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**That Obscure Object of Desire:
The Art of Art History***

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A work of art can be defined as a man-made object of aesthetic significance, with a vitality and reality of its own. Regardless of the medium of expression, a work of art is a unique, complex, irreducible, in some ways even mysterious, individual whole.

W. E. Kleinbauer, *Modern Perspectives in
Western Art History*

I. Lust for Life

While to be sure there is a certain ironic fictionality in the constitution of disciplinary "objects" in the human sciences, the fictionality of the object-domain of art history is almost unique of its kind as an illusory, panoptic projection—hypostatized precisely because of the rhetorical and metaphorical power of its discursive protocols and ideological double-binds. In this theatre of illusion and memory, the "art" of art history has been rather like a *holograph*—a multiple projection by an apparatus of self-defining and mutually-supportive

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practices and desires, achieving solidity and "configuration" as the *imago agens* of those practices.

The Hollywood film biography of the nineteenth-century painter Vincent van Gogh, *Lust for Life* (1956), included a number of scenes where the eye of the camera was coincident with the eyes of the artist-hero looking at various landscapes, persons, and interiors. In each case, after a momentary pause—during which there was a quick flash to the intensely concentrated visage of the tortured artist—the scene dissolved into one or another famous van Gogh painting.

The use of cinematic dissolve in these instances is no mere decorative flourish: it is intended precisely to exemplify and perform the derivation and provenance of the completed aesthetic image before our very eyes. In so doing, the cinematic device exemplifies two things: the predominant conception of "art" in the West since the Renaissance—namely, as a morphological transformation or translation of ordinary sensory perception, and the predominant notion (up to our own time) of art historical and critical practice—namely, the detection of an ordinary view of an artist which comes to be transformed in a metamorphosed *vision* by the artist. At the same time, the device performs for a lay audience what must be done to *measure* and appreciate that vision.

This is truly extraordinary. In the twinkling of an eye *Lust for Life* sets out for its viewers the dominant thrust of speculation on the nature and processes of aesthetic creativity in the visual arts over the past four centuries, since its paradigmatic foundations in the work of Vasari.¹ And in addition, the demonstration is *mythomorphic*, approximating the "form" of that which it speaks,² twice over—in the forward motion of the mode of aesthetic or artifactual production, and in the (sometimes implied, sometimes shown) "backward" motion of the mode of art historical reconstruction.

Nevertheless, the former process is given a miraculous aura, as if the artist's brush were a wand transforming an optical array into a new reality. The spectator never sees the processes of production (the actual painting of the scene) directly, even though we are shown Vincent applying paint to canvas from time to time. We are shown a species of *creativity* rather than a form of labor or production. Nor do we ever see on the screen the art historian-critic at work, only the results of that labor of detection and exegesis; the historian too is indicated as a re-creator of ordinary vision.

The artist-hero (the ostensible protagonist; the actual "hero" of *Lust for Life* is the discipline of art history) is also to be construed here as a grid or filter, an aesthetic mediator refracting the prose of the world to poetry, distiller of the Essential from the world in which we live.

In this refractive regime, the artwork is a record or trace of the artist's individuality and originality. Indeed, the film indicates for us that the measurable *distance* (difference) between painted image and encatalyzing view is isomorphic with the artist's original degree of difference from the mundane: this distance is an iconic *sign* of artistic genius. As the distance changes, so also, and to an equivalent degree of sorts, does that genius change and grow. Vincent's life is a narrative

journey of growth from the photograph to the abstract, a quest for an essential (higher) Reality increasingly different from the ordinary.

But here, precisely, is the rub: as a *fabula metrologica*, that distance may also be a sign of increasing removal from sanity: it is also a journey into madness. The film ostentatiously displays the agony and madness of the artist-hero as a measured distance from an objective (camera-eye) real world.³ The resultant artwork ("Starry Night," or whatever) stands as eloquent testimony to that madness, that marginally. As time passes, the increasing madness of Vincent is made to be seen as congruent and commensurate with an increased irrealty of his paintings. To be sure, there are occasional lapses into euclidean lucidity, but the essential vector remains constant.

Let us examine this more closely.

The "story" of Vincent van Gogh is an occasion for *Lust for Life* to perform important ideological work for art history and criticism. Apart from the film's attempt to marginalize "modern" nonfigural artwork along a dangerous boundary between sanity and madness (on which more below), it is primarily concerned with establishing and exemplifying art historical practice as a benign therapeutic, operating within a carefully circumscribed and neutral frame. The art historian or critic is the implied practitioner (operator) of a revelatory machinery, working at a recuperative task of reconstituting for us all an ordinary fullness of meaning and reference, a semiologically articulatable presence of real Being.⁴

We are made to understand that the historian-critic is one who with patience, fine cunning, and with a certain behind-the-scenes modesty will restore the original sense of what Vincent saw. (Indeed, he has already done so, hence the film, and the existence of the film as an example of narrative "realism" assures us that we are looking at a biographic record, i.e., a true *istoria*, a projection through an Albertian window.)⁵ Tracer of Lost Person(s), the analyst is a forensic detective, whose de-tection (literally and etymologically) removes the opaque roof off the lugubrious chambers of the artistic mind.

And yet it is also apparent from the film that this is a daring and dangerous metrology nonetheless, for the distance between some "original" state and its filtered, altered, post-hoc "record" or trace is both negative and positive. We are shown, both directly and by inference, those villainous art critics of Vincent's time who, taking the distance from optical illusionism ("photographic" or near-photographic "reality") in the canvases as a negative measure, a quantity below the point of a Cartesian zero, see a sign of a separation from sanity.

But *Lust for Life* assures us that the same quantity may be read (more properly, more truly) as a positive measure of creativity and originality, a heightened aesthetic vision. For by hind-sight, Vincent is aesthetically *dans le vrai*: his work is a pointer toward a (more enlightened) future; the artist is a Gregor Mendel who understood the evolutionary line of "art history" before the time of his profession. Thus the historian-critic possesses a measure which can be used to remedy and poison, a true *pharmakon*.⁶

Nowhere in the film is it made apparent that critical dispute has

any basis other than in terms of a progressive evolution of aesthetic morphology—the sometimes gradual, sometimes abrupt evolution of a visual aesthetic logic. The film thus works to hypostatize the implicit social Darwinism of the survival of the best and brightest of that company of artistic Seers—a justification of the diachronic Canon monumentalized in the corpus of disciplinary “textbooks” which synoptically “survey” the “history” of that object termed “art.” It works to legitimize and naturalize the idea that art (as such) “has” a history of its own; that there is a *vie de formes* which is independent of the life of men and their interrelations and social determinations. In this grey and lugubrious “history,” form is all, and any work of art incorporates traces of its (own) *unicity*.¹⁹ The subject of van Gogh’s painting is ultimately art history itself, which is a history of Form.

The film accomplishes the recuperation of positivity in two ways. First, it makes it clear that Vincent’s genius *did* come to be recognized by the company of critics in due course (albeit rather too late, perhaps, to do our hero much good—and here *Lust for Life* stands as an object lesson for the modern art critic and historian). In other words, it is made clear that there is a *true* history of art, a real evolutionary progression which in time will out. Secondly, the film shows us at various points in the cinematic narrative samples of Vincent’s *grounding* in traditional, “representational” technique—the fact that he could “really draw,” and produce images which were fully “naturalistic” (sc., photographic). In short, Vincent is revealed as in fact a child of orthodoxy—a revelation which is greatly strengthened by periodic reference to his religiously orthodox upbringing and familial roots. This is an astute recuperative device, intended to resonate with, and call up in the minds of the audience, the fact that in a theologic order there are higher Realities which may not “resemble” at all the realities of sense and mundane life: Vincent’s paintings might very well then indicate, in their Altered Vision, deeper or higher truths. And in the film there is nothing but a profound religiosity about our hero. He is, of course, a Saint.

Vincent’s aesthetically orthodox training is thus presented as the basis of a permissible “liberty”—a license to take representational (historical) liberties and “freedoms” in the pursuit of his ostensible goal of indicating a truer world, and a deeper reality. But in presenting us with a truer world, *Lust for Life* also situates that world for us—it is nowhere to be seen right now, but lies in the future—the future of art history, in fact. And the history of art is thereby revealed as no mere random vector in time, but rather is in fact a teleology, drawing us inexorably to a final state of perfection.

