

## 'What I wanted was concepts': Michael Baxandall's intellectual Odyssey

*Michael Baxandall, Vision and the Work of Words*, edited by Peter Mack and Robert Williams, Farnham UK and Burlington VT, Ashgate, 2015, xii +175 pp, 16 col. Plates, £ 60 hdbk, ISBN 9781472442789.

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The elegantly concise introduction to this volume (1-8), subtitled "Of Tact and Moral Urgency", is indicative of the editors' proclivity to offer a prefatory piece that at once goes to the heart of two distinctive aspects of Baxandall's meditations on 'method', and subtly imitates his terse prose style. Their selection of a text from Baxandall consisting of but ten words signifies their desire to adopt a critical stance that reveals their own immersion in the problematics that arise in this author, perhaps the most seductive yet unknowable art historian of his generation. They write:

A striking and much-remarked moment in Michael Baxandall's work is found at the very end of the chapter on Chardin's *Lady Taking Tea* in *Patterns of Intention*. There, having analyzed the picture so exactly in relation to eighteenth-century optical theory, he pauses to say of the woman depicted that she is 'probably Chardin's first wife a few weeks before her death'. The effect of this abrupt aside is complex. On the one hand, it signals a potential aspect of the picture's interest that Baxandall himself has chosen not to pursue; it draws attention to the limited, circumscribed nature of the argument he is making. By treating such personal information almost as if it were an afterthought, moreover, he seems to be challenging us, daring us, to think him so preoccupied with his preferred mode of analysis, so callous, that he has forgotten about the human content of the image. At the same time, it feels as though he is scolding us for our prurience, our misplaced curiosity. Is his purpose thus to dismiss a clumsy kind of art-historical contextualism, a vulgar social history of art? Or is he confessing to his own inadequacy, a lack of psychological and emotional sensitivity sufficient to deal with those aspects of the picture in an appropriate way? Perhaps, he is saying, pictures deserve a measure of privacy.

The passage is a brilliant contemplation of a putative reader's experience, one tinged with the uncertainty triggered by Baxandall's comment. In writing that 'it feels as though' Baxandall may be 'challenging us, daring us' or 'scolding us' for 'our prurience, our misplaced curiosity', or 'confessing his own inadequacy, a lack of psychological and emotional sensitivity sufficient to deal with those aspects of the picture in an appropriate way', the editors prepare the reader for a collection of studies that will be unusually intrusive, in the context of the existing corpus of art historiography. They are asking the reader to consider whether Baxandall's published, unpublished, and posthumous works, and the art historical method that

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the contemporary theorist might expectantly seek to discover in them, are really as accessible as one might assume.

One is moved to ask, what is it about Baxandall's work that is so elusive, and that elicits an approach that one normally finds devoted to the critical biographies of purely literary authors rather than art historians? One sliver of the answer resides in the fact that five of the contributors to the volume (Elizabeth Cook, Evelyn Lincoln, Jules Lubbock, Peter Mack, and Alex Potts) were students of Baxandall either at the Warburg Institute or at Berkeley, and therefore lived that exchange between student and teacher which sometimes affords personal insights otherwise unretrievable. An equally substantive explanation lies in the book's title's phrase, 'Vision and the Work of Words'. The collection makes clear the necessity of inquiry into the totality of Baxandall's writing, as novelist, memoirist, essayist, art history book author, and perhaps most significantly, theorist and practitioner of the problematic relation of words and pictures embodied in what he preferred to call 'art criticism'. Yet the assertion that Baxandall's literary strategies in analyzing visual phenomena might appear puzzling even to (or especially to) a reader immersed in professional art history, warns the reader, in a curious application of *captatio benevolentiae*, that he/she is going to require unusual effort to winkle Baxandall out of his shell.

The question posed, how does Baxandall suggest he should 'deal with' aspects of a picture 'in an appropriate way', and that perhaps, in his comment on Chardin's *Lady* he was saying that 'pictures deserve a measure of privacy', are calculated to suggest that a profoundly personal conception of methodological decorum was at work in Baxandall's writing. That the editors explicate this idea of decorum in the introduction, expressed in Baxandall's terms 'tact' and 'restraint', together with his related concept of 'moral urgency', allows them to retrieve vital evidence from its relatively inaccessible place (for the general reader) in Baxandall's later oral recollections in interview situations.<sup>1</sup> The *Patterns of Intention* passage, and another from *Shadows and Enlightenment*, both produce, for the editors, 'an effect' in the reader, when Baxandall 'stops to acknowledge something of all that he has left out'. They explain:

The effect is to point up the highly focused, even obsessive concentration of his own inquiry, but also to indicate the potential scope and depth of the issue he has raised, the richness of its implications for future study. For his own part, he will not presume to decide for the viewer what the metaphysical expressivity of the shadow language at work in Chardin's still-lives may be. People who look at pictures also deserve a measure of privacy.

<sup>1</sup> Among these are 'Substance, Sensation, and Perception: Michael Baxandall interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith', Getty Research Institute 1998 ([http://archives.getty.edu:30008/getty\\_images/digitalresources/spcoll/gr940109\\_baxandall\\_transcript.pdf](http://archives.getty.edu:30008/getty_images/digitalresources/spcoll/gr940109_baxandall_transcript.pdf)); Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Interview with Michael Baxandall', *Res*, 2 (2008): 42-54; Alan Langdale, 'Interview with Michael Baxandall', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2009 (<http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-1-december-2009/1-AL/1>)

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If both pictures and people who look at pictures deserve 'privacy' what exactly does Baxandall offer his reader, or expect the reader to discover? The editors find it essential to explain first that Baxandall's concept of 'tact' determines what most historiographers, but not Baxandall himself, would describe as his 'methodology':

In one of the interviews he gave toward the end of his career, he insisted that 'tact' is more important than 'method'. Although his attitude is sometimes thought to imply a rejection of method, it should rather be understood to involve a recognition of the need for sensitivity to the built-in limitations of our various analytical procedures, of language, and of our faculties in general. Since his entire approach to the study of art was governed by this idea and by the constraints it imposes on the kinds of claims we might legitimately make, it could be regarded as itself a methodological principle. Yet it might also be understood to involve something more than constraint: an active element indicated more clearly by the word 'tactical'. His teacher, F.R. Leavis suggested such an idea when he declared that 'the problem of critical method is largely tactical'. Baxandall's emphasis on tact testifies to a sense of critical practice having to be governed by a self-regulating order or protocol of some kind, structured by an inherent decorum. His lifelong project could be described as an effort to fashion the best possible mode of engagement with art: the most comprehensive, penetrating, and empirically rigorous, but also the most flexible and receptive to what may always elude our conceptual and linguistic equipment.

This is an admirably succinct statement of Baxandall's mature method. Concealed here is the editors' process of investigation of scattered gleanings palimpsested in this lucid summary. On the face of it, Baxandall outlined his approach more clearly and revealingly in the interviews conducted late in his life than he ever did in his publications.

The editors (2) describe the 'unlikely' nature of his 'professional *iter*':

Trained in classics at school and in English at Cambridge, he spent a couple of years on the Continent, in Italy, Switzerland, and Germany, originally intending to write a novel but slowly drifting into the serious study of Renaissance history and art. After working in the Photographic Collection of the Warburg Institute and the Sculpture Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum, he was appointed in 1965 to lecture at the Warburg, not on art history but on rhetoric and dialectic.

The phrase 'slowly drifting into' captures the tone of Baxandall's own terminology from his interviews in which he describes his haphazard, almost accidental passage to a teaching position at the Warburg. That favoured recent term from biography and intellectual history, 'trajectory', seems to have no relevance in Baxandall's case. Far from being an art history major destined for postgraduate grooming, the Ph.D. and the usual patronage route into a university teaching position within the one

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discipline, Baxandall was inclined to describe his mental life at university and in the couple of years after as something akin to 'messing about in boats'.<sup>2</sup>

Mack and Williams give (2) a concise account of the relation of Baxandall's research and writing at the Warburg from 1965 to the publication of his first two books:

He began a dissertation under the supervision of E.H. Gombrich but did not finish it, though his research provided him with material for several important articles as well as his first two books. *Giotto and the Orators* (1971) examined the relationship between Renaissance pictures and the conventions of humanist Latin while demonstrating the necessity of attentiveness to language in any self-conscious approach to visual art. The suggestive and highly influential *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972), still his most widely read book, considers the ways in which pictures are informed by the visual, conceptual, and linguistic skills of the people by and for whom they were made.

