

Art and Bewilderment

Jakub Stejskal

In this paper, I seek to defend the proposition that bewilderment can contribute to the interest we take in artworks. Taking inspiration from Alois Riegl's underdeveloped explanation of why his contemporaries valued some historically distant artworks higher than recent art, I interpret the historical case of the European audiences' fascination with the Fayum mummy portraits as involving such a bewilderment. I distinguish the claim about effective bewilderment from the thesis that aesthetic meaning resists discursive understanding and seek to establish that bewilderment can figure positively in art appreciation, drawing on Richard Wollheim's argument—developed in engaging Sigmund Freud's essays on art—that posing obstacles to our understanding can actually contribute considerably to art's effect: it prolongs and intensifies our engagement with the work. Riegl's observation that some historically distant artworks have an especially strong effect is thus explained in terms of their anachronism: the effect is caused by the difficulties experienced in making sense of their contemporary look and their distant origin.

I

Uncertainty, indeterminacy, ambiguity have all been terms employed in philosophical, particularly post-Kantian, aesthetics to describe the effects of the supposedly fundamental feature of aesthetic phenomena, namely, their resistance to our conceptual understanding. These pronouncements are usually framed in terms of the inexhaustibility or impenetrability of artwork's meaning as its necessary feature,¹ and rarely in terms of bewilderment as to the source of its effect. If it is true that 'for many people understanding why I have the reaction to a poem that I in fact have is part of the process of proper engagement with it',² then it seems reasonable to ask what role bewilderment plays in such an engagement: is it a hindrance, ideally to be dispensed with, or can it actually contribute to rather than weaken art's effect?

In this paper, I seek to defend the proposition that bewilderment can contribute to the interest we take in artworks. This will be done in the following steps: first, I will introduce a specific kind of bewilderment, namely, that caused by confusion as to what agency is responsible for an artwork's effect. Taking inspiration from Alois Riegl's underdeveloped explanation of why his contemporaries valued some historically distant artworks higher than recent art, I will interpret the historical case of the European *fin-de-siècle*

1 For recent examples, see Michael Podro, 'Literalism and Truthfulness in Painting', *BJA* 50 (2010), 457–468, on inextricable uncertainty and difficulty as marks of 'truthfulness'; Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 52–54, on indeterminacy as a necessary feature of aesthetic objects.

2 Raymond Geuss, 'Must Criticism Be Constructive?', in his *A World without Why* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 68–90, at 71.

audiences' fascination with the Fayum mummy portraits as involving such bewilderment. I will then move on to some philosophical ground-clearing in order to distinguish effective bewilderment from the idea that aesthetic meaning resists discursive understanding. Next, I will seek to establish that bewilderment can figure positively in engaging with art. This will be done via discussion of Richard Wollheim's subversive reading of Sigmund Freud's contention, put forward in his 'The Moses of Michelangelo', that while asking after the source of art's effect is a legitimate part of a proper engagement with it, bewilderment contributes nothing to the process; Wollheim effectively reinstates bewilderment as an artistically relevant factor in engaging with art. I will then argue that his conclusions apply with some adjustment to the case of effective bewilderment about the agency responsible for an artwork's effect.

II

For the purposes of this paper, 'bewilderment' designates confusion stemming from the inability to grasp the source of one's reaction to an artwork. More specifically, 'bewilderment' will here stand for a cognitive state when the effect an object's visual presence—for I confine myself to discussing the visual arts—has on us cannot be traced uncontroversially to its source. A variety of reactions may fall under the rubric of 'effect' (e.g. emotive response, critical judgement, contemplation, motivation to act in a certain way); all I assume is that they all share—at least initially—the character of a merited response relying on acquired sensitivity to artistic means and that trying to understand the merits motivating the response may be part of a legitimate engagement with artworks.³ What instantiates bewilderment, then, is that the merits supposedly underlying the response become difficult to establish. Furthermore, a variety of aspects may fall under the rubric of 'source' (e.g. formal, stylistic, semantic, expressive features, as well as ascriptions of intention, agency, or origin). Just which potential sources are held responsible for the artwork's effect largely depends on where one is used to looking for an answer to the question 'What made me react the way I reacted to this artwork?', that is, again, on one's acquired, habitual skills for engaging with art. Bewilderment arises because our habitual tracing of the source encounters difficulties. Sometimes these difficulties are intended by the artist(s), but sometimes, as in the example of encountering distant art provided below, they are the result of processes not under their control.

There exists a historically very common instance of effective bewilderment, yet rarely discussed by contemporary philosophers of art: the bewilderment stemming from confusion as to what agency is to be held responsible for the effect of an artwork. One common way of producing art objects across various cultures has been to invest them with such

3 On the notion of merited response see, for example, John McDowell, 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in his *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 131–151. McDowell's is a non-inferential account, but the argument presented here allows for deliberations on the merits motivating the response to art to be part of a legitimate engagement with artworks. On the tension between habitual response to art and its justification, see Fabian Dorsch, 'Non-Inferentialism About Justification: The Case of Aesthetic Judgements', *Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (2013), 660–682.

intricate formal, semantic, or illusionist configuration that the intended audience would be forced to doubt that the object before them is a product of human skill. The artwork would thus usually index two agencies, the actual human agent and a non-human agency (e.g. divinity, ancestral spirits, but also forces of nature, genius, or the unconscious). The resulting bewilderment serves to intensify the effect of the object.⁴ That an artefact can captivate us in this manner is of considerable sociological and anthropological interest, as such bewilderment often serves religious and other non-artistic purposes. This may partly explain why philosophers of art have not paid closer attention to the phenomenon, leaving the matter to the social scientists.⁵ Another, more serious reason for the neglect may be that the phenomenon of bewilderment could seem an arbitrary, incidental circumstance of engagement with art: one may feel bewildered about the agency responsible for a vast variety of occurrences (e.g. new technologies, tricks, seemingly paranormal events, and so on) and it is not clear how its discussion can enrich our understanding of our responses to art. Part of the argument developed in this essay consists in giving reasons for why bewilderment (and, consequently, bewilderment about agency) is not just an accidental feature of our responses to art.

