

The Argan-Brinckmann polemic (1932–33) and the reception of Piedmontese Baroque architecture¹

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The short but intense polemic that took place following Giulio Carlo Argan's review of Albert Erich Brinckmann's *Theatrum novum Pedemontii* of 1931 inaugurated the international twentieth-century scholarly reception of Piedmontese Baroque architecture.² Today, it provides a captivating snapshot of the turbulent and complex disciplinary feuds that prevailed in architectural historiography during the interwar period, often pushing contenders into deep water when attempting to clarify their views. The twenty-three-year-old Argan – later to become one of Italy's most celebrated academics – had just graduated from the University of Turin when he gave a bravely disapproving review of the latest book by one of Germany's most prominent architectural historians at the time.³

Quite unexpectedly – especially considering the seemingly uncontroversial and catalogue-like composition of the *Theatrum* – the young, ambitious reviewer accused Brinckmann of gravely misrepresenting Piedmontese Baroque architecture. Brinckmann's rendering as one unified stylistic movement, the architecture of the

¹ I would like to extend my gratitude to Professor Andrew Hopkins for his helpful review of this article.

² Albert Erich Brinckmann, *Theatrum Novum Pedemontii: Ideen, Entwürfe und Bauten von Guarini, Juvarra, Vittone wie anderen bedeutenden Architekten des piemontesischen Hochbarocks*, Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1931; Giulio Carlo Argan, 'A. E. Brinckmann, *Theatrum novum Pedemontii. Ideen, Entwürfe und Bauten von Guarini, Juvarra, Vittone*', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 1: 3, 1932, 233-236; Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung: Über den Gusto Piemontese', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 2: 2, 1933, 147-150; Argan, 'Per una Storia dell'Architettura Piemontese', *L'Arte*, 36: 4, September 1933, 391-397.

³ Argan (1909–1992) had completed his *tesi di laurea* on Serlio the year before, *La Teoria di Architettura di Sebastiano Serlio*, Torino: Regia Università, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, 1931. Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain access to this source, but a short version of the thesis was published in the form of the article 'Sebastiano Serlio' in *L'Arte*, 35: 3, 1932, 183–199. For a comprehensive chronology of Argan's life and career, see the final chapter of Claudio Gamba, ed, 'Cronologia della Vita e dell'Opera di Giulio Carlo Argan', in *Giulio Carlo Argan. Intellettuale e Storico dell'Arte*, Milano: Electa, 2012, 461-527. Having been called to take on the position as *Lehrstuhl* at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität of Berlin the same year, Brinckmann (1881-1958) was definitely at the peak of his career when he published the *Theatrum*. For his works and biography, see Sabine Arend, 'Albert Erich Brinckmann (1881–1958)', in *Kunstgeschichte an den Universitäten im Nationalsozialismus (Kunst und Politik Bd5)*, Jutta Held, ed, Göttingen, 2003, 123–142, and the fourth chapter in Evonne Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism (1845 - 1945): Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Gurlitt, Brinckmann, Sedlmayr*, Basel: Schwabe AG, 2015, 245-301.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Argan's native region was, he inveighed, merely displaying the author's subjective beliefs rather than working according to the scholarly standards that the young critic envisioned for architectural history. These standards were to a large degree based on ideas derived from his professor Lionello Venturi, a convinced follower of Crocean idealism, which he deemed on a collision course with Brinckmann's methodological approach. In his subsequent response, Brinckmann dismissed Argan's criticism and noted that the opinions of a Renaissance scholar were irrelevant for the subject in question. It is not clear whether Brinckmann was aware of the reviewer's young age at the time. Furthermore, he made sure that Argan was prevented from publishing in the *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, the journal in which their debate had taken place up until then. Argan did not hesitate to criticise him for this in his subsequent response in *L'Arte* which also concluded the polemic.

This article begins with an outline of the scholarly reception of the Piedmontese Baroque. This is followed by an analysis of the arguments presented by Argan in his 1932 review of the *Theatrum*, Brinckmann's counterresponse the year after and, lastly, Argan's subsequent clarification of his critique. The point of contention was a set of fundamental historiographical problems pertaining to the relationship between architectural form, the intentions of architects, the cultural dynamics within artistic circles, concepts of style, and society in general. It is necessary to discuss these subject matters in the broader context of architectural historiography at the time, in which romantic-idealist approaches had been proliferating since the late nineteenth century, challenging standard historical methods.⁴

Another inescapable backdrop was the ongoing political tension resulting from widespread nationalism and the rise of totalitarianism during the interwar era. Argan joined the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* in 1928, but is today most well-known for his later political career as a socialist and, eventually, as a communist.⁵ After the Second World War, he took part in the *Sinistra Indipendente* and in 1976, he became Rome's first non-Christian Democratic governor representing the *Partito Comunista Italiano*. Brinckmann joined the *NSDAP* immediately after its election victory in 1933 and sustained his career throughout the Third Reich era. His next major project, *Geist der Nationen* of 1938, was permeated by Nazi ideology and promoted the idea that artistic phenomena throughout history first and foremost reflect the race of their creators.⁶ After the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945, Brinckmann was

⁴ For a general survey of early twentieth-century romantic-idealist art historiography focusing on German-speaking scholarship, see Branko Mitrović, *Rage and Denials: Collectivist Philosophy, Politics, and Art Historiography, 1890–1947*, University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2015.

⁵ It has, however, been argued that Argan was forced to join the Fascist Party as a career necessity. See Claudio Auria, 'Note sulla Carriera Amministrativa di Giulio Carlo Argan', *Le Carte e la Storia*, 9: 2, December 2003, 189-202.

⁶ Brinckmann, *Geist der Nationen: Italiener – Franzosen – Deutsche*, Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, 1938. In the second chapter (20-29), Brinckmann claimed that the historical developments of Western art have been driven by race since antiquity. Moreover, he sought

suspended and then soon dismissed. Shortly thereafter, he voluntarily requested early retirement.⁷

The reception of Baroque architecture

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, architectural historiography was dominated by Neoclassical aesthetics and authors did not hesitate to make such judgements in writing. In the late 1850s, Amico Ricci labelled the Baroque as a bizarre and irrational caricature of architectural beauty for which Francesco Borromini's 'delirious' San Carlo alle quattro fontane and Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza manifested the most telling examples.⁸ He explained this aesthetic dissipation as the result of a power play exercised between the papal dynasties in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which constantly pushed them to demonstrate their wealth and power and, at the same time, caused them to 'lose their judgement and sense of elegance'.⁹ In 1862, a similar view was advocated by James Fergusson, for whom seventeenth-century Italian architecture was 'as bizarre as it was tasteless'.¹⁰ Furthermore, he made the point that 'Turin possesses little that need arrest the student of Architecture as a fine art' and that 'the theatrical style of [Guarini]' was 'absolutely destructive when applied to so permanent an art as that of Architecture'. For Fergusson, also Guarini's successors were 'men with as little feeling for Art as can well be imagined, but whose good fortune it was to live in an age when the art was at its lowest ebb'.¹¹

By contrast, Jacob Burckhardt was less dismissive of the Baroque in his *Cicerone* of 1855 and made the effort, almost apologetically, to atone for its bad reputation. Although, as he wrote, it may be far-fetched for the art lover to find delight in the 'degenerate forms' of the Baroque, it is nevertheless 'not so uninteresting as one might think', because 'the Baroque speaks the same language

to prove the superiority of the German race by declaring that those parts of the Western Roman Empire that were not invaded by Germans remained artistically 'unfruitful' in posterity. In the post-war edition of *Geist der Nationen*, which came out in 1948, Brinckmann did what he could to clear his name by censoring (or denazifying) the book's most problematic citations and phrasings. Levy has conscientiously recorded these revisions in *Baroque and the Political...*, 276-279.