Baxandall's non-completion of his dissertation would probably have rendered him unemployable in an American university. In the 1960s many leading scholars in the humanities in England held M.A. degrees, some of which (including Baxandall's) had not required a postgraduate thesis, and the group of Austrian and German scholars in art history who resided at the Warburg, most of them refugees from Hitler in the 1930s, were unusual in possessing the doctoral degree in art history. The American universities had adopted the German model much earlier.<sup>3</sup> Baxandall had graduated from Cambridge with an upper-second degree in English and not the coveted 'first', a stigma that could have eliminated entry to postgraduate research degrees and curatorial positions such as he took up at the Victoria and Albert and the Warburg. The absence of rigidity in the British systems, and his good fortune in encountering Gertrud Bing, allowed Baxandall to demonstrate the requisite intellectual gifts. His 'several important articles' of the 1960s were published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (JWCI) which began in 1938 as the *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, with the mission statement devised by Edgar Wind and Rudolf Wittkower: '...the Journal takes for its province the study of Humanism in its widest sense. It seeks to explore the working of symbols – the signs and images created by ancient, and employed by modern generations, as instruments both of enlightenment and of superstition.' Number 4, April 1938, 'a selection of essays written in honour of Fritz Saxl by his friends in London' included contributions from English scholars, including Anthony Blunt. The editors added a monitory note: 'As it does not come within the scope of this Journal to publish studies devoted primarily to questions of attribution or style, the editors have been forced to omit a number of

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind In the Willows* [1933], Illustrated by Ernest H. Shepard, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons: 6.

<sup>3</sup> See Craig Hugh Smyth and Peter Lukehart, *The Early Years of Art History in the United States: Notes and Essays on Departments, Teaching, and Scholars*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993.

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essays which, in view of their interest, it would have been an honour to include.' Rhetoric, Baxandall's initial field at the Warburg, already found its place in Delio Cantimori's essay in issue 2 of that year, 'Rhetoric and Politics in Italian Humanism', but style was seen to belong in *The Burlington Magazine*, designed for connoisseurs. The *JWCI* was never to change its mission and its exclusions. Gombrich, however, was publishing elsewhere analytical studies on concepts of style as early as in *The Story of Art* (1950), *Art and Illusion* (1960) and his essay 'Style' appeared in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* in 1968, when Baxandall was shaping his *JWCI* material for *Giotto and the Orators*. Otto Kurz had published his catalogue of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Baroque drawings in the Royal collections in 1955. And so on, for some other members of the Warburg group. I mention these facts to sharpen our understanding of Baxandall's situation when he arrived at the Warburg and started working on rhetoric, humanism, art history and social history, while contemplating 'style'.

The sub-title to Baxandall's *Painting and Experience* was 'A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style'. Baxandall explicates the 'Style' element at 38-40. Three framing sentences indicate his approach 'We have been moving towards a notion of a Quattrocento cognitive style. By this one would mean the equipment that the fifteenth-century painter's public brought to complex visual stimulations like pictures... We are concerned here with Quattrocento cognitive style as it relates to Quattrocento pictorial style'. The radically new aspect of 'cognitive style' was evident to all of us in 1972. The word 'primer', something less noted, was intentionally provocative, and its rhetorical impact can easily be overlooked. 'Primer', in Anglo-American usage, denotes (in Webster's *New International Dictionary* of 1920 entry, for example: II, 1705) "A small elementary book for teaching children to read; a reading or spelling book for a beginner; hence, any small book of elementary principles of a subject.' A scholar of rhetoric, Baxandall maintained the lapidary deliberative style throughout the book, expounding his new arguments about style in simple, often axiomatic sentences. The book was developed from lectures he delivered to history students. He states in the preface that:

The lectures were meant to show how the *style* of pictures is a proper material of social history. Social facts, I argued, lead to the development of distinctive visual skills and habits: and these...become identifiable elements in the painter's style. With some complications the same argument underlies this book. It is therefore addressed to people with a general historical curiosity about the Renaissance rather than to people interested just in Renaissance painting, who might well find it insensitive and flighty by turns. This is not a way of saying I think it vacuous as art history.

The complex locutions here were, as we know from interviews, designed to irritate people who practiced the 'Courtauld' approach to art history. By characterizing his audience as 'general' and 'curious' Baxandall appeared to align himself with Gombrich, and with visual art seen in relation to cultural and intellectual history. Yet his sub-title contrasted pointedly with Gombrich's heavily weighted one for *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial*

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Representation', while touching on similar dimensions of the 'cognitive' practices of both artists and beholders. Baxandall's throwaway line 'This is not a way of saying I think it vacuous as art history' was as much a challenge to Warburg traditions of image-analysis (Panofsky, Wittkower and Wind) as it was to the particular Courtauld scholars whose work he did not find interesting. In Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, a book that Baxandall repeatedly describes as having stimulated discussion with Gombrich and younger friends, one can detect a corresponding, tetchy direction to the general reader: '...it should be clear by now that this is not a picture book with explanatory letterpress. It is reading matter with explanatory pictures.' Rhetorical antithesis was brandished here to prepare the reader for serious theoretical stuff, while Baxandall disingenuously claimed to be offering an undergraduate ABC 'with some complications'. So when Michael Ann Holly describes *Painting and Experience* as a 'textbook', she is correct, in the definitional sense given above.<sup>4</sup> But if she were saying that she views it in qualitative contrast with Baxandall's later, more 'purely theoretical' (my terms) books, I think that would open a discussion regarding the survival of 'positivist' components in Baxandall's work as a whole.

To return to the editors' introduction, (3) Baxandall's *Limewood Sculptors* (1980) is said to attempt 'a more ambitiously comprehensive and systematic historical contextualization, examining everything from the cellular structure of limewood to the dynamics of commerce to the relation between religion and emergent humanism. As in *Painting and Experience*, the author quarried a refreshingly varied array of primary sources while also structuring the argument in such a way as to offer a methodological model.' The book is thus said to offer the very model that Baxandall was to claim later he had no intention of ever delivering. In this book he certainly exposed every raw analytical nerve, opening up the problematics of 'verbalizing' persuasively about a personal style (123), stating that 'There is no question of fully possessing oneself of another culture's cognitive style', despite the attempt being worthwhile. If anything, the 'period eye' section in this book (143-63) is more sharply focused but less self-convinced in its exposition. The editors then describe how when in 1986 Baxandall took up his dual chairs at Berkeley and the Warburg he had shortly before (1985) published *Patterns of Intention* with its chapters on Picasso, Chardin, and Piero della Francesca, which testified to 'a growing range of interests as well as a more rigorous and finely tuned interrogation of analytical language and procedure'. The preface to this book definitely signalled a change of analytical approach, and in the direction of philosophy (v):

The lectures [of which the book is a revised version] addressed a question: If we offer a statement about the causes of a picture, what is the nature and basis of the statement? More particularly, if we think or speak of a picture as, among other things, a product of situated volition or intention, what is it that we are doing? So the question is, within limits, one about the historical explanation of pictures, though I more often speak of 'inferential criticism' of

<sup>4</sup> Michael Ann Holly, 'Patterns in the Shadows: Attention in/to the writings of Michael Baxandall', in Adrian Rifkin, ed., *About Michael Baxandall*, Oxford and Malden MA, 1999, 5-16

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pictures because this corresponds better with the balance of my interest in the activity.

Characteristically, Baxandall positioned himself as an amateur in this analytical field where description and explanation interact, commenting (1): 'I shall limit myself to pointing – with a quite shaky finger, since this is intricate ground beyond my competence – to three kinds of problem explanatory art criticism seems to meet.' The two later books, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence*, written with Svetlana Alpers (1994), and *Shadows and Enlightenment* (1995), mark a concentration on eighteenth-century topics. As the editors say, 'The first addresses the practical challenge of large-scale decorative painting, the second, the relation between the intimate work of artists like Chardin and the optical theory both of their time and ours.' The editors then turn to Baxandall's plan to write a dissertation on the principle of 'restraint' in Renaissance culture, noting that his interest in the topic had developed 'early on'. They remark perceptively (3): 'His attraction to the principle as an object of historical inquiry thus overlay his sense of its importance to any mode of historical inquiry'. This allows them to assemble statements from *Patterns of Intention* and the interviews regarding Baxandall's insistence that art criticism should merely 'establish a platform from which people can do the last stage themselves', applying 'tact', 'good manners', and an approach that is both 'scientific' and 'sociable'. They see in his work 'a fastidiousness that sometimes irritated even his admirers, a refusal either to rush heedlessly into unsustainable conjecture or to bully readers into accepting apodictic assertions'. Perhaps his most succinct version of this (3) is: 'I don't like art criticism which spells out directly what the narrative feelings of a picture are'. In *Limewood Sculptors* (153) he had identified this 'disposition to infer character and feeling from a representation of a human figure' as a 'strong and deep...constant in the older European art criticism' that had to be resisted. The editors then turn to Baxandall's notion of 'moral urgency', a phenomenon he observed in the teaching of F.R. Leavis at Cambridge. They comment (4):

Apparently antithetical as they may seem, tact and moral urgency should not be understood as opposed to one another but as two aspects of the same fundamental principle, two sides of the same coin: an expression of human sensitivity, tact is a sign of alertness to the dynamic of human concerns that ground and motivate our interest in art in the first place, and is thus a direct expression of what is most pressingly at stake in it.

