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Fake or Fortune? Alexander Dorner and the Weimar Reproductions Debate

Camilla Balbi

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Abstract Between 1929 and 1930 the *Der Kreis* journal hosted a debate among art historians and museum directors on how art copies were changing the museum landscape. The so-called *Hamburger Faksimile-Streit* constitutes a crucial moment in the Weimarian theoretical debate on the categories of copy and original, culminating a few years later in Benjamin's well-known essay on the work of art. After examining the theses of the main participants in the debate, this article focus on the position of curator and museum director Alexander Dorner – the only one advocating for the non-superiority of originals over copies in art museums – and on his relationship with Walter Benjamin's later theories.

Keywords Alexander Dorner. Hamburger Faksimile-Streit. Museum Studies. Art copies. Weimar Art Theory.

Summary 1 Against Copies: the *Faksimile-Streit*. – 2 Copies, Avant-garde and Museum: Dorner's Position. – 3 Riegl's Echoes: Dorner and Benjamin. – 4 Beyond Riegl: A Political Issue. – 5 An Official Epilogue, an Unofficial Prologue.

1 Against Copies: the *Faksimile-Streit*

It was in 1926 that Carl Georg Heise, a pupil of Aby Warburg and, at the time, director of the Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte in Lübeck, curated an exhibition to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the city's recognition as *Freie Reichsstadt* and member of the Hanseatic League, *Lübeckische Kunst außerhalb Lübecks*.¹ The exhibition, based in the old church of St. Catherine, had one peculiarity: the absence of original works.

The unorthodox choice of only displaying plaster casts and photographs was justified by the scarce

availability of the originals due to the very theme of the exhibition: the influence of the Medieval art of Lübeck in the cultural context of Northern Europe, especially Scandinavia.

Organised in close collaboration with the city of Hamburg,² to which Heise – who would become the first director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle in the post-war period – was very attached, the exhibition was welcomed by some of Hamburg's leading cultural figures, such as Erwin Panofsky who had visited it with his students in June 1927.³ However,

1 Meyer 2010, 281.

2 In December 1925, Heise mentioned the casting work of the *St. Jürgen Group*, the most important cast in the exhibition, in a confidential conversation with Dean Zinn, the Hamburg State Press Office, and Carl Petersen, Mayor of Hamburg. In a further letter, dated December 22, Petersen expressed his intention to present the reproduction as a gift from the Hamburg Senate to its 'sister city' Lübeck on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of imperial freedom in June 1926 (Meyer 2010, 281).

3 Panofsky in Wuttke 2001, 236.



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Panofsky's opinion on Heise's initiative would be hotly challenged and very different from that formulated in the same year by Max Sauerlandt, director of the Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe since 1919. In a heated correspondence begun even before the opening, Heise went so far as to assert that the original large-scale plaster copy of the St. George group had greater educational value and was more 'alive' than the individual works of art preserved in Sauerlandt's Museum of Arts and Crafts.⁴ In response, the latter published an article, "Das Sofabild oder Die Verwirrung der Kunstbegriffe" in *Der Kreis*,⁵ at that time Hamburg's leading cultural journal, in which he strongly criticised the cultural use of art copies, initiating what later historians would call *die Hamburger Faksimile-Streit* (the Hamburg facsimile dispute).⁶

In the closing years of the decade, Sauerlandt's position would be further exacerbated and strengthened from a theoretical point of view after two more episodes of the 'dysfunctional' use of reproductions: the production of commercial galvanoplastic copies of the *Bamberg Knight* by a workshop in Württemberg, to which Sauerlandt would dedicate the polemical pamphlet *Der Bamberger Reiter - gefälscht!*,⁷ and, most importantly, the exhibition *Original oder Reproduktion?* organised in 1929 by Alexander Dorner, director of the Hannover Landesmuseum, at the Kestnergesellschaft, a Hanoverian association for avant-garde research.

Dorner's curatorial purpose (partially conditioned by the Gesellschaft's financial situation, which prevented the realisation of exhibitions with

loans of expensive works) was to demonstrate how reproductions had in "up to 99% of the cases the same impact as the originals", and how a copy, while not being able to convey the "historical experience" of the original, was perfectly able to convey its meaning.⁸ Therefore, it was not only a curatorial choice - as it had been for Heise - but a precise theoretical position and cultural provocation.