⁷ Arend, 'Albert Erich Brinckmann...', 134 n. 11: 'Nach Hammerstein wurde Brinckmann zunächst beurlaubt, dann entlassen. Er habe dann selbst aus "sachlichen Gründen [...] den Antrag auf vorzeitige Emeritierung" gestellt.'

⁸ Amico Ricci, *Storia dell'Architettura in Italia dal secolo IV al XVIII*, Vol. I, Modena, 1857, 8: '[il] Barochismo, che è uno stile tutto bizzarro, irrazionale, contorto; una caricatura, direbbesi, del bello architettonico.'; Vol. III, 572: 'Quest'eccesso di delirio aveva toccato l'apice nelle chiese di S. Ivo e di S. Carlo alle quattro fontane [...]'

⁹ Ricci, *Storia dell'Architettura...*, Vol. III, 568: 'Non solamente rivaleggiavano nella vastità delle opere, ma anche nella ricchezza degli ornamenti, secondo il gusto di que'di, ne' quali un lusso soverchio avea fatto smarrire il giudizio e il senso della vera eleganza.'

¹⁰ James Fergusson, *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture: Being a Sequel to the Handbook of Architecture*, London: John Murray, 1862, 130.

¹¹ Fergusson, *History of the Modern Styles...*, 127.

as the Renaissance only in a somewhat unkempt dialect'.¹² Borromini's bell towers, for example, do manifest 'method and artistic certainty' despite their 'madness'.¹³ On the one hand, generally speaking, English language architectural historians remained disdainful of the Baroque well into the twentieth century.¹⁴ On the other, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the tides turned in the German and Italian language contexts.¹⁵ Both Cornelius Gurlitt's pioneering monograph on Baroque architecture, *Geschichte des Barockstiles in Italien*, and the second volume of Alfredo Melani's *L'Architettura Italiana* – both published in 1887 – treated the Baroque as an artistically valuable phenomenon eligible for historical inquiry.¹⁶ Both stated that it was about time for the Baroque to be taken seriously and studied as a significant and laudable period in the history of architecture.¹⁷ Admittedly, the foregoing negativity had contributed to the Baroque's relatively late birth as a credible subject in the field.

Brinckmann's *Theatrum*

By the time Brinckmann's *Theatrum* was published, the Baroque had eventually found its way into the mainstream of architectural history. Still, the major studies on Baroque architecture that came out in the decades after Gurlitt's and Melani's works focused predominantly on Rome and, for the most part, they ignored later

¹² Jacob Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone*, Basel, 1855, 366-368: 'Man wird fragen: wie es nur einem Freunde reiner Kunstgestaltungen zuzumuthen sei, sich in diese ausgearteten Formen zu versenken, über welche die neuere Welt schon längst den Stab gebrochen? Und woher man nur bei der grossen Menge des Guten in Italien Zeit und Stimmung nehmen solle, um auch an diesen späten Steinmassen einige mögliche Vorzüge zu entdecken? [...] Die Physiognomie dieses Styles ist gar nicht so interesselos wie man wohl glaubt. [...] Die Barockbaukunst spricht dieselbe Sprache, wie die Renaissance, aber einen verwilderten Dialekt davon.'

¹³ Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone*, 376: 'Wenn in diesem Wahnsinn [Borromini's campanili] Methode und künstlerische Sicherheit ist [...]'

¹⁴ The Baroque was still described as 'debased' in Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture upon the Comparative Method*, London, 1896, 231. However, the re-edited eighth edition of 1928 states that it has been 'treated too harshly by critics' (546). Martin Shaw Briggs recognized only the less experimental versions of the Baroque in *Baroque Architecture*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913, 222: '[...] Baroque architects were prone to sin. Men like Borromini, Guarini, and Pozzo, with all those others whom they influenced throughout Catholic Europe, did unlimited harm to their craft. Their work is less defensible than the designs of Churriguera, Fischer von Erlach, and Faid'herbe, because it is so utterly false to every canon of truthful design [and] brought the style into a disrepute from which it has never recovered.'

¹⁵ Alina Payne has offered an insightful analysis of this major shift in art historiography. See Payne, 'On Sculptural Relief: *Malerisch*, the Autonomy of Artistic Media and the Beginnings of Baroque Studies', in *Rethinking the Baroque*, Helen Hills, ed, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, 39-64.

¹⁶ Cornelius Gurlitt, *Geschichte des Barockstiles in Italien*, Stuttgart: Ebner & Seubert, 1887; Alfredo Melani, *Architettura Italiana*, vol. 2, Milan, Naples and Pisa: Ulrico Hoepli editore, 1887.

¹⁷ Gurlitt, *Geschichte*, Preface, VII-X; Melani, *Architettura Italiana*, 241: 'Il Settecento non solo non è stato studiato fino ad ora, ma non è stato neanche considerato seriamente.'

developments elsewhere such as that of Piedmont.¹⁸ Consequently, Brinckmann's book was intended as a dissemination of a subject that he deemed highly significant – both historically and artistically – yet still largely overlooked.¹⁹ He saw it as his vocation to fill the gap left by Burckhardt in the *Cicerone*; Piedmont was admittedly an important part of Italy that had not been sufficiently covered.²⁰ A decade prior, Brinckmann had contributed to the *Handbuch der Kunstwissenschaft* series with a volume on seventeenth and eighteenth-century architecture of the region of Rome, and his interest in Piedmontese Baroque must have grown out of this early encounter with the topic.²¹

The architectural movement that came to pass in Turin and the Savoyard State in the century between Carlo Emanuele II's appointment of Guarino Guarini as court architect in 1666 and Bernardo Vittone's death in 1770 was an idiosyncratic offshoot of the Italian Baroque tradition – Brinckmann duly called it its pinnacle.²² Throughout this period, the House of Savoy went from being a prosperous, yet minor, duchy under French subjugation to becoming an independent and fairly powerful kingdom from 1713.²³ It correspondingly gained as much architecturally as dynastically and Brinckmann's objective essentially was to trace the course of the spectacular architectural achievements of this prosperous period, primarily by way of photographs and architectural drawings. In addition to a general historical introduction, the book contains brief descriptions of individual buildings with reference to existing scholarship and archival documents.

¹⁸ Neither Heinrich Wölfflin's *Renaissance und Barock* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1888) nor August Schmarsow's *Barock und Rokoko* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1897) gave any attention to the Piedmontese Baroque. Briggs' *Baroque Architecture* (97ff.), on the other hand, did in fact include a chapter on north Italian Baroque, among which some of Guarini and Juvarra's works in the 'almost Baroque city' of Turin were discussed.

¹⁹ He was about to disprove Gurlitt's claim that the Baroque architecture had died out with Guarini, as rendered in *Geschichte des Barockstiles...*, 457: 'Guarini hatte keinen Schüler. Er ist, gemeinsam mit dem Jesuiten Pozzo, der rechte Schlußstein im Gebäude des Barockstiles.'