Mack and Williams identify two places in Baxandall's work where moral urgency 'occasionally' makes itself strikingly felt, one in his account of Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* in *Words for Pictures* (2003) and another from his posthumously published autobiographical sketch, *Episodes* (2010). Such instances, though telling, seem not to be plentiful. The editors wisely comment (6) that Baxandall's 'outright resistance to many trends that went on to become fashionable' is 'part of what makes him interesting and possibly more important than we can now clearly assess'. In fact, the late interviews are almost a comedy of rejections, where interviewers project upon him a presumed series of obligatory (chiefly

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French) intellectual influences, only to have them demolished in series. One of the 'rejects' edges back into in this volume, notably Wittgenstein. We need further study of the origins of this Baxandallian diffidence towards new, but not self-generated theory. I would relate it – beyond the fact of his propensity toward intellectual solitude and originality – to the broader personal struggle many young people educated by Oxbridge scholars at the time experienced, to free themselves gradually and in distinctive ways from their positivist/empiricist training. In the 1970s many of us were, then, like Baxandall, seeking to keep our heads above water in a tsunami of theory, searching selectively through each new wave while still profiting from, but interrogating, our empiricist roots, which bound us to investigate textual and archival sources, and the historical terminology of past societies.

Alex Potts opens the collection with a sharp piece on 'The Visual Conditions of Pictorial Meaning' (9-23), in which he explores the subtle variations in Baxandall's sequential accounts (between 1985 and 2003) of Piero's *Resurrection of Christ* and *Baptism of Christ*, Braque's *Violin and Pitcher*, and Chardin's *Lady Taking Tea*. He sets this investigation against a 'necessarily very speculative' enquiry into how these concerns about 'the historical circumstances informing artistic practices' might 'relate to and differ from the preoccupations with problems of picturing that were circulating in the contemporary art world at the time when his outlook on art and writing about art was being formed in the 1950s and 1960s'. Potts justly notes that Baxandall's 'later thoughts on painting are in their own way just as significant' as his earlier, and much studied, 'exploration of the language of art-critical and art-historical analysis', of 'sculptural aesthetics and the materiality of sculpture, or his often misunderstood reflections on the notion of the period eye'. Potts (10) succinctly describes Baxandall's later theoretical focus:

At issue for him was a very basic question having to do with the nature of pictorial depiction. How does attending closely to the internal processes and subtleties of a painterly depiction prompt one to see something in a painting – whether meaning or affect or some sense of a larger culture – that is not literally there? This in part has to do with very basic processes of seeing a motif or scenario emerge from the forms created by the marks on the surface of a painting. However, it is much more than the mere recognition of what is being depicted. It involves apprehending in the minutiae of the picturing something that brings the depicted motif to life and gives it its larger meaning.

Baxandall (10) arrived at a position on 'the distinctive kind of looking that painting invites' that led him, towards the end of his life, to express stronger interest in 'inattention and what is happening outside of attention', in peripheral vision and what happens for the viewer 'when one's attention wanders'. Potts argues (11) that Baxandall's ultimate account of 'pictorial meaning' and '[t]he process whereby significant meaning gets into the painting...has little to do with conventional iconographic or representational subtleties, the nuts and bolts of the hermeneutic interpretation that have dominated art historical analysis'. Baxandall's approach, Potts suggests, entailed a 'reciprocal hypothesis that the same holds for the painter,



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whose work gains in resonance through his or her focus on the technicalities of picture making, technicalities whose relation to any larger meaning might seem at first sight to be incidental or even inconsequential'. These 'technical-seeming concerns' were preoccupying Baxandall in the 1950s and early 1960s, when he and Michael Podro encountered Gombrich's 'systematic rethinking of pictorial representation', with its 'close engagement with recent scientific studies of visual cognition and perception', only to embrace Richard Wollheim's critique of Gombrich, in search of a theory able to account for 'the more complex and resonant aspects of pictorial depiction'. Potts thoughtfully considers (12) whether the 'intensive preoccupation with painting and painterly process' in contemporary art can be usefully related to Baxandall's 'distinctive concerns'. He examines Dubuffet's practice of 'painterly mark-making' and his interest in inattentiveness, (12-13) but is cautious about claiming any direct influence. He builds (14) a tentative bridge to Dubuffet's figurative paintings via an essay on the sculpture of George Baselitz Baxandall wrote in 2004, but finds firmer terrain in his fascination with works of Braque and Picasso, in *Patterns of Intention*. Here (15) 'the painter's complex problem of good picture-making becomes a serial and continually self-redefining operation, permanent problem-reformulation, as soon as he enters the process of actually painting'. This sentence would serve as a description of Baxandall's own continuous processes of analytical self-definition throughout his career. Potts shows how Baxandall returns to Braque in his late article 'Fixation and Distraction: The Nail in Braque's Violin and Pitcher', as he began to free himself from 'a concern to clarify issues of art-historical methodology', focusing now (17) on how the painting elicits awareness 'of an interplay between focal and peripheral viewing, between fine and coarse registration', engaging in what Baxandall calls 'the visual representation of visual knowledge, and that is a sign not transparent through to some paraphraseable semantic object somehow inside.'

In the final part of his study Potts takes (17-19) Baxandall's 2003 article on Piero's *Resurrection of Christ* as a 'particularly fine instance' of Baxandall's 'more densely articulated discussions of issues of picture making and pictorial depiction'. The *Resurrection* is a picture, one might venture, already recognized within the discipline as unique within its iconographic category, and Baxandall rightly concentrated on its 'visual particularities and apparent awkwardnesses', which, as Potts writes, 'he then envisages as making visually present, in a very indirect way, certain larger Christian thematics of resurrection which would have had a powerful resonance in the painter's immediate cultural environment'. Rather than rehearsing Potts's selective summary of Baxandall's argument, it suffices to give Baxandall's own concise comment, which he quotes (18): 'It would be a pity to reduce this pictorial universe, reverberating in sympathy with the Resurrection of Christ, to a level of questions about whether or not, yes or no, this particular thing stood for that'. A crucial facet, however, of Baxandall's argument in this essay derives from a singularly important piece he published in 1993: 'Pictorially Enforced Signification: St Antoninus, Fra Angelico and the Annunciation', in *Hülle und Fülle: Festschrift für Tilman Buddensieg*, Cologne 1993: 31-399: cited Baxandall 2003, 122, note 6). In the 2003 essay he argues that 'A sort of divergence between pictorial rendering of something and verbal rendering of the same thing is inherent in the instruments

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each employs. One way of thinking about this divergence is as picture and verbal text each being committed to a medium that enforces different systems of discrimination'. In his 2003 study Baxandall himself undertakes to address the traditional art historical techniques of image analysis in relation to Piero's painting, notably iconography, only to dismiss much of its relevance to his inquiry. He also feels the need to account for San Sepolcro's specific civic and religious ambience, much as any art historian influenced by recent social and political history would do.

These forays into 'ordinary' art history serve to differentiate Baxandall's own approach. But his path through to a personal apprehension of the image is less freely executed in Piero's case than in many of his other studies. He found it harder to divest himself of the usual question-sets of the discipline in dealing with this spectacularly original painting from the Quattrocento. Potts interprets this in reverse: 'In his later analysis of Piero's *Resurrection*, he had moved beyond the somewhat self-denying ordinance he had set himself earlier [in 1985] of refusing any assigning of cultural or social historical meaning to the work'. Potts observes, in this respect, that Baxandall's account of Piero's *Baptism of Christ* in *Patterns of Intention*, while adopting 'a somewhat similar approach' to the 2003 essay on the Resurrection, 'does not have the same resonance...in part because he was constrained by the somewhat didactic agenda of the book in which the critical analysis was incorporated'. Potts substantiates this point, beyond question. Yet one suspects that these fluctuations in Baxandall's investigative methods, which he now disposed of, then re-addressed to varying degrees, signify a troubled relationship with not just the hermeneutic habits of Renaissance art history, but with the process of finding a single voice for himself. This is cleverly summarized by Potts near the close of his essay (20):

Baxandall's way of engaging in detailed critical analysis of paintings might be characterized as acrobatic deadpanness. There is a strategic indirectness, with comments about larger meanings presented as tangential afterthoughts, but which then, nevertheless, seem to resonate retrospectively in his punctiliously deliberate analysis of pictorial detail and his matter of fact narration of the cultural realities that might have been at play in a the conception of a work.