In the historical context of the film’s production, it works forcefully to suggest the reality of a Progress not only in “art” but in the scientific and technological products of a (progressive) market economy. It is of no small interest that the film appeared at a time when the U.S. had come to successfully market its culture industry abroad, and it is now quite common knowledge that one of its major instruments in the cold war was in fact formalist abstract painting.²⁰

But at the same time that the film ostentatiously van Gogh’s license to produce the kind of images he did, it performs for us a kind of

morality play demonstrating that liberties have limits and embody a certain civic responsibility; boundaries are suggested and shown beyond which artistic vision dissolves into madness, and, of course, social opprobrium. At the same time that the film validates what can only justly be termed a teleological scientificity, it tells us that progress and change should best come about by properly graduated stages: too much too soon is madness. Although the film validates Vincent’s forward-looking vision, it indicates that, after all, there are absolute limits in the accelerational capacities of the apparatus; to strain the machinery in reaching toward an art historically inevitable future may very well lead to mental dis-integration. *Lust for Life* performs an ethical and social lesson, and stands as a Guide for the Perplexed on a variety of different crossroads of individual and collective life. It is, after all, about *lust*.

These cinematic accomplishments, however, raise some art historical problems, and point to at least one major contradiction in the picture of historical criticism constructed by the film. Indeed, it points to a scandal, which is the essential *ambiguity* of critical “standards” as such, the fact that they are instruments of power.

The exhibition of van Gogh’s very fine abilities as a draughtsman, scattered as mementoes over many episodes in the filmic narrative, is the result of a very obvious *tension* regarding the ambivalence of critical standards and norms—the fact that the same norms (all based upon distance or difference from an optic reality) have distinct and even *opposite* meanings. In the first place, a distance from a figural, realist ground is a sign of madness and aesthetic (and consequently social) deviancy; on the other hand, it is a measure of originality and genius, a mark or trace of a deeper, more Real Vision. It is a “measure” with two opposite or opposed meanings. In effect, this fact erases the distinction between the positive and negative axes of a Cartesian geometric grid, leaving us with no absolute standard or frame of reference—for it allows for the existence of a quantity which has antithetical referents.

The contradiction is elided in the film by appeal to the real or *true* history of artistic evolution, the historical denouement which reveals which application of this “standard” is right and which is wrong. Which is to say, it is resolved in teleological and ideal time, as the result of a synoptic perspective to which the art historian (of the future) is privy. In other words, the contradiction is resolvable *outside* of history, in some ideal and ahistorical world.

But the contradiction is thereby compounded. Not only are we up against a normative contradiction, we are also up against the problem—indeed the scandal—that “taste” and critical “norms” or standards are themselves artifacts of historical and social development and change. In other words, it is made apparent that aesthetic standards are conventional and arbitrary, and not neutral or value-free or absolute, or independent of institutions, classes, or ideologies. In short, they are revealed as instruments of power: the power of the villainous critic to enter the genius of Vincent beyond the pale of a Canon, the power of the enlightened critic to rescue that genius and enshrine it in its (proper)

place in the growing pyramid of human creativity and worth.

Again, this contradiction can only be rescued by the film in a theocratic and meta-historical manner; some critics are *right*, period. This right(eous)ness is proved by the subsequent, validating synopticism of the art historical textbook of the future, that Domesday Book in which, after all, all our names are inscribed, all is justified, and all the now-hidden linkages of (a true) history are charted. We are "rescued" from a world in which might makes right into a future world in which right makes might.

This is extraordinary, a remarkable sleight-of-hand, an optical illusion of very fine cunning and cinematic brilliance. And *Lust for Life* performs for us how to step aside from these nicely-woven double binds, in the following manner, echoing art history itself.

The problem is that if (a) the standards of an age and place can *change*, often abruptly, over time, and if (b) even within the same time and place standards can *differ* among historians and critics, then the film's promise of the existence of absolute limits and norms is a recuperative illusion. But by portraying nay-saying critics as obsolescent dunderheads behind their (i.e., *art history's*) "time," we are shown that certain critical perspectives and evaluations must needs be *better*, in some intrinsic way, than others. And of this set of "better" judgments, it is necessary that only one can be the correct and true perspective. This is a doubly effective movement, indicating that better judgments *are* historically-grounded (in terms of the evolutionary time of formalist progress) *and* (presumably if the spectator doesn't completely buy this) it is outside and beyond mere historical fluxion. And the film makes quite clear just what the criteria for the latter—i.e., for absolute critical standards, those which are non-relativist—would be. In short, that stance is true and right which is restorative of narrative fullness, sense, and order; a composed picture of "the-man-and-his-work" precisely as a

... unique, homogeneous, complex, irreducible, in some ways even mysterious, individual whole.

—to repeat Kleinbauer's definition of "a work of art."¹² The critical restoration of Being, then, is shown to operate in a scientific manner, purporting that the "simplest," most "economical," most (scientifically) "elegant" solution is necessarily the truest. True science is a real art.

This is perforce a gestaltist geomancy, a fixing of the artist-hero on the sunlit stained-glass-window of a homogeneous Selfhood.

But should the spectator, viewing a film produced and manufactured at least half a century beyond Freud, *still* have qualms, *Lust for Life* has words for you (this is, after all, a Hollywood movie), which amount to the implication of a *droit des artistes* for a certain contrariness and biographic messiness (not, however, a deep contradictoriness or deep dis-order). This is couched in the allusive trope of the great Artist-Genius's (limited) license to be Contrary and Idiosyncratic. Of course the buck ultimately does stop, and the film's beginn-

ing and middle work inexorably to a theatrically composed end, for this is a tamed Idiosyncrasy wherein the man (and/or his work) *can* be "in some ways even mysterious" while remaining as a homogeneous "individual whole." This may be a fuzzy set, but it is still a set, and *Lust for Life* works to re-center a potentially (and dangerously) de-centered Subjecthood:¹³ the "man-and-his-work" must be thought as "the-man-as-a-work."

Thus the film engenders and produces "the-man-as/and-his-work" as itself a "work of art," and indicates to us that *only* such a regime of critical history can be acceptable as *true*. Consequently, *only* the critic/historian who uses the apparatus of his discipline (need it be said, his own "draughtsmanly" instruments?) to compose *such* a life can in fact himself be *dans le vrai*.

So, despite the fact that

The judgments of the art historian are not correct or incorrect in the way a hypothesis in science is; rather they are illuminating for the time and place in which they are made.¹⁴

It will be understood additionally that

Art historians may approach art and work around it, but they can never penetrate its mysterious core in the way a scientist seeks out the truth of his theories and hypotheses.¹⁵

—so therefore we are warned in advance of the following:

The art historian . . . shuns the tendency of the scientific historian to empty works of their aesthetic significance and drain away their aesthetic integrity.¹⁶

It is therefore quite clear that false *vite* will be those whose composition of the "man-and/as-his-work" are architectonically heterogeneous or internally contradictory, and poorly carpented. Poor carpentry, craftsmanship in which the joints and seams of the hero's life are not finely meshed, is to be avoided at all costs: the outer must match and reflect the innermost, and gaps in the logical and verbal carpentry will invariably lead to leakage, the emptying, draining away of spirit and integrity.

Which of course we cannot have; in this classicist architectonic rhetoric a chink in the armor of the artist-hero inexorably leads to the promiscuous insertion of interrogative wedges which pry this temple of the spirit apart. And it is best to burn all blueprints and preliminary sketches, and all traces of the chisel in this Praxitelean pragmatics. All traces, in short, of art historical and critical grounding in time, place, and social ideology: art history is to be written in such a manner as to suggest that its story, its text, composes itself, authorless, in the third person singular.¹⁷

These would be marvelous instruments indeed, stuff that dreams are made of—the dream of scientificity.

II. Dreams of Scientificity

History does not therefore escape the common obligation of all knowledge, to employ a code to analyze its object, even (and especially) if a continuous reality is attributed to that object. The distinctive features of historical knowledge are due not to the absence of a code, which is illusory, but to its particular nature: the code is a chronology.

Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 1966, p. 258

The data of the art historian are unique, while those of the scientific historian are specimens of a class, or cognate occurrences under a law.

W. E. Kleinbauer, *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History*, 1971, p. 34

Lust for Life presents itself as a paradigmatic framework for art historical criticism, and stands as an exemplar, a *tableau vivant* both of "the-man-and-his-work" and "the-historian-and-his-work," replicating, in a mythomorphic manner, a Vasarian *auteurist* problematic. This cinematic "biography" only makes sense if (a) its format is infinitely extendable to any aesthetic Moment, Genre, Life, or Period, and (b) if it is but one case study, one case (the) taken from the shelves of a Universal Archive or library of "works and days," yet another Testimony or trace of human creativity and artistry in all their ineffability.

But this can be no random aggregate of *vite*: It assumes the existence of a pre-existent *domain* of like phenomena systematically attended to so as to capture and articulate the transfinite variety of tokens of a type of class.

