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DEEP INNOVATION AND MERE ECCENTRICITY

Six case studies of innovation in art history

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Being known is essential – your texts, your actions – something – has to appear. Otherwise you haven't made a difference.

Alexander Nehamas, Interview with David Carrier, *Bomb*, 1998, no. 65

To be taken seriously and responded to by your colleagues, you must accept the standards of the community to which they belong. Like all professional groups of any size, the academic world contains various communities, each with its own standards. We all know which submissions are more likely to be accepted in *October* and which in *The New Criterion.* However, there are ideas that lie beyond the pale of any existing academic community. If you express such ideas you will be considered an eccentric. But if standards change, you may not remain an eccentric forever.

Galileo was eccentric when he said that the earth moves, and John Stuart Mill when he argued that women are not inferior intellectually to men. Several twentieth-century art writers made claims, initially considered eccentric, which now are generally accepted. Panofsky's reading of the van Eyck *Arnolfini Marriage* as an allegory was eccentric when it was first advanced. So was Leo Steinberg's argument that Caravaggio was not a simple naturalist and Clement Greenberg's assertion that Pollock was a great painter. Within a short time, these unorthodox opinions came to be taken seriously by most scholars. Even critics and historians who reject these claims find them worth discussing. Panofsky, Steinberg and Greenberg are exceptional. Most eccentric interpretation is not taken seriously. Nevertheless, the fact that radical innovation is sometimes successful gives some reason to take eccentric arguments seriously.

My book *Principles of Art History Writing* examines the changing styles of argumentation within art history.[1] I seek to identify the implicit assumptions defining reasonable discussion within art history. The book deals only with art historians of established reputation – with insider art history. This chapter supplements that analysis by looking at outsider art history. I look at the work of some scholars who are eccentric. And I compare successful and failed

attempts at radical innovation. When a community defines standards of reasoning, it takes seriously publications that accept these standards. Ideas that violate such basic principles are not taken seriously. Yet, we all know that the standards of any community change. How then can we reconcile our awareness that the grounds for our judgments can change with the need for truth as a foundation for those judgments? I give six case studies, the first worked out in detail, the five others presented more briefly. Then I answer that question.

In art history, as in art itself, the greatest recognition and highest professional esteem go to those capable of deep originality. To become an art historian, a student is expected to learn the skills of professors. Of the graduate students who become professors, only a few attempt significant innovation. To write showing skilled mastery of the established methodologies, extending these familiar approaches to new materials, is a significant achievement. But at the highest levels of academic life, more is expected. Our admiration for deep innovation reflects the demands of the intellectual market place. A discipline unable to innovate would be unlikely to attract good students or adequate financial support. Demand for innovation is a natural expectation of a culture where change of all kinds in everyday life comes so quickly.

A younger student may think of the demands of the profession as merely externally imposed when, for example, her professors tell her what thesis topic is acceptable. But the more senior scholar becomes aware of the way in which the standards are both imposed upon her, and have an authority which depends, in part, upon her willingness to validate them. Scholars have learned the accepted standards. The system of peer reviewing practiced by academic publishers means that several scholars are willing to testify to the value of an academic book. Self-taught scholars who self-publish their books are effectively outside the academic system. They are the art historical equivalent of doctors practicing without a license.

Outsiders look eccentric to the professionals. They argue in strange ways, discussing the 'wrong' questions. Louis Richard Velazquez's *Rembrandt: the Man in the Golden Helmet* (1994) attributes this painting to Rembrandt by using a self-portrait hidden in the picture. The book tells of the author's career in law enforcement; reproduces a mural made by the author at the age of seventeen; and provides a form letter for the reader to send to the director of the Berlin Gallery, protesting the recent deattribution of this painting.[2] The minimal condition necessary for engaging your colleagues is that you learn enough about their rules to get them to take your claims seriously. Velazquez fails to do that. And so, the professional art historian who reads Velazquez will likely feel frustrated.