Jules Lubbock's chapter (25-47) is entitled: 'To Do a Leavis on Visual Art': The Place of F.R. Leavis in Michael Baxandall's Intellectual Formation'. Lubbock's first paragraph addresses the point I raised above. In his late 1960s teaching Baxandall counselled his students to avoid anachronism in estimating how fifteenth-century spectators would have 'articulated their responses to a work of art', while regarding their critical terms 'to be in many ways inadequate':

Nor did he consider it desirable, let alone possible, to respond only as a beholder contemporary to the work of art would have done. Nevertheless, much of his career was devoted to the study and teaching of what he called 'art and its circumstances', and even if he did not consider that a grasp of the

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latter was a sufficient condition for understanding of the former, he did regard it as a necessary one.

Lubbock utilizes Baxandall's papers in the Department of Manuscripts at Cambridge University Library to study his activities 'from his Cambridge years up to the early 1970s, and upon a single topic, namely his enduring admiration for Leavis and how his ambition "to do a Leavis on visual art" manifested itself'. Lubbock shows (26) that Baxandall, while studying English literature with Leavis at Downing College, was drawn into his 'practical criticism' classes, four sessions per week of 'close reading' and the transmission to students of 'a set of values' that were 'established in exemplary pieces of literature ... read in his way'. Baxandall did, however, yearn for something Leavis would not deliver, 'an explicit method with precepts and procédés', a 'sort of neat driver's manual'. Baxandall composed for himself an 'illegitimate' glossary of four 'key terms' extracted from Leavis's teaching (Standards, Moral Judgements, Art and Morality, Impersonality: texts in Lubbock, Appendix, 38-40). Lubbock examines 'Standards'. For Leavis, Baxandall noted, standards were 'complex and interdependent upon other concepts and activities denoted by other key terms... A poem doesn't exist in the same way as a physical object. It only exists once it has been 'established' ... in the minds of its readers. This is 'to be accomplished through the exercise of 'literary criticism', whereby the experience of the poem is recreated in the minds of readers and shared through collaborative discussion. This in turn depends upon an intelligent 'reading public'. And so on. Lubbock infers that Baxandall's 'disinterring and understanding the key terms of Renaissance art criticism and theory', including those of Alberti, was inspired by Leavis's 'standards and procedures'. Baxandall discovered it was not possible to 'act out' the text and the author in analyzing visual art, however he explored Leavis's approach to 'characteristic movements and dictions of the eighteenth century', to 'social deportment and company manners', suggesting that 'literature is embedded in its 'milieu' through diction and social mores'.

Lubbock documents Baxandall's early reading of Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, and parts of Wölfflin's *Classic Art*. When he enrolled for external BA at the Courtauld in 1955, Baxandall spent time at the Collegio Borromeo in Pavia, taught English in Switzerland and began to study art history in Munich. Lubbock quotes (29) from Baxandall's recollections of Pavia to show that he was contemplating as early as 1955-56 that conceptualizing about visual art was necessary, but that implied grasping the period's own concepts. There were questions to raise about 'the historical frame'. He found a worthy teacher in Munich in Ludwig Heydenreich, who set him working on 'the use of source material for the study of the Ducal Palace in Urbino'. From Baxandall's fragmentary papers, Lubbock reconstructs (30) his approach to the patron's biography, vivid architectural description, and his conviction that one should express 'energy' in 'your response to a work.' Lubbock argues (31-2) that Baxandall's idea of 'doing a Leavis on visual art' persisted 'throughout his career. He traces this, using Baxandall's unstudied papers from Munich and, more importantly, his 60 page draft for the unfinished Ph.D. thesis. Here there is a piece on 'Decorum in Alberti' which Bing had commented on. Lubbock notes: 'Baxandall is highly critical of Alberti's framework of architectural

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theory and criticism, which he considers "to have been too tidy and inflexible" to do justice to the complexities both of the experience of architecture and the job of designing a building'. In a handwritten note Baxandall comments: 'The very clarity of the system seems to give it a certain unreality'. Lubbock brings out significant new details, observing (33) Baxandall's 'hostility to the "driving manual" and his admiration for writing [in rare vernacular passages in Alberti] which is less systematic and more spontaneous, more direct and enthusiastic, in a word, more visceral'. A personal letter to Lubbock from 1970 affords further support: '...Alberti...inhibited people through the difficulty of his equipment...'. Lubbock shows (34) that by the time *Giotto and the Orators* was published (1971) Baxandall had 'moved beyond his crudely polarized admiration for the [Italian] vernacular and condemnation of revived latinity' of his draft on Alberti and Decorum. The manuscripts open a window 'to penetrate the poised scholarly style of the published work to his personal hostility to some aspects of the language of art criticism and history, both Renaissance and modern'.

Lubbock argues that *Painting and Experience* (1972), viewed through the unpublished writings, had the 'ambition...to provide an answer to the problems of neo-classical art criticism aired in *Giotto and the Orators*'. Baxandall's discovery of dancing as one of his 'vernacular visual skills' appears first in a typescript from the early 1960s (35), annotated by Bing. Lubbock describes Baxandall's 'identification' of dancing's relevance as 'an imaginative leap, whose precise trajectory I have not been able to reconstruct': 'It may have been the serendipity of the Warburg Library, where dance is located on the shelves close to cookery, household management, festivals, and the conduct of courtly life, where he may have been looking for material on decorum'. Lubbock makes two additional points: 'dance provided [Baxandall] with trace evidence of key terms in the Italian language, in the vernacular, which Galli and others were applying in their discussion of the visual arts...I think dancing, more than the other vernacular visual skills...provided Baxandall with the kind of shortcut between social life and the visual arts that he found in Leavis, and which he considered to be less problematic for literary than for art criticism'. Lubbock's is a richly documented exploration of the unpublished papers, and his notes also merit close reading.

Alberto Frigo's chapter is entitled 'Baxandall and Gramsci: Pictorial Intelligence and organic Intellectuals' (49-68) The author takes up the challenge posed by Gramsci's absence from Baxandall's art historical publications, save one mention in an endnote to *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence*. His sources (49-51) will be Baxandall's late interviews, his *Episodes*, and *A Grasp of Kaspar*, his posthumously published novel, where in all three the Italian socialist intellectual (1860-1937) is given not just heroic status, but is acknowledged as an author deeply embedded in, or bound into his own consciousness throughout his academic career. Frigo documents how Baxandall discovered Gramsci's work at Pavia in 1955-56 (the *Prison Notebooks* had been published 1948-1951), isolating particularly Gramsci's notion of 'common sense' as the focus of his attachment. Frigo analyzes Gramsci's diverse and flexible range of meanings for his concept (52-4), noting *inter alia* that for him it was 'the philosophy of non-philosophers', a phenomenon different from the *Zeitgeist* or 'the Volk[s]geist of German Idealism', something 'continually

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transforming itself', acting as 'a base or a set of knowledge or skills that belong to a single individual and that everyone can use, correct, or integrate' (53). Gramsci's common sense 'finds its primary mode of expression in language' given that 'Every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture'. Frigo argues (54-5) that one can detect Gramsci's presence in Baxandall's earliest books, if one follows the trail of the common sense concept in its transmuted forms of 'the words were the system (*Giotto and the Orators*), 'language and syntax [are] selective sharpeners of attention', the 'integrity' of the 'historical cultures' under examination, and (in *Patterns of Intention*) his seeing 'human cultures and human minds as wholes'.

In an interview with Obrist published (after Baxandall's death) in 2008, Baxandall defended in Gramscian terms his concept of the period eye as presented in *Painting and Experience*, where it had drawn criticism from Gombrich: 'The period eye is constituted by the skills of discrimination one acquires by living in a culture, including perceiving the art in that culture, but it is totally different from zeitgeist and has none of the theoretical substructure.' Note 47 quotes Baxandall recalling to Obrist that 'I never persuaded Gombrich' that the period eye concept was not 'a zeitgeist claim', and here it would have been useful to note that Gombrich's *In Search of Cultural History*, (1969),<sup>5</sup> had carefully explored the penetration of both *Volkgeist* and *Zeitgeist*, emanating from Hegel and passing through Burckhardt's *The Civilization* (admired by Baxandall), where one meets with the (Baxandallian) practice of gathering promising sources and excerpts. Gombrich (18) found Burckhardt 'impressive in 'his economy in their use, and the magic touch with which he turned these selected extracts into signs of the time'. Gombrich (21) also notes Burckhardt's 'Hegelian optimism' in his claim that 'the Italian spirit turned towards the discovery of the external world and *its representation in language* (my emphasis) and in art'. Gombrich identified elements of the 'Hegelian construct of cultural history' in Wölfflin's *Renaissance and Baroque*, when he says: 'To explain a style cannot mean anything but to fit its expressive character into the general history of the period, to prove that its forms do not say anything in their language that is not also said by the other organs of the age', Gombrich stressed that Hegelian metaphysics were not 'accepted in all their abstruse ramifications by any of these historians', but that even Panofsky had 'never renounced the desire to demonstrate the organic unity of all aspects of a period, and in his *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* had postulated a 'mental habit' acquired by the scholastics 'and carried over into architectural practice'. In his *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art ...* he explicitly defended the notion of cultures having an essence...'. One can understand why Gombrich, having just published this critique, was troubled by Baxandall's *Painting and Experience*, and it is not clear whether Baxandall defended himself to his intellectual mentor in the early 1970s (as distinct from in the late interviews) by referring to Gramsci's denial that his concept of common sense differed from *Volkgeist* and *Zeitgeist*. I do not suggest that Baxandall blundered into a Hegelian methodology. Rather it might be profitable to pursue how Baxandall's period eye differed from several of the Hegelian and crypto-Hegelian formulations