According to Diers's reconstruction, the exhibition, of which very little evidence seems to have survived, displayed only thirty-six originals out of a total of three-hundred-and-four works, mainly drawings and works on paper. In what took the form of a real prize competition, the public was encouraged to recognise them among the reproductions.⁹

For Sauerlandt, the most disturbing aspect of the exhibition was not only its great success among the general public, but above all the fact that even the experts who attended the exhibition were unable to distinguish between the originals and the copies¹⁰ and that, in the debate among experts that followed the exhibition on the pages of the *Hannoverscher Kurier*,¹¹ he was essentially the only defender of the originals. Sauerlandt would republish an expanded version of the Hannoverscher article that same year in *Der Kreis*,¹² forcing Heise - because of the frequent polemical references to his text - to reply to him in the same venue.¹³

This exchange, which shifted the epicentre of the controversy from Lübeck and Hanover to Hamburg, was followed by two other essays on the subject in the November issue of *Der Kreis*: one by art

⁴ Reineke 2012, 25.

⁵ Sauerlandt 1929a. Subtitled *Zeitschrift für künstlerische Kultur*, the journal was published by the Hamburg writers Ludwig Benninghoff and Wilhelm Postulat. At first, it was the magazine of the Hamburger Bühne association, but it soon became known outside the *Land*. Benninghoff, who was also the editor of the periodical *Deutsches Volkstum*, was to become a prominent figure of the anti-modern bourgeois public in the following years.

⁶ Diers 1986.

⁷ Sauerlandt 1929b.

⁸ Dorner 1930, 158.

⁹ According to Uchill's reconstruction, originals by Paul Cézanne, Kate Kollowitz, Claude Lorrain, Auguste Renoir, Giambattista Tiepolo, and Hans von Marées coming from Bremen, Hamburg, Hanover, Lübeck, and private collections were displayed (Uchill 2015, 17).

¹⁰ The 'contest' was in fact won by two young boys with no artistic education whatsoever. According to a witness of the time "there was a prize question: 'Which is the Original?' First, nobody wanted to have anything to do with this very easy task. When it was made known that there were 36 originals among the 104 pictures in the exhibition, contenders began to step up. For hours the pictures were subjected to a detailed test: they took them from the walls, held them against the light. No one was completely successful. Five of the approximately 150 contestants could indeed point out all the originals, but only because, to be safe, they also mistakenly declared a few reproductions to be originals" (Luke 2010, 340).

¹¹ For the exhibition, a survey appeared in the Sunday supplement of the *Hannoversche Kurier* of June 9, 1929 on what had essentially become a topical subject for the city's cultural life. The newspaper published essays by Wilhelm Hausenstein, Max Sauerlandt, Alexander Dorner, and Carl Georg Heise titled *Original oder Reproduktion?* Cf. "Original oder Reproduktion". *Beilage zum Hannoverschen Kurier*, 264-5, June 9, 1929.

¹² Sauerlandt 1929c.

¹³ Heise 1929.

historian Kurt Karl Eberlein,¹⁴ who supported Sauerlandt's positions, and one by Hamburg journalist Hugo Sieker, who spoke out instead in "Einspruch gegen das Todesurteil der Reproduktion" (Opposition to the death sentence of reproduction).¹⁵

In order to put a definitive end to an issue that seemed to have become increasingly divisive, Sauerlandt decided – in agreement with the editors of

the magazine – to devote the March 1930 issue of *Der Kreis* to the subject, inviting the most prominent figures of the art world to express their opinion. They were thus called to write a contribution along with Sauerlandt, Gustav Pauli, Arthur Haseloff, Fritz Schumacher, Erwin Panofsky and Alexander Dorner.

2 Copies, Avant-garde and Museum: Dorner's Position

In the following paragraphs, we will consider the position taken in this context by Alexander Dorner, one of the fathers of contemporary curatorship,¹⁶ who had played a decisive role in the genesis of the controversy with the exhibition *Original oder Reproduktion?* The show constitutes a pragmatic manifesto of reflections on the status of authenticity versus copy that Dorner had conceived and written down only one year later in an extremely audacious and almost forgotten theoretical text.