Professors of art history know how to argue in ways their colleagues find convincing. This appeal to shared standards does not in itself say anything about what particular professional standards are adopted. Analytic philosophers are distressed by the standards of cultural studies; most art historians write very differently from art critics. And non-academics, like astrologers, have their own

standards. None of these groups is monolithic. When in 1872 Friedrich Nietzsche published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he hoped to change the standards of academic philologists. He failed completely – Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, who became the most significant German classical philologist, persuaded his colleagues that Nietzsche's work did not deserve serious consideration. But Nietzsche attracted a different, much larger audience.[3] This wider public, not competent to judge Nietzsche's philology, found his diagnosis of modernist culture of great interest. "The art world is a fairly savage social zone where values are always in doubt and often in conflict," the critic Peter Schjeldhal writes in his account of that community, "that's a function and part of the fun of the art world."[4] Similar remarks apply to communities in the art history world.[5]

To talk about standards for evaluating creativity is thus to talk about how communities validate opinions and make it possible to have constrained debates. Authority within an interpretative community is the product of an implicit consensus within at least some subgroup. "We who know are the possessors of an institutionalised competence."[6] This 'we' may be a small group, but its shared standards define a community. Not everyone agrees which innovations are worth discussion, but unless a critical mass of scholars takes interest in a new interpretation, soon it will be forgotten. What, by contrast, makes a genuine outsider eccentric is his inability to enter into debate. An influential original account may be full of errors or conceptually confused. What matters is that it be thought a productive starting point worthy of further investigation. Better suggestive error than an unproblematic truth – for suggestive error may sometimes inspire more interesting research than unproblematic truths. Even downright error is not necessarily an obstacle to fame. Michel Foucault's account of *Las Meninas* is untrue to the facts, for it depends upon a straightforward miscalculation of the perspective. But many writers (myself included) think it deserves discussion.

When a writer breaks with the accepted standards, how are we to judge that accomplishment? Insofar as a writer is genuinely original, the existing criteria are not adequate for evaluation of his work. But what other criteria then are appropriate? Following Thomas Kuhn, philosophers of science have had much to say about paradigm shifts. "The normal-scientific tradition that emerges from a scientific revolution is not only incompatible but often actually incommensurable with that which has gone before."[7] The same perhaps is true in the visual arts when we are evaluating a radically novel interpretation. After being described by a deeply original historian, a well known painting may momentarily seem unfamiliar. That experience can be exciting, but it is also disconcerting. Innovation attracts attention when it provides scholars with techniques they can borrow. An original analysis is susceptible to being popularized. This is why the history of innovation is hard to reconstruct. When an interpretation becomes renowned, then it is imitated. Soon it is hard to reconstruct that moment when this novel account was genuinely unsettling. Few innovations succeed. What

professor is not familiar with those once exciting seeming volumes which gather dust in her study? If a novel interpretation is not taken seriously, soon no one reads it.

CASE STUDY ONE: NICOLAS POUSSIN AS POLITICAL PAINTER

Orthodox accounts of Nicolas Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds* focus on iconography. Panofsky, drawing attention to the ambiguity of the words on the tomb, argues that Poussin's earlier version of this scene, the painting in Chatsworth, expresses a different meaning than the later one in the Louvre. Pierre Rosenberg's catalogue entry for the 1994 retrospective, citing the elaborate recent literature, sets the debate within this now well-defined paradigm.[8] Although a landscape occupies the largest part of the painting, it is not implicated in the iconographical interpretation. Not so in the eccentric interpretation that I will now discuss at some length.