²⁰ Brinckmann, *Theatrum...*, 7: 'In erster Auflage des Cicerone, der 1855 in Basel erschien, schrieb Jacob Burckhardt auf Seite zwei der Vorrede: "Nun ist es meine erste Pflicht, die wesentlichen Lücken des Werkes zu bezeichnen...: Turin und ganz Piemont." Die determinierende Wirkung einer übergrossen Leistung auf unsere Forschung ist selten mit solcher Klarheit hervorgetreten. Genau dreiviertel Jahrhundert nach Erscheinen des wegweisenden Cicerone [...] gehört Piemont, an der Schwelle Italiens liegend, auch jetzt zu den unbekanntten Gegenden des kunstgeschichtlich bekanntesten Landes.'

²¹ See Brinckmann, *Die Baukunst des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin and Neubabelsberg: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion M. B. H., 1919.

²² Brinckmann, *Theatrum...*, 15: 'Piemontesische Baukunst des Hochbarocks ist die letzte Krönung des großartigen Werks Italienischer Barockbaukunst.'

²³ In the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713, which concluded the War of the Spanish Succession, the Duke of Savoy, Vittorio Amadeo II, was rewarded the crown of Sicily. He was forced to renegotiate this arrangement in 1720, after which he assumed the crown of the less important Sardinia. For Vittorio Amadeo II's biography and the history of the House of Savoy in this period, see Geoffrey Symcox, *Victor Amadeus II: Absolutism in the Savoyard State, 1675-1730*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

As the *Theatrum's* subheading informs us, Brinckmann's primary concern was the works of Guarini (1624-1683), Filippo Juvarra (1678-1736) and Bernardo Vittone (1704-1770). Guarini and Juvarra, who both held the prominent position of royal architect, had already been examined in earlier works.²⁴ Vittone, on the other hand – whom Rudolf Wittkower has rightfully declared 'perhaps the most creative architect Italy had at that period' – was virtually unknown outside Piedmont and had gone completely under the radar of architectural historians until Eugenio Olivero published a monograph on him in 1920.²⁵ In addition, Benedetto Alfieri (1699-1767), who succeeded Juvarra as the king's architect, with his elegant, often experimental and always exceptionally competent works, were brought out of a state of relative historical obscurity. Other less known architects active in Piedmont in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were also discussed.²⁶ Alongside Olivero's book on Vittone, various Italian monographs on Piedmontese Baroque architects had started appearing since the 1880s.²⁷ Brinckmann's objective was, against this background, to gather together the various pieces of the Piedmontese Baroque movement – a tradition that continued the undulating, complex and experimental spatial configurations that had been pioneered by Borromini in Rome – and bring them together under one banner.

Argan's review of the *Theatrum* and the term 'gusto'

The point of departure for Argan's critique of the *Theatrum* was methodological. He deemed the book to have failed in raising academic standards in accordance with its subject's elevation from 'regional studies to a higher scientific sphere'.²⁸ In order to clarify what he envisioned as such standards, he argued that Brinckmann's documentary approach was insufficient to inaugurate a 'new historical vision' of Baroque architecture in Piedmont. He also disagreed with the notion of a 'Piedmontese Baroque style' *per se*.

By the end of the nineteenth century, general periodization of styles had already been established in architectural historiography. What interested Argan, however, was the broader historic-cultural context in which architecture was created. It was therefore crucial for him to provide insight into the artistic intentions

²⁴ Melani, *Architettura Italiana*, vol. 2, Ch. 5; Gurlitt, *Geschichte des Barockstiles*, Bk. 2, Chs. 18 and 22; Briggs, *Baroque Architecture*, Ch. 7.

²⁵ Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971 [first edition 1949], 149. Eugenio Olivero, *Le Opere di Bernardo Antonio Vittone: Architetto Piemontese del Secolo XVIII*, Turin: Collegio degli Artigianelli, 1920.

²⁶ E.g., Michelangelo Garove (1648-1713), Francesco Gallo (1672-1750), Gian Giacomo Planteri (1680-1756), Costanzo Michela (1689-1754), Carlo Andrea Rana (1715-1804), Mario Ludovico Quarini (1736-1800) and Pietro Bonvicini (ca. 1741-95).

²⁷ Notably G. C. Chiechio, *L'Ingegnere ed Architetto Francesco Gallo, 1672-1750*, Turin: G. Derossi, 1886; Tommaso Sandonnini, *Del Padre Guarino Guarini, Chierico Regolare*, Modena: Vincenzi e Nipoti, 1890; Giovanni Chevalley, *Un Avvocato Architetto: Il Conte Benedetto Alfieri*, Turin: Edizioni d'Arte E. Celanza, 1916; Augusto Tellucini, *L'Arte dell'Architetto Filippo Juvara in Piemonte*, Turin: Crudo & C, 1926.

²⁸ Argan, 'A. E. Brinckmann, *Theatrum...*', 234: '[...] per portare questo problema dal campo degli studi regionali in una più vasta sfera scientifica.'

of architects, the preferences of clients and so on, in order to explore the relationship between culture and architecture and, essentially, explaining how styles evolve and develop throughout history. Formal characteristics could merely serve as the starting point for such inquiries, because they could only be seen as results, not causes. Therefore, in Argan's estimation, Brinckmann's usage of the term 'Piedmontese Baroque style' was in and of itself problematic. He argued that such a term was more in keeping with the generic character of Turin's pre-Guarinian urban developments than Savoyan architecture from Guarini to Vittone. He considered the latter too diverse to be reduced to one unified stylistic category. As for the former period, admittedly more stylistically uniform than the latter, 'Piedmontese Baroque' came across as more suitable. At any rate, Argan argued, this period primarily describes a 'cultural moment' in the history of the Savoyard state, denoting increased civil and political self-awareness in early seventeenth-century Piedmont. The principal weakness of the *Theatrum* was, as he saw it, that it failed to explain why the House of Savoy, as well as a broader spectrum of clients, favoured architects such as Guarini, Juvarra and so forth. And vice versa, Argan inveighed, Brinckmann's book should have addressed the issue of how architectural works could be understood as reflections of general society.

Exemplifying what he meant by a 'new historical vision', Argan referred to a classical problem in the history of Piedmontese Baroque architecture which still remains captivatingly unresolved, namely, what exactly led Carlo Emanuele II to choose Guarini. After all, Guarini's architectural resumé was not significant in 1666.²⁹ The architectural works for which Guarini gained his reputation in posterity were all conducted after he arrived in Turin. This complex historical problem could, according to Argan, only be elucidated by studying what he called the '*gusto piemontese*' (Piedmontese taste).³⁰ The concept of *gusto* – a central term in both Benedetto Croce's studies of aesthetics, as well as the works of Argan's tutor Venturi – had, unlike the English 'taste' or German '*Geschmack*', acquired meaning beyond 'preference' or 'inclination' in the traditional sense as well as 'judgement' in the Kantian sense.³¹ For Venturi and Argan, *gusto* was employed as a generic term

²⁹ He had designed the façade of the church of Santissima Annunziata in Messina and a project for the church of Sainte-Anne-la-Royale in Paris.