In recent art-historical scholarship, effective bewilderment has been addressed under the rubric of the anachronic power of images. Georges Didi-Huberman has introduced the topic by describing his fascination with the disturbing resemblance of the four fictive marbles painted below the figural scene of Fra Angelico's *Madonna of the Shadows* and Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.⁶ For Didi-Huberman, the event marked the beginning of his idiosyncratic efforts at theorizing the heuristic potential of such 'aberrant' anachronic experiences. Taking inspiration from his writings on the subject, but focusing less on the heuristic potential of anachronism and more on its artistic effects, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood assert in their *Anachronic Renaissance* that 'the ability of the work of art to hold incompatible models [of tracing its origin] in suspension without deciding is the key to art's anachronic quality'.⁷ It is assumed that this anachronic quality contributes to art's effect.⁸ I want to support this assumption by arguing more generally that bewilderment as to the source of an artwork's effective power can contribute to the effect an art object has on us.

4 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), see esp. 23, 46, 68–72. See also Matthew Rampley, 'The Ethnographic Sublime', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 47 (2005), 251–263, at 260–262; and Whitney Davis, 'Abducting the Agency of Art', in Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner (eds), *Art's Agency and Art History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 199–219, at 211, 217.

5 Significantly, Gell's *Art and Agency*, widely discussed by art historians and social scientists, has been all but ignored by the philosophers of art. But see Jason Gaiger, 'Participatory Imagining and the Explanation of Living-Presence Response', *BJA* 51 (2011), 363–381.

6 'If I try today to recall what stopped me in my tracks in the corridor in San Marco, I think I am not mistaken in saying that it was a kind of displaced resemblance between what I discovered there, in a Renaissance convent, and the drippings of the American artist that I had discovered and admired many years before' (Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism', trans. Peter Mason, in Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (eds), *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31–44, at 41).

7 Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 18.

8 *Ibid.*, 14.

We typically approach art pre-equipped, so to speak, with such habituated skills that artworks appear to demand and command, as if by their very nature, specific ways of handling and interpreting. In other words, artworks require applying appropriate categories under which they are to be experienced.⁹ But sometimes the categorial identity of an artwork can come into question, as when an artwork seems to command the application of a category that could not have framed its production. This happens, for example, when an artwork produced under circumstances historically and/or culturally distant from ours appears surprisingly relevant to our current concerns. I take such an undermining of the artwork's categorial identity to be an instance of the above-described confusion as to what agency is to be held responsible for the effect of an artwork (though in this case no non-human agency is evoked), because the work indexes two incompatible sources of its effective power: it is the end product of someone's effort in a distant past and at the same time accommodates our present interests and tastes. We cannot believe that the distant producer of the artefact could have intended it to be engaged under what we take to be current artistic standards, yet the features of the artefact compel us to do just that.

A fitting example of such a reaction to distant art is that of European audiences to the so-called 'Fayum mummy portraits' touring large European cities at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Brought from Egypt to Vienna in 1887 by the dealer Theodor Graf and publicized by his friend, the popular Egyptologist and novelist Georg Ebers,¹¹ these funerary portraits, originally attached to mummies and dating from the first three centuries CE, possessed such a degree of what seemed like distinctly modern illusionism and naturalism that some archaeologists mistook them for forgeries.¹² Mostly done in encaustic on wood, they are considered to be the oldest surviving examples of naturalistic portraiture, that is, of a systematic effort at capturing a person's likeness in paint, suggesting that at least some of the portraits must have been painted from life. The identities of the depicted are mostly unknown and no written record of the portraits' use, ceremonial, commemorative, or otherwise, survives.¹³

9 Kendall L. Walton, 'Categories of Art', *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970), 334–367; reprinted in his *Marvellous Images: On Values and the Arts* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 195–219; references are to the book.

10 For the present state of scholarship on the Fayum portraits, see Barbara E. Borg, 'Painted Funerary Portraits', in Wileke Wendrich (ed.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* (Los Angeles, CA, 2010; published online September 2010) <<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7426178c>> accessed 30 October 2015; and Susan Walker, 'Painted Hellenes: Mummy Portraits from Late Roman Egypt', in Simon Swain and Mark Edwards (eds), *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 310–326; for the history of their display, see Debbie Challis, 'What's in a Face? Mummy Portrait Panels and Identity in Museum Display', in William Carruthers (ed.), *Histories of Egyptology: Interdisciplinary Measures* (London: Routledge, 2015), 227–241.

11 Georg Ebers, *The Hellenic Portraits of the Fayoum* (New York: Appleton, 1893).

12 Hilde Zaloscer, 'Mumienbildnisse und ihr Problem', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 51 (1998), 145–158, at 146.

13 Their catalogue has counted more than 750 documented mummy portraits, see Klaus Parlasca, *Mumienporträts und verwandte Denkmäler* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1966), 12. For large format colour reproductions, see Euphrosyne Doxiadis, *The Mysterious Fayum Portraits: Faces from Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995); for informed speculations by an art historian on the portraits' possible meaning and function, see Jean-Christophe Bailly, *L'Apostrophe muette: Essai sur les portraits du Fayoum* (Paris: Hazan, 2000).

In 1888, a London exhibition of the Fayum portraits excavated by Flinders Petrie caused great excitement, with press reviews waxing enthusiastic about the vivid, life-like portrayals capturing the individual psychological traits, likening them to the then popular portrait art of Frederick Leighton or William-Adolphe Bouguereau. The astonishment they caused resulted from their showing the ancient deceased as if they were the audiences' contemporaries, glowing with life and expressing familiar attitudes.¹⁴ The unsettling experience was surely facilitated by the technique used in their production. Very likely their painters wanted to endow them with a sense of time-defying living presence.¹⁵ But what they could hardly have intended was to invoke astonishment among distant future audiences at their modern artistic sensibilities.