Henry Lincoln's *The Holy Place* discusses Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds* in the context of his earlier writing about the medieval sect known as Catharism.[9] He builds on his book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, co-authored with Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh.[10] According to Lincoln, the tomb depicted in Poussin's painting is located in the village of Rennes-le-Château, in the South of France, where a crusade against the Cathars took place in the thirteenth century. The top image shows the tomb; at the bottom we see the landscape after that tomb was removed. In the late nineteenth-century the parish priest became rich because he found the treasure left behind by the Cathars. The painting is a visual encoding of a secret of the Cathars. Poussin learned the secret from the brother of Nicolas Fouquet, his patron. Fouquet was the finance minister of France under Louis XIV until the king had him deposed and arrested in 1661. This is usually interpreted as an act of jealousy on the part of Louis XIV. Fouquet built a chateau that was grander than the king's own palace. Lincoln has a different explanation.

Louis XIV, Lincoln explains, wanted Poussin's painting because it recorded a secret about the Cathars. The secret that Lincoln reveals was known only to a sequence of wise men, Poussin and Jean Cocteau among them. What the Bible does not tell is that Christ married Mary Magdalene, and that their child, who is not named by Lincoln, founded a dynasty that later became a rival to the French monarchy. Christ, contrary to Catholic teaching, did not die on the cross. He staged the crucifixion to establish his political position. He and his family went to Marseilles, where his descendants thrived. By 1100 they were prominent in European politics. That is why the Pope sought to exterminate the Cathars. The secret history of Europe is the struggle between Christ's descendants and the Church.

This story is taken further in Lincoln's more recent books, *The Holy Place* and *Key to the Sacred Pattern*. A cryptic inscription on a headstone in the town

church of Rennes-le-Château yields a coded reference to Mary Magdalene; the grave slab refers to a king and treasure, and to the words on the tomb in Poussin's painting, *et in Arcadia ego*. The painting's geometry reveals a pentagon. Lincoln calls our attention to a pentagon which he says was hidden in the composition by Poussin, to be copied by Cocteau in his 1960 depiction of the crucifixion in Notre Dame de France, near Leicester Square, London. Lincoln finds in the picture "coherent and precise geometric patterns." A "'structured landscape'" is revealed "when we superimpose a map of the local countryside over Poussin's composition."[11] The background landscape in Poussin's painting is an actual landscape in Southern France. And the composition of his painting presents an aerial view of that landscape. Poussin showed the tomb in the landscape and structured his painting following the geography to make a visual memorial to the Cathars' secret.

Lincoln's claims have generally been dismissed. Anthony Blunt told him that there is no documentary evidence showing Poussin to have visited this area, which is not on the usual route between Rome and Paris. Poussin's landscape may look like a real landscape, but he could easily have invented such a scene. With ingenuity, any landscape can be mapped onto such a pattern. Nevertheless, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* does fit together much evidence. A non-historian would need to do a great deal of reading to disprove Lincoln's account. Lincoln probably would advise him not to read history books, since the published histories of Christianity and Europe are all wrong. The true history of Christianity has been hidden. According to Lincoln, Louis XIV desired Poussin's painting because it revealed this secret.

Lincoln employs visual demonstrations of a kind not practiced in mainline art history. No matter how visually convincing his analysis may be, it will therefore be considered irrelevant. His interpretation of Poussin's painting is not taken seriously. In itself, there is nothing scandalous about this. All of us rely, at some point, on division of intellectual labor. Unable to check all the evidence and rethink all the theories, we depend upon our colleagues. In doing so, we gravitate toward like-minded scholars and avoid those whose ways of thinking appear alien to us. Conservatives do not trust Marxists; positivists dislike continental philosophers. We trust our community. Art writers often appeal to Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, though few of us are prepared to evaluate their claims. Few art writers can discuss Foucault's evidence about the history of madness or critique Lacan's argumentation about what he calls the mirror stage. Once Foucault and Lacan were taken by the community to be authorities, their followers did not question their claims.