The *objects* within this constant and uniform domain will necessarily be a sub-class within the entire set of artifactual creations of a society or period. The domain, in other words, is not coterminous with the "material culture" or the made world or built environment of a time or place. Not everything may be subsumed under this special domain, and objects belonging to this class cannot be indistinguishable from mere commodities or product(ion)s.

Thus a primary condition for the scientificity of a discipline whose domain incorporates such objects would be that this domain be clear, coherent, and consistent; that its "boundaries" are articulatable and distinct (or at least fuzzy but sufficiently dense and thick). Consistent definitions of appropriate objects must be made so as to distinguish them from other phenomena in the artifactual universe. We may assume that characteristic definitions would include such properties as medium, mode of perceptual address, "a certain

evident constancy of "subject matter" or "content," or the predominance of certain themes, modes of reading and reception, or even characteristic orientations and sitings within a given built environment." Beyond such boundaries, however delimited, objects cannot share the same properties, or share them to an equivalent extent. Art cannot exist by degree (any more than one can be only a little pregnant)—a situation which raises not a few epistemological and practical problems.

This is a measured and measurable world. For its norms and standards to be operable at all, they must perforce be absolute and trans-historical, beyond the vagaries of temporary taste or fashion (presumably those artworks which "endure" and have pertinence for the ages justify their inclusion in the canon—a tricky proposition, as *Lust for Life* should indicate). Its objects of study are "unique, complex, irreducible," and each is an "individual whole." Moreover, within this framework or domain of attention everything (about its objects) is significant in some way, but not everything can be significant in the same way; in addition, everything cannot be significant in every way. The historian and critic (not to speak of the lay viewer/user) are *not free* to assign (or "discover") any set of meanings or referents or associations in an "artwork": although it will be admitted that the range of associations catalyzed by an artwork may multiply to infinity, that range is fixed and oriented and grounded in some common core set of percepts. Viewing artwork cannot, at base, be an occasion for infinite semiotic bricolage or free play. As our film makes quite plain, it must be the case that some interpretations are truer than others, "closer" to originary intention and programmatic purpose. And criticism is an apparatus and discursive practice to ensure a fidelity to (what it has systematically identified as) authorial intention.

All of which means, of course, that the disciplinary analyst is dealing with a *code* of determined and determinate formations and contents. And herein lies the tip of the problematic iceberg.

In the first place, there is an essential contradiction between a domain of objects which are "unique and irreducible" and a domain of objects which are tokens of a type or class of like phenomena. Either we are dealing with an order of monadic unicums or with a constant class of phenomena. If the former, there is no possibility of having a disciplinary science; if the latter, then "art" cannot be a *kind* of thing but rather a way of attending to or using a wide variety of (what might be morphologically quite distinct) things.²⁰

If there is to be a discipline of art history (and the existence of *Lust for Life* indicates that there must be for its conclusions to be accorded any seriousness), then in a general sense three broad premises must govern it: (1) that artworks "say" (express, reveal, articulate, project . . .) something *determinate*; that (2) such determinacy is grounded ultimately in authorial or artistic intention—what the *maker* meant to express or "convey" about a view of the world or the truth of an "internal," emotive state; and that (3) the properly equipped historian or critic can mimetically approximate such determinate intentionality by producing a *reading* which it is assumed a similarly

trained and skilled expert might agree possesses some (consensual) objectivity.²¹

Such fixity of determination underlies the cinematic performance of *Lust for Life* and a corresponding determination to fix meaning characterizes the activity of critical history in the film. We are given the measure of fixity in the morphological distance between optic view and artistic (transformative) vision, revealing the latter as grounded in and catalyzed by the former. The historian-critic (in the "person" of cinematic apparatus) works to render morphological opacity semiologically transparent: within the code of artistic practice developed by our artist-hero, meaning is reduced ultimately to reference in a complex heuristic manner, which might be understood as follows.

In the first place, it is taken as given that the paintings of Vincent refer to a given view of the natural world, and that the latter comprises the works' "subject matter" or content. This might be termed a "vertical" axis of signification. Secondly, it is implied by the film, the historian works to establish the "intentions" of the artist by a variety of means, most notably by a comparative method or *combinatoire* wherein the corpus of works are juxtaposed and compared so as to reveal a certain constancy or invariance of pattern (in formation or in "content"). These tell-tale signs of constancy, which might loosely be termed "style,"²² are assumed to be arrayed along—which is to say align themselves so as to suggest—a plane or table of *distinctive features* characteristic of the corpus of the artist. Such a grid of features may then be employed (by hind-sight) as a criterion for judgment as to whether certain works are attributable to the authorship of this artist.²³ Needless to say, such "features" may concern morphology pure and simple, or may indicate other kinds of constancy (thematic, semantic, and so forth),²⁴ and may be used to distinguish other aspects of the artist's corpus.²⁵ This second analytic practice might be considered as a kind of "horizontal" axis of signification.

The foregoing may be understood, according to the implications of the film, as the disciplinary apparatus which works to decode or decipher the system of formation and signification comprising the artist's *oeuvre*—to render the visual *legible* as signs within an aesthetic system, structure, or code, peculiar to an artist, period, or place. Indeed it necessarily follows that the aesthetic code of our artist-hero is but one of a large number of partly idiosyncratic, partly shared "codes" of practice. The meanings of the artist's work is thereby taken to represent a personal and original "inflection" of a wider code or system of artistic practice: an *idiolet* which is recognizably that of van Gogh.

Moreover, each of the distinctive features of this particular code of practice must in some way be mutually-implicative and mutually-defining: each must in some way mesh with all others so as to work in concert to engender and exemplify that stylistic code.

Such a set of assumptions depends, for its pertinency, upon a further set of circumstances. For the entire system to work at all, it must be assumed that there is an epistemologically legitimate division between "form" and "content"—or, in modern terms, between a for-

mation which is that which *signifies*, and a content or "meaning" or "reference" which is that which is *signified*. The purpose of the formation is to convey or transport a meaning (from a maker to a receiver or beholder). It would be proper, then, to assume that each of these facets might form the basis of two semi-autonomous "objects" which are susceptible to having a "history"—a history of the signifier (a *vie des formes*), and a history of signifieds (a *Gelstesgeschichte*): each might then "evolve" or undergo diachronic change and transformation, and each might be seen as having "lives," so to speak, of their own. The two facets are in fact the two faces of the traditional *sign* inherited from Mediaeval scholastic philosophy up through its Port-Royal and Lockean extensions and transformations, to the culminative work of Saussure.²⁶ This is the notion of the sign and of semiosis in its structuralist mode.

The semiological framework of "stylistic" analysis as implied by *Lust for Life* (and forming the tacit base of the discipline of art history) hinges essentially on one major assumption—the isomorphism of the significative elements of the entire system or code or *oeuvre* of an artist (or by extension a time or place),²⁷ itself grounded in a deeper belief in a homogeneity of Selfhood on the part of the artist.

It is clear that the entire system makes sense only if we assume that "the-man-and-as-his-work" is a "well-formed" system²⁸ displaying a constancy of patterning (morphologically and/or thematically) across every instance of the corpus of objects: that each work, both in its totality and in all its details, is a trace of an organic wholeness, a constant self-identity of the Subject in all its variations.

In short, the system is teleological, grounded in a conflation of "the-man-and-his-work" with "the-man-as-a-work (of art)." Once again, to recall the discussion in the previous section, the disciplinary apparatus works to validate a metaphysical recuperation of Being and of a unity of intention or voice. At base, this is a *theophanic* regime, manufactured in the same workshop which once crafted paradigms of the world as artifact of a divine Artificer, all of those works incorporate a magnetism oriented upon an immaterial center. In an equivalent fashion, all the works of the artist canonized in this regime reveal a trace of (are signifiers with respect to) a homogeneous Selfhood, and are proper(ty) to him.

All of which necessarily situates the art historian and critic as sacerdotal semiotician or diviner of intentionality on behalf of a lay congregation. It becomes evident that we are dealing here with a disciplinary apparatus which in delimiting a domain of attention equally specifies what constitutes proper historical criticism or exegesis: both the art of art history and the art historian of art history come into complementary alignment as mutually-defining and supportive artifacts of a disciplinary apparatus.

For it will be clear that the "protagonist" of *Lust for Life*, and the implied historian (manifested here as the performative cinematic apparatus) are not historical figures as such, but rather characters projected by the textual machinery. Let us examine some of the implications of this fictional regime.

10

It may be evident that the art historical canon includes classes and types of objects which both "have" and "do not have" "authors." Looking at the preserved traces of the visual environments of historical societies, it is clear that the overwhelming bulk of this artifactual world is "anonymous" with respect to known authorship. The art historical archive, however, works to rectify this anomaly by means of an encyclopedic system of nominalizations ("the master of x; school of y; ca. 1215-1225 A.D.") which may or may not include a proper name as such, but invariably includes some form of diachronic and diatopic attribution or provenance—in short, a marker of fixity within a (projected) universal space-time grid of appearances. Indeed, it is obvious that the greater bulk of art historical practice is concerned specifically with attribution in various senses of the term, with assignation of works to loci of generation, with "authentication."