³⁰ Argan, 'A. E. Brinckmann, *Theatrum...*', p. 234: '[S]ebbene l'Autore riconosca che questo movimento [the Piedmontese Baroque movement] non è piemontese d'origine, non riflette che, ove si voglia studiare il gusto piemontese, non si deve tanto studiare Guarini e Juvara (un modenese studioso del Borromini e un messinese educato da Carlo Fontana), ma le ragioni per cui il gusto piemontese si rivolse al Guarini e al Juvara e il modo col quale il intese.'

³¹ Croce published influential works on the history and theory of aesthetics in the early 1900s, notably Croce, *Estetica Come Scienza dell'Espressione e Linguistica Generale*, Bari: Gius. Laterna & Figli, 1908 [1902]; *Breviario di Estetica*, Bari: Gius. Laterna & Figli, 1913. *Gusto* was a central concept in Venturi's study on late medieval (or 'primitive') and early Renaissance art. See Venturi, *Il Gusto dei Primitivi*, Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1972. The book was first published in 1926, one year prior to Argan's first attendance at one of Venturi's lectures, after which he subsequently decided to abandon his ambitions of becoming a painter and rather enroll as Venturi's student. Immanuel Kant's fundamental concept of *Geschmacksurteil*

pertaining to the cultural characteristics (in a broad sense) of a collective (such as a city, region or state) in a given moment in history.

‘For lack of a better term’, Venturi stated in the introduction of his *Il Gusto dei Primitivi* of 1926, the concept of *gusto* is defined as ‘the totality of preferences in the world of art on the part of an artist or a group of artists’.³² Much later, in the preface of the 1972 edition of Venturi’s book, Argan defined Venturi’s *gusto* as a fusion of Alois Riegl’s *Kunstwollen* and ‘the modern concept of poetics’.³³ Furthermore, Argan saw the relationship between *gusto* and art as equivalent to the ‘distinction between a complete or institutionalized culture and a culture in bloom’.³⁴ In this perspective, *gusto* can essentially be understood as that which precipitates an architectural style. Accordingly, he criticized Brinckmann for his emphasis on architectural results (i.e., form) in favour of the pre-existing *gusto piemontese* (i.e., that which causes form).³⁵ The examination of architectural precursors when studying a particular building, architect or style – e.g., considering Vittone in light of Guarini and Juvarra – was for Argan only one of many approaches when reconstructing the *gusto* of a particular era. Equally important was the consideration of written works and wider streams of thought.³⁶ In conclusion, Argan deemed the *Theatrum* as falling between two stools. It was neither a *Corpus* of Piedmontese Baroque architecture nor a rigorous historical inquiry into the cultural mechanisms that made the architectural developments of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Piedmont possible.

Brinckmann’s counterresponse and the problem of constancy in architectural history

One can only imagine the growing irritation with which the acclaimed professor read the negative review of his latest book. Moreover, it had been written by a practically unknown author who, on top of it all – whether Brinckmann knew it or not – was a recent graduate. Most likely, he was unaware of Argan’s young age, given the fact that he never mentioned it. Had he known, he would most probably have used it against him, given the strikingly insulting tone that pervaded his

entails a disinterested, non-conceptual aesthetic judgement of perceived objects (such as a work of architecture). The object’s aesthetic value is determined by the pleasure engendered by pure sense perception. See Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, A210f. (the edition consulted is Kant, *Die drei Kritiken: Kritik der reinen Vernunft, Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Köln: Anaconda Verlag GmbH, 2015).

³² Venturi, *Il Gusto dei Primitivi*, 13: ‘[...] dichiaro che intendo per gusto l’insieme delle preferenze nel mondo dell’arte da parte di un artista o di un gruppo di artisti.’

³³ Argan, ‘Preface’ in Venturi, *Il Gusto...*, XXII: ‘Il concetto di gusto, infine, interessando tutto il processo genetico o poetico dell’opera d’arte nonché quello del suo interagire con la cultura della società in cui si produce, appare da un lato come lo sviluppo in senso storicistico del *Kunstwollen* del Riegl, e dall’altro come la prima (ed ingiustamente dimenticata) formulazione del moderno concetto di “poetica”.’

³⁴ Argan, ‘Preface’ in Venturi, *Il Gusto...*, XXII: ‘La distinzione tra gusto e arte si riduceva così alla distinzione tra una cultura data o istituzionalizzata ed una cultura *in fieri* [...]’

³⁵ Argan, ‘A. E. Brinckmann, *Theatrum...*’, 235: ‘E sono le conseguenze dell’opera torinese del Guarini e del Juvara, che soprattutto interessano lo storico [Brinckmann] del Piemonte.’

³⁶ Argan, ‘A. E. Brinckmann, *Theatrum...*’, 235: ‘si sarebbe dovuto cercare il movente intellettuale, tutto il mondo d’idee ch’è presupposto dalla loro opera.’

ensuing response. Brinckmann dismissed the critique on all fronts, stating that the ideals Argan accused him of not having fulfilled were merely subjective constructions. Furthermore, he assessed Argan's request for a broader cultural perspective unreasonable because it would only lead to a 'mishmash that our objectively-minded German researchers predominantly reject'.³⁷ First and foremost, Brinckmann continued, his objective had been to introduce a new body of material into the discipline of architectural history in a systematic manner, not to 'peck minor constituents out of corpulent works'.³⁸ Furthermore, he noted that the opinions of a Renaissance scholar who lacked expertise in Piedmontese architecture were completely irrelevant.³⁹ With these insults, spanning *ab natione ad hominem*, an astoundingly aggressive tone characterised Brinckmann's defence.

As for the notion of *gusto piemontese*, Brinckmann dismissed its premises as vague interpretations or plainly false.⁴⁰ *Geschmack* or *gusto* could not be understood as a constant entity within a nation. If so, he argued rhetorically, was the so-called *gusto piemontese* also present in the Piedmontese Renaissance and Gothic as well?⁴¹ Regional, or rather, national constancy in architectural history was indeed a topic that interested Brinckmann, but he interpreted Argan's notion of *gusto* as its opposite; shifting, unstable and not fixed within the national collective.⁴² In the article 'Zeitkomplexe und Dynamische Komplexe in der neueren Zeit' of 1925, he presented a critique of periodization in art history and the subjectivity of established

³⁷ Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung...', 147: 'ein Mischmasch, wie ihn unsere sachlich eingestellten deutschen Forscher überwiegend ablehnen.'

³⁸ Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung...', 147f.: 'Mein "Ideal" war daher, ein neues Tatsachenmaterial in die Kunstgeschichte so einzuführen, daß nach Möglichkeit der einzelne Bau sich vielfältig in überwiegend neuen und neu gesehenen Abbildungen repräsentierte [...] Ich bin der Überzeugung, daß auf diese Weise ein neues Material am übersichtlichsten zu publizieren ist. Wir haben keine Zeit, Substanzkörnchen einem dickleibigen Werk herauszupicken, und kein Geld mehr, ein solches zu drucken.'

³⁹ Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung...', 148: 'Es ist schließlich unerheblich, welche Meinungen und Wünsche jemand hat, der sich zwar mit der Baukunst der Vignola-Zeit beschäftigt, doch keinesfalls als Kenner der piemontesischen Baukunst angesehen werden darf.' This proves, nevertheless, that Brinckmann had read the articles on Palladio and Serlio that Argan had published as a student. See Argan, 'Andrea Palladio e la critica neo-classica', *L'Arte* 33: 1, 1930, 327-346; 'Sebastiano Serlio'.