Such reactions were not confined only to the general public. Writing in 1895, Franz Wickhoff, one of the founding figures of the Vienna School of art history, celebrated the Fayum portraits as examples of the highest accomplishments of Roman art, applauding their illusionist style as almost attaining 'the most significant achievements of modern [that is, Impressionist and post-Impressionist] painting'.¹⁶ For Wickhoff, Roman illusionism shared with Impressionism the same goal: reconstructing optical experience. Wickhoff was apparently so intrigued by the assumed striking resemblances between the Roman and modern optical naturalisms that he went so far as to suggest that the Roman illusionist heritage lived on uninterrupted in the Far East only to be recently passed on to the Impressionists via the influence of Japanese woodcuts.¹⁷

For his younger colleague, Alois Riegl, Wickhoff's fascination with Roman illusionism betrayed his modern sensibilities and poisoned his scholarship with ahistorical bias.¹⁸ He would no doubt have subjected the popular fascination with the Fayum portraits to the same criticism. But that does not mean Riegl dismissed both high- and low-brow fascination with distant art as a mere case of unscientific anachronistic projection. In distinguishing between the historical and artistic values of monuments, he suggested that the reason why his contemporaries found certain artworks from the distant past more compelling than contemporary art, despite the former having been produced for a culturally very different audience, was not that they complied more successfully with universal artistic standards, but rather that some of their aspects happened to meet modern artistic preferences. According to Riegl, this coincidence, and the contrast between the anachronistically 'contemporary' features and those recognized as proper to the artwork's time of production, gave rise to a powerful effect contemporary art could not compete with.¹⁹

14 Dominic Montserrat, 'Unidentified Human Remains: Mummies and the Erotics of Biography', in Dominic Montserrat (ed.), *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1998), 162–197, at 173–174.

15 David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 291–293.

16 Franz Wickhoff, *Roman Art: Some of Its Principles and Their Application to Early Christian Painting*, trans. Arthur Strong (London: Heinemann, 1900), 161.

17 Michael Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface: Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 123–124.

18 Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Bretschneider, 1985), 10–11; Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface*, 126–127.

19 Alois Riegl did not mention the Fayum portraits or any other specific artwork in this context ('The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin', trans. Kurt W. Foster and Diane Ghirardo, in K. Michael Hays (ed.), *Oppositions Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 621–651, at 622–623 and 647–649). After

Unfortunately, Riegl did not elaborate on just why this contrast proved so powerful. He may be read to suggest that since the features that resonated with contemporary audiences were juxtaposed to properties alien to their taste, these features acquired sharper contours and were therefore more effective. But this explanation ignores that the contrast in question was not just between the properties of a distant artwork that were aesthetically stimulating and those that were not. If that were the case, historically distant art would not differ much from contemporary artworks that just happened to juxtapose aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties. But importantly, in the case of the distant art that exercised great effect on Riegl's contemporaries the contrast was between two kinds of awarenesses: a historical awareness that characterized its object as belonging to a distant past (what Riegl called 'historical value') and an aesthetic awareness that was sensitive to the artwork's aesthetic properties ('artistic value'). The mindset Riegl took for granted in his fellow *Mitteleuropäer* was one aware that it was looking at a distant artefact and that the criteria it applied in engaging with the object were contemporary and presumably alien to the artwork's original culture.²⁰

Michael Gubser offers another explanation:

Historical paintings with modernist resonances revealed contrasting artistic sensibilities and thereby offered immanent criteria for comparison, criticism, and evaluation. Neither purely modern art nor utterly foreign historical works could provide this visual stimulus; the former obliterated critical distance whereas the latter offered no opening for evaluation.²¹

Gubser is sensitive to the peculiarities of the case at hand, but overstates the disinterested, intellectual character of the engagement with such art; it may very well be that distant artworks serve as great subjects for exercising one's critical faculties, but the example of the reaction to the Fayum portraits suggests that their effect on the audiences was akin more to unsettling fascination.²² Riegl himself talked emphatically of such art's

years of neglect, Riegl's studies have been a burgeoning field for the last few decades. Important contributions in English include Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 71–97; Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1992); Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface*; and Diana Reynolds Cordileone, *Alois Riegl in Vienna 1875–1905* (London: Ashgate, 2014). For an overview of recent literature on Riegl, see also Diana Reynolds Cordileone, 'Introduction', in her *Alois Riegl in Vienna 1875–1905*, 1–22. On the historical context of Riegl's 'The Modern Cult of Monuments', see Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History: Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847–1918* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 186–211.

20 Riegl, 'The Modern Cult of Monuments', 622–623. Wickhoff's speculation about the Japanese connection can in this light be seen as an attempt to reconcile the cognitive dissonance.

21 Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface*, 152.

22 This fascination seems to live on, as demonstrated by the titles of recent press articles on these funerary portraits: 'Expressions so Ancient, Yet Familiar' (*New York Times*, 18 February 2000), 'The Oldest Modernist Paintings' (*Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2012). In his latest book, the essayist John Berger writes emphatically: 'They are the earliest painted portraits that have survived Why then do they strike us today as being so immediate? Why does their individuality feel like our own? Why is their look more contemporary than any look to be found in the rest of the two millennia of traditional European art which followed them? The Fayum portraits touch us, as if they had been painted last month. Why? This is the riddle' (*Portraits: John Berger on Artists* (London: Verso, 2015), 7).

Wirkungskraft (effective power), implying that its power went beyond just stimulating intellectual curiosity.

