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**Rodin-Lektüren**  
**Deutungen und Debatten von der Moderne zur Postmoderne**  
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**English Summary**  
**Interpreting Rodin**  
**Debates and Discussions from Modernity to Postmodernity**

With the works of Auguste Rodin, modernity finally reached the art of sculpture. One might think for example of the French sculptor's innovative depiction of the human body as a living organism (*The Age of Bronze*) and of the playful proliferation of iconographic and literary references (*The Gates of Hell*). But how, one could ask, did this art historical knowledge come into being? How did the work of the French sculptor become an iconic ›incarnation‹ of modernity itself?

While art historical research and exhibitions usually tend to use the notion of »modernity« as a conceptual framework which helps to describe the newness of Rodin's works, this study in contrast turns to the historical emergence of this modernist discourse in some of its key moments. Its main focus is on the highly divergent approaches to the sculptor and his work, as they appeared for example in the art criticism of the naturalist and symbolist schools, but also in vitalist philosophy, in sociology, in cultural criticism, in the rather conservative art historical research of postwar Germany, in the American debate on modernism and in postmodernist interpretations. In the debates about Rodin, every new ›reading‹ of his works and of the artistic *persona* seems to take up earlier interpretations and reinterprets them. The reader of this study is therefore invited to take part in the encounter of a dense network of ideas and concepts about modernity in search of itself.

The second chapter, entitled *Einführung und Diagnose*, is devoted to Rodin's famous sculpture *The Age of Bronze* (1877) and to the notorious scandal that this work evoked at its first presentations in the Salons of Belgium and France. Rodin's naturalistic exaggeration of the traditional modes of representation of the human body has traditionally been interpreted by art historians as a proof of his outstanding craftsmanship. As can be read in many studies, the artist had, with this work, achieved a new degree of sculptural immediacy in the empirical description of the human body. In contrast to that, the focus of this chapter will be more on the ways how contemporary art critics, in their early comments on this work, and later art historians have exerted the ambivalence of their own receptive attitude towards the work – and how this ambivalence has become an important catalyst for the discussions about Rodin's modernity. As shall be demonstrated, these early critics verbalized an indecisive oscillation

between an enthusiasm for the aesthetic presence (which seemed to directly emanate from this sculpture) on the one hand and an accusation that this work might have been produced by the use of a mechanical reproduction of a living body on the other hand.

Life and death, presence and absence, an intuitive way of experiencing art and a diagnostic gaze, an apologia for artistic originality and a looming reproach for mechanical reproduction: these seemingly opposing terms are intermingled in an indissoluble way since the early debates about the sculptor – up to the highly polemical dispute between Rosalind Krauss and the Stanford art historian Albert Elsen in the 1980s which will be discussed in the last chapter.

The third chapter addresses the recent research on Rodin. In addition, some theoretical and methodological reflections are presented. A central challenge of this study lies in the question of how the reception history of Rodin's works can be described without falling back into antiquated notions of creative genius and artistic »intentionality« on the one side and radically constructivist methods on the other side. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, a theorist of science studies, has created the concept of »Experimentalsysteme« in order to be able to describe the emergence of new knowledge in the process of knowledge-making. This notion can help us to come to terms with the fundamental contingency of the discourse on Rodin and the project of modernity.

The fourth chapter with the title *Figurenkunst und Künstlerfigur* turns to the art-critical writings on the *Gates of Hell* (1880). In this chapter, famous art critics and writers such as Edmond de Goncourt, Gustave Geffroy, Anatole France and Arthur Symons are at the center of interest. For the generation of the symbolist art critics, for example, the *Gates of Hell* became an icon of their own melancholic art doctrine insofar as the art work seemed to stage a temporality of deferral and hesitation which could be understood as a counter-image to an all-too-optimistic belief in historical progress. At the same time, Rodin's apparent inability to bring this work to an end seemed to betray a very similar understanding of time.

Rilke's and Simmel's interpretations of Rodin's work, which are at the core of the following chapter, are described as theoretically ambitious attempts of emulating the art-critical debate at the turn of the century by using innovative narrative strategies of coalescing biographical patterns and reflections on art (Rilke) or by declaring Rodin's work to be the ideal object for an analysis of modernity in the context of contemporary sociology (Simmel).

The sixth chapter, entitled *Verlust und Wiederbelebung*, turns to two interpretations by German-speaking authors in the years around 1950: the philosopher Günther Anders and the art historian Josef Schmall. gen. Eisenwerth. Anders, who was also a student of Edmund

Husserl, described Rodin's sculptural images of the human body as artistic expressions of an historical experience of loss and isolation, as objects which could stimulate a deepened reflection about modernity as crises. Josef Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth's investigations of the motif of the torso, which emerged in the 1950s, rather tried to describe the fragmented body as the »symbol« of an aesthetic experience of totality and holism. Obviously, the art historian's strategy of emphatically denying the disturbing aesthetic effects of some of Rodin's torsos can be – at least from today's perspective – conceived as a way of dealing with the historical experience of the collapse of civilization.

The last chapter of the study is entitled *Auf dem Weg in die Postmoderne*. It focuses on the writings of Leo Steinberg and Rosalind Krauss since the 1960s. While Steinberg was mostly interested in the diverse ways of how Rodin constructed and deconstructed the meanings of his sculptures with the help of the art forms of the »montage« and the »assemblage«, thereby ostentatiously demonstrating the sculptural »semiosis«, Krauss emphatically turned to the problem of ›reading‹ Rodin's images of the human body. For her, Rodin's sculptures became emblems of an ›opaque‹ subjectivity and therefore the first artistic realizations of a radically new paradigm of aesthetic reception: Instead of clinging to the traditional notions of psychological and hermeneutical depth in the beholding of sculptures, in her view Rodin's sculptures emphasize the material surface as the original site of the production of meaning.