The peculiarity of Dorner's thesis – as formulated in the article published in *Der Kreis*, "Original und Faksimile"¹⁷ – is much more radical than the positions of his colleagues, even those most favourable to the use of reproductions.

One of the main points of the debate, shared by all those who took part in it, was the belief that the potential for confusion between the original work and the copy was the real 'original sin' behind the use of facsimiles (which were also acknowledged as valuable, mainly in terms of educational support): a danger to be avoided at all costs.

Panofsky expressed his sympathy for reproductions while stressing his belief that their widespread use should intensify skills in distinguishing originals from copies.¹⁸ Similarly, Gustav Pauli – director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle from 1914 to 1933 – in his text published in *Der Kreis* defended the use of reproductions, which he considered valuable "Urkunden" (testimonial documents), and "Lehrmittel" (didactic instruments), but he nevertheless believed it was necessary to maintain a difference in purpose between originals and copies: "auch ist es unbedenklich, Urkunden, Lehrmittel und Reproduktionen als Zimmerschmuck zu ver-

wenden".¹⁹

Compared with those of his colleagues, the tones and positions of Dorner's article are very different. With the provocative attitude that characterised his prose from his earliest writings, he brings about a genuine epistemological revolution, questioning one of the great taboos underlying the entire debate – that of the clear superiority of the original over the copy:

Eine solche Faksimilierung ist auch ein Eingriff in unsere bisherigen Vorstellungen von Original, dessen Einmaligkeit bisher feststehende Tatsache war. Mit dem Faksimile aber hat die Reproduktionstechnik einen Entwicklungsgrad erreicht, der im Prinzip die Situation völlig verändert. Denn das Faksimile erstrebt in der Tat eine Annäherung an das Original, die auf dessen Ersatz hinausläuft.

Such a production of facsimiles constitutes an attack on our previous idea of the original, the uniqueness of which was hitherto an established fact. With the facsimile, however, reproduction techniques have reached a degree of development that, in principle, changes the situation completely. In fact, the facsimile aspires to come closer to the original, to the point of replacing it.²⁰

Dorner seems to be arguing here that authenticity is, in the end, a characteristic of the work of art that had been considered important up to that moment, but which is, after all, inessential and ultimately historically determined. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Dorner's position is that it largely

¹⁴ Eberlein 1929.

¹⁵ Sieker 1929.

¹⁶ Obrist 2006.

¹⁷ Dorner 1930.

¹⁸ Panofsky [1930] 1990, 10.

¹⁹ 'It is, however, unthinkable to use documents, teaching tools, and reproductions to decorate a room' (Pauli 1930).

²⁰ Dorner 1930, 156; transl. by the Author.

derives, as he would admit a few lines later, from his acquaintance with the avant-garde. While Maria Gaugh²¹ has shown how Dorner's use of Lissitzky's *Kabinett* was partially instrumental to the fulfilment of his museological theories, it is of extreme interest to observe how Dorner's interpretation of contemporary art, not only as a curator but also as a theoretician, leads to a radical rethinking of the museology of the time:

Erst bei den Vertretern der modernsten Kunstrichtungen, so beim Neoplastizismus eines Mondrian, oder dem Konstruktivismus eines Lissitzky, tritt der neue und bisher undenkbbare Zustand ein, daß die Künstler das Faksimile als eine ihrer Kunst adäquate Erscheinung und als Verbündeten betrachten. Denn für diese Kunstwerke, die keine differenzierten Illusionen von Oberflächenansichten von Körpern innerhalb einer Raumbühne geben wollen, sondern in einfachsten Formen die aus dem Illusionsraum befreiten Flächen, Linien und Farben selbst in ihrer realen Struktur, ist die Faksimilierung nicht nur keine Gefahr, sondern in ihrer Exaktheit sogar eine Verbesserung. Die Einmaligkeit des Kunstwerks als materielle Erscheinung ist hier weder ideell noch praktisch notwendig.