My aim, however, is neither to contribute to Riegl scholarship nor to the history of the reception of the Fayum portraits, but rather to suggest an interpretation of the nature of the powerful effect Riegl described by addressing it in terms of the audience's struggle to identify the source of an artwork's effect. Its spectators try to account for it, but are torn between its apparently contemporary features and its distant origin. The premise informing this explanation—and missing from Riegl's own account—is that bewilderment as to the source of an artwork's effect can contribute to its effect. Obviously, much work needs to be done to make this premise plausible, among other things, freeing it from the confines of Riegl's interpretation that relied so heavily on attributing to his contemporaries a relativistic stance (at least as far as matters of taste, or—to use Riegl's terminology—*Kunstwollen*, were concerned).²³ What also needs to be addressed is why such bewilderment increases rather than diminishes the effect of the artwork.

III

The premise that bewilderment as to the source of an artwork's effect can contribute to the interest we take in artworks is not a reformulation of the principle that aesthetic meaning resists discursive understanding. The former principle can be defended independently of the latter. Granting plausibility to the general dynamic that I take to be informing effective bewilderment assumes that identifying (or trying to identify) the source of an artwork's effect may legitimately figure in an appropriate response to it and that it is somehow desirable for the process of identification to face obstacles. This does not necessarily amount to holding that the process of identification must figure in every standard case of responding to art or that in each case it must ultimately fail. Two objections spring to mind: but does not being receptive to an artwork's effect already mean identifying the source of this effect? And, conversely, does not being receptive to an artwork's effect rule out being able to identify (and/or interested in identifying) the source? The obvious answer to the first question seems to be in the negative. Just like finding an armchair comfortable to sit in does not necessarily mean knowing what makes it so (just as it does not necessarily imply the desire to find out), being susceptible to an artwork's charms does not necessarily mean being able (and desiring) to describe their source.

The answer to the second question is more complex. Some would claim that what is specific about artworks (or aesthetic objects in general) is that there is no satisfactory way of grasping the source of their effect (this view is what I shall call the 'Impenetrability Thesis') and that there is no point in trying. This is a view that was held, for example, by the trademark formalist Clive Bell.²⁴ Others would agree that the source is impenetrable,

23 There exists a large literature on Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen*, or 'artistic volition', a controversial term he introduced in his *Late Roman Art Industry*. For a concise discussion of the concept and its implications, see Jas' Elsner, 'From Empirical Evidence to the Big Picture: Some Reflections on Riegl's Concept of *Kunstwollen*', *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006), 741–766.

24 'For a discussion of aesthetics, it need be agreed only that forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular way' (Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Stokes, 1913), 11).

but believe that experiencing this impenetrability is part of the meaning of artworks. Theodor Adorno's theorizing of art as essentially enigmatic would arguably secure him membership in this club.²⁵ Yet others are convinced that one may get to the root of an artwork's appeal and that doing so does not diminish its effect on us.²⁶ All I want to establish in this section is that in order to take on board what I propose to be the general dynamic behind effective bewilderment, one does not have to commit oneself either way with regard to the Impenetrability Thesis (though one obviously has to reject the first option, that is, that the process of identification of the source of the effect cannot play any meaningful role in the experience of art).

Whether something passes for a successful work of art hinges to a large extent on its having an appropriate effect on its recipients. It could be claimed that in accounting for this appropriateness in one's experience one need rely solely on the nature of the effect: that an object has an effect on me in a certain way counts towards its being a successful work of art. Some people may indeed be satisfied with just that.²⁷ While such an account can serve as an appropriate description of the phenomenology of these people's encounters with art, it leaves out the entire cultural configuration that to a large extent determines the relationship between the art object and its recipient: typically, an object must be perceived as an artefact intended for a specific engagement by a recipient who has been trained to attend to the artistically significant aspects of it. To attend to these aspects already means isolating a possible source or a range of sources of the artwork's effect. But being so disposed does not mean being able, or desiring, to identify the source of the artwork's effect, if by identifying we mean tracing down specific circumstances under which this particular work of art holds this particular mind under spell. It just means that one is sensitive to the significant aspects of a work of art, not that in each case of engaging with an artwork one is able, and desires, to trace the source of the artwork's effect. One may very well believe that art's effect is due to a general law governing the occurrence of value in artworks or their particular subgroup, or that there is a category of properties (formal, semantic, expressive, and so on) we respond to in our engagement with art, but that in itself does not secure that one is able, and desires, to isolate the purported instances of these principles.

Adherents of the Impenetrability Thesis, for example, have been metaphysically committed to the view that characterizes the source of artworks' appeal as a *je-ne-sais-quoi*, that is, something that defies our conceptual capacities while appealing to our senses.²⁸ A defining characteristic of the effective component of artworks, so the reasoning goes, is that it cannot be pinned down.²⁹ But it is one thing to claim that the

25 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 118–136.

26 One of them was Sigmund Freud, more on him below; another was one of the forefathers of analytic philosophy, Bernard Bolzano, see his 'On the Concept of the Beautiful: A Philosophical Essay', trans. Adam Bresnahan, *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2015), 229–266.

27 See n. 24.

28 On the origin of the notion of *je-ne-sais-quoi*, see Jacques Morizot, '18th Century French Aesthetics', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford, CA, 2013; published online 24 April 2013) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/aesthetics-18th-french/>> accessed 23 October 2015.

29 This is the position of Kantians past and present: what is indeterminate about the aesthetic judgement is the rule that instances of the 'subjectively purposive' form follow. In the framework of Kantian aesthetics, we may in a

source of an artwork's effect cannot be identified (Impenetrability Thesis), and quite another that the process of identification itself does not figure in engaging with art. In other words, the Impenetrability Thesis does not rule out that *trying* to understand (as opposed to actually understanding) why I have the reaction to an artwork that I have cannot, at least in some cases, form part of a legitimate process of engaging with art. It implies rather that this effort must ultimately fail. It could still be the case, then, that the state of intellectual bewilderment accompanying this process contributes to the artwork's effect. And if what is artistically relevant—in cases of effective bewilderment—is not so much the fact that we fail to grasp the source of a given artwork's effect, but rather that in trying to do so we enter into a state of bewilderment, then to appreciate this point we needn't subscribe to the Impenetrability Thesis. The question whether bewilderment as to the source of an artwork's effect contributes to this effect does not necessarily depend on whether arriving at the source of the artwork's effect is beyond one's power or not. One could coherently hold both that bewilderment about the source contributes to art's effect and that the nature of the source can become certain without diminishing the effect.