Lincoln, by contrast, does not belong to a scholarly community. Neither do his followers. The pamphlet *Poussin's Secret*, which supplements his account, is by David Wood and Ian Campbell, British mystery writers. Their analysis is also unlikely to impress the scholarly community. Comparing the first and second versions of *The Arcadian Shepherds*, they write: "Considering the state of undress exhibited by the shepherds and the shepherdess, the pregnancy in the

Louvre version is hardly surprising."[12] But even if Wood and Campbell made less outrageous claims, they would have a hard time winning support from academics. Catharism and its devotees are outside the academic world. Many art historians expect a picture to reveal social history. Lincoln's analysis reveals too much. So far as I know, this theory is taken seriously in the Poussin literature only by Christopher Wright, who says that the landscape near Carcassonne "bears some resemblance to the Poussin landscape background. These similarities are undeniable and are unlikely to have been coincidental."[13] But he does not develop this analysis, beyond suggesting that other Poussins also may show specific localities.[14]

CASE STUDY TWO: HIDDEN IMAGES

The search for hidden images is typical eccentric art history. János Plesch writes: "The quality that distinguishes Rembrandt from all his artistic contemporaries is that he not merely brings his subjects to life with colour, likeness and expression as they did too, but that he breathes a soul into them."[15] According to Plesch, Rembrandt's paintings, drawings, and engravings are filled with subordinate figures which "because they arise unnoticeably out of their surroundings and unnoticeably merge into them ... represent an integral part of the work as a whole." Plesch asks that we look for these figures "with half-closed eyes and from a certain distance ... the observer should put himself into a kind of trance." For example, in the etching *The Descent from the Cross* Plesch sees a veiled woman climbing and, turning the picture to look at another angle, a high priest in prayer robes and Christ hanging on the cross. No one else recognized these figures because they are set in unusual positions.

The problems with Plesch's analysis seem obvious. The suggestible viewer will project such unintended images into any picture. There is no reason to believe that Rembrandt intended that his images be scanned in this odd way. Plesch is an eccentric within art history. But recently writers who are taken seriously by art historians have taken up the search for hidden images.

Mieke Bal argues that the Rembrandt etching *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* contains two phalli – the one identified with the father, that is the bedpost, and another associated with the son which is "hidden yet conspicuous for whoever has eyes to see."[16] And she considers also the navel of Potiphar. "We can also erase it. Erasing the navel turns the woman around ... " And then we see not the woman facing outward, but a figure with her back turned. "This dream of pleasure takes place inside, within the gigantic female body formed by the curtain." Bal deals with much discussed concerns – feminist art history, literary theory, and semiotics. Published by a distinguished academic press, her book on Rembrandt is taken seriously by art historians.

Sidney Geist finds hundreds of revealing hidden images in Paul Cézanne's paintings and works on paper.[17] Thus, to take one typical example, in *Still-life with Bread* (1879–82), the bread (in Provençal, *pan*) "is an excellent effigy of a

donkey head ... On the left of the loaf, the tablecloth is arranged in a vaginal fold; further to the left are apples symbolic of Hontense" (the artist's wife).[18] My review of his account was highly critical.[19] I can imagine a surrealist creating such hidden images, but I do not believe that Cézanne worked in this way. Even when I see the images Geist identifies, I do not believe that these hidden images are significant. But here we come to interpretative disagreements which are not easy to resolve. Geist's book, published by Harvard University Press, was supported by peer reviewers. His analysis is original and suggestive. It gathers much information not found in the literature, builds upon Freud's famous account of Leonardo da Vinci, and it could be applied also to other artists. Geist's analysis is not too eccentric to be discussed by art historians.

CASE STUDY THREE: RECENT MANET-STUDIES

The traditional view of Manet was that he was a spontaneous, essentially unreflective artist. In 1975 George Mauner described him as a highly complex painter. And in 1985 Tim Clark also said that Manet was not a straightforward artist. Both historians argued that *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), traditionally treated as an exercise in failed perspective, was a picture whose visual structure deserves close attention. The interesting shared assumption of Mauner and Clark is that the failure of the mirror to be consistent is seriously meaningful:[20]

> There is a direct opposition between the "two" barmaids who are, nevertheless, undeniably the same person. The actual girl is conceived much in the manner of the early portraits ... The brilliance of the setting ... identify this looking-glass as the mirror of the vanities. Only part of the girl belongs to it, and Manet has dissociated that part of her nature from the other part ... [Two women are] used to illustrate the duality of human nature ... (Mauner)

