and soil”», and then «Slav nationalist if he wants a profit from slaves [*szj*], liberal when he takes money from jews, teuton when he awaits to be canonized by Nazis – he would disgust you as deeply – I am quite sure – as me». As in the case of his break with Pächt, Sedlmayr was a bigot but not

<sup>51</sup> E. H. Gombrich, interview with Richard Woodfield, 1 January 1990.

necessarily a Nazi and the letters do not «draw the line from his politics to his pre-*Anschluss* work».

Is his brand of formalism amenable to fascism? Of course, as I have argued, we have to ask which one? The early writing – *Die Architektur Borrominis* and «Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft» is highly recognizable within the Berlin Gestalt tradition. Gestalt theory had both a moderate and reconciliatory role to play in Weimar-era intellectual circles<sup>52</sup>. For one thing, its founders – especially Max Wertheimer – were politically progressive. As Simone Schnall writes of Karl Duncker, whose parents were prominent Marxists: «At no other institute were as many leftist and antifascist researchers as at the Berlin Institute. For example, Lewin was a socialist, Gottschaldt was associated with the communist party and von Lauenstein was close to the Social Democrat Party»<sup>53</sup>. For another thing, Gestalt theory promoted holism without the obscurantist and romantic associations of reactionary uses, while at the same time maintaining scientific rigor. It was seen as an intellectual movement capable of providing a third way to the deep divisions separating life in the 1920s.

Gestalt theory was known for its “Jewish” identity, since two of its founders were Jewish (Wertheimer) or half-Jewish (Koffka). Its inspiration in a Spinozistic worldview was well known, and its commitment to principles of truth and justice were an important part of especially Wertheimer’s teaching. One misunderstanding that must immediately be removed is the identification of holism with fascism. As recent scholarship shows, it is anachronistic to read Weimar history from a post-Nazi perspective and in that time many scientists were forming theories of human liberation within the context of holistic-inspired paradigms<sup>54</sup>. Michael Ermarth points out how Berlin thinking

---

<sup>52</sup> See Mitchell Ash, «Gestalt Psychology in Weimar Culture», *History of the Human Sciences* (1992); *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890-1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>53</sup> Simone Schnall, «Life as the Problem: Karl Duncker’s Context», in Jaan Valsiner (ed), *Thinking in psychological science: ideas and their makers* (Transaction Publishers, 2007); citing Ulfried Geuter, «“Gleichschaltung” von oben? Universitätspolitische Strategien und Verhaltensweisen in der Psychologie während des Nationalsozialismus», *Psychologische Rundschau* 35 (1984), 198-213.

<sup>54</sup> Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture*; Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science. Holism in German culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Lawrence C. Weisz (eds.), *Greater than the Parts: Holism in Biomedicine, 1920-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

had little or no connection with the speculatively free-wheeling (or ideologically and politically inflected) deployment of gestalt thinking as a kind of gnostic nimbus by writers such as Spengler, Jünger, Steiner, Carus, and Rosenberg, for whom gestalt became synonymous not merely with «frame» or «constellation» but with «destiny» and «fate» as a whole; that is, the recapitulation of the telos of grand historicism or even «cosmicism» under another name.<sup>55</sup>

Here, it is useful to contrast Sedlmayr with Heidegger. The difference is that if features of Nietzsche's or Heidegger's (or Clossewitz's, etc.) lent themselves to Nazi appropriation, Sedlmayr's do not. Our animus against him is rarely based on his early texts but instead his biography, actions and statements. He demonstrates the necessity to rethink our permitted writers. I would like to see the two figures as almost inverted. Both embraced Nazism but Heidegger moved away from it, even though there are ambiguous elements in his thought that could lead others to mistake its affinity for National Socialist thought. Sedlmayr, the man, moved closer to Nazism, while his thought has little or no relationship to it.

Habermas, in praising Heidegger's work (about which he has deep reservations) has criticized the crude sociological notion of a «short circuit [...] between work and person»<sup>56</sup>. More generally the historian of philosophy Maurice Mandelbaum clarifies that «a man's politics has more to do with his biography than with any aspect of his philosophy, or, I might add, with his science or his art»<sup>57</sup>. These supposed correlations, then, are more artifacts of individual biographical circumstances than anything else. Wilhelm Pinder, the conservative author whom Sedlmayr admired, interestingly wrote of this dilemma with visual artists: «If a man works in secret for the Red Front, then he is a Communist and an enemy of the State, there's no question about that. But if someone paints a landscape differently than another, then it is simply too easy to say "That man's a bolshevist"»<sup>58</sup>.

---

<sup>55</sup> Michael Ermarth, «Maurice Mandelbaum on History, Historicism, and Critical Reason», in Ian Verstegen (ed.), *Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism* (London: Routledge, 2010). Ermarth sees Mandelbaum's early philosophy of history as a response to Weimar.

<sup>56</sup> Jürgen Habermas, «Work and Weltanschauung: The Heidegger Controversy from a German Perspective», *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989), 431-445.

<sup>57</sup> Maurice Mandelbaum, «On the Historiography of Philosophy», *Philosophy Research Archives* 2 (1976), 710-44, 734.

<sup>58</sup> Wilhelm Pinder, «Die bildende Kunst im neuen deutschen Staat», 35; cited in Schwartz, *Blind Spots*, 128.

Even though he gains no special sympathy in this, we have to acknowledge the sociological circumstances of the cumulative effect of Sedlmayr's choices toward his (lack of) canonicity. The two voluntary associations with National Socialism are enough to test the patience with any particular thinker. Contrast this with the tragic end of Walter Benjamin, and we have a perfect pair of opposites. For that matter, we might examine the actions of a young Meyer Schapiro. The politics do not coincide with biography because it can be argued that Schapiro was an even better *Strukturforscher*, as suggested by Otto Pächt, than Sedlmayr himself.

What if we regarded (at the very least) Sedlmayr's two theories as complexes of ideas put into tension with his changing life circumstances? We would then have a set of theories at least of sufficient complexity to have a fruitful discussion. Then we would have to conclude that Sedlmayr was conservative, closed-minded, abandoned his cosmopolitanism and, ultimately, was one of the most brilliant art historians of the first half of the twentieth century. As Habermas said of Heidegger, he is «responsible for lasting insights»<sup>59</sup>. His thought influenced Michael Baxandall, Karsten Harries, Werner Oechslin, Felix Thürlemann, and Wolfgang Kemp. He is not a heroic victim like Walter Benjamin, but why should we need heroes if we don't need victims?

---

<sup>59</sup> Habermas, «Work and Weltanschauung», 455.