Let me now restate what I claim to be the general dynamic behind effective bewilderment: the effort to identify the source of an artwork's effect may contribute to it if the work poses obstacles to achieving this goal and we experience a (perhaps temporary) state of bewilderment. By phrasing the position in these terms we remain agnostic with regard to the legitimacy or otherwise of the Impenetrability Thesis. All we commit ourselves to is the claim that there exist cases when bewilderment as to a given artwork's source of effective power contributes to its effect.

Outside art, this is hardly a controversial claim: optical illusions, puzzles of all sorts, and jokes are just a few examples of phenomena involving temporary bewilderment that contributes to their effect and whose dissolution does not necessarily diminish it (often quite the opposite). What needs to be explained is why theorizing such a state of bewilderment is relevant specifically to our understanding of art's effect.

IV

Such an explanation must presuppose that, to paraphrase Geuss, trying to understand why one has the reaction to an artwork one in fact has may be part of the process of a legitimate engagement with it. One would be hard pressed to find a more explicit formulation of such a position in modern humanities than the one found in Sigmund Freud's 'The Moses of

sense become aware of the source of aesthetic pleasure—the subjectively purposive form—but we cannot make it the subject of propositional knowledge. In the process of aesthetic judging our conceptual capacity synthesizes the manifold in perception, but the result is not a case of cognitive insight, but a harmonization of our conceptual and imaginative powers in a 'free play' of imagination and understanding. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), §9, 102–104 (5: 216–219 in the *Akademie* edition); for a discussion of some recent literature on the free play of faculties, see Paul Guyer, 'The Harmony of the Faculties in Recent Books on the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009), 201–221.

Michelangelo'.³⁰ In the initially anonymously published essay, Freud—or the anonymous persona in whose voice he speaks—announces that the source of attraction artworks have for him is located at the level of their content rather than form.³¹ And he goes on to say that he obtains hardly any pleasure from them unless he is able to explain to himself how they achieve such an effect. Given the opening statement, it follows that this effect is due to the artwork's expressed content and that, unless Freud is able to interpret its content, the work does not give him any real pleasure. Freud tells us that when he is affected by a work of art, he tries to trace the cause of the effect, and he gets pleasure from the work only if he is successful in doing so. On a first reading, this is puzzling: either Freud makes a logically incoherent statement that he gets no pleasure from artworks unless he finds out its source (for, in order to locate the source of pleasure in an experience of it, one has to have felt it first), or he implicitly differentiates between the initial strong effect (*starke Wirkung*) and the resulting pleasure (*Genuss*) obtained once the source of the effect has been located. Unfortunately, the latter cannot be the case as becomes clear from the following statement: 'Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of mind in me rebels against being moved [*ergriffen*] by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me [*was mich ergreift*].'³² What is at stake here is not a new kind of pleasure to be had from knowing the source of the initial affect, but rather whether the initial affect is to be suppressed or not. A third option thus surfaces: the pleasure to be had is continuous with the initial affect; it is the same affect, only this time acknowledged by Freud's intellect as an adequate response to the work of art (adequate because traceable to its appropriate source).³³

Freud then goes on to identify a paradox: 'Some of the greatest and most overwhelming creations of art are still unsolved riddles to our understanding.'³⁴ Whereas before Freud was describing only his attitude towards art, he now makes a general statement, supposedly paradoxical. But the statement's paradoxical nature hinges on the general validity of a claim Freud initially made only about himself, that is, that he finds true pleasure in art only when he is able to

30 The jury is still out on the place of this 'un-psychoanalytic' essay in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, both in terms of its methodology and content. A critical commentary of some recent literature is provided in Thomas Albrecht, 'Subject and Object in Psychoanalytic Criticism: On the Interpretative Method of Freud's "The Moses of Michelangelo"', *Textual Practice* 28 (2014), 783–806. With regard to the essay's intellectualist position, I am in agreement with Kuspit's characterization of Freud's treatment of visual artworks as intellectual puzzles; see Donald Kuspit, 'Freud and the Visual Arts', *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 2 (2000), 25–39. For a reading stressing by contrast that 'analysis' multiplies the enigma of Michelangelo's *Moses*, see Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 168–170.

31 Sigmund Freud, 'The Moses of Michelangelo', in his *Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 13, ed. and trans. Anna Freud and James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 211–238, at 211–212.

32 *Ibid.*, 211.

33 Under a very charitable reading, the passage allows for yet another interpretation, though hardly helped, and at times contradicted, by Freud's wording. Freud is contemplating an artwork, that is, an object he recognizes as intended for appreciation, so he expects to be affected by it, but, unless he fully grasps the intended effect, it leaves him cold.