<sup>5</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *In Search Of Cultural History*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969

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that Gombrich analyzed in those authors to whom Baxandall held an early attraction. Frigo (56) offers some tantalizing leads, to show how Baxandall moved away, in Gramscian mode, from his earlier conception of period eye, recognizing that in *Words for Pictures* Baxandall invoked 'Alberti's cast of mind' and suggests that 'the extraordinary *De pictura* was not just an outcome of the cultural moment' but the product of a 'drive that imposed systematic order on painting' that was personal and 'eccentric'. In *Giotto and the Orators* 'Alberti had been recognized as a spokesman of the humanistic point of view on paintings, or rather, of "the authentically humanistic, because periodic point of view'. In *Words for Pictures* 'this humanistic common sense, so to speak, is not enough to explain *De pictura*'.

Frigo devotes 57-9 to Gramsci's distinction between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals, the latter 'directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong', showing how Baxandall revealed to his interviewers Langdale (1994) and Obrist his concept of the intellectual, and (59) 'identifies painters as intellectuals': 'I think of artists as Gramscian intellectuals'. Frigo devotes the remainder of his study to 'how Piero della Francesca, Picasso, Chardin, or Tiepolo can be considered Gramscian intellectuals.' 'The first and most natural hypothesis', Frigo argues, 'is connected with the idea that works of art are also historical documents and that artists are witnesses to their culture'. So far so good, yet Frigo has to do some fast footwork here. He opens his case with Baxandall's suggestion in *Limewood Sculptors* (vii) 'that works of art can sometimes be "addressed as lenses bearing on their circumstances"'. He continues, more tentatively: 'Understood in such terms, *some* artists *seem* to show traits that *link* them to the intellectuals described by Gramsci (my emphasis). Thus 'Great artists, Baxandall affirms more than once, unite in a coherent and ordinate way the elements coming from a number of heterogeneous circumstances imposed by the society and culture with which they interact'. More assuredly, Frigo states: 'Only very good works of art, the performances of exceptionally organized men, Baxandall in fact' writes in *Limewood Sculptors*, 'are complex and co-ordinated enough to register in their forms the kind of cultural circumstances sought here; second rate art will be little use to us'. So for Baxandall, artists – great artists – are intellectuals because they produce a synthesis characterized by what Gramsci called 'homogeneity', 'coherence', and 'logic'. Avoiding the traditional art historical evaluative categories of "sensitivity, taste, or originality', Baxandall emphasizes these artists' 'high degree of organization', a quality that renders them Gramscian intellectuals. Frigo (60-62) makes a strong case that Baxandall and Alpers, in *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* made a 'rigorous and ...original application of the notion of organic intellectuals', showing that Tiepolo is a pictorial intellectual 'because of *how* he paints, not *what* he paints'. Overall, Frigo's investigation is strongly justified and clearly demonstrated, and culminates in a marvellous quote from the interview with Obrist about why Baxandall felt 'content to stay with Gramsci'.

I add here a note regarding what Baxandall says in *Limewood Sculptors* about restricting the scope of his study to 'very good works of art, the performances of exceptionally organized men'. There is a tempting parallel that seems to have eluded critical notice, between this decision and Edgar Wind's comparably terse 'An observation on method', concluding his *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958)

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(236-38), an in-house Warburg book doubtless familiar to Baxandall.<sup>6</sup> Wind's preoccupation with his fundamentally Warburgian mission to 'penetrate the pagan mysteries of the Renaissance' (1) in both classical texts transmitted via humanist scholarship and in selected images, was in no way commensurate with the tasks Baxandall set himself. Yet, there may be a resonance, linguistic and attitudinal, in Wind's insistence that his reader must accommodate to 'a certain ingredient of deliberate paradox, which qualified the imitation of antiquity by Renaissance humanists' to avoid 'misjudgi[ng] altogether the atmosphere in which the pagan mysteries were revived'. 'They were sponsored', he wrote, 'by men of letters who had learned from Plato that the deepest things are best spoken of *in a tone of irony*'. Wind admits, with calculated rhetorical intent, that '*Serio ludere* might also stand as a motto over a chapter which I have not attempted to write, and the omission of which may help to demonstrate the incompleteness of my observations on pagan mysteries...'. In closing, Wind states the necessity of the historian (he does not say art historian) concentrating on 'the exceptional in history'. This is far from being a Gramscian message, rather one about exegesis in iconology, but it asserts the historian's perceived obligation to balance research between the 'commonplace', a 'relentless force', and 'the exceptional in history, the power of which should also perhaps not be underrated'. He continues: 'In a perfect study, both aspects should be present; and it is one of the many weaknesses of this book that, except in one or two cases, it does not show how an adventurous proposition sinks into a platitude, or how genius is engulfed by complacency or inertia'. He goes on: '...inasmuch as we are forced to select, it would seem that to choose the exceptional for study is, in the long run, the lesser risk. An eminent iconographer who preferred the opposite course discovered that "the symbolical creations of geniuses are unfortunately harder to nail down to a definite subject than the allegorical inventions of minor artists". If this be so, there is something wrong with the manner of nailing down'. I am simply intrigued as to whether the rhetorical tactics employed by Wind here, tactical admissions that the method is imperfect and incompletely executed but nevertheless justified although risk may still be present, and the insistence on the more difficult path to 'the exceptional', may have had a delayed, albeit diverse, impact on the young Baxandall in framing his work.

Whitney Davis contributes 'Art History, Re-Enactment, and the Idiographic Stance', 69-89. He launches his piece with a telling reference to Maurice Mandelbaum's *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge* (1977), with its distinction between art history (along with the histories of literature and science) as a 'semiautonomous special history', and 'general history'. Davis argues (69) that the 'experience' in *Painting and Experience* 'belongs to the territory covered by Mandelbaum's general history', whereas in *Patterns of Intention* 'experience also includes the art historian's activity in experiencing (and "explaining") pictures from fifteenth-century Italy'. Davis's target here is Baxandall's notion of 're-enactment' and its sources. In *Patterns of Intention* Baxandall presented 'a model of how 'the experience of people in the past who made pictures can be replicated in the

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, London, Faber and Faber 1958; new and enlarged ed. 1968 cited

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experience of people who explain them historically in the present. The replication...involves re-enactment'. In explaining a picture 'historically, we re-enact something about it'. Baxandall proposed a 'triangle of re-enactment', consisting of 'the terms of the problem' confronted by picture makers (the 'painter's Brief'), the 'culture in which they addressed the problem', and 'our description' of the picture. Davis stresses, however, (70) 'that Baxandall 'resisted' re-enactment 'from the picture described by us in the present to the terms of its cultural production in the past': he was 'cautious about re-enactment'. His concept of 'the idiographic stance' required that 'we reconstruct the [historical] actor's purposes on the basis of the particular rather than general facts, even while clearly if implicitly using generalizations, soft rather than hard ones, about human nature and so on'. One 'might partly distinguish' art history practiced thus from the models of the physical and natural sciences, fields in which inquiry is characterized by 'nomological' concerns. Davis shows how Baxandall eventually 'backed away' from 'the scope of this distinction...when applied to art history'. 'It turns out that the "historical explanation of pictures" cannot do without the nomological inquiries at well-defined stages in its procedure'. Davis's approach to the issue is as follows:

I begin with historiographical considerations. In addition to its role in much modern aesthetics and art criticism, re-enactment has occupied the philosophy of history since Dilthey, notably in Gadamer's hermeneutic concept of the 'fusion of horizons'. In this arena, Baxandall's *anti*-hermeneutic version was partly tailored to engage re-enactment as it had been conceived both in a preceding special art-historical theory and in a preceding theory of general history, namely Panofsky's and Collingwood's respectively. Then I offer analytic considerations: what are the particular components and claims of Baxandall's triangle of re-enactment and its idiographic stance? Finally, I pursue critical implications and consequences.