Such a practice goes well beyond mere attribution of an artwork or artifact to a given individual, however; its purpose, as Foucault has reminded us, is in fact to "construct the rational entity we call an author."²⁹ He notes further that

these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author) are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts.³⁰

In the tradition of biblical exegesis as codified by St. Jerome,³¹ the author is understood as (1) a consistent standard of quality (distinguishing him from inferiors or imitators), (2) a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence (with a regard to the articulation of a system of doctrine), (3) a certain stylistic uniformity (exhibiting certain characteristic morphological elements), and (4) a definite historical figure in which a series of events converge (thereby eliminating works of a different time or place).

Foucault observes that modern criticism (in referring to literary analysis) presents a number of striking similarities to these exegetical strategies, and St. Jerome's criteria "define the critical modalities now used to display the function of the author."³² It will be evident that the criteria for reconstituting the (visual) artist performed by *Lust for Life* (as exemplar of historico-critical practices in the discipline of art history at least over the past century)³³ are fundamentally the same as these. "The artist" explains the presence of elements in a corpus of work—which is to say that "the artist" operates as a principle of unification for (what is thereby simultaneously assembled as) an oeuvre:

The author also constitutes a principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence.³⁴

In addition, the artist-function serves, in historical and critical discourse, as a device to neutralize contradiction. Which is to say that

It is one of the functions of art historical discourse to do so, by appeal to authorial self-identity in all its works:³⁵ Picasso must always be himself in his paintings, ceramics, whimsical sculptures, personal letters, and signed receipts. And governing all of this

is the belief that there must be—at a particular level of an author's thought, of his conscious or unconscious desire—a *point where contradictions are resolved*, where the incompatible elements can be shown to relate to one another or to cohere around a fundamental and originating contradiction.³⁶

The disciplinary involvement with artistic attribution and recuperative justification goes very far beyond a dispassionate librarianship concerned with "archival order" and system for its own sake. It is clearly grounded in a deep concern for the juridico-legal rectification of what is proper (ty) to an artist and thereby with the solidity of the basis for the circulation of artistic commodities within a gallery-marketplace system. At the same time, it works toward the legitimization and naturalization of an ideal, integral, authorial Selfhood without which the entire disciplinary (and commodity) system could not function at all. The concern for fakes and forgeries is no mere marginal curiosity: it is the *key matrix* where disciplinary, legal, and commercial lines of power converge and support each other; the keystone in the disciplinary edifice. Not only must the property of different artists (or places or periods or ethnicities) be sharply distinguished from each other, but the artist must be true to himself in all his works:³⁸ he must always be self-identical, and his work over time and circumstance must be woven together as a coherent fabric.

~~And we need not be reminded that this notion of Selfhood is consonant with ethnic and national self-identity: indeed, they are mutually supportive and defining. Nor is it without pertinence that the disciplinary apparatus came to crystallize as a systematic technology, a discursive framework, during a century increasingly obsessed with ethnic self-identity and solidarity, and national statism.³⁹ Art history was a site for the production and performance of regnant ideology from its beginnings, one of the workshops in which the idea of the nation state was manufactured.~~

III. The Wickerwork of Time

The Vasarian apparatus—the *method* grounded in the Mediaeval principles of biblical exegesis—sets forth the protocols for the discipline's erection of Temples of (the) Spirit. This is a *naos* rather more Roman than Greek, more Pantheon than Parthenon—not merely a sculpted Block of solids, but an articulated mass defining and framing an ineffable Void: a material *Lust* for an adjacent, metonymically contiguous, mold-negative, intangible *Life*. It carves out of airy nothing a local habitation, an obscure *object* of meta-physical *desire*. The art of art history, to paraphrase Wallace Stevens,⁴⁰ is the Palm at the end of the Mind.

And like the Pantheon, the discipline is a vast *aggregate* of materials, methods, protocols, technologies, institutions, social-ritual, systems of circulation and inventory: some visible, most hidden, all interlocked into/as a machinery, an architectonic apparatus for engendering and sustaining a central Truth, a void made so palpable as to appear as a distinct solidity, an *object* in its own right. Let us look at some of this machinery.

It almost seems natural at times to approach the discipline as if it were a department store of methodological options from which we might pick and choose or mix and match, according to the dictates of personal taste, selecting particular instruments suited to interlock with the configurations of perceived problems.⁴¹ Indeed increasingly, institutional departments of art history have come to advertise themselves as such, although to be sure such apparent diversity masks not merely an implicit and tenacious hierarchy of "methods" but also a widening rift and deep incompatibility between art history as a form of *history* and art history as a form of *art*—or between (not always exactly the same thing)⁴² a secular practice and a metaphysical one.

Yet this seemingly innocuous pluralism is but the equally extreme polar correlate of an opposite reductionism wherein we treat everything as a nail because all we have is a hammer. The "views" illuminated by (or revealed by) the apparently differently crafted windows of heuristic opportunity under the rubrics of) iconography, connoisseurship, stylistic, semiology, critical theory, social history, etc., are neither different "perspectives" on the "same" objects, nor differentiated facets of some ultimately uniform master instrument.

Any methodology is a set of explicit and implicit stage directions for taking up declamatory analytic positions—positions from which to make statements which are *dans le vrai*, from which certain kinds of questions are natural or pertinent or poignant. The self-identities of professional practitioners derive in no small measure from just such an epistemological stagecraft whose function is to validate and naturalize and centralize certain kinds of discursive protocols while simultaneously marginalizing others. The disciplinary strategy (by no means unique to art history of course) is not merely to carve up discursive freedoms related as equals in some disciplinary commonwealth, but rather to make it appear that *other* forms of discourse, other "methods," are off the wall. The "language" of art history has always been *intensely* agonistic and theocratic.

Our concern at the present stage in the development of the discipline should I think be less with perpetuating the dreary oscillation of alternate ideologies, playing the preppie to some hippie only to be punked in turn, but rather with understanding why and how certain metaphorical options in practice (i.e., metaphors for practice) are consistently or characteristically adopted at certain times: why some rhetorical choices seem natural, inevitable, or poignant and insightful. A rereading of the history of the discipline (as a discipline) will show that certain dominant themes and "methods" do emerge at certain times, and in their emergence serve to align chains of consequential paradigms, co-implicative of a variety of supportive rhetorical apparatus.

One of the most persuasive and tenacious tacit structures of the discipline is what may be termed the *instrumentalist metaphor*, a paradigm which has worked as a validating and naturalizing scaffold for many aspects of art historical practice, and many apparently opposed "theoretical" positions. By picturing methodologies as "tools" for analysis, we tacitly legitimize an empiricist modality which by its very terms—its implicit euclidean geometry—*situates* the "analyst" behind a glass wall, "apart" from "objects" and "analysands." This binarism, this subject-object topology, serves to reify the phenomenon in question ("artwork"), investing it with a pre-given ontological status—an *otherness* which is (must be) autonomous of the analyst-subject. As H. I. Brown observes,

we must remember that scientists are trying to understand a reality which is objective in the sense that it exists independently of their theories.⁴³

In investing this *Gegenstand* with ontological status, the object-to-hand (the Palm at the end of the Mind) is loosened from its modes of production and reception in order to align it with "classes of objects" perceived and defined as homologous or isomorphic on formal and/or thematic or functional lines.⁴⁴ This instrumentalist apparatus works to encatalyze a wide variety of consequent paradigms and chains of deponent propositions, one of the more obvious of which is that if such objects have a "life" and reality of their own, they must also have a "history" of their own.⁴⁵ Thus the subject-object opposition works actively to reify *both* object *and* subject, held here in suspension in disciplinary space.

The "method" devolving upon this spatial metaphor is that which is the ground to disciplinary knowledge as such: a *panopticism* which served as the dominant nuclear metaphor during the period of the establishment, institutionalization, the systematization of the disciplines of Western education and professional life during and since the Enlightenment. Michel Foucault's classic study of the importance of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon model for the ideal prison or *institute for surveillance* is worth recalling;⁴⁶ for our purposes here it will suffice to note that the site of observation in the circular structure confers upon the observer an invisibility and detachment—a position bearing no small resemblance to the epistemological and synoptic position of the (art historical) disciplinary "subject." Indeed, the panoptic prison, in its topological stagecraft, also provides a systematic grounding for the organization of the disciplinary Archive:⁴⁷ each back-illuminated cell is the extension of the Vasarian Frame, a pre-figuration of the cinematic logic of our *Lust for Life*. It is also an extension of a metaphysical and onto-theologic regime, connected (as Foucault does not discuss) with an earlier (Renaissance) perspectivism.⁴⁸

The pertinence to our present concern is that the panoptical metaphor has given the discipline the illusion that a site of subject observation is neutral and detached—a *locus* inhabitable by anyone with appropriate credentials, and a position which remains constant and consistent despite changes in personnel.