⁴⁰ Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung...', 148: 'Anders ist es, wenn gelegentlich dieser insubstanziellen Rezension Argan unter dem Stichwort "gusto piemontese" [...] Definitionen gibt, die bestenfalls nur sehr bedingt richtig, häufiger jedoch falsch sind. Schon Tatsachen, mit denen Argan seine Konstruktion des gusto piemontese stützt, sind schief interpretiert.'

⁴¹ Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung...', 148: 'Diese Epoche [...] wird nun die Grundlage eines von Argan konstruierten "gusto piemontese", wobei die Frage nicht einmal gestellt wird, ob denn solch eherner gusto sich schon in der Renaissance, in der piemontesischen Gotik erwiesen habe.'

⁴² Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung...', 149: 'Argan macht den fundamentalen Fehler - und dagegen wende ich mich nun prinzipiell - an die Beständigkeit, sagen wir nationale Verankerung eines Geschmacks zu glauben.'

Zeitkomplexe ('temporal complexes').⁴³ Brinckmann here developed a theory of so-called *Dynamische Komplexe* ('dynamic complexes') which encompass the sum of all 'spiritual forces' that drive artistic production in a given period.⁴⁴ The core argument here was that art manifests constant and shifting characteristics which are unique to region and period; the former of which are ultimately a product of 'people and race' (which 'carry the forces' of the *Dynamische Komplexe*); the latter of which are caused by interaction between different *Dynamische Komplexe*.⁴⁵

As an example of this phenomenon Brinckmann, in his response to Argan, argued that the innovations of non-Roman architects such as Bramante, Maderno, Borromini and Bernini occurred because they fused their native style with the local style they encountered in Rome.⁴⁶ Similarly, as for the case of Piedmontese Baroque, the Modenese Guarini and the Messinese Juvarra altered the *gusto piemontese* because they brought their national (i.e., racial) heritage into Piedmont. However, he continued, 'national constants' (*Nationale Konstante*) are typically vague, hard to pinpoint, and do not necessarily crystalize in individual works.⁴⁷ Still, their nature (or essence) may be detectable in the average artistic character of a particular nation in a particular period. '*Gusto*', on the other hand, 'is more variable, subjective and conditional'.⁴⁸

Therefore, in Brinckmann's estimation, both the Savoyard state's artistic inclinations in the wake of becoming a kingdom in 1713, and Juvarra's architectural achievements after arriving in Piedmont as the king's architect in 1714, must be understood in the context of 'the procreative soil of Piedmont' ('*der zeugungswillige Boden Piemonts*'). Without the article on '*Zeitkomplexe*' in mind, this phrasing would seem ambiguous. One could, after all, read '*zeugungswilliger Boden*' as a metaphorical expression indicating that the social environment of Piedmont was particularly receptive to new influences at the time and that this contributed to previously unknown architectural achievements. This somewhat commonsensical

⁴³ Brinckmann, 'Zeitkomplexe und Dynamische Komplexe in der neueren Zeit', *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*, 46, 1925, 3-14.

⁴⁴ Brinckmann, 'Zeitkomplexe...', 11: 'Unter einem dynamischen Komplex der Kunstgeschichte verstehe ich die Summe aller der geistigen Kräfte, die zu einem bestimmten Zeitabschnitt in der künstlerischen Produktion [...] schöpferisch sich auswirken.'

⁴⁵ Brinckmann, 'Zeitkomplexe...', 11: 'Die einzelnen Kräfte oder Elemente der dynamischen Komplexe sind als Funktionen des anschaulichen Denkens überhaupt anzusehen, die sich in der verschiedenen Veranlagung und Befähigung der einzelnen Kräfteträger, Volk und Rasse, manifestieren. [...] Konstante Elemente erklären die Kontinuität der kunstgeschichtlichen Wandlung. Die großen Wandlungen aber erfolgen durch die Auswirkung dieser dynamischen Komplexe aufeinander.'

⁴⁶ Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung...', 149: 'Etwa, wie sich auf römischem Boden, im römischen Ambiente die Geistigkeit oberitalienischer Künstler umformte: als Folge davon dann bei den Oberitalienern Bramante, Maderno, Borromini, dem Florentiner-Neapolitaner Bernini die reichen Leistungen, die neue fruchtbare Synthese aus Fremdem und Römischem.'

⁴⁷ Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung...', 149: 'Niemals wird eine einzige Epoche diese Konstante in Reinheit zur Erscheinung bringen.'

⁴⁸ Brinckmann, 'Zur Erwiderung...', 149: "'Gusto" aber ist variabler, subjektiver, bedingter [...]'

reading collapses, however, in a later paragraph, when Brinckmann refers to the ways in which ‘recent biological research’ (without citing any sources) has confirmed how individuals are transformed by the ‘enormous force of the soil’.⁴⁹ In other words – it is important to stress that this was meant literally – Brinckmann’s argument at this point stipulates that Juvarra’s works must be understood as a product of the architect’s national (i.e., racial) background on the one hand, and the Piedmontese soil onto which he arrived in 1714 on the other. He further claimed this mechanism to be ‘the law of the eighteenth century’, a law by which local stagnation yielded to international influence.⁵⁰ As expounded by Branko Mitrović in his recent *Rage and Denials*, ‘*Blut und Boden*’ (‘blood and soil’) arguments – seeking to establish connections between geography and ethnicity – proliferated in the interwar era, not only in the writings of prominent architectural historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin but also in best-selling histories such as Oswald Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*.⁵¹

Brinckmann finally concluded, however, that his *Theatrum* was not dealing strictly with any matters relating to *gusto* or *Zeitkomplexe*. Rather, it sought to extend the knowledge of a subject ‘to which art history had been indifferent since the days of Burckhardt’.⁵² Regardless of this, the political implications of Argan and Brinckmann’s disagreements had become overly clear on this point. Before discussing Argan’s response, it is worth discussing some of the politics lurking in interwar architectural historiography.

Positivism and idealism in interwar architectural historiography

With the rise of romantic-idealist historiography in the interwar period, the Baroque transpired to be a controversial subject among architectural historians, albeit not as a matter of taste, as it had been in the nineteenth century, but as the fulcrum of heated disciplinary debates.⁵³ The Argan-Brinckmann polemic was only one among many scholarly exchanges in which various aspects of the Baroque were discussed in relation to historical methodology. By this time, general periodization had long since been established in the field, and many scholars made significant efforts to explain not only how but also why architectural styles developed the way they did, often by pinpointing the ‘essence’ or ‘nature’ of given periods and regions. Claims about art and architecture as predetermined products of their age, culture, nation or

⁴⁹ Brinckmann, ‘Zur Erwiderung...’, 149: ‘Wir wissen aus jüngsten biologischen Untersuchungen, welch enorme Kraft dem Boden für die rein konstitutionelle Umbildung des Individuum zuzusprechen ist.’

⁵⁰ Brinckmann, ‘Zur Erwiderung...’, 149: ‘Denn das ist ein Gesetz des XVIII. Jahrhunderts: lokale Verhaftung muß jetzt völlig internationaler Bezogenheit weichen.’

⁵¹ Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*, 66-70.

⁵² Brinckmann, ‘Zur Erwiderung...’, 150: ‘Mein Buch hielt sich bewußt und streng von diesen allgemeineren Fragen fern. Es wollte Tatsachen geben, Materialquellen kritisch und formanalytisch bearbeiten auf einem Gebiet, an dem seit Jakob Burckhardt die Kunstgeschichte gleichgültig vorübergegangen ist.’