Only with the representatives of the most modern artistic currents, for example, Mondrian's Neo-plasticism or Lissitzky's Constructivism, does a new and hitherto unimaginable state emerge whereby artists consider the facsimile to be a phenomenon appropriate to their art and an ally. In fact, for those works of art not intended to give any illusion of differentiated viewpoints for the perspectives of bodies in space but seek to restore, in their simplest forms, those surfaces, those lines, those colors, freed from the space of illusion, the production of facsimiles not only represents no danger but, in its accuracy, even an improvement. The uniqueness of the work of art as a material phenomenon is neither ideally nor practically necessary here.²²

This freedom in hybridizing the most abstract theoretical thought with careful observation of the artistic transformations of the present is perhaps the most emblematic consequence of the two-sided nature of Dorner's thought. As an art historian, but also as museum director and leading figure of an avant-garde association such as the Kestnergesellschaft, Dorner shares in some ways a condition of

semi-outsider (not a philosopher, not a scholar, not a university student, nor a journalist), with Walter Benjamin, the theorist of reproducibility *par excellence*: it is precisely this condition that allows him to question any constituted paradigm, even the most 'auratic' place of the entire early twentieth-century art system: the museum.

Dorner, in fact – in a display of fine rhetoric worth quoting in its entirety – compares the nature of copies to that of the museum, therefore making them provocatively unassailable (at least by experienced museum professionals, such as Sauerlandt or Eberlein):

Wir brauchen es aus ähnlichen und verwandten Gründen, aus denen wir das Kunstmuseum brauchen. Auch das Museum greift gewaltsam in die ursprüngliche Bestimmung des Kunstwerks und die Absichten seines Erzeugers ein, wenn es Altäre aus Kirchen und Gemälde aus Schlössern herausholt und in ein Milieu überträgt, das aus den Interessen und Bedürfnissen der Gegenwart geschaffen und nur aus solchen heraus zu verstehen ist. Die Gegenwart braucht diese Werte, die die Vergangenheit erzeugt hat, um ihr Weltbild zu gestalten. Eine Bewegung, die den Abbau der Museen und die Rucktransportierung aller Kunstwerke in Kirchen und Schlösser verlangt, ist – abgesehen davon, dass sie etwas praktisch Undurchführbares propagiert – ihrem Wesen nach destruktiv. Sie will die Nutzbarmachung der Werke, die die Vergangenheit erzeugt hat, reduzieren, indem sie sie zu Inseln macht, die isoliert im Strome des gegenwärtigen Lebens liegen. Nicht anders liegt es aber bei der Faksimilierung alter Kunstwerke. Auch sie erfüllt als organisch gewachsenes, zeitgemäßes Mittel das Bedürfnis der Gegenwart, einer Möglichst vollständigen, Allgemeinheit die Werte alter Kunst zu vermitteln. Es ist ein Schritt weiter in der Richtung, in der man ging, als man Museen einrichtete. Aber auch dieser neue Schritt bringt es notwendig mit sich, dass wiederum dem ursprünglichen Sinn der alten Kunstwerke Gewalt angetan wird. Wie sollte es auch anders möglich sein, dass Teile einer alten Welt in eine neue übertragen und von sicher verwertet werden.

We need them [the copies] for reasons similar and akin to those for which we need a museum. Even a museum violently interferes with the original purpose of a work of art and the intentions of its creator when it takes altars out of

²¹ Gaugh 2003.

²² Dorner 1930, 156; transl. by the Author.

churches and paintings out of castles and transfers them into a context that has been created by the interests and needs of the present and that must be understood only through them. The present needs those values that the past has expressed to create the image of its own world. A movement that aims to abolish museums and return all works of art to churches or castles – even though it would be an unfeasible project in practice – is in its very essence destructive. It seeks to reduce the usefulness of those works of art that the past has produced by transforming them into islands alienated from the vortex of present life. It is no different when we produce facsimiles of ancient works of art. This too, like an instrument that has grown organically with the times, satisfies the need of the present to transmit the values of ancient art in a generalization that is as complete as possible. It is a step forward in the direction that was followed when museums were created. But even this new step necessarily implies that violence is done to

the original meaning of the ancient works once again. And how could it be any different, when parts of an old world are transferred to a new one and surely used by it?²³