But in addition, this panoptic instrumentalism works to maintain the illusion of its "objects" of surveillance as understandable by removal and isolation from their social and historical contexts. What is occluded here is the fact that these "data" are in fact *capta*. This fragmentation necessarily gives priority to the formal, morphological, and surface characteristics of the observed objects.

The instrumentalist paradigm, in foregrounding and abstracting phenomena from their "context" (indeed from their "textuality" as such)⁴⁸ establishes the topological protocols of the discipline to permit the (bracketed) object—"tokens" of a reified type—to remain suspended on a lattice of formal or functional homologues.

But not without consequent loss, for the resultant "formalism," despite an enormously extended sophistry to the contrary,⁴⁹ is a deponent modality, the sound of one hand clapping. Consequently, an important recuperative movement takes place in the direction of "connecting" or "relating" the object or class of objects back to their historical, social, individual "grounds" or *con*-texts: for every text there must be an apposite and opposed context. Having made the initial instrumentalist suture, the double-blind must be sewn back together again.

What is of interest here is the metaphorical operation of re-integration as such. More often than not (indeed almost without exception), the operation is couched in the vocabulary of euclidean spatial geometry. Relations between object and context, between "art" and its contexts, are articulated as linear or multilinear planar connection, with the object staged as a *resonance* or *reflection* of a historical or social or temporal ground; a *trace* of (necessarily, in this regime) "external" forces; a *sign* of its time, a symbol or emblem which evokes, in a particular medium, the pertinent or salient properties of its geographical or chronological "surround"; or a *distillation* of the "spirit" of a person, place, or period.

Necessarily, all such figurations are not reducible to the same master or nuclear metaphor, and there is a wide variation in the language of the discipline in modern times; but it is clear that underlying all of this variation is an invariant notion of re-integration of some fullness. Nevertheless, there are important distinctions in the ideological assumptions underlying (i.e., producing) these linguistic and spatializing protocols, stemming from a basic contradiction in the discipline between "art" as autonomous and "art" as essentially one (sometimes ironically distinct) facet of a broader set of social and historical processes.

And yet it is apparent that (within the discipline as such), there is a general or common ambivalence about the whole problematic of contextual re-integration and its "methodologies"—which range from the mechanical simplicities of iconographic text-matching⁵¹ of an early modern generation to more contemporary "postmodern" or post-structuralist practices and various versions of "social history," all of which continue to coexist in pedagogical colloidal dispersion. All of this is above and beyond formalist "connoisseurship" which, as the archival arm of the art-commodity marketplace (and currently up against

the wall of obsolescence being erected by computer-aided technologies, as various as "aesthetic scanning" and "shape grammar")⁵² hardly sees this as an issue at all, even though (as is suggested by the previous sections above) it too is grounded in a reintegrative praxis.

I think this ambivalence is best illustrated by the very wide range of geometric theorems informing contextual praxis (and not only in an explicit vocabulary)—from a view of an artwork as a literal pictorialization of a guiding text through various metaphysical marxisms⁵³ to the rube-goldergesque contraptions of certain forms of artistic psychobiography.⁵⁴

It may seem obvious that if one hand of the discipline dissects, the other must sew up the patient after the operation, and it might seem apparent that we might thus envision the discipline as made up of a corporation of practitioners each with their own tasks to perform in seeing to it that all parts of the machinery are well-oiled and meshed together with somewhat clumsy but ultimately good intentions. It is less obvious, but clear after some careful circumspection, that this is an illusion manufactured by the very geometry of "disciplinary" knowledge as such—the idea, that is, that like the parallels of Euclid the various lines of sub-disciplinary work run in parallel toward an ideal future (perhaps just around the corner) where the strands will be tied together by our Betters, by disciplinary Masters with a synoptic vision to match those of our (idealized) masters of some golden disciplinary age two or three generations ago.

There is no central control tower in the disciplinary shunting-yard of lines of research. To purport that there is or should be is to continue the ideological work of idealization and mystification which engendered and reified artwork as an instrumentalist Object. It is much more important to rearticulate the blueprints which have worked to erect (and continue to maintain by their absence) the metaphorical landscapes within which we practice. Metaphor is never innocent: it orients research, and prefabricates and fixes its results.⁵⁵

At various times in the history of art history certain images persist almost as "prefabricated" material capable of assimilation to a wide variety of rhetorical and methodological practices. A close rereading of the history of the discipline's retentions and transformations of its guiding tropes reveals a picture of that evolution which is rather different from that to be found in the most prominent "histories" of art or art history. By attending to the detailed mechanisms by which tropes, paradigms, and metaphorical images work to establish the positions by which art historians define or envision their tasks, we come into closer contact with the ideologies which double-blind us. These bonds operate with remarkable—indeed increased and heightened—power at the most elementary constitutive syntactic levels of art historical texts.

To understand the ideological double-bindings which work to legitimize the discipline's operational protocols, it is necessary to attend closely to language—to attend to the fact that language is never transparent, neutral, or value-free. To employ a disciplinary language is to enter into (not that we are ever outside some prefabricated

language) a composed world, a tapestry of ontological fabrications, wherein an illusion of greatest freedom and idiosyncratic bricolage frequently masks precisely those sites of declamation which are the most controlled. The observer in a panoptic apparatus, while hidden from that system of objects under surveillance, and hence "invisible" is himself in a prefabricated position or *locus*, a prisoner of a device which delimits and defines what may be "seen" at all. The seer and the seen are functions of the apparatus.

The Instrumentalist metaphor is precisely an apparatus for the manufacture of a particular family of ideologies. Within its frame, it comes to appear inevitable and natural that any artwork, any "object" of attention is "fully" accountable only (and ultimately) by certain absences (of which it is in some way an "effect"). That which is absent operates as anything from "spirit" (of a person or time) to social or economic or historical "forces" determining anything from the object's morphology to its operative functions. The hypostatized *objet* is akin to a gnarled tree on a windswept coast, whose very "form" is a "function" of many years of a constant invisible "wind."

An obsessional formalism, which sees the task of the historian-critic as complete in a verbal paraphrase of its visuality, nonetheless is a subspecies of a re-integrational regime, if only in situating the object as a Testament of genius (or lack thereof). In all versions of disciplinary praxis, the object is invariably a *sign*, a signifier of something signified—an artifact resulting from some prior mentification. While it is obvious that art objects are invariably the result of some prior assemblage of materials (whether manufactured or appropriated from a given environment),⁵⁸ and are thus in some sense an effect of activity, within an Instrumentalist paradigm the cause-effect relationship is characteristically skewed so as to privilege the prior state—whether that is envisioned as "situated" "internal" to the maker or as "external," as in the case where the maker is reduced to an instrument of extrinsic "forces" of various kinds (economic, social, historical, etc.). In short, the Instrumentalist metaphor—whether in its formalist mode or in its "structuralist/semiological" mode—raises questions about a confusion of final, proximate, or efficient cause.⁵⁹

But it is clear that the metaphor is dependent upon some theory of semiosis in all of its variant "theoretical" or "methodological" formats. And the version of semiosis on which all of these variations rest is rather more akin to that inherited from Mediaeval scholasticism than from any more recent post-structuralist tradition; and in particular from the theories of the Port-Royal grammarians.⁶⁰

To return to the question of the situational geometry of the Instrumentalist metaphor: if every methodology is construed as oriented toward some (autonomous or pre-given) "domain" of attention, it simultaneously implicates a "near side" or "inside" of the window. It incorporates a viewing "from somewhere": a perspective whose apex is at the site of the analyst, the wielder of tools.