34 Freud, 'The Moses of Michelangelo', 211.

locate its source on the level of the expressed content of the artwork. If that were true of all of us, then we would indeed be facing a paradox. How can we experience such an intense pleasure before these great works of art without actually knowing their content, which in turn is supposed to be the source of the pleasure? Freud realizes that this apparent paradox may actually be explained as providing the case for these artworks' greatness. Perhaps they are such overwhelming and lasting masterpieces precisely because we cannot rationally explain their effect. But Freud tells us that he cannot accept such an explanation, and we can see why. For him, the fact that we are overwhelmed by the artwork means that we have somehow—emotionally—already grasped its content, yet have a hard time translating it into words. In a certain sense, we have located the source of the artwork's effect on us; without such identification there would be no effect. However, this identification takes place outside the realm of our intellect (and so is not identification proper) and Freud wants the intellect to gain control over this process. Once this is achieved, the strong effect of these works will not be diminished, or so he hopes.³⁵

Freud explicitly rejects the idea that 'intellectual bewilderment' (literally, 'our comprehending mind's cluelessness [*Ratlosigkeit unseres begreifenden Verstandes*]?') regarding an artwork's source of the effect may increase this effect.³⁶ He believes that even when unsure intellectually about what affected us, we somehow already 'feel' the reason and that we can—supplied with the right method—translate this feeling into a conceptual understanding of its source without diminishing its effect. It could be argued that bewilderment is playing a contributing role, if for no other reason than that this kind of hurdle is part of our engagement with great works of art. Freud himself hints that the emotions expressed by masterpieces are too complex for a straightforward interpretation. But he still insists that intellectual bewilderment does not contribute to art's effect in the sense that it would be responsible for the strong effect masterpieces have on us, so that resolving the bewilderment does not diminish their effect.³⁷ We can see that Freud rejects the Impenetrability Thesis, according to which there is no satisfactory way of grasping the source of art's effect, and alongside with it the idea that bewilderment could enhance it. But as I have shown in Section III, one can reject the Impenetrability Thesis and yet hold that bewilderment can contribute to the effect an artwork has on us: that an engagement with an overwhelming masterpiece involves only a temporary intellectual bewilderment later resolved does not mean that the bewilderment has not contributed to its effect.

To summarize: according to Freud, (1) art's effect is caused by its successfully expressed content; (2) great masterpieces express their content in such a way that they overwhelm us emotionally and it is difficult to intellectually make sense of them; (3) this 'intellectual bewilderment' does not contribute to the artwork's effect and deciphering its source intellectually does not diminish it either.

V

It would be easy to dismiss Freud's obsession with identifying the source of his aesthetic pleasure and the accompanying belief that bewilderment plays no role in our encounters with great art as a betrayal of his intellectualizing bias. But this would be

35 Ibid., 212.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

to disqualify the whole conceptual framework Freud is navigating and thus effectively to miss what is interesting about Freud's attitude, namely, the context in which he rejects the notion of bewilderment. By advocating the relevance of the identification of an artwork's source of effect in engagement with art, Freud has inadvertently created a space for questions about the nature of the source and the role of bewilderment in its identification.

In his 'Freud and the Understanding of Art',³⁸ Richard Wollheim can be plausibly read as effectively exploiting the space created by Freud. He also finds the opening paragraphs of Freud's Moses essay problematic. According to him, it is, first, not clear whether Freud's admittance that he gains no pleasure from a work of art unless he can explain its source is just a personal quirk or a more general condition, perhaps one that awaits anyone trained in psychoanalytic interpretation. Second, it is not clear what pattern of understanding Freud sought to apply to art.³⁹ I have already suggested a possible answer to the first question: Freud's attitude cannot be just an idiosyncratic trait of his personality if his observation that some of the most overwhelming masterpieces are riddles to us is to be regarded as a paradox. I shall leave aside the second question since it concerns the possibility of a psychoanalytic contribution to art interpretation, which is surely a fascinating question—one that Wollheim has interesting things to say about—but is not a matter of concern in the present essay.⁴⁰ Instead, I will concentrate on Wollheim's view of the consequences that stem from Freud's taking seriously the possibility that learning about the nature of the source of an artwork's effect is somehow relevant to engaging with it. Freud is convinced that the challenge great artworks pose to our understanding is not the cause of their greatness, but does not say much about the correlation between masterpieces and intellectual bewilderment. Wollheim painstakingly develops such an explanation and in the process both builds on and goes beyond Freud's own expressed opinions, undermining in the end Freud's dismissal of the relevance of intellectual bewilderment. Against Ernst Gombrich's judgement that Freud's being partial to expressed content at the expense of form was informed by his conservative aesthetic outlook,⁴¹ Wollheim stresses the innovative aspect of Freud's approach.

In the Moses essay Freud took advantage of Giovanni Morelli's method of attribution, which was based on isolating seemingly marginal details of paintings, details that were

38 Richard Wollheim, 'Freud and the Understanding of Art', *BJA* 10 (1970), 211–224; republished in a polished version in his *On Art and the Mind: Essays and Lectures* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 202–219. The latter version is included in Jerome Neu (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 249–266. All references are to the Cambridge edition.

39 Wollheim, 'Freud and the Understanding of Art', 250.

40 For a discussion of the influence of psychoanalysis on Wollheim's own aesthetics, see Whitney Davis, 'Fantasmatic Iconicity: Freudianism, Formalism, and Richard Wollheim', in his *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 271–295. Unfortunately, Davis does not discuss Wollheim's interpretation of Freud's 'The Moses of Michelangelo'.

41 E. H. Gombrich wrote that Freud 'always took it for granted that what we must seek in the work of art is the maximum psychological content in the figures themselves' ('Freud's Aesthetics', *Encounter* 26 (1966), 30–40, at 33).

more likely to betray their author than the overall composition or the subject-matter depicted.⁴² Freud saw in the Morellian method an obvious parallel to psychoanalysis—with its focus on apparently inessential automatisms and habits—and drew on it in his effort to establish the content of Michelangelo's *Moses*. Freud believed that through 'despised or unnoticed features, from the rubbish-heap, as it were, of our observations'⁴³ the content that is the source of the artwork's effective existence could be extracted and made available to our intellect.⁴⁴ But why would the content be expressed through such small details? Why would the artist not express it by more obvious means? And why is this covert way of communication to be found in masterpieces?