As Uchill notes, this passage on the ‘authenticity’ of the art experience highlights Dorner’s participation in a certain “contemporary sentiment”,²⁴ which can be related to the critique of the museum levelled in the same period by Carl Einstein,²⁵ and which goes as far as Walter Benjamin’s essay on the work of art. It is not possible to reconstruct with philological certainty Benjamin’s reception of the debate and the resulting influence on his theory of photography.²⁶ Nevertheless, it is possible – and this is what I will suggest in the following sections – to reconstruct the genealogy and the political and sociocultural significance of the complex dialectic between reproduction and museum exhibition that takes place in these authors in the last years of the Weimar Republic.

3 Riegl’s Echoes: Dorner and Benjamin

The complex analogical relationship that Dorner establishes between copies and museum experience reveals how influenced he must have been by a late text by Alois Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus* (1903), still considered the most significant theoretical contribution to the autonomous foundation of conservation of the twentieth century.²⁷ The aspect of Riegl’s thought that undoubtedly impressed Dorner – who, as a fervent admirer of Riegl, we can assume to have been familiar the text – was that Riegl related his theory of *Kunstwollen*²⁸ not only to the production of contemporary works of art, but also to the fruition of those of the past:

Nach der älteren Meinung besitzt ein Kunstwerk insofern Kunstwert, als es den Anforderungen einer vermeintlichen objektiven, bisher niemals einwandfrei formulierten Ästhetik entspricht; nach der neueren bemißt sich der Kunstwert eines Denkmals danach, wie weit es den Anforderun-

gen des modernen Kunstwollens entgegenkommt.

From the past point of view, a work of art possesses artistic value insofar as it corresponds to the demands of an aesthetic that is considered objective and has never before been defined in an unobjectionable manner. According to the modern view, the artistic value of a monument is assessed in terms of how much such monument meets the requirements of the modern *Kunstwollen*.²⁹

For the first time – with Riegl – ‘artistic value’ had thus ceased to be an absolute concept to become, consistently with his entire theory of art, relative. Thus, in another passage of his text, Riegl explains that the value of the antique, the *Alteswert*, was not a result of the object itself, which “vollends bereits zu einem bloßen notwendigen Übel verflüchtigt” (appears almost completely sublimated to a simple

²³ Dorner 1930, 155; transl. by the Author.

²⁴ Uchill 2015b, 26.

²⁵ Einstein 1926.

²⁶ Markus 2007, 359-60.

²⁷ Scarrocchia 1995, 47.

²⁸ Riegl 1893.

²⁹ Riegl [1903] 1988, 6; transl. by the Author.

lesser evil);³⁰ but of the *Stimmung* that it was able to arouse in the modern user. Dorner – despite rejecting the romantic tendencies underlying Riegl’s cult of the antique and ruins – seems to refer to this very aspect of his theoretical discourse: namely the subjectivity of modern fruition, in which the object appears to be considered a merely lesser evil, to defend and reaffirm the usefulness of reproductions. In accord with Riegl, he shifts his attention away from the authenticity of the work of art (which thus ceases to be a supreme value) onto the *Stimmung* and the effects it produces on the viewer.

Of course, something similar would be achieved seven years later by one of the central protagonists of the German philosophy of the time, Walter Benjamin.

Wolfgang Kemp³¹ has dealt extensively with Benjamin’s acquaintance with the texts of the Vienna school, pointing out that Riegl and Benjamin – and, we would add, Dorner – had begun to consider the work of art in relation to its present conditions of reception.

From Riegl, Dorner and Benjamin derive their interest in the possibilities of reception and the suspicion that perception might be a historical product, making every statement on the value and func-

tion of the work of art irremediably relative. And it is precisely (the wholly Rieglian) idea of the instability intrinsic to the concept of art and its function that led both Benjamin and Dorner to investigate the cultural manifestations of the present, seeking to lose – to suspend – any stable *a priori* reference point.