It is not without significance that this "view from" is characteristically occluded or taken for granted in art historical and critical writing. The position of the analyst (in this panoptic regime) is

a tacit space (which may be "filled" by similarly-equipped or invested persons)—an ideally neutral Cartesian zero-point, as divested of its own history, socially, and conditions of investment and establishment as its analysis. Just as the analytic isolation of the object under study serves to generate and naturalize illusions of completeness or closure—the artwork as an "object" or unity in its own right—and evokes or elicits dependent chains of metaphorical imagery in validation of such closure, so we may observe that the anti-symmetric isolation of the analyst produces similarly powerful consequences.⁶¹

In our discussion above in connection with *Lust for Life* and its implied art historian it was observed that the "art object" and the "art critic" are co-implicative and mutually-defining functions. The "subject" established in relation to an "object" is himself subjected to the particular constraints of the instrumentalist machinery. These constraints are manifested in two primary ways: (1) in the specific regime of visibility of the apparatus, which constructs a position from which, and only from which, the object (artwork, an *oeuvre*, a *vita*, a genre or period) is readable or "legible"; and (2) in a system of linguistic protocols whereby declamation by the subject is acceptable only in an "historical," narrational, third-person mode. The latter (shared by the historical and sociological disciplines in general) involves a praxis which is carried forward in an enunciative regime, in Benveniste's sense of the term,⁶² while the former is a species of *anamorphism*—the channeling of vision into the singular point from which a scene reveals itself as veridical or "real." Anamorphism is a fundamental design principle of the entire disciplinary apparatus,⁶³ from panoptic instrumentality to the organization of the art historical archive—one of a series of guiding metaphors in the discipline which link together formats for pragmatic analysis, theories of visual representation, and definitions as to acceptable and proper forms of declamation.

Lust for Life performs and validates, as we have seen, a notion of the life and work of an artist as an ordered unicum, an art work in its own right, characterized by an essential homogeneity and self-identity. And it was clear that the film biography derives its own naturalness from an implied universal archive of *equivalent vite*. It will also be apparent that the *vita* is also a paradigm for other kinds of "lives"—the life of a people, race, nation, and period—and that in so being, operates and suggests itself as a "micro-period" in the diachronic evolution of artwork. In short, the Vasarian Frame of "the man and his work" resonates with and evokes larger *unicums* on a diachronic scale, and leads us to a consideration of one of the central problematics of the discipline—the notion of *periodicization*. Frederic Jameson has aptly noted:

It may suffice to note that any rewarding use of the notion of an historical or cultural period tends in spite of itself, and often despite the best intentions, to foster the impression of a facile totalization, a seamless web of phenomena each of which, in its own way, "expresses" some unified inner truth—a world

view or a period "style" or a set of structural categories which marks the whole length and breadth of the "period" in question.⁵²

It is not difficult to understand the manner in which the individual *vita* operates as a nuclear metaphor aligning chains of consequent and deponent metaphors or paradigms, and it may be suggested that on the dual axes of space and time, the *vita* of an individual is the model both of the art historical "period" (or period "style") and of an "ethnic" or "national" "style." We need not be reminded that a large bulk of art historical discourse has been devoted to the justification of such unities. Indeed, the history of the discipline may be portrayed not unjustly as an ongoing and ever-refined writing-out of this implicit programmatic,⁵³ and the history of museology is essentially a resonance and *performance* of that programme in the imaginary "space" of the museum.⁵⁴

It has already been observed above that the discipline in its formative phases in the latter part of the nineteenth century was one of the important *sites* for the manufacture, validation, and perpetuation of ideologies of ideal nationalism and ethnicity—for a view of the underlying cultural unity of "a people" (necessarily in opposition and contradistinction to other "peoples"). In this regard, the discipline may be seen as one facet of a broader movement which included the resuscitation of national or "folk" art and architecture and literature, operating, so to speak, at the "fine arts" end of this broad spectrum, and intended in no small measure to justify the self-identity of a people or nation back to origins lost in the mists of primordial time.⁵⁵ And in addition, various national "histories" of art came to be systematized and codified according to contemporary paradigms of evolution. But apart from more generic biological models, it may well be that closer and more specific models were to hand to inform the epistemological foundations of the growing discipline—notably philology and *glottochronology*.⁵⁶

The latter, in my view, is one of the primary sources for an art historical formalism which assumes an "intrinsic" or "internal" aesthetic evolutionism—the view that art forms exhibit a largely autonomous growth and evolution according to laws which are largely independent of external conditions (barring Visigothic or Mongolian invasions). The glottochronological model of language change focussed specifically upon diachronic changes in the signifier—in this case phonemic and acoustic configuration—held that there could be shown to exist inexorable laws of change and transformation in linguistic sounds which operated independently of meaning, context, or social usage. The abstraction of such "laws" could therefore serve as standards against which to assess the relative age of linguistic texts of unspecified date.

Glottochronology was a facet of nineteenth-century philological study addressed to the question of the origins and formation of linguistic families, a study which achieved a major breakthrough after the painstaking demonstrations of the previous century that the ancient sacred language of the Rg Veda, Sanskrit, was a cognate of classical Greek and Latin, and could also be shown to be cognate to other

languages of the European group (which came to be known alternately as Indo-Germanic or Indo-European).⁵⁷

Such work should be seen in the context of the intense eighteenth-century concern for natural evolution, a not unimportant facet of which was the study of geology and of the earth itself as bearing within itself traces of "natural hieroglyphs," sediments and strata indicative of cataclysmic upheavals of past eons. The latter, a focus of an important genre of European painting discussed recently with great eloquence by Barbara Stafford,⁵⁸ provided one of the correlative metaphors for philological research, and eventually served as a theoretical ground for the subdiscipline of glottochronology.

This is not to claim that art historical formalism in its diachronic mode is a direct linear "descendent" of these paradigms (even if in some cases art historical evolution in the early modern period was conceived of as a direct analogue to glottochronology);⁵⁹ rather it is to affirm that the former grew up within a certain epistemic framework of which linguistic and "natural" evolution were also facets. In other words, it would be more realistic to view the situation as one of mutual engenderment and interwoven theoretical justification and naturalization. In the case of language evolution, it is quite clear that in no small measure this line of study served (both implicitly and covertly) important ethnic and nationalistic priorities; in this regard, theoretical frameworks and consequent methodological protocols in the development of aesthetic history served equivalent if not identical aims.

In one very important sense, early art history and glottochronological phonology operated from a common set of assumptions, chief among which was the notion that the spirit or nature of a people was manifested—and could be systematically traced through—every morphological detail of a cultural system. That is to say, everything about any detail of formation will (indeed, logically *must*) reveal something of the central organizing *nature* of a people in its various phases of evolutionary development.

It is clear that such a perspective is at one with the assumptive principles governing the rhetorical writing and framing of artistic *vite*, within which, as we have seen above, the artist is revealed in every facet of his engendered products—everything from his hand in proper (ty) to him. And it is equally apparent that the concept periodization is grounded in the same perspective. Which is not of course to deny your court that the differences between generic art historical period "styles" may be historically real: it is to affirm that with few variations, the justificatory assumptions guiding such framings have been couched in a metaphorical rhetoric which is metaphysical at base, and at one with a broad ideological programme of onto-theological validation⁶⁰ linking together a large number of practices and "methodologies" of which "art history," as a disciplinary form of knowledge, is itself a facet.

It need not be argued strenuously that a great deal of art historical writing, even today, in being pervaded by the problematics of "periodization," works in such a way as to isolate and privilege an element in a totality such that the element or class of elements—forms, forms of belief, formats of social interaction and ritual—serves

as a master code or "essence" capable of explicating other elements of the totality in question. It has been precisely this reificational movement which has lent the "history" of art history its characteristic fictionality. At the same time reductionist and scientific, the engendered "history" of art works to occlude complexity and contradiction in both "life" and "art," producing a curiously (but certainly unsurprising, as we have suggested) "aesthetic" version of social and cultural history—a utopia as compellingly well-ordered and internally self-consistent as it is fictional. And the discipline manufactures this ideological fiction at a variety of often disparate "sites"—textbooks, archives, biographies (verbal and cinematic), university syllabi, the topology of establishing appropriate "fields" of research both for professional practitioners and doctoral candidates (the constitution, in other words, of what shall be *dans le vrai* in both questioning and answering), the formats of journalistic "reviewing" and "criticism," as well as the erection and maintenance of a class of imaginary spaces-as-history, those carpentered grids of intelligibility, museums.

If the "history" of art history has more often than not been to history as Disneyland is to the history of the U.S., it is because both have worked as paradigmatic sites for the maintenance of a particularly theocratic ideology, a utopic vision of what it would be more comforting to believe about ourselves and our history. But this is not to oppose the "history" of art history to some truer or more "real" history, to imply that the view of history manufactured and maintained by formalist instrumentalism is fictive simply because of being a clumsy synopsis or distortive refraction of a fuller *istoria*. It is to affirm that this very relationship is not one of dependency but of equality: there is no history which is not fictive or not ideologically invested which is articulated within a discursive framework based upon homogeneity, centrality, or continuity (whether linear or multilineal).

Opening up the problematic of history as such—history, that is, as a discursive practice and a genre of writing—brings us up against one of the most deeply-seated metaphors for artwork in the entire historical development of the discipline.