⁵³ Levy’s *Baroque and the Political...* explores this shift comprehensively. More recent studies on this subject can be consulted in *The Baroque in Architectural Culture, 1880-1980*, Andrew Leach, John Macarthur and Maarten Delbeke, eds, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015.

ethnic group prevailed. Scepticism towards, or rejection of, standard historical methodology was also a widespread phenomenon which added fuel to the ideological fire that blazed in the history of art and architecture.

Claudio Gamba has suggested that Argan's negative review of the *Theatrum* was inspired by another interwar 'skirmish', as Evonne Levy has recently put it, namely the one that took place between Wittkower and Hans Sedlmayr over the preceding two years.⁵⁴ Gamba's assertion is that Argan, by taking a stand against Brinckmann, intended to position himself politically and partake in a greater alliance against scholars with ties to Nazism.⁵⁵ Theories of art and architecture as a manifestation of the collective (be it race, culture, nation or the like) were so widespread in the decades before 1933, especially in German speaking scholarship, that it can be difficult to distinguish between 'Nazis' and 'non-Nazis' in the years up until 1933.⁵⁶ With historical hindsight, however, it is not unreasonable to link the Argan-Brinckmann case to the confrontation between one of the most influential Austrian art historians, Sedlmayr, later known to have been a member of the Austrian Nazi Party at the time, and one of the most prominent Jewish art historians, Wittkower, who was forced leave Germany only a few years later.

The prelude to the Wittkower-Sedlmayr debate had been the latter's review of Eduard Coudenhove-Erthal's monograph on Carlo Fontana of 1930. Wittkower found it necessary to come to Coudenhove-Erthal's aid after Sedlmayr's accusation of employing outdated methods. The debate developed into a cumbersome quarrel over two of Fontana's churches. Although the point of contention was architectural at first, irreconcilable theoretical disagreements in methodology – not without political connotations – were boiling underneath the surface. The disputatious Sedlmayr – perhaps the most radical proponent of alternative art historiography at the time and at the forefront of the so-called Second Vienna School – habitually professed his controversial theories by employing examples from Baroque architecture, his favourite topic.⁵⁷ He also asserted his 'political antisemitism' in private letters to his Jewish colleague Meyer Schapiro during the early 1930s, at the

⁵⁴ Levy, 'Sedlmayr and Wittkower (1931-1932), More than a Skirmish' (*Selva: A Journal of the History of Art*, 2, 2020, 51-59). An English translation of the debate is provided by Daniel Spaulding in the same volume. The original articles can be consulted in *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur*, 3/4, 1930-32: Hans Sedlmayr, 'Eduard Coudenhove-Erthal, Carlo Fontana und die Architektur des römischen Spätbarocks. – Wien, Schroll. 1930', 93-95; Wittkower, 'Zu Hans Sedlmayrs Besprechung von E. Coudenhove-Erthal: Carlo Fontana', 142-145; Sedlmayr, 'Zum Begriff der 'Strukturanalyse' (Noch einmal Coudenhove-Erthal's Fontana-Monographie)', 146-160.

⁵⁵ Gamba, 'Cronologia...', 474.

⁵⁶ Mitrović, 'Romantic Worldview as a Narcissistic Construct', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 9, 2013.

⁵⁷ See Christopher S. Wood, ed, *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, New York: Zone Books, 2000. E.g., Sedlmayr's dubious analyses of Borromini's San Carlo as a demonstration of *Gestaltetes Sehen* ('constructed vision') in Sedlmayr, "Gestaltetes Sehen", *Belvedere: Monatsschrift für Sammler und Kunstfreunde*, 8, 1925, 65-73.

same time dismissing ‘racial antisemitism’ in the same breath.⁵⁸ In his critique of standard historical methods in favour of *Strukturanalyse* (‘structural analysis’) by way of Gestalt methodology, the Baroque came across as the ideal kind of architecture when exploring what Wittkower, on his part, scornfully classified as alleged ‘structures and hidden laws’ of artworks.⁵⁹ Levy has made it clear how this dispute crystalized the deep split between Wölfflin’s school of *Stilgeschichte* (‘history of styles’) and the Vienna School of *Kunstwissenschaft* (‘science of art’).⁶⁰ The former worked by the standards of formalism and rigorous philological inquiry. The latter insisted on the notion that – as Sedlmayr put it – each artwork must be seen as a structural whole carrying intrinsic meanings.⁶¹ Moreover, Sedlmayr had already claimed styles to be products of objective spirits, as accounted for in his interpretation of Alois Riegl’s 1890s neologism *Kunstwollen* (‘artistic will’) in 1927.⁶² This may be understood as an attempt to bridge the gap between positivist and idealist approaches since it declares mental processes – traditionally understood as something belonging to the realm of the ‘spirit’ (or in German ‘*Geist*’) and therefore more or less detached from the material world – as objective. Overall, interwar

⁵⁸ See Levy, ‘Sedlmayr and Schapiro Correspond, 1930–1935’, *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 59, 2010, 235–263.

⁵⁹ The most notorious of which being his ‘Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft’ (*Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, 1, 1931, 7–32) in which he famously drew a sharp line between ‘first’ and ‘second science of art’ (*erste und zweite Kunstwissenschaft*). *Strukturforschung* encompasses the detection of patterns and meanings in artworks. For a comprehensive introduction to this subject, see Ian Verstegen, ‘Materializing Strukturforschung’, in *German Art History and Scientific Thought: Beyond Formalism*, Daniel Adler and Mitchell B. Frank, eds, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, 141–160. Wittkower, ‘Zu Hans Sedlmayrs Besprechung...’, 142: ‘S. [Sedlmayr] stellt generell fest, daß C.-E.s Buch eine gute, nach außerkünstlerischen Gesichtspunkten angelegte Materialsammlung sei: ein “anschließendes Werk” der “ersten Kunstwissenschaft” (was, wie aus obigem hervorgeht, gerade nicht der Fall ist). Scharf sondernd hebt S. hiergegen diejenige Betrachtungsweise ab, die die Kunstwerke selbst, ihre Struktur und ihre geheimen Gesetze betrifft.’

⁶⁰ Levy, ‘...More than a Skirmish’, 58.

⁶¹ Sedlmayr called for a deeper understanding of artworks that went beyond the formal and the factual in “Zu einer strengen...”, 9: ‘Aber nicht nur “Teile” und Teileigenschaften der Kunstwerke kann man erfassen, ohne von ihrem *künstlerischen Gehalt, Sinn und Bau* etwas verstanden zu haben - auch Eigenschaften, die den Gebilden als *Ganzen* zukommen, lassen sich so konstatieren. [*italics mine*]’

⁶² Sedlmayr, ‘Die Quintessenz der Lehren Riegls’ in Alois Riegl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Augsburg and Vienna: Dr. Benno Filser Verlag, 1929, XVIII: ‘Dieser “überindividueller Wille” ist ebenso wie der “objektive Geist” getragen von einer Gruppe von Menschen. Und obwohl er weder eine “in mystischer Weise zwischen den einzelnen Individuen schwebende Substanz” noch etwas Phänomenales, das heißt in dem bewußten Seelenleben der einzelnen Individuen Aufweisbares ist, wie zum Beispiel die individuellen Vornahmehandlungen, ist er wie der “Geist” etwas Reales, und zwar eine reale Kraft.’ For an extended discussion of various interpretations of the term *Kunstwollen*, see Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*, 38–41. For an exploration of other curious neologisms used in the Baroque studies of this period, see Ute Engel, ‘Against Formalism: Aspects of the Historiography of the Baroque in Weimar Germany, 1918–33’ in *The Baroque in Architectural Culture*, 97–108.

architectural historiography was permeated by similar discussions. Concepts that were intended to explain the essence behind general tendencies throughout the history of art and architecture proliferated.