Against this backdrop, and faced with the growing presence of artistic copies, the two authors did not focus on the degeneration of art as an exogenous phenomenon; for them, what was taking place was an endogenous and epistemological change within art itself. As for Dorner, the presence of facsimiles had undermined the very concept of the original’s exclusive value, so Benjamin, years later, would write:

In dem Augenblick aber, da der Maßstab der Echtheit an der Kunstproduktion versagt, hat sich auch die gesamte soziale Funktion der Kunst umgewälzt.

But as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionised.³²

4 Beyond Riegl: A Political Issue

The connection that Benjamin establishes between the spread of reproductions and a changing in the social function of art is crucial for understanding the distance between his position and Dorner’s on the one hand, and that of Riegl on the other.

Riegl did not see the increased participation of the masses in the ‘cult of culture’ produced by modern fruition as a political phenomenon capable of modifying the very status of the work of art; for him, it was rather a greater “possibility of providing the masses with aesthetic satisfaction”.³³ For Benjamin, as for Dorner, the broader access to works of art that copies facilitated implied not only a quantitative, but also a qualitative change in fruition, whereby not only the originality of the work was challenged, but its usefulness in the present. Dorner emphasises this aspect in stating that:

Die Gegner des Faksimiles denken nur an dessen Verwertung für die Gegenwart; den einen ist das Erlebnis einiger weniger allein wichtig, den anderen darüber hinaus noch die Weiterentwicklung der Gesamtheit.

The opponents of the facsimile think only of its utility in the present; for some, only the experience of the few is important, while for others the further development of the community also counts.³⁴

These words were later echoed by Benjamin, arguing that:

die technische Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks emanzipiert dieses zum ersten Mal in der Weltgeschichte von seinem parasitären Dasein

³⁰ Riegl [1903] 1988, 9; transl. by the Author.

³¹ Kemp 1982, 417-19.

³² Benjamin [1936] 1963, 18; English translation by Michael W. Jennings, in Benjamin [1936] 2008, 25.

³³ Kemp 1982, 418.

³⁴ Dorner 1930, 158; transl. by the author.

am Ritual [...] An die Stelle ihrer Fundierung aufs Ritual tritt ihre Fundierung auf eine andere Praxis: nämlich ihre Fundierung auf Politik.

For the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual [...]. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.³⁵

Although the tools to conceive the function of the work of art and its values as relative and influenced by fruition are derived from Riegl, both Dorner and Benjamin go further, supplementing aesthetic reflection with more directly political-social issues. Here, however, Benjamin's and Dorner's paths diverge, taking irrevocably distant directions, both of which are worth exploring. In Benjamin's view, strongly influenced by Marxism and himself inclined to a very personal form of messianism,³⁶ making copies widely available would lead to a change of great aesthetic, perceptive and social significance.

In Benjamin's thought, the new actor called upon to shape the aesthetics and perception of modern times are the masses, the most impressive sociological novelty of the Weimar Republic, with their distracted perception and passion for film entertainment. This was not a phenomenon to be aestheticised or despised but to be observed with interest, one in which to place the last hopes of an effective return of art to life and life to the individual, when cultivating these hopes was becoming increasingly complex and vain. For Benjamin, the new function of art was realised at the cinema, in the city streets, in the shimmering kaleidoscope of modern reality: his judgment on the museum in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, although not explicit, is severe.

For Benjamin, the museum is a secular temple, theatre of a linear and predefined narrative. The tendency of the museum of the time to propose an incremental and progressive narrative, *Erfahrung* of human culture, is at the antipodes of Benjamin's conception of history as *Erlebnis*, an immense and complex picture of ruins that, from time to time, are assembled to compose ever-new epiphanies, destined, however, to remain eternally incomplete.³⁷

Although Dorner, like Benjamin, was against a cult-like attitude towards works of art, he contin-

ued, as museum director, to consider this institution as the place designated for art *par excellence*. Making art existentially and socially useful was, ultimately, the task of the curator, who Dorner considered to be the only holder (over and beyond the artists and the work itself) of the narrative monopoly.