IV. Every Little Breeze Seems to Whisper Louise

He walked Broadway like an active transitive verb amidst a rabble of adverbs, prepositions, and other insignificant parts of speech.⁷²

The notion of art objects as communicative tokens, as forms of condensed message-material, in short as (a) *language*, is a metaphor which has risen like a phoenix from the ashes of nearly every methodological framework in the history of the discipline (and transcending many diverse and otherwise opposed theoretical perspectives) and in the history of writing about art in the West. Its more recent variants have been iconography, and its more recent apotheosis, structuralist semiology. Indeed, the notion of art as (a) language seems at times coterminous with the history of art history itself.⁷³ we will concern our-

selves here with some of its more recent variants and nuclear paradigms.

Within such a framework, aesthetic activity is in broad terms pictured as a nonverbal correlate or analogue of the speech act or enunciative situation whose three primary constituent elements are a *speaker*, a *message*, and a *listener*. The speaker is taken to correspond to that of the designer or maker or artist; the made object—which, depending upon the particular level of analysis, may be anything from a salt cellar to an entire city—is taken to be a message or "text"; and the viewer or beholder or user (singular or plural) is taken to be an addressee or receiver or consumer of such message-objects.

Despite its rhetorical variants, what has remained constant over the centuries has been the geometry (more specifically, the *topology*) of relationships among the three terms or constituent elements. And what has remained constant in disciplinary discourse, particularly over the past century, has been a very strong attempt to render this metaphorical paradigm natural or inevitable. Indeed, what could seem more natural than a view of art as a form of social communication? For surely, art objects can with some reason be spoken of as conveying a certain content (intellective, emotive, social, historical) to a certain audience? As we shall see, however, the paradigm in its disciplinary formats is neither natural nor inevitable.

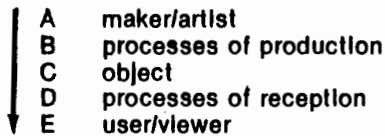
It is certainly true that formations are made and used, and that in certain societies at particular times maker and user are distinct individuals, groups, classes, or professions. And unquestionably it has been the case that makers and users do indeed construe artifactual formations as communicative in some fashion. To greater or lesser degrees, made formations are taken as autonomous and semiotically complete or closed or finished, or as coordinated components in broader socio-cultural *transmissions* which may or may not include formations in the same or in other media. Some of these latter may (if one is thinking of painting) be architectonic, verbal, musical, tactile, olfactory, and so forth; one may imagine the iconographic programme of a Mediaeval church or a modern museum as necessarily including the building "itself," as well as the various performative rituals oriented around an iconographic stage.⁷⁴

To construe made formations as meaningfully communicative in some way (at least to construers) may or may not be generically pertinent or historically apt; but to construe them as always communicating, or as always communicating in the same or equivalent ways across contexts is quite another kettle of fish (included in this chowder is also the idea that the artwork "has" a message "in itself," and that we may interrogate "it" so that it may "tell us" what it is saying...). It is this kettle which has been simmering (and not only on the back burner) throughout the history of the discipline, but in this century the gas has been turned up by iconography to arrive at a full and consistent boil with the advent of visual semiotics.⁷⁵

We are confronted here with an essentially *transitive* and linear chain of events wherein the object in question is taken as a trace of the intentions of an active fashioner whose intentions and conditions

of production are to be reconstituted by users, viewers, or beholders—in short, to be “read.” In this (often very long) chain of assumptions, the artwork is construed as a reflection or re-presentation of originary mentifaction: It is the signifier of some set of signifieds. That which is signified is assumed to have existed in the mind of the maker (either consciously or unconsciously).

What tends to remain constant here is the topology of relations among maker, object/message, and viewer (or among producer, product, and consumer). If we look at the paradigm more closely in the history of the discipline, we can see that there are in fact *five* constituent elements:



There have been a wide variety of metaphorical variants for each of these positions or functions in the paradigm. These have included:⁷⁸

- S
- (a) *maker* as: inspired articulator of collective or class values; privileged servant of a social order; prophetic or bohemian rebel dissidently marginal to conventional society; independent manufacturer freely offering his or her private products to an amenable audience; god; or worker-engineer or bricoleur on a fraternal footing with an audience;
 - (b) *process of production* as: manufacture; revelation; play; inspiration; labor; reflection; reproduction (of originary mentifaction), reproduction of intention; or fantasy;
 - (c) *artwork* as: product; process; practice; medium; symbol; epiphany; gesture; icon; index; or as the message in a personal or collective, real or imaginary code;
 - (d) *process of reception* as: consumption; magical influence; ritual; participatory (or indirect) dialogue; passive reception; spiritual encounter; translation; divination; cryptanalysis;
 - (e) *user/viewer* as: reader; consumer; receiver of a transmission which may or may not have been broadcast at him or her; critic, connoisseur; worshipper.

Close attention to art historical writing reveals far fewer meta-

phorical variants for (e) than for any of the other terms in the paradigm, for essentially the viewer has been seen as a passive or reactive reader or consumer of images: the end of the line, so to speak, a targeted audience of (or inadvertent interceptor of) a transmission. By and large, this *logocentric* paradigm⁷⁹ is given a characteristic slant or trajectory so as to privilege the maker or artist as an essentially *active*, originary force, in complementary contrast to the largely *passive* consumer or viewer of works.

It involves no great leap of the imagination to see that the paradigm simultaneously serves as a validating device to privilege the role or function of the historian or critic as a legitimate and invested diviner of intentionality on behalf of lay beholders.⁷⁸ The position is at the same time sacerdotal and secular, the historian or critic inevitably (wittingly or not) representing the interests of a certain class or group or collective in the rectification of readings (in “interpretation”).

In the articulated space of the paradigm, the art historian and critic occupy a position athwart (d)—let us call this (d,)—functioning as an exegetical grid. Indeed, it might appear that (d,) is the enabling device or mechanism which gives life and direction to the entire paradigm: viewing artworks *cannot* ultimately be an occasion for idiosyncratic bricolage or freeplay on the part of beholders if the entire disciplinary domain is to exist as a domain at all. Which is not to say that even within this disciplinary regime, beholders cannot assign personal meanings to imagery or cannot employ imagery as sites for the evocation of polysemic and changing reference—only that, as we have seen above in the case of *Lust for Life*, some meanings must be truer or closer to originary intentionality. In short, pictorial imagery is a *code*, and by definition conventionally-grounded and arbitrary, with determinate and determinable signifieds.

It will be clear that we are dealing here with an essentially representational, logocentric paradigm. In sum, the object is construed as a “vehicle” whereby the intentions of the maker are “transported” to the mind of a beholder; the object is a *form* or conveyance for a particular (absent) content in the same manner that words carry “meanings” or references. The paradigmatic apparatus may be seen as working in support of reflectionist notions of artwork consonant with those discussed above in connection with Vasarian *auteurism* and instrumental formalism. For the lay beholder, moreover, the “message” is invariably the same—the genius of the artist as yet another trace of human creativity in all its ineffability; the Artist as chip off the Divine Block.

Historically, this “absent content” has been positioned on one of two major axes:

(1) *externally*, in the direction of a “Zeitgeist” or “Kunstwollen” or of ethnicity in general, or of primitively or mechanically conceived economic or social or historical “forces,” of which the maker is but the “instrument” of transmission; the ghost-writer, so to speak;

(2) *internally*, in the direction of creative or libidinal impulses or energies of which the maker is as often as not unconscious, and for which (again) he or she may serve as the instrument.

These two explanatory axes connect the logocentric paradigm to (with regard to [1]) assumptions and rhetorical paradigms of periodicization and ethnicity, and (with [2]), to Romanticist notions of a homogeneous Selfhood, all of whose products are to be construed as complementary evidence for psychobiographic unity or self-identity.

And in addition, both axes connect logocentrism to validating assumptions within the art-commodity marketplace: to possess a work by *x* is to possess, dually, the spirit of *x* and of *x*'s period or place.

It will also be clear that the linguistic paradigm in all of its metaphorical variants is not only idealist in the extreme with regard to language as such (occluding the actual complexities in all but the most simple social and historical situations)⁹ but is also deeply metaphysical. Ultimately, it derives from (and works to maintain) a metaphor of the world itself as the artifact of an ideal or divine Artificer, privileging original Voice over its representations or material "Traces."¹⁰ It may be suggested, then, that logocentric paradigms of artistic activity are dependent metaphors oriented around a core ontotheologic paradigmatic apparatus, one of whose manifestations has been the co-ordination of Vision and Voice in Renaissance Iconography.

The metaphor of art as (a) visual "language" is thus no mere innocent or neutral analogy, even if that metaphor has been largely "secularized" in the modern discipline: it is in fact the very warp on which the disciplinary weft has been supported in its ongoing historical development.