> Little by little we lose our imagined location and because of that ... our first imaginary exchange of glances with the person in the picture is made to appear the peculiar thing it is ... inconsistencies so carefully contrived must have been felt to be somehow appropriate to the social forms the painter had chosen to show ... The mirror must ... be frontal and plain, and the things that appear in it be laid out in a measured rhythm. And yet it is clear that some of these things will not be allowed to appear too safely attached to the objects and persons whose likenesses they are. I think that this happens ... as a result of Manet's attitude ... towards modern life in Paris ... (Clark)

In neither case can even these extended quotations do justice to the well developed arguments, which set this painting in the context of book-length

interpretations. Mauner says that Manet is painting modernist versions of visual allegories found in late medieval art by Mauner's teacher, Meyer Schapiro. According to Clark, Manet, acutely sensitive to the political currents of the day, anticipates Clark's own awareness of the events of the late 1960s. Mauner's traditional-seeming Manet attracted much less attention than Clark's proto-leftist painter, whose concern with popular entertainments, civil unrest, and gender politics speaks to many of us. Clark's analysis inspired imitation and criticism because it politicized Manet's painting in suggestive terms, and suggested ways of looking at other modernists. Both books are speculative. Mauner's speculations did not attract much attention. Clark's social history of art inspired many other scholars.

CASE STUDY FOUR: SEMIOTIC THEORIZING AND ART HISTORY

In the 1980s, there was the felt desire for art history to explore and exploit the rich array of theorizing developed within literary studies of narrative. Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gerard Gennette and the other French figures and their American commentators were much discussed. How was semiotic analysis relevant to visual art? Richard Brilliant's *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art* gave a clear analysis, developed in lucid detail. He shows how Roman art can be described in a semiotic vocabulary.[21]

> The Column of Trajan embodies three distinct, but interrelated codes of varying degrees of narrrativity: the annalistic, the iconic, and the imagistic. The annalistic informs the helix as a primary whole ... The iconic code shapes the ceremonial structure through individual scenes ... whereby Trajan's powerful effect on affairs is manifested in comprehensible, framed patterns ... The imagistic code relies on the tableau as the principal form of immediate visual communication ... The artist who invented Trajan's Column integrated these three systems or codes to an unusual degree.

This account attracted less attention than another semiotic analysis. Rejecting Ernst Gombrich's claim that naturalistic painting is "a copy of the world," Norman Bryson offered an alternative, a semiotic account of pictures. Gombrich, he complains, has "dehistoricised the relation of the viewer to the painting; history is the term that has been bracketed out ... "[22] Bryson's semiotic account emphasizes "the immanently social character of the painterly sign ... all the codes of recognition flow through the image ... they interact at every point with the economic and political domains."

Bryson's analysis is not easy to evaluate.[23] His claim that Gombrich fails to deal with the social dimension of Constable's achievement is belied by some explicit claims in *Art and Illusion*:[24]

> In a case such as Constable's it should indeed be possible to reconstruct some of the motivations, social, historical, and psychological, which determined his choice ... No one whose youth coincided with the French Revolution could remain unaffected by its challenge to the old hierarchy of values. The "humble style" had always been associated with truth unadorned.

Gombrich seeks to understand what he calls the "framework of the social situation" in his analysis of Constable's style. He says a great deal about the political preconditions for an art showing English country houses. He certainly does not claim, as Bryson asserts, that "no cultural training will be required for the viewer to 'recognise' Wivenhoe Park – all he need do is consult his own visual experience ... ."[25] On the contrary, Gombrich explicitly says: "I consider it a heresy to think that any painting as such records a sense impression or a feeling. All human communication is through symbols ... " Bryson's real complaint is not that Gombrich is apolitical, but that he has the wrong politics. Gombrich is a liberal. Bryson wanted to associate his semiotic theorizing with the leftist politics of Roland Barthes. Much of the appeal of the semiotic theory to feminists relies upon the claim that defending realism means taking a conservative view of gender politics.

