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New Findings in the Archive of Michael Baxandall: From David to Friedrich (via Jena)

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As we look back at the Caspar David Friedrich jubilee year, with the numerous exhibitions and publications that have accompanied it, we may be tempted to start looking for the next celebratory moment. While no grand exhibitions seem to be announced, 2025 will still mark two centuries from the death of Jacques-Louis David. The coming together of these names may put the mind of a virtual event organiser into a certain excitement, although obviously for external reasons.

Nonetheless, this may yield further (and less ironic) reflections. An example could be an unknown strain of work by Michael Baxandall. For a long time, he worked on what we can understand as an indirect connection between the two artists. He studied how in the German Romantic reception – that of the Jena Romantic group, from 1798 to 1803 – the absorption of Friedrich coincided with a rebuttal of David or, rather, of a specifically German *Sonder-David*.

In 1988, Baxandall received the Aby M. Warburg Preis of the City of Hamburg – the “Aby M. Warburg-Preis der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg”, since 2012 the “Aby Warburg-Preis”. On the occasion of the prize ceremony, on 19th September 1989, he held a talk entitled *Jacques-Louis David und die deutsche Romantik*. It was never published thereafter, but its English text is archived in the Baxandall Papers at the Cambridge University Library. Other significant new discoveries from the Archive in Cambridge revolve around it.

I. That lecture was not Baxandall’s first take on these themes. He had already presented a paper based on similar material in 1972. That year, the Tate Gallery hosted a Friedrich Exhibition, crucial for the (re)dis-

covery of Friedrich outside Germany (Vaughan et al. 1972). On that same occasion, the Tate organised a symposium on the German artist. Baxandall delivered a paper on *Caspar David Friedrich’s “Serious Game”*. No typed version of this paper is present in the Archive at Cambridge, although some handwritten notes are arranged in a fashion suggesting they represent an almost final step towards the paper (see CUL – GBR/0012/MS Add. 9843/5/2). The heading of the folder containing these materials – “Misc. Friedrich (dead), 1972” – clearly shows an extended elaboration, even if unsatisfactory at last. It also shows how the first focus of attention was Friedrich rather than David. To prepare this paper, Baxandall read widely in the philosophy, art history and theory of German Romanticism: he was probably trying to assess how, and how much, Friedrich’s painting could be seen through the lenses of Romantic philosophy and science.

However, there is yet an even earlier occurrence for Baxandall’s interest in Romanticism (and its reception of contemporary French Art). The same folder containing his later work on David, Friedrich, Runge and the Romantics, archives another unknown paper by Baxandall. The typescript is untitled and revolves around the work of Géricault. It is not easy to date this untitled piece of work, but it may have been written around the late 1950s (see CUL – GBR/0012/MS Add. 9843/6/4), during Baxandall’s period as a Junior Fellow at the Warburg Institute. In it, he attempts to save Géricault from a superficial symbolic reading: a reading, that is, in which one would look for an attached symbolic meaning for each and every element of the picture (say, horses as “symbols of vitality”).

Whereas a symbol would be something that can be read off the painting, thus making its painterly dimension unessential, the significance of a visual metaphor would have to be understood *visually*. The top right figures in Géricault's *Radeau de la Méduse* (1819) can be seen as a "visual metaphor of excitement". This is clearly attuned to Gombrich's essay on visual metaphors and his criticism on iconography (Gombrich 1963), but Baxandall enlarges the scope of the visual metaphor. He suggests reading the *painting*, that is, its style broadly construed, as political in itself. This political dimension may be recognised not by way of reference – in a symbolic reading – but through a visual metaphor. Furthermore, it shows its relevance when seen as a cultural force. These aspects come back in the later paper.