Wollheim suggests that stumbling blocks to our explicit understanding of the expressed content can actually contribute to the art's effect and he finds corroboration of this idea implicit in Freud's own writings on the arts. According to Wollheim, in cases where learning about the character's motivations and intentions is a relevant part of the experience of art (i.e. in narrative art), how we come to gain insight into them is aesthetically relevant. Thus the content cannot just be laid out before us; it is the artist's task to control 'the pace of revelation'.⁴⁵ This is the case of a more general artistic strategy, an 'alternate current' as Wollheim calls it, i.e. to divert attention away from an all too easy identification of content. Wollheim names three ways of diverting attention, all borrowed from Freud's texts: controlling the pace of revelation of the content (as Wilhelm Jensen does in his story *Gradiva*); diverting attention by 'plunging the spectator or the reader into a whirlpool of action' (as is the case with drama); or by drawing our attention to the artwork's formal aspects (an effect described by Freud in his theory of the jest).⁴⁶ But why do we need our attention diverted from the source of the artwork's effect? Freud himself—or again, the persona he constructs in the *Moses* essay—thought there were instances where the diversion of attention was so thorough that only a method devised by himself or Morelli's could uncover the source of the artwork's effect; but he did not believe, at least not in the *Moses* essay, that the diversion itself added anything to it. As Wollheim readily admits, such a diversion was for Freud primarily motivated by the need to avoid the censorship of consciousness or, to use Wollheim's terms, 'to secure popularity for the work', as artworks may express ideas or emotions resisted by their audience.⁴⁷ But Wollheim also wants to argue that diversion of attention is more than just a 'cheap bid for popularity' and that it contributes genuinely to the effect of an artwork. By introducing alternate currents, the artist creates a situation typical of art. Our attention is caught between several

42 On Morelli, see Richard Wollheim, 'Giovanni Morelli and the Origins of Scientific Connoisseurship', in his *On Art and the Mind*, 177–201; Carlo Ginzburg, 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm', in his *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 110–125; and Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 86–120.

43 Freud, 'The *Moses* of Michelangelo', 222.

44 Wollheim, 'Freud and the Understanding of Art', 256.

45 *Ibid.*, 260.

46 Wollheim discusses Freud's 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*' (*ibid.*, 257–260), 'Psychopathic Characters on the Stage' (*ibid.*, 260–261), and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (*ibid.*, 261–263).

47 *Ibid.*, 261.

potential sources of the artwork's effect not just in order to get past the censorship of consciousness, but in order to make us engaged with it in ways that a mere joke—a way of catching us off guard Freud famously discusses—could rarely do.⁴⁸

Wollheim does not develop the idea much further, but he provides enough clues for the following conclusion. Drawing our attention away from an artwork's 'main current' of effect serves the goal of securing our attention, making us linger in its presence and tarry with it. This is, I believe, the conclusion to be drawn from Wollheim's reading of Freud's essay, as the following sentence suggests: 'We have now gone far enough to see that part of understanding how it is that a work of art affects us is recognizing the confusion or the ambiguity upon which this effect in part depends.'⁴⁹

As it should be clear by now, this conclusion is at odds with Freud's opinion, at least as expressed in the Moses essay. There, Freud insisted that bewilderment caused by our inability to trace intellectually the source of pleasure we gained from observing a work of art did not contribute to the work's effect on us. He believed that dissolving the confusion would not diminish our enjoyment. Instead of just dismissing such a rejection of the Impenetrability Thesis as over-intellectual and motivated by conservative predilections, Wollheim chose to take seriously Freud's stress on the relevance of the process of identifying the source of an artwork's effect. Relying on Freud's own ideas, he proposed how posing obstacles to our understanding actually served artistic purposes and thus contributed to art's effect.⁵⁰ Wollheim's subversive reading of Freud's Moses essay does not cancel, but rather underlines its premise: that seeking the source of the effect art has on us may contribute to this effect. Our inability properly to understand the source, in ways described by Wollheim, actually contributes to the effect. Is it the plot depicted, or the form, or perhaps the psychological content? We find ourselves in a state of bewilderment that entangles us more profoundly with the artwork. Even if it is in the end possible to dissolve the bewilderment with the help of a psychoanalysis-cum-Morelli-inspired method, that does not in and of itself nullify the contribution of bewilderment to the artwork's effect.

VI

In the effective bewilderment I identified in the *fin-de-siècle* reception of Fayum mummy portraits, what mainly caused the audience's bewilderment was the confusion regarding what made the historically distant art objects appealing, framed in terms of how such distant artefacts could have an utterly contemporary appeal. This appeal indicated to them a contemporary agent as the source of the object's effect, yet its other properties indicated as its source a historically distant agency. What we need, then, in order to bring the insight gained from Wollheim's reading of Freud—that bewilderment as to the source

48 Ibid., 263–264.

49 Ibid.

50 'Freud, in dissociating himself from the traditional theory that "intellectual bewilderment" is a necessary ingredient in the aesthetic attitude, may have prepared the way for an account of art and our attitude toward it more thoroughly and more deeply challenging to a naively rationalist view' (ibid., 264).

of an artwork's effect can contribute to it—to bear on the Fayum case is to rephrase the discussion of bewilderment in terms of agents responsible for art's effect.

On my interpretation, the audiences' infatuation with the Fayum portraits resulted from the bewildering confusion regarding the conflicting temporal frames they seemed to demand for themselves. On this interpretation, these audiences felt bewildered by the presence of certain aspects deemed modern in a distant artefact, suggesting two incompatible agencies responsible for its existence. Riegl, at least, believed that it was their awareness of the radically different conditions of distant art's production that determined this effect. Arguably, the Fayum portraits would hardly have commanded such a degree of interest, had they been of recent origin: there would be nothing disquieting about their modern outlook. The category that suggested itself as appropriate for engaging with the Fayum paintings, namely, the late-nineteenth-century realist portrait, indicated to them a contemporary agency as the source of the object's effect, yet its other properties indicated as the source of its existence a historically distant agency.