Baxandall's early attraction to Panofsky's essay 'Art History as a Humanistic Discipline' has been well documented in the late interviews, and Panofsky's argument (Davis, 71) that the art historian 'has to mentally re-enact the actions and to re-create the creations', an act of 'intuitive aesthetic re-creation, including the perception and appraisal of "quality"', is familiar. Davis (72) is concerned to show how Panofsky's model is adjusted by Baxandall to 'make the "meaning" of the art work in the past "disappear" as the historian's object. It is replaced by "historical circumstances" ... a compound of the "terms of [an artistic] problem" and the cultural conditions of its solution'. Baxandall replaces Panofsky's "'freely created" aesthetic valuation' ... with "pictures considered under descriptions"'. Davis argues (73), however, that 'we cannot use the whole of the description that we can produce to retrieve the *whole of the culture* that produced the picture...'. He engages here with Margaret Iverson and Stephen Melville regarding Baxandall's linguistic means of differentiating himself from Panofsky.<sup>7</sup> He moves on to describe Baxandall's

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Iverson and Stephen Melville, eds, *Writing Art History. Disciplinary Departures*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010: 26-37



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'distaste' for 'high iconography', 'painstaking decipherments of subtle humanist themes or specialized theological symbolisms in ...Renaissance pictures', interpreting this position as directed more at 'latter-day Panofskyans and their "overelaborate iconographies"' than at Panofsky's own argument of re-enactment.

This overlooks the fact that Baxandall must surely have recognized that Gombrich, his thesis adviser, had, since the late 1930s, opposed Panofsky's own applications of his method to explaining the meanings of pictures, as well as actively directing his students in his seminar at the Warburg, which Baxandall attended during the 1960s, away from the 'over-interpreting' approaches of the latter-day Panofskyans.<sup>8</sup> Davis contrasts Baxandall's work in *Patterns of Intention*, where 'he wanted to show that 'Chardin's culture was broadly "Lockean" – mediated to the painter by French scientific middle-men'. Chardin need not have read Locke, as we must do.

Davis offers (74-78) a detailed critique of Baxandall's responses in *Patterns of Intention* to R.G. Collingwood's concept of history as re-enactment in his *The Idea of History* (1946). Baxandall's 'resistance' to Collingwood's model of re-enactment (76-7) began from his conviction that the latter's 're-thinking' 'must be impossible for the art historian in view of the special kind of thought that is *art-thought*'. In *Patterns* Baxandall identifies 'art-thought' as the 'maker's style'. Davis argues that in *Patterns* 'there is nothing but style – the dialectic of process'. In reviewing this problem (78), Davis arrives at the position that 'At its best, we might say, art history cannot but be maximally distant from the thought that created its objects'. Going on to discuss the 'analytic parameters of art-historical reconstruction', according to Baxandall, Davis sceptically reviews (78-9) Baxandall's inference that in the artist's 'relinquishing' the work the 'style-thought' was 'actually terminated in the past', rendering re-enactment 'impossible in principle'; he interrogates Baxandall's paradigm of 'style-thought' being 'rational', with the implication that 'we do not have to re-enact it at all'; and questions the assumption that only 'good pictures' will enable historical reconstruction. Davis concludes (80) that 'style-thought could not be duplicated even in its own time and place. As enactment without possibility of *re-enactment*, style-thought has a history but no hermeneutics – an archaeology of survival, but no theatre of reanimation'. He proceeds to examine (81) the 'good picture – bad picture' issue in relation to historical explanation and the means by which we can 'discover what a visual culture is', noting 'an undesirable consequence of Baxandall's model' being 'the methodological circle enshrined in the triangle of re-enactment: in explaining a picture we move toward understanding its visual culture even as we depend on knowledge of it gained by explaining pictures'.

Davis shows (83) that Baxandall's late work 'increasingly turned to nomologically organized inquiries in visual psychology in order to help reconstruct pictures historically', enabling what he calls 'patterns of intention' to be 'enacted again and again just because they are lawful and replicable, even if the pattern of intention cannot be re-enacted because our evidence falls short'. Overall, Davis subjects Baxandall's arguments in *Patterns*, and their probable sources, to a

<sup>8</sup> See Robert W. Gaston, "Erwin Panofsky and the Classical Tradition", *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 4, 4, 1998, 613-23

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systematic critique that resonates with thoughtful, but not unsympathetic, reflection on the problematics arising from virtually every element of Baxandall's evolving method.

Robert Williams, in his 'Inferential Criticism and *Kunstwissenschaft*' (91-106), continues the critical approach to Baxandall's method, turning first to his essay of 1979, 'The Language of Art History', where he engaged with some current varieties of art historical method and 'provides a drily pointed explanation of his own concerns'.<sup>9</sup> 'The issues I most worry about in art history', he wrote, 'fall into two main groups... One group is connected with the pretty gratuitous act of matching language with the visual interest of works of art ... The other... is connected with how one can and cannot state the relationships between the character of works of art and their historical circumstances'. The essay, Williams shows, is an sketch of the 'inferential criticism' that he would expound fully in *Patterns of Intention*. It is 'inferential criticism' that Williams distinguishes as Baxandall's 'principal contribution to art historical method'. Williams confronts the characteristic nature of Baxandall's simultaneous refusal to declare himself a methodologist while openly exploring aspects of theory, and his apparent evasiveness regarding probable intellectual influence in his publications, while admitting to certain connections in late interviews. Williams notes (92) that he consistently expressed doubts about 'the academicizing-up of the discipline', and yet 'his approach was carefully meditated and profoundly original, a contribution to *Kunstwissenschaft* while also a critique of it, and it may still serve as a point of departure for productive reflection upon the essential challenges of our field'.

Williams rightly judges that Baxandall's preoccupation with language in historical method arises in his earliest publications, where he diverges sharply from the Warburg and Panofsky tradition of using 'literary sources to enhance their understanding and interpretation of images, by matching content in both text and image'. Baxandall's 'innovative force' lay in 'the sheer perversity of undertaking an art-historical inquiry not by direct engagement with the works themselves, but indirectly, through the language used by period writers'. It surely, as he himself stated, constituted an attack on the 'Courtauld' tradition of connoisseurship, but, more importantly, as Williams notes, 'defamiliarize[d] the works we take for granted, to force us to reckon with a complex world structured by mental habits unlike our own. On a deeper level... it also undermines our confidence in any assumptions that we, as art historians, may make about pictures based on our direct experience of them. Period language does not necessarily offer a more accurate or satisfactory account of the objects, but it does expose the limitations of our own terms and categories.' Baxandall thus sought (94) "a new, more self-conscious, more critically circumspect strategy for the historical interpretation of images.' A crucial assumption of his, already evident in *Giotto and the Orators*, and continued in *Patterns of Intention*, was that 'language is not just the essential medium through which the results of art-historical inquiry are communicated; it is also an essential object of such inquiry'. Williams uses the late interviews to describe how Baxandall developed his early positions on linguistic relativism, and probes (93-4) his playful

<sup>9</sup> Michael Baxandall, 'The Language of Art History', *New Literary History*, 11 (1979) 453-65

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reluctance to acknowledge the patent influence of Wittgenstein's critical terminology, from his Cambridge period, and later. Williams argues that the 'Language' article established Baxandall's view that 'Words inferential as to cause are the main vehicle of demonstrative precision in art criticism', a plank in the formation of his theory of inferential criticism. Offering a striking re-evaluation of an aspect of Baxandall's method that infuriated critics, Williams argues that Baxandall's 'strategic indirectness', 'the 'provisional, empirical – sub-theoretical – nature of his approach' is 'even more fundamental to his method than the emphasis on language'. He aspires 'to a kind of procedural rigor and purity', rendering him 'the Wittgenstein of art history'.

Williams' sub-section 'Society' (95-6) explores the novelty of the 'period eye' in *Painting and Experience*, where his approach to language's role facilitates his spectacular extension of retrievable sources that went significantly 'beyond the emphasis of then recent work on patronage by scholars such as Francis Haskell and D.S. Chambers 'to explore 'more pervasive and deeply embedded assumptions, values, and practices that structure culture'. The mixed reception of the book (by art historians, mainly) and Baxandall's responses in 1979 are explored (95). Williams then comments (96-7) on Baxandall's second selected piece, the essay 'Art, Society, and the Bouguer Principle' (1985),<sup>10</sup> where Baxandall gives a self-revealing, but also strategically methodological, account of a projected but unpublished study of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's frescoes in Siena, where a 'social history' approach would have failed, given the 'terribly simple fact' that art and society are 'analytical concepts from two different kinds of categorization of human experience'. He turned to a new term, 'pictorialization', 'the deployment of the resources of the medium...not just the bare registration of a subject matter'. And, as Williams records, he later spoke of his lack of 'sympathy' for the theoretical relativism of New Historicism, in a statement that sounds startlingly like a positivist manifesto: 'I think of myself as trying to find out what really happened'.