Some parallels in the two abovementioned debates are obvious. As for the historiographical aspects, in both cases a deep split between what one might call 'positivist' and 'idealist' methods transpires. The 'positivist' branch (Brinckmann and Wittkower) advocated hard facts, formalism and conscientious sourcework as the core of the field. The 'idealists' (Argan and Sedlmayr) emphasized historical analogies by intellectualizing cultural aspects beyond obvious matters of fact, as well as the importance of inquiring into history's 'spiritual substances' in order to obtain new insights beyond what standard methods might offer. This complicates the political frontlines drawn by Gamba. The following section seeks to clarify these difficulties.

Careers and politics

Argan's political orientation at the time of the debate with Brinckmann is ambiguous and one must not forget his young age. Shortly after graduating on 13 June 1931, Argan joined Lionello Venturi, his professor and sworn anti-fascist, when the latter moved to Rome in order to succeed his father Adolfo as Chair of Art History at the Sapienza. The great influence the younger Venturi had on Argan at this time supports Claudio Auria's thesis which infers that, most likely, Argan's enrolment in the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* was predominantly motivated by a career strategy that looked beyond the world of politics.⁶³ In 1934, documented anonymous allegations were directed against Argan, calling into question his loyalty to the Fascist cause.⁶⁴ It is, however, not necessarily self-evident that an opponent of Italian fascism would be equally opposed to Nazism during these first years of the 1930s. The Axis was officially formed only in 1936. Moreover, Argan later served the *Fascist Ministry of National Education* (as *ispettore* from 1933 and *provveditore* from 1936) under Cesare Maria De Vecchi, who deliberately targeted young up-and-coming academics and professionals for new appointments.⁶⁵

In August 1931, after less than two months at the Sapienza, Venturi's political convictions forced him to step down and he subsequently left Italy. Remaining in Rome, Argan frequented various academic institutions and at the Biblioteca Hertziana, according to Gamba, he became acquainted with Wittkower.⁶⁶ Wittkower's invective against Sedlmayr was written in October 1931 and Argan's review of the *Theatrum* surfaced in the first issue of *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* in June 1932. Given these circumstances, Gamba's theory might not be improbable. Still, it is not obvious that the reputation of Sedlmayr and Brinckmann was at this point associated with Nazism. True, Sedlmayr was member a of the Austrian Nazi Party from 1930 to 1932 and re-joined it as an '*Illegaler*' shortly before the *Anschluss*

⁶³ Auria, 'Note...', 194f.

⁶⁴ Auria, 'Note...', 196.

⁶⁵ Auria, 'Note...', 195.

⁶⁶ Gamba, 'Cronologia...', 474.

of 1938.⁶⁷ Still, whether Wittkower was aware of Sedlmayr's party membership when he wrote his polemic in 1931 is not clear, but also not unlikely. Brinckmann, in turn, joined the *NSDAP* only in March 1933, immediately after the election victory.

Politically, both Sedlmayr and Brinckmann were indeed conservative nationalists but with regard to theoretical orientation and historiography, Sedlmayr was a radical idealist and Brinckmann more of a stern traditionalist. Already in Brinckmann's *Plastik und Raum* of 1922, he explicitly dissociated himself from the abstract *Begriffsphilosophie* (philosophy of concepts) promoted by Hegelians and the Idealist movement, in favour of a formalist approach to architecture which he termed *Anschaungsphilosophie* (a philosophy of visual observation).⁶⁸ His work on Piedmontese Baroque architecture as rendered in the *Theatrum* – with emphasis on archival sources and graphic material (constituting about three fourths of the book) – suggests a strong inclination towards what Sedlmayr would dismiss as '*erste Kunstwissenschaft*' ('first science of art', meaning traditional art historiography).⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the works of both Sedlmayr and Brinckmann promoted ideas – be it related to *Geist* or *Rasse* – that made it easy for them to promote the National Socialist cause in the time to come, which they also did.

Argan's clarification of his critique

Having been blackballed by *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, Argan had to submit his counterresponse to Brinckmann elsewhere. It surfaced in September 1933 in *L'Arte* which was directed by Adolfo Venturi and in which Argan had already published several papers. In this final contribution to the polemic, he sought to clarify his methodological critique of Brinckmann's *Theatrum* by elaborating on some fundamental problems regarding the relationship between architecture and the collective which produces it. Additionally, he deemed the *Theatrum's* documentational approach – which Brinckmann justified by the subject's immature state – as 'a common excuse for historians who are unable to think'.⁷⁰ He also reprimanded Brinckmann for his elitist attitude towards the opinions of 'non-specialists'.⁷¹

The main problem, as Argan saw it, was that, in his estimation, there existed a fundamental methodological distinction between the task of the philologist and the historian. The former 'collects documents and facts' whereas the latter 'revives

⁶⁷ Frederic J. Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, 282 n. 94.

⁶⁸ Brinckmann, *Plastik und Raum als Grundform Künstlerischer Gestaltung*, Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1924, 83.

⁶⁹ As opposed to '*zweite Kunstwissenschaft*' ('second science of art') which represented Sedlmayr's methodological ideals, accounted for in Sedlmayr, 'Zu einer strengen...'.
⁷⁰ Argan, 'Per una Storia...', 391: 'L'immatunità dei problemi storici è una scusa frequente per quegli scrittori di storia che non sanno pensare [...]'

⁷¹ Argan, 'Per una Storia...', 391: '[...] il Brinckmann non riconosce il diritto di discutere la sua opera se non agli "specialisti" [...]'

history in his mind'.⁷² This methodological confusion, he continued, was the reason why Brinckmann had interpreted the concept of *gusto piemontese* in a 'positivist manner', which again led him to the erroneous conclusion that the *gusto piemontese* is related to 'the persistence of artistic features within the race'.⁷³ Therefore, he continued, Brinckmann was mistaken when he placed the *gusto piemontese* in a taxonomic rank above *barocco piemontese* in a genus-species relationship. On the contrary, Argan argued, they are equivalent.⁷⁴ The reason why he had preferred the former term was that, the way he saw it, Piedmont in itself has no historical justification for the formal features of a Piedmontese Baroque style per se.⁷⁵ Therefore, the term *gusto piemontese* was more suitable since it is not defined as the 'distinctive quality of a group of artistic facts' but as a '*momento culturale*' (cultural moment).⁷⁶ 'The inherent features of race', Argan continued, 'belong to the physical world' whereas 'culture', on the other hand, 'belongs to the spiritual world and there is no interference between the two worlds that does not degenerate into confusion'.⁷⁷ Accordingly, he rejected Brinckmann's interpretation of *gusto* as something along the lines of *Nationale Konstante*.