Summarising, we have traces of three main stages of work by Baxandall on these topics – or at least of three main stagings of it. The first one dates probably in the late 1950s and centres on a political reading of Géricault's paintings. The second one results in the 1972 paper for the conference at the Tate Gallery and focuses on Friedrich by placing his art in the framework of German Romantic appraisal of contemporary art, especially through a vast reading of Joseph von Görres' *Aphorismen über die Kunst* (Görres 1802), backed by Schelling's metaphysics. And finally the third one, which was read for the Warburg Prize in 1988. We can be assured that *this* version was the one he presented on that occasion by reading its last sentence: "Thank you for the Aby Warburg Preis". The interesting thing about this last version is how strongly it pivots on the refused reception of David. Thus Baxandall proposes what he names an "exercise in immunology". It is about how David's painting could – or rather, could not – be received by the Romantics. (A broader essay on this exercise in immunology is also archived, in the form of a French text that features more or less the same themes as the Warburg Prize one – of which it may be a translation, at least partly. It differs in its second part: instead of discussing Friedrich and Runge, it takes up once again the discussion of Görres.)

II. To appreciate the relevance of this, we could follow a thread that connects the three versions. As we have already seen, a major issue for Baxandall in the paper on Géricault was the criticism of the "symbolic" reading of his paintings – the idea, for instance, that horses are symbols of vitality. The way in which Baxandall performs this criticism is significant: he does not deny its feasibility but questions its relevance for the appreciation of the painting in its context. He discussed a similar issue many times throughout his writings, and poignantly from *The Language of Art History* (Baxandall 1979) onwards. Such symbols would lastly equate a linguistic content, as such painterly unavailable, that would drive us away from the visual interest of the picture. Yet the critique of the symbolic reading has a peculiar twist in this paper. It is rather that such a symbolism would be as such too general to provide something relevant for the appreciation of the single picture. It would also be a public symbolism, easy to read off for anyone with the appropriate cultural background: something quite superficial, as it were.

Baxandall strikes a similar note in the two following stages, particularly discussing the possibilities of a symbolic reading of paintings by Friedrich. As he shows, the symbolism was again a very general and public one – so much so that it could be underpinned by books such as Christian Reinhold's *System der zeichnenden Künste* (Reinhold 1784). One cannot make use of it, if superficially, to acquire insights in Friedrich's painting. Baxandall's strategy in the 1972 paper relies again on the significance of the visual interest. This is where Görres and David become relevant. Baxandall discusses how the reception of David's painting was intertwined with the political perception of his role in France. Just as Görres refused jacobinism on a political level, David may have been criticised on the pictorial. That is, in the Romantic reception his painting must have been seen as handling its material in a painterly Jacobin way: hyper-subjectively or, in Görres' terminology, "productively".

The "productive" painter transforms light, and thus color, into its intellectualised counterpart as chiaro-

scuro, relief, and distance: this could be thus seen as a “subjective”, ego, or idealised, way of painting. Baxandall sees in Görres the grounds for a Romantic rebuttal of David’s work. And that is what he had sensed to be possible about Géricault: the reading of the painterly style as politically and culturally relevant leads to a peculiar critical judgment. Why is this so relevant? In Baxandall’s proposal, because the German Romantics would have worked out the tenets of what art should be in opposition to that of David. One can refer to a word used by Friedrich himself, and say that the decisive trait of a picture should be its possession of “character” (*Charakter*) – the idea that a painting’s impact depends on how the artist organises visual elements, and that it only comes to life when both the artist and the viewer share the same frame of mind and knowledge. If this obtains, the spectator is put in a certain mood (*Stimmung*) and feels moved (*fühlt sich ergriffen*). A picture with character makes its “whole” perceived, whereas one without character is felt as cold and invented, as Friedrich makes clear (see Friedrich 1924, 170). But one must stress once again that to articulate this, the rebuttal of David was decisive. We are on the verge of the exercise in aesthetic immunology articulated in the third stage of these researches.

III. The first interesting aspect of this last stage is that it can be read in two ways, both materially and conceptually. For the Warburg Prize ceremony, Baxandall prepared a paper that went from the rebuttal of David to a reading of Friedrich. But as the title suggests (again, *Jacques-Louis David und die deutsche Romantik*) he left out a conspicuous part on Friedrich that he had already written. He had developed it by taking up the material on Friedrich once more, and particularly his notion of *Charakter*. After writing a longer version, he reduced it by excluding Friedrich. This is easy to see in the archived manuscript, which testifies Baxandall’s own handiwork. The longer version is preserved; with many parts crossed out. Thus one can virtually read two papers: a broader one including longer passages on Friedrich, and a shorter

one centred mainly on the Romantic rebuttal of David. This can highlight the relevance of the immunological approach. The lecture tries, in fact, to move from the refusal of influence – specifically David’s painting – coming from the outside towards the Jena Romantics, to the reasons sustaining that resistance on the inside (see Baxandall’s later refusal of the concept of influence in his famous excursus: Baxandall 1985). Both elements, in their combined effect, then lead towards Friedrich’s (and Runge’s) painting.