In addition to a de-emphasis upon the viewer or user of artworks (co-ordinated with a privileging of the artist/Speaker), the intermediary elements in the verbocentric paradigm have been marginalized in the discipline, and relegated to "external" or "extrinsic" status in the hierarchy of attention, to use Kleinbauer's term. Both (b) (circumstances and processes of production) and (d) (processes of reception) have been largely attended to in a reduced fashion, although attention to the latter has increased greatly in recent years.¹¹ But apart from the exemplary and powerful studies of reception (such as the work of T. J. Clark, among others)¹² and occasional reconstructions of the formats of artistic production, the bulk of work in mainframe art history has attended to secondary issues.¹³ Moreover, disciplinary attention to problems of perceptual and cognitive psychology has all but ceased after the heyday of Gestaltist study, as has attention to the important question of how children learn to mean nonverbally.¹⁴

In no small measure, the discipline has maintained its focus upon the "what" of artwork to the near-exclusion of the "how"—the historical circumstances of artistic work, and the complex mechanisms of how meaning is socially produced. This persistence stems from a perspective on art as "representation" in a narrow sense—art as a *second* "reality" alongside the world in which we live day to day, rather than as one of the principal instruments for the creation and maintenance of the world in which we live. The former perspective invariably legitimizes "art" as essentially a form of entertainment, a dream world to distract from the actual complexities and contradictions of the past and the present.

The discipline surely knows what it does. It frequently knows why it does what it does. What it "knows" less is what what it does does.¹⁵

The reaction to the tedious michelangelism of a previous generation should not be a repetition of the logocentric double-bind in reverse, a privileging of "addressees" or "decoders," a throwing of the question of meaning into an arena of completely idiosyncratic bricolage, or an "opening up" of the artwork to the transfinite multiplication or eternal polysemy of signification. Such a movement would amount to a negative theology as theocratic as that which is negated, amounting ultimately to maintaining the severance of the subject or the object from their social and historical and ideological circumstances. To do so would be to continue to practice an idealist and mystifying prioritization with a different hand but with the same deck of cards.

Moreover, a reversed logocentrism would work to obscure the psychic complexities of individual subjects (as logocentrism itself obscures those of makers). Subjects, rather than "consuming" or passively deciphering artworks, appropriate, maintain, transform, and *reckon with* the made world in all its facets in meaningful and changing and frequently self-contradictory ways. In so doing they may be said to "transmit" to themselves and others certain information regarding the dynamic and changing nature of such appropriations. I use the term "information" here in Gregory Bateson's sense as "news of difference," and the term *reckon with* rather than "read" precisely because of its double meaning of "coping with" and "thinking with." Whatever the source(s) of artifactual production, the user is always an active, complicit, constru(ct)ing subject.

Artworks (as all artifacts) afford positions for subjects in signifying practice. The maker of an object is at the same time an "addressee" of her own activity. Any articulation is necessarily directed both towards oneself and some Other. Indeed, one may say that one articulates to oneself from the place of an Other.¹⁶ Semiotic activity, whether verbal or visual, involves not simply the transfer of information from *a* to *b*, but coevally involves the very establishment and maintenance of the Subject in relation to his Other, as well as the ways in which this Other is internalized in the very formation of the self.

Moreover, all signifying activity is, in varying and changing ways, referential, self-reflective and autotelic, allusory with respect to a system or code of values or beliefs or formations, territorial or phatic, emotive or expressive, and conative or didactic or directive. Varying degrees of domination among these modalities may be attested in the intentions of the maker and also (and thus not necessarily in similar or equivalent ways) in the reckonings of the viewer or user with respect to the "same" work. And in addition, such semantic configurations will necessarily change over time, place, and circumstance: a painting of a Virgin and Child in a thirteenth-century church may be materially identical to itself when removed to a foreign museum, but it is not the "same kind" of object aesthetically (being prized more for its morphological or historical value than for its role as an *imago agens* in a religious programme) or historically (having become part of a new and different

Iconographic programme for a museum).

Precisely because visual artifacts have a certain degree of "object permanence"—in contrast to unrecorded speech acts—and may remain perceptually available over long periods of time, they are necessarily subject to often major changes in significant appropriation by different users, or by the same users at different times and in diverse circumstances.

The complexities may be multiplied quite easily, and it becomes clear that the differences between verbal language and visual artifacts may be much more pertinent than their purported homologies, as I have argued at some length elsewhere.⁵⁷ The point to be made is that we must attend to the entire set of processes whereby artifacts used as artworks are produced and reckoned with in the maintenance and engenderment of individual and social realities or ideologies if we are to see the logocentric and instrumentalist double-blinds in a clearer and more enhanced light. And in attending to the "how" of such processes, we shall be in a better position to understand why it has been that certain rhetorical tropes and guiding metaphors have informed the growth and development of art history as a discipline; why, in other words, they have come to seem natural, neutral, legitimate, or inevitable.

Which is not to say that we shall "escape" into a neutral clearing in the forest of ideological symbolism, or outside the tissue-box of metaphors. To imagine that we might do so is to fall precisely into a prefabricated trap.

This essay has focussed upon several of the more pervasive metaphorical landmines in art history. There are of course many more, for in its long and complex history since the Renaissance what we refer to as the "discipline" of art history has been dominated by several major themes. Among these may be noted the themes or metaphors of genesis, origins, continuity, resemblance, evolution, and periodization. The corpus of art historical and critical writing has spoken of dualities and binarisms, among which have been the notions of primitivism vs. sophistication, simplicity and complexity, monumentality vs. ordinariness, uniqueness and replication. Our discourse is deeply imbued with notions of invention, change, problem-solving, transformations, the gradual (or abrupt) emergence of one visual logic or style out of or against another or others, as well as various kinds of geometric theorems for the mapping of relationships between objects and surrounds or systems of social, cultural, and individual value.

In point of fact, art history has always been a *system of value pertaining to the nature of history, sociality, production, consumption, exchange, perception, cognition, and origins*. Historically, its discursive formats have been bent toward making inevitable and natural the idea of "art" as an "object" in its own right. We have seen here how some of its metaphorical mechanisms work to establish and position artwork and "art historian" relative to one and another as functions within a disciplinary apparatus, with all that has entailed. All of this suggests that the discipline has served also as a mechanism to produce certain kinds of viewing subjects (ideally passive consumers—in more con-

temporary contexts, educated and discerning cryptographers—but "receivers" of messages all the same). And it has served as a system of investiture of certain groups (art historians, critics, connoisseurs, curators, archivists) with interpretative, semiotic, or exegetical power.

In sum, the discipline of art history has been a complex apparatus for the ongoing manufacture of certain forms of ideology-as-knowledge. Its forms of power and control, despite a latent tendency toward heroicization, are diffuse and diverse, as anonymous as a machine or a language, or a work of art whose mode of address is "to whom it may concern." In the words of Stephen Heath,

an important—determining—part of ideological systems... is the achievement of a number of machines (institutions) which move, which *move*, the individual as subject—shifting and placing desire, the energy of contradiction—in a perpetual retotalization of the imaginary.⁵⁸

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NOTES

- 1 Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* was first published in Florence in 1550 and in an enlarged edition in 1568. In the introduction to his biographies of individual artists, Vasari includes a tripartite schema for historical development (infancy, adolescence, maturity) which is cyclical. On the latter, see the critical appraisal by Svetlana Alpers, "Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's Lives," *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes*, 23 (1960), 190-215.
- 2 Jacques Derrida's now classic critique of Levi-Straussian structuralism ("Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," a lecture delivered in 1966 at the International Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man at Johns Hopkins University, and published in Alan Bass, ed. & trans., *Writing and Difference* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978] pp. 278-293) opposes mythomorphic discourse to epistemic discourse, which is founded on the principle of return to origins (pp. 286-87 and n. 8). Art historical discourse partakes of both, and indeed works to frame the former by the latter.
- 3 On this "distance," see the important article by Joel Snyder, "Picturing Vision," in W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Language of Images* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 219-46, esp. p. 219 and notes 1 and 2 in reference to Descartes's *Dioptrics*. See also n. 6 below.
- 4 These terms will be used more or less interchangeably here in reference to the disciplinary practice of the interpretation of artwork, as for our purposes both "critic" and "historian" will be seen as occupying equivalent *discursive* positions within the disciplinary apparatus.
- 5 The most important critique in modern times of the metaphysical, "onto-theological" programme of Western philosophy and art is the body of work of Jacques Derrida (understood as a reaction to and in part an extension of the work of Heidegger). See especially his *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967) (English translation *Of Grammatology* [Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976], translated by and with an extraordinary 78-page introductory essay by Gayatri C. Spivak [pp. ix-xxxvii]), and also his *La Vérité en Peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978)