Finally, Williams explores Baxandall's developing notions of visuality (97-100), especially his late, 'virtuoso' attempt to recover those aspects of "the visual" that had seemed to lie beyond the reach of language'. The *Tiepolo* book (1994) is described as 'a sustained effort to address "the absolutely pictorial", while *Shadows* (1995) concentrating on optical theory and rather narrow-based study of a picture by Chardin, eliciting Williams's concern that here Baxandall's approach, 'with its "obsessional" interest in shadows, has not begun to yield diminishing returns'. Williams similarly takes issue with Baxandall's essay on Piero's *Resurrection* in *Words for Pictures* (2003), spotting repetition from his 1994 essay on Braque, and perhaps 'projecting an interpretation onto the images that has more to do with his own visual habits and preoccupations than the objective importance of the feature in question...'. Baxandall ran the risk, Williams comments, of succumbing, in insisting that 'the primary interest of the visual arts lies in their specifically visual properties', to 'an old-fashioned form of modernism'. In a thoughtful summary Williams ponders that 'tactical indirectness' of Baxandall's scholarship, a history of successive 'virtuoso performances', of self-distancing from current theory.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Baxandall, 'Art, Society, and the Bouguer Principle', *Representations*, 3 (1985): 33-42.

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Williams is surely correct in recognizing the kinship of Gombrich and Baxandall in their mutual and separate efforts to 'ground the discussion of art' in diverse, and ultimately disputable ways. One might have added that Gombrich's assertion in *Art and Illusion* that 'it is precisely because all art is "conceptual" that all representations are recognizable by their style', probably had a measurable influence in temporarily satisfying Baxandall's relentless search for concepts.<sup>11</sup> And Williams interjects a stimulating idea of his own, that those who have reservations about Baxandall's fascination with the 'absolutely pictorial' might yet 'be able to see them as grounded in a recognition of the fact that the technical challenges faced by artists were an important part of their work, that it is not the intrinsic visuality of pictures that grounds their interest but the work – the human labour – that the resulting product makes visible'. He leaves the reader with the thought that Baxandall's 'inferential criticism' attempted to deal with 'the groundlessness of art history as a form of knowledge': 'As long as that groundlessness continues to concern us, we are likely to keep re-reading Baxandall'.

Paul Hills, in 'The Presence of Light' (107-15), take us initially into Baxandall's *Episodes* and *A Grasp of Kaspar* in search of illuminating passages in which he recalls and retrieves his subtle and deeply personal responses to light and its myriad effects, from the privacy of his childhood bedroom to his postgraduate travels, and eventually, in his publications. Hills cautions the reader not to assume that the late *Tiepolo* and *Shadows* books signalled a new attentiveness to light. He directs us (108-09) to consider Baxandall's intimate curatorial experience with sculpture in the 1960s as a bridge to his work on shadows, sheen, and textures in the *Limewood Sculptors* of 1980. Hills offers many typically sensitive observations on the complexity of Baxandall's responses to light on the German works *in situ*.

Hills devotes the second half of the essay to three paintings executed between about 1470 and 1530, offering readings of the artists' 'engagement' with light and shadow, works for which Baxandall's 'discriminations have shaped my response'. This was (111) 'a period when light and shadow exercised pictorial intelligence in a manner that would shape the distinctive visual grammar of later European art'. The 'attention given to both monochrome and polychrome forms of depiction and ...the interplay between them', is explored through Baxandall's analysis in *Limewood Sculptors*, and the rise of engraving 'as a self-sufficient artistic medium' is seen as sharpening a new awareness of modelling'. Antonello of Messina's *Virgin Annunciate* provides Hills with a fine example of the 'interruption' of light falling on the Virgin's hand, cloak and face. His detailed account of this picture, Giorgione's *La Vecchia*, and Titian's *Supper at Emmaus*, are too complex to summarize here, and are as subtle and richly informative of the trajectories, 'manipulations', and transformative powers of pictorial lighting as we are used to reading in his other publications. The contact points with Baxandall's work are telling, but not numerous. This is a reflective essay that contributes to the collection in a different way, gently referring here and there to the presence of Baxandall's ideas through his *Limewood Sculptors*, *Patterns of Intention*, and *Words for Pictures*. It

<sup>11</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London: Phaidon, 1960, 76.

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conjures something like the meditative visual process Baxandall himself might have used in relating a series of images to a specific theme of representation.

Evelyn Lincoln's chapter, 'Printing and Experience in Eighteenth-Century Italy' (117-40), arises from the personal experience of Baxandall's teaching at Berkeley. Lincoln writes: 'Studying with him was conversational and dialogic, with teaching understood in the sense of showing, rather than telling, of providing conditions in which observations could be raised, and information could travel freely. Most importantly he taught how to ask illuminating questions'. A detailed account is given of Baxandall's teaching of a fourteen-week lecture course, with Lincoln's assistance, a course notable for the 'singular brevity' of its syllabus, recording his use of Alberti's *De pictura*, Hartt's *Italian Renaissance Art* for 'factual information and illustrations, and *Painting and Experience*. The first assignment, a '3-page essay about what knowledge about [the] circumstances, function, or techniques of making, might or might not be useful in the understanding and perception of' a selected object in the University Art Museum, is significant for its brevity and strong theoretical focus. One believes Lincoln's comment (119) that when Baxandall told students that 'responses to art in the form of questions to ask were important enough to constitute a formally written essay' these proved 'extremely useful for the development of the students and very difficult to mark'. The lecture programme reveals how Baxandall gave nuance to his core text of 1972, with its emphasis on workshops, pictorial skills, contemporary vocabulary, and so on, importing new terms 'from our own time but not our own discipline, using words like "induction", and "constancy", ... terms Baxandall had borrowed from scientists working in psychology of vision...'

Lincoln devotes the remainder of her text (123-38) to 'a particularly daunting and impenetrable-seeming example' that arose in a class on early modern festival and carnival that would culminate in an exhibition of prints and festival books. The etchings were produced annually between 1722 and 1785 for 'a solemn festival that also had some carnivalesque qualities, called the China'. The students studied the prints in Baxandallian mode, beginning with the question 'what it was that people saw in them, given the visual paradox that they seemed to represent little that was visually relevant to 'fiery spectacle of impressive sounds and destruction'? Lincoln offers a stimulating discussion of how one's art-historical expectations regarding the content and nature of festival prints had to be re-thought, give that the prints 'fail[ed] to record' the requisite 'sensory experiences', in contrast with other literary and visual forms of commemoration. She concludes (132) that 'The overt flatfooted fakeness of the China prints signals the conflation of the real and the false on several registers, something that was remarked on as a source of pleasure for viewers'. Thus, if they were 'lacking as documents of the festival experience, they are interesting documents of viewing experiences: both of stage sets, in public, and of prints, in more private settings'. Utilizing insights in *Patterns of Intention*, Lincoln concludes (137) that the curiously dull prints are 'not only representations of an act of perception...or, in this case, willed misperception, but *a machine in themselves* for re-mobilizing that kind of perception in viewers.'

Peter Mack's chapter entitled 'Pattern and Individual: *Limewood Sculptors and A Grasp of Kaspar*' (141-56), begins with the proposition that Baxandall was

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'primarily a writer'. When he left Cambridge he 'hoped to write novels', and completed *Kaspar* in 2005, but his career was as a writer and teacher of art history and theory. Mack explores, taking *Limewood Sculptors* as 'perhaps his most distinguished work' in art history, 'some ways in which *Kaspar* reworks and builds on ideas expressed in *Limewood Sculptors*', and 'what *Kaspar* adds, what fiction permits Baxandall to write about which he could not express in art historical scholarship'. Mack begins with a detailed account of *Limewood Sculptors*, which I cannot reproduce here. He focuses (141-43) on the broader aims, 'to understand the larger social, commercial, and religious structures and functions governing the trade...He tried to develop a historical sense of the sculptures which could also respond to the subjectivity of both the artist and the modern viewer'. Mack notes Baxandall's characteristic use of lists and categories; his strong 'sense of place' and diverse civic contexts; the 'extraordinarily rich ostensive descriptions of particular sculptures'; his 'picture of the constraints operating on the artists', and the materiality of the woodworking process. Beyond that, Baxandall investigates individual style and 'the tension between developing' one and 'making expressive choices' within national styles, while artists observed decorum in sculpting the female body.