Kendall Walton famously proposed that we become sensitive to artistically relevant factors by perceiving artworks in appropriate categories. And these categories are 'determined partly by the historical facts about the artist's intention and/or his society'.⁵¹ Walton lists two historical circumstances that are relevant: whether the artist intended the work to be perceived under the category in question and whether this category was 'well established and recognized' in the artist's society.⁵² This means that the fact that the category under which I perceive an artwork is the one intended by the artist or that this category was recognized in her times counts toward the correct application of the category. But in my account of the Fayum case, one is uncertain about under which category the artwork is to be perceived. Riegl talks about distant artworks striking his fellow *Mitteleuropäer* as contemporary in their artistic outlook despite their distant origin. Their acquired habits make them perceive a distant artwork under a category that makes it artistically significant to them.⁵³ This circumstance contradicts the audience's awareness of the fact that such a category could not have been intended by the artist(s) and was not recognized and established in their society (the two 'historical' conditions listed by Walton). The possibility of effective bewilderment concerning under which category an artwork should be perceived does not play a role in Walton's essay, though he does allow that 'works may be fascinating precisely because of shifts between equally permissible ways of perceiving them', where 'permissible' implies 'aesthetically worthwhile'.⁵⁴ Even if it is the case that such a fascination involves bewilderment, that is, confusion stemming from the inability to grasp the source of one's reaction to an artwork, allowing that Walton's shifts in categorial identity may be rewarding is not the same as allowing that an artwork may be fascinating because the known or alleged historical conditions of its production collide with the category in which the artwork strikes us as (equally) appealing. In the latter case, the shift in categorial

51 Walton, 'Categories of Art', 217.

52 Ibid., 212.

53 The circumstance that an artefact is perceived aesthetically more interesting under a given category than any other belongs to one of Walton's conditions counting towards a correct application of a category (ibid.).

54 Ibid., 216.

identity cast a doubt, even if only temporarily, over the identity of the agency responsible for the artwork's effect. Nevertheless, Waltonian vocabulary has allowed us to go beyond the Freud-Wollheim discussion of bewilderment caused by confusion regarding what attributes of the artwork are responsible for its effect, and to bring into view cases of bewilderment as to the artwork's categorial identity, namely, the case where the cause of bewilderment resides in a distant artwork's embodying familiar artistic properties. Here, the effect of the artwork is not amplified by bewilderment about which kind of properties are its proper source (Wollheim), nor is it enhanced by shifting between equally permissible ways of perceiving it (Walton), but by making it enigmatic for us how a distant agency could have produced an artefact indicating a contemporary agency.

As Freud recognized, it is a common feature of powerful artworks that the source of their power tends to elude us. It should not surprise us, then, to find one of the mysterious Fayum portraits in his study in London.⁵⁵ Yet he believed there was no reason to think that the mystery was in principle resistant to understanding. With Wollheim's help, we can understand Freud's opposition to the Impenetrability Thesis as a rare opportunity to think bewilderment outside of the confines of the traditional Kantian or *je-ne-sais-quoi* vocabulary. Bewilderment understood as the result of a 'diversion of attention' is dissociated from conceptual indeterminacy understood as the defining characteristic of the effective component of artworks. As Wollheim demonstrated, diversion of attention is a strategy typically employed by artworks to keep us interested; that is, a strategy that puts stumbling blocks in the way of our identifying the source of the work's effect. More than the ultimate source of the effect, bewilderment is a technique of its enhancement. And it is this kind of factor that we should be looking for when making sense of Riegl's contention that the reason why some distant art fares better with audiences than art made by their contemporaries resides in the distant art's contrasting its historical and artistic values. The explanation I have offered, that these historical artworks have a stronger effect because our attention is diverted by the discrepancy between their contemporary look and their distant origin, thus draws on Wollheim's reading of Freud to make sense of Riegl.

The anachronic effect Riegl mentioned and I hold responsible for the fascination with the Fayum mummy portraits is, however, different from the effect of the alternate current as described by Wollheim in that it cannot be explained as the result of an artistic strategy, an intended 'diversion of attention'. On the contrary, as I tried to show with the help of Walton's categorial approach, the anachronic effect is the result of a nagging sense that the category an artwork invites us to employ cannot have been the one under which it was produced. But, even if not part of an artistic strategy, the anachronic discrepancy works like a diversion of attention: in indexing two temporally incompatible agencies, it makes it difficult for us to make sense of the source of the artwork's effect.

55 Freud acquired it in Vienna from Garf; see Lynn Gamwell and Richard Wells (eds), *Sigmund Freud and Art: His Personal Collection of Antiquities* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 78–79.

VII

In this paper I have offered the grounds for explaining how bewilderment stemming from confusion as to which agency is to be held responsible for the effective power of an artwork—to be distinguished from the thesis that art’s meaning is ultimately impenetrable—can contribute to its effect. I have tried to demonstrate this on the historical case of the reaction to Fayum mummy portraits, read through the lens of Riegl’s underdeveloped explanation of why some distant artworks are valued higher by modern spectators than recent art. I have endeavoured to explain this fascination in terms of effective bewilderment, drawing on Wollheim’s argument that posing obstacles to our understanding can actually contribute considerably to art’s effect: it prolongs and intensifies our engagement with the work. However, this paper can also be read as a contribution to a larger claim, generally neglected by the philosophers of art, that one of the ways art can captivate us is by making us uncertain as to the agency responsible for its production.⁵⁶

Jakub Stejskal
Freie Universität Berlin
jakub.stejskal@fu-berlin.de

56 I am grateful to Ondřej Dadejčik for his comments on an early draft. This paper has benefited greatly from the feedback received at a session of Georg Bertram’s *Forschungskolloquium* as well as from the suggestions made by the two anonymous referees for the *BJA*. Work on this essay has been supported by the Dahlem Research School, Freie Universität Berlin.