Reliance on the use of copies reveals, in both Dorner and Benjamin, a faith in the ability of the present to interact with the past, enhancing it, and perhaps changing its meaning. If, however, for Benjamin, this process was entrusted entirely to the masses, finally able to approach a work of art actively and critically, for Dorner the increased access to the work of art did not mean equating the skills of the masses with those of the specialists; on the contrary, it provided an opportunity for the latter to significantly extend their still highly paternalistic pedagogy. Dorner's decision to accept copies, while abandoning many of the traditional attributes of the work of art, did not imply a rejection of the narrative aspect that it was intended to acquire in a museum. Whereas Benjamin saw reproductions as a revolutionary instrument to emancipate the masses through a renewed relationship with the work of art, Dorner considered them an instrument that could lead to an understanding of the present brought to the masses from above rather than being discovered, being achieved by them. Dorner makes this conviction implicit by analogy in his defence of reproductions:

Die Wirkungen des Originals und die des idealen Faksimiles sind etwa damit zu vergleichen, ob ich einen Redner persönlich sprechen höre (das wäre das Original) oder seine Rede lese (das wäre das Faksimile). Das ideale Faksimile kann uns die im Original enthaltenen Vorstellungen mit einem Minimum an Verlust vermitteln.

The impact of the original and that of the perfect facsimile can be somewhat comparable to the situation of someone listening to a speaker talking in person (which would be the original) or reading his speech (and this would be the facsimile). The ideal facsimile can communicate the images contained in the original with a minimum of loss.³⁸

Despite starting from similar premises, the conclusions of the two authors are radically differ-

³⁵ Benjamin [1936] 1963, 18; English translation by Michael W. Jennings, in Benjamin [1936] 2008, 24-5.

³⁶ Traverso 2018.

³⁷ Brent Plate 2005, 99.

³⁸ Dorner 1930, 158; transl. by the Author.

ent: for Benjamin, copies can subvert institutional discourse concerning the work of art; not so for Dorner, instead, they possess great potential for becoming known, but they never question the 'power relations' of museum fruition.

With the advent of mechanical reproduction, two options were available to those who did not oppose

them: Benjamin's unmistakably Marxist and people-centred vision, and that of Dorner, with its pedagogical and populist horizon, albeit animated by an authentic and anti-elitist faith in the possibilities of art, capable, if correctly narrated, of enriching the lives of the masses.

5 An Official Epilogue, an Unofficial Prologue

During the years of the *Streit*, however, the problems raised in the *Der Kreis* articles reached, to some extent, an 'official' conclusion. German museology of the time was not ready to accept Dorner's radical positions on the presence of reproductions in museums - neither from an aesthetic nor a pedagogical and social point of view. So, in the same context, Sauerlandt wrote:

Wir wollen also getäuscht sein und halten es für gut und richtig, auch unsere Mitmenschen zu tauschen oder sie tauschen zu lassen. Ja man verbrämt diesen Täuschungsversuch sogar sehr ethisch, sehr sozial mit der Begründung, dass es heutzutage nicht mehr möglich sei, den Minderbemittelten als den auch geistig weniger Berechtigten zu behandeln, man mochte in schönem geistigen Kommunismus 'allen alles' gönnen, und übersieht dabei nur, dass man den Minderbemittelten gerade dadurch als den geistig Minderberechtigten behandelt, dass man ihn mit dem vitaminenfreien Surrogat des Faksimiles abspeist.

So we want to be deluded and consider it good and right to also delude our fellow human beings or let them be deluded. Actually, this pursuit of deception is even dressed up most ethically, most socially, with the justification that nowadays it is no longer possible to treat the less fortunate as being spiritually less entitled, wanting to grant 'everything to everyone' in a fine spiritual communism, and we ignore the fact that by doing this we treat the poor as if they were less spiritually entitled, deceiving them with a surrogate in the form of a facsimile wholly devoid of nourishment.³⁹

On this basis, Sauerlandt responds to Dorner's 'provocations' by adopting a proudly reactionary stance, where defence of works of art and the mis-

sion of the museum - as explicitly stated - coincide with upholding their cultural value:

Wir aber, die wir noch einigen Wert auf Wahrheit legen und nebenbei auch eine Art von Verantwortung für die Kunst der Vergangenheit - und der Gegenwart - tragen, haben die sittliche Pflicht unserer Berufung unzeitgemäß zu sein [...] Wir müssen das Gefühl der Ehrfurcht vor dem lebendigen Kunstwerk stärken das jedem in den öffentlichen Kunstsammlungen zugänglich ist - wenn nicht materiell, so doch ideell als eigener Besitz. Wo diese Ehrfurcht fehlt, die sich gegen die Lüge empört - denn was ist 'Täuschung' anderes als Lüge? - oder wo diese Lüge nicht mehr als Lüge empfunden wird, bleibt jedes andere Wort umsonst.