Mack then turns to *Kaspar* (144), suggesting that the novel 'shares many of the preoccupations of *Limewood Sculptors*.' 'Above all', he writes, 'characters in the book offer us schemas for understanding the behaviour of other characters, most often, but not only, the absent Kaspar, whom Briggs [Baxandall fictionalized as an economic historian] and the reader are attempting to grasp'. Mack perceives that Baxandall's account of a discussion between his characters Briggs and his academic friend Klaus regarding personality types and suitability for relationships, entailing a relation between 'excitement' and 'repose' that is 'mathematically expressed' and rejected by Briggs as 'far too schematic (and also too simple)' can profitably be juxtaposed with 'Baxandall's exposition of the location of individual sculptors in relation to the 'relaxed stability' and 'flaunted stress' of limewood sculpture 'in the Florid Style'. Another point of contact is identified (144-5) in an episode where 'the Gramscian Pasquale gives Briggs a lesson in the limitations of using general patterns of social life'. *Kaspar*, we are told, also 'resembles' the sculpture book in having 'a long and very Baxandallian passage on alpine paths, the production of cloth, and the technology of weaving to a pattern', and 'passages of detailed visual description of landscapes, paintings, and a wooden sculpture of St. Roche' and 'short disquisitions' on geology, and so forth. Mack identifies (146) strong points of contact in *Kaspar* passages dealing with 'geography, trade, and social history', 'old maps and trade-route', 'transfers of money', and visual responses to 'different types of light', with details in *Shadow and Enlightenment*. Descriptions of Kaspar's paintings (147) are said to 'provide important clues about Kaspar' during 1944. These are two puzzling compositions, one of an Italian town view, the other of an Italian bridge, and Baxandall's character's perform 'ekphrasis' (using Mack's term) on these as a way into 'the state of Kaspar's mind'. The character Don Ivo quotes Kaspar on the material nature of painting: 'It is mostly flax, you know...When painting, one is playing with flax. Heterogeneous but mainly mineral dye-stuffs are suspended in the oil of flax seeds: linseed. That is what paints are...And the fibre of flax stalks is

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spun...then bleached and plain-woven. That is the canvas. One smears the first on the second.' Mack notes (148) the 'less appreciative wonder and more of a witty sense of futility' in these words than in Baxandall's 'attention to materiality' in *Limewood Sculptors*. Mack adduces further examples of the transmission of ideas between the two books, culminating (150) in the significant question, 'what...does the fiction of ...*Kaspar* allow Baxandall to talk about which the virtuoso art history of *Limewood Sculptors* did not permit'? He concludes (150) that fiction 'allows him to be more open in providing the pleasure which readers take from fine description, elegant narrative, and beautiful and far-reaching argument.'

Mack's example from *Kaspar* of the book's 'combination of description and thinking' (151) is given a penetrating exegesis, and as one would expect from an expert on Renaissance rhetoric. Mack isolates the 'comparisons', similes in fact, as producing more 'pleasure' for the reader than Baxandall permitted himself in his art history writing. Mack seems to be exercising Baxandallian restraint in eschewing a technical rhetorical analysis of the reduction or suppression of pleasure-inducing, persuasive ekphrasis in Baxandall's work. One hopes he will return to this topic. Mack argues that the fiction mode 'allows the writer to scatter fragments of teaching, reflection, and erudition across the work, giving accidental pleasure to the reader', freeing the writer from the argumentational strictures of academic writing. Fiction permits (152) the intrusion of 'moral judgement of human actions', and 'demonstrations of the deceptiveness of knowledge and interpretation' (153). Mack closes with a quotation from one of Baxandall's last letters to him, expressing the 'difficulty of getting the balance between "rhetoric and dialectic as pervasively conditioning and enabling, and rhetoric and dialectic as plastic and adaptable; it's so difficult to avoid the impression of schematic rigour"'. One senses in Mack's piece the scholarly and literary challenge posed by Baxandall as a teacher and friend, and as an author writing in diverse media whose work demanded explication in terms that Baxandall himself might well have resisted.

The final chapter is Elizabeth Cook's 'Michael Baxandall's "Stationing"' (157-69), which draws the reader initially into a personal meditation on how Keats's term 'Stationing or statuary', denoting Milton's more rhetorical forms of 'simple description' that augmented a sense of 'situation in space', would have pleased Baxandall, given that he delighted in Hobbes's idiosyncratic meaning of the Latin 'conatus' [struggle attempt, impulse, in classical Latin], interpreted as 'instantaneous motion through minimal space'. 'It was', she says, 'gladly adopted as a useful, practical, and current term to denote a process we were jointly exploring [when she was at the Warburg as a doctoral student] to indicate swift, intuitive grasp...The adjective "conative" was coined to describe the rapid leaps of association'. Cook focuses on Baxandall's posthumous *Episodes* and *A Grasp of Kaspar*, suggesting, however, that 'the impulse to station - to give an account of spatial situation and space- ... runs through the work for which he is ...better known'. She selects Baxandall's recollection in *Episodes* that while working at the V&A, having decided to study the group of 'late-gothic and renaissance south-German sculptures, he 'could have Veit Stoss's boxwood *Virgin and Child* on my desk while I worked on it. It was a perfect position for getting a grasp of a new field'. Cook takes this sentence as the 'crux of the paragraph', 'a passage that anchors the paragraph in the solidity

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of the figures, a solidity that extends almost by sleight of hand, to "while I worked on it", and "a perfect position for getting a grasp on a new field". Cook writes (159): 'However, I cannot imagine that Baxandall handled the Veit Stoss piece very much when he worked on it. Rather, that it sat upon his desk, being given space and occupying that space. The attention that would have been paid to it would have avoided any taint of intrusion. It required a way of mapping without interference'. I wonder, though, given Baxandall's stating that he was drawn to Wölfflin's *Classic Art* in the 1950s, that he had probably contemplated at the Warburg Franz Landsberger's little book, *Heinrich Wölfflin (1924)*,<sup>12</sup> with its photograph facing the title page showing an exquisitely-posed Wölfflin, seated, holding with rapt attention in both hands a small Quattrocento devotional painting and resting it on a small table upon which stands a classicizing fragmentary statuette of a Venus, flanked by flowers and a book. The physical, ocular and mental attention of the scholarly art historian to tangible *objets d'art* has rarely been more powerfully represented, and its potency in a biographical sketch may have been suggestive. It was of a type, but one potentially influential.

Cook offers subtle observations based on *Episodes* about Baxandall's student reading habits, the feel of books frequently handled, tying this to comments regarding 'what shaping pressures have been at work in producing the memory-like objects and events I have in my mind'. She excavates (160) Baxandall's references to feelings of being 'too actively directive' in giving advice to a friend, of being 'invaded' in one's personal working space, of having one's things touched, causing irritation. His close observation of human gesture and intellectual inwardness as applied to someone whom he deeply admired at the Warburg, Gertrud Bing, is cleverly excerpted here: '[Bing] could convey a quite subtle qualifying view of what one had just said by the timing and pace with which her hand moved the cigarette to her mouth, her face expressionless and unchanging'. Cook observes (152) that 'Much of *Kaspar* is concerned with correcting the vision that is seen through distorting lenses', and 'a continual revision of grasp'. Her judicious selection of topics from *Episodes* and *Kaspar* are gently suggestive of her own grasp of Baxandall's ever-so-particular mental and social attitudes, such as had a bearing on the preoccupations of his teaching and published research. Her endnotes warrant careful reading in the latter respect.

This slim book is the most important collection published to date on Baxandall. Its 'insider's' view, combined with extensive critical use of the late interviews, affords an intimate and searching intellectual portrait of this complex man. There are more aspects of the Warburg Institute context worthy of exploration, of course. For example the significance of the editorial dominance of J.B. Trapp. Trapp, Institute Librarian and then Director, operated for decades (1953-1990) as an arbiter of style in the Institute's publications, enticing a lapidary, always elegant economy of prose from authors, Baxandall among them (Trapp 'chastened' his style: *Giotto and the Orators*, viii), a style that held clear intellectual implications in its fastidious handling of language, some of which are evident in the present book. Then there is the question of Gombrich's potential influence on Baxandall's

<sup>12</sup> Franz Landsberger, *Heinrich Wölfflin*, Berlin: Elena Gottschalk, 1924.



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reluctance to engage with 'method'. Gombrich's privately expressed scathing contempt, in the late 1960s, for text books on art historical method such as Hans Tietze's (1880-1954) published in 1913 (*Die Methode der Kunstgeschichte: ein Versuch*, Leipzig: Seemann), has to be balanced with the admiration that both he and Otto Kurz patently shared for Tietze as their teacher in Vienna. Thus, as Gombrich himself approached issues of method from around 1950 onward, he was transmitting simultaneously a profound scepticism about existing versions of the practice, a similarly conflicted posture that we encounter in Baxandall, even if the scholars differed greatly in intellectual background and responses to art. These are just two aspects of 'deep structure' at the Warburg that one hopes will be explored further.

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