At first glance, it might appear somewhat surprising that Argan's critique of Brinckmann's claims about architecture and race materialized as a reproval of positivism. Although racism in the name of science was a widespread phenomenon at the time, it is somewhat remarkable that a critic of such views could implicitly recognize them as aligned with the materialist worldview in the sense that positivists – according to their critics – tendentially focus too much on the material, yet provable aspects of their research subjects. Brinckmann did not cite any specific sources when referring to 'recent biological research' and Argan's critique aimed exactly at the lack of substantiation behind Brinckmann's claims. Argan dismissed race as a methodologically invalid explanation since '*Nationale Konstante*', as he wrote, is a contradiction in terms given that the concept 'national' means continuous evolution and is therefore not constant. He further noted that 'national' in the sense of ethnicity is a 'fictive concept and antihistorical *par excellence*'; it entails the 'mythology of forces and potencies as acting in the world and even in the age'

⁷² Argan, 'Per una Storia...', 392: 'Infatti, io rimproverai al Brinckmann, non tanto di non aver compilato un *Corpus*, quanto di non aver saputo decidere tra l'attività del filologo, che raccoglie documenti e fatti, e quella dello storico, che li rivive nel pensiero.'

⁷³ Argan, 'Per una Storia...', 392: 'La stessa confusione metodologica induce il Brinckmann a interpretare positivisticamente, come persistenza di caratteri artistici connaturati alla razza, la mia definizione di "gusto piemontese".'

⁷⁴ Argan, 'Per una Storia...', 392: 'Nè [Brinckmann] intende che tra "gusto piemontese" e "Barocco piemontese" non v'è rapporto di genere e specie, ma di equivalenza [...]'

⁷⁵ Bianca Tavassi La Greca discusses Argan and later scholars' interpretation of the term 'Piedmontese Baroque' in the article 'Argan e l'Architettura del Seicento e del Settecento in Piemonte' in Gamba, ed, *Giulio Carlo Argan...*, 287-292.

⁷⁶ Argan, 'Per una Storia...', 393: 'Inoltre, il termine "gusto piemontese" non definisce la qualità caratterizzante di un gruppo di fatti artistici, ma un momento culturale.'

⁷⁷ Argan, 'Per una Storia...', 393: 'Infine, i caratteri connaturati alla razza appartengono al mondo fisico, la cultura al mondo dello spirito: e tra i due mondi non v'è interferenza che non degeneri in confusione.'

despite the fact that ‘nobody knows where they come from and who produces them’.⁷⁸ With regard to architectural historiography in particular, Argan added that the *Theatrum* was too much focused on the *Bauentwicklung* (architectural development) of the ‘physical world’ in favour of the *gusto* of the ‘spiritual world’. In conclusion, he repudiated Brinckmann’s methodological approach for not engaging in the ‘spirit which created the artistic forms’ in question.⁷⁹

The distinction between material and spiritual in Argan’s critique raise some confusing issues and implications. On the one hand, he refuted the ‘mythology of forces and potencies’ – virtually the core of the romantic-idealist ideology promoted by scholars who Ernst Gombrich would later refer to as ‘mythmakers’ – by pointing out its lack of substantiation.⁸⁰ On the other hand, he dismissed what he understood as Brinckmann’s positivist (i.e., materialist) understanding of history by insisting on an invocation of the *gusto* of the spirit of the specific culture. Whether this was an act of fighting fire with fire or simply a critique against the wrong kind of idealism remains unclear. In many respects, Argan’s theory of architectural history was at this point in alignment with the ideas of Sedlmayr, who insisted on the existence of an ‘absolute spirit’ governing artistic creativity throughout history, only by way of different phrasing. Sedlmayr – on the opposite end of the political spectrum from Argan – also denied the relevance of ‘race’ in the history of art and architecture but, as Mitrović has pointed out, not without self-contradiction.⁸¹

Conclusion

The core conflict in the Argan-Brinckmann polemic was not so much whether it was more reasonable to speak of a Piedmontese Baroque style *per se* or merely Baroque architecture in Piedmont, nor whether historians should be pedantic taxonomists or interpretative (or even speculative) virtuosi. Rather, both Argan and Brinckmann failed to consider architecture independently of the historical circumstances in which it had been produced. For the former, architecture mirrored the *gusto* of its culture and for the latter, the race of its nation. Both ideologies failed to consider architecture as an art of universal characteristics that can be created, admired and studied by individuals regardless of their collective affiliation. By this it is not meant that the two scholars actually failed to do so in their works on architectural history. Rather, when finding themselves at a loss for a justification of their theoretical views

⁷⁸ Argan, ‘Per una Storia...’, 393: ‘Anche perché la “Nationale Konstante” è un’astrazione fatta di termini contraddittori. Infatti, o il concetto di “nationale” s’intende storicamente, e allora vale come continuo divenire che contraddice al termine “costante”; o s’intende in senso etnico e allora si ricade nella fisicità con quel fittizio concetto di “razza” ch’è per eccellenza antistorico; tanto che trae con sé la mitologia delle Forze e delle Potenze, che agiscono sul mondo, anzi sul “secolo”, senza che si sappia di dove vengano e chi le produca.’

⁷⁹ Argan, ‘Per una Storia...’, 393: ‘[...]“gusto” e “Bauentwicklung” sono termine che si escludono, poiché la “Bauentwicklung” non è che una trasposizione del concetto di “gusto” dal concreto all’astratto, cioè l’evoluzione delle forme artistiche in se stesse, avulse dallo spirito che le ha create [...]’

⁸⁰ Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, London: Phaidon Press, 1984 [1960], 15.

⁸¹ Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*, 67.

and the historic methods these entail, they painted themselves into two separate corners: one of cultural determinism and one of racial determinism.⁸² The first is generally associated with left wing politics and the second with right wing politics but, as has been shown, figures like Sedlmayr dramatically complicate such dichotomies.

The political turbulence of the early 1930s is admittedly a complicating factor when considering the historiographical differences between Argan and Brinckmann. The rise of totalitarianism forced scholars to take sides and, for posterity, these politics constitute a confusing yet inescapable backdrop in virtually all historical studies on interwar affairs. It is not uncommon for historiography to be deeply marked by contemporary explanatory models, and the twentieth-century international reception of Piedmontese Baroque architecture is no exception in this respect. For Brinckmann, the views expressed in previous scholarship aligned well with the ideology of the new regime, enabling him to sustain his career until the fall of the Third Reich. For Argan, who was only in the early phase of building his career, politics was probably more of a complicating factor. Yet, history has shown how he astutely managed to remain not just afloat but, one might say, successfully surfing the many significant waves of changing regimes.

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⁸² It should, however, be noted that Argan took a far more moderate stand later in his career. In the article 'La "Rettorica" e l'Arte Barocca' (in Argan, *Studi e Note dal Bramante al Canova*, Rome: Mario Bulzoni editore, 1970, 167-176) of 1955, he argued that the consideration of the Baroque solely as a manifestation of Counter-Reformation ideology (i.e., as a social or cultural capacity) is reductionistic and 'simply absurd'. See 'La "Rettorica"...' 173: '[...] sarebbe semplicemente assurdo ridurre tutta la tematica barocca alle tesi religiose della Controriforma [...]'. Andrew Hopkins has called for a closer consideration of Argan's impact on Baroque studies (especially the abovementioned article) in his critical review 'Not enough Baroque' (*Kunstchronik*, 66: 3, 2013, 118-121. <https://doi.org/10.11588/kc.2013.3.81104> accessed 09.10.2022).