We, however, who still value truth and bear, among other things, a sort of responsibility towards the art of the past - and of the present - have the moral duty of our vocation to be outmoded [...] We must strengthen the sense of reverential awe for the living work of art, which is accessible to all in public collections - if not materially, then at least ideally as one's own possession. Where this awe, which is outraged at the lie - after all, what else is a copy but a lie? - is lacking, or where this lie is no longer considered as such, any other word remains in vain.⁴⁰

Sauerlandt - dismissed three years later by the National Socialists because of his connection with avant-garde circles - makes precisely the same shift from aesthetics to ethics that led, a few years later, to the canonization of the concept of *entartete Kunst*, degenerate art (a Jewish and Bolshevik 'moral disease'), when he states that "ein Leben in falschen Gefühlen - das Schlimmste was es gibt! - ist die unausbleibliche Folge" (a life of false

³⁹ Sauerlandt 1929c, 498; transl. by the Author.

⁴⁰ Sauerlandt 1929c, 503; transl. by the Author.

feelings – the worst there can be – is the inevitable consequence [of using copies]).⁴¹

The sense of threat, outrage, and moral and cultural perversion accompanying such a conception of copies led Sauerlandt to an all-out war against introducing facsimiles in museums. This represented a dimension in which the first legitimate and rationally articulated doubts about the question of authenticity and pedagogical efficacy of replicas were already being replaced by less reasonable and more millennialistic statements calling for reproductions to be stopped because “das geht an die Wurzeln unserer Existenz” (the very roots of our existence are at stake).⁴²

Sauerlandt was never able (being outvoted twice) to convince the Internationaler Verband

von Museumsbeamten to express an official position against the use of facsimiles in museums. However, in September 1929, he succeeded in preventing his colleague from Hannover from joining the association. Dorner’s efforts,⁴³ letters and appeals to the other board members to make him retract his opinions on facsimiles were in vain: on 23 September 1929, the Weimar museum establishment expressed implicitly its final opinion on the facsimiles and explicitly on the work of the director of the Landesmuseum.

Nevertheless, Benjamin’s essay would later prove that, although the statements of Sauerlandt and the professional humiliation of Dorner may have seemed conclusive, the debate on the cultural value of copies had only just begun.

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⁴¹ Sauerlandt 1929c, 499; transl. by the Author.

⁴² Uchill 2015b, 30.

⁴³ “Am 6. August (oder 7. August) war ich dann persönlich bei Herrn Sauerlandt und habe ihm in einer mehrere Stunden währenden Unterhaltung meinen Standpunkt in der Frage “Original und Reproduktion” klargelegt und ihn davon unterrichtet, dass ich im Erdgeschoss des Hannoverschen Provinzial-Museums eine Ausstellung von Faksimiles alt-orientalischer und antiker Kunst machen werde und das die Umbauten bereits im Gange, bzw. beendet seien. Herr Sauerlandt erklärte mir im Laufe der Unterhaltung, dass er sich mit mir besser verständigen könne als mit Herrn Heise. Im Anschluss daran sprechen wir auch über meine Aufnahme in den Internationalen Verband von Museumbeamten [...] In einem Brief vom 5. 9., mit 1 Nachtrag von 11. 9., also 10 Tage vor der Tagung des Deutschen Museumsverbänden, teilt mir dann Herr Sauerlandt plötzlich mit, dass meinen, (ihm seit Juni bekannten) Aufsatz im “Hannoverschen Kurier” nochmals gelesen habe und dass man, “wenn man so, wie ich, Ober das Galvano denkt, nicht gut einer Verbindung beitreten kann, die grundsätzlich anders denkt und urteilt” (Alexander Dorner’s letter to an unknown correspondent, quoted in Uchill 2015a, 138).