At this stage, Baxandall seems to be less preoccupied with the failures of a symbolic reading, though he reiterates his argument against it. Compared to the background of the previous version, he discusses here more widely the main traits of how David was known in Germany, what he calls the German *Sonder-David*. It was a highly reduced version of David, mainly based on written accounts, reproductions, and some direct knowledge by those who had been in Rome in the 1780s and in Paris around 1800. This time Baxandall puts Görres by side and makes wider use of Friedrich Schlegel and particularly Johann Dominicus Fiorillo to show the texture of reception (with Schelling lingering again in the background). Fiorillo’s *Geschichte der zeichnenden Künste* (Fiorillo 1798–1808) provides direct access both to the *Sonder-David* and to some traits of its reception (Fiorillo 1805, with its chapter on David, 451–464). Fiorillo’s disapproval of David’s coldness (Fiorillo 1805, 454) resonates clearly with Görres’ critique of intellectualist and “productive” painting, but it is more specific and useful: it deals directly with some paintings by David. Baxandall outlines the Romantic programme that would have led to a refusal of the *Sonder-David*. It is exactly here that Baxandall’s experiment in aesthetic immunology becomes active and moves on to Friedrich – because the same principles that generated both the *Sonder-David* and its rebuttal made up the tenets of what art could be in positive.

This is the core of Baxandall’s proposal. In this view of Romanticism, a painter can only succeed when his knowledge and the knowledge of the public align. The sense of knowing is here, says Baxandall, a strong

one. It involves possession of and by the object of representation, and includes reference to the ongoing scientific debate. It is now – leading towards the conclusion of Baxandall's research, and of this mapping of it – that Friedrich and Runge really come onto scene, but awkwardly. We can only read widely about them, in fact, in the parts that Baxandall then cleared out. He seemed to have been very interested in Friedrich's take on *Charakter*. This also paved the way for a brief discussion of *Das Große Gehege bei Dresden* (1832), and *Wir Drei* (1805) by Runge, based on contemporary optics and psychology. Alongside with the immunological metaphor, this is perhaps one of the most interesting insights of his strain of work on Romanticism, even if not fully developed, which can resonate with some recent Friedrich scholarship: The Romantic scientific endeavour and its aesthetic relevance is a focus, for instance, of Busch 2023, Busch 2024 and Ziche 2024.

It is highly interesting to think about how this last development was mainly cut out in his lecture for the prize. In fact, this is the acme of his research on the topic and of the immunological experiment which he put at the centre of the lecture. Baxandall describes with his "immunology" a cultural *process of adaptation* – an active, selective response to (refused) foreign artistic influences that mirrors how an immune system would protect the body from harmful external agents. This metaphor ties directly into Warburg's ideas about the survival and transformation of cultural forms over time.

IV. Just as immunology makes sense only when it can play an active role, Baxandall's paper reveals its relevance by reaching its positive side: the interpretation of Friedrich (and Runge). In a way, Baxandall seems to have played the same game he thinks the Romantics to have played. Something is developed and ruled out to get a focus on a possible outline. A point of great interest is actually how he conceals his operation: not just in his exposition, but also, more concretely, by almost completely excluding the positive side from the paper he finally seems to have read.

And, lastly, by not publishing anything about this long research. But why? One is left with a question that seems better left unanswered: would it be possible, so to say, to reverse engineer Baxandall's own exercise in immunology, just as he tried to reconstruct the aesthetic immunology of the Romantics? This would imply revising his take on the relationship between French and German art in a broader context and discussing his view of Jena Romanticism. The Baxandall Papers in Cambridge offer material that could lead to an answer.

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