Bryson's constructive arguments are not convincing. Rejecting the realist theory of art history, which would imply that Giotto's *Betrayal of Christ* is more realistic than Duccio's earlier version, Bryson claims that his semiotic analysis provides an alternative explanation of realism. "The Giotto *Betrayal* conveys far more information than the Duccio ... None of this information is required for the purpose of recognising the scene as a *Betrayal* ... "[26] This is incorrect. Giotto provides different information than Duccio, but the semiotic theory gives no warrant to assume that the Duccio provides less information. Here Bryson appeals illicitly to a realist analysis.

Bryson's book offered a suggestive, novel interpretative framework, and so art historians borrowed from him. Gombrich's account had been much discussed; art historians felt a need for a novel approach, and Bryson, more than anyone else, provided a suggestive appropriation of the structuralist literature. Aestheticians had better arguments about the nature of representation, but these philosophers' concerns were distant from the practice of art history. *Visual Narratives* provided more reliable theorizing, but without suggesting how to extend the analysis beyond Etruscan and Roman Art; *Vision and Painting*, for all of its obvious problems, promised more.

CASE STUDY FIVE: AN HEGELIAN THEORY OF THE END OF ART HISTORY

Arthur Danto's "The Artworld" (1964) must have seemed eccentric when originally published in *The Journal of Philosophy*.[27] After beginning with an epigraph from Hamlet, Danto asks whether art is mirror-like. Discussing theories of art

and the identification of artworks, he closes with an interpretation of a puzzling sculpture exhibited that year by the then little known Andy Warhol. Danto argues that Warhol's *Brillo Box* suggests how to develop a structuralist theory of art, in which the style of every kind of painting would be identified in relation to the array of possible artistic styles. In 1964 this was a genuinely eccentric argument. Apart from the assigned commentator in *The Journal of Philosophy*, who found Danto's account very puzzling, no one responded until the 1980s, when Danto became a famous aesthetician and art critic.

Today, after Danto's account of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* has been presented in many books, including his 1995 A.W. Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery, and much commented on, it is hard to reconstruct the original context of its presentation. In 1964 Warhol had only started to be discussed by art critics. Danto's claims surely were very hard to understand. A Columbia professor, Danto was an editor of *The Journal of Philosophy*, where this essay appeared. But had he himself not taken up the ideas presented in "The Artworld," then probably this article would have disappeared from sight. For deep innovation to have an impact, a commentator must work out his analysis in sufficient detail to make borrowing from him possible. Danto himself presented his thesis repeatedly until it became well known. When Warhol became famous and was much written about, he was described as a political painter, or a gay artist. Such commentary was relatively predictable. No other writer developed anything like Danto's analysis. In order for innovation to succeed, it may be necessary to be extremely persistent.

CASE STUDY SIX: EMILIA DILKE'S LATE VICTORIAN ART WRITING

Emily Francis Strong (1840–1904), an important figure in the history of feminism, published two books on art history under her first married name, E.F.S. Pattison, and five more volumes under the name of her second husband, as E.F.S. Dilke. Writing in both English and French, reviewing very widely, this erudite self-educated woman was the leading expert on French art from the Renaissance to the nineteenth-century.[28] Her discussion of French art in relation to political institutions anticipates the most important recent approaches. Like some of the most influential present-day modernist historians, she sought to link art history to political activism. She is a reliably suggestive narrator, as when comparing Watteau with Chardin she writes:[29]

> When one meets the full strength of that perfect workman, Chardin, his masterly whites impose themselves by their forceful quality, but Chardin ranks apart – a reigning prince, but of another royal house,

or when she calls Claude Lorrain the greatest landscape painter of his century:[30]

> Sa passion pour la lumière et pour l'air aurait suffi pour donner à sa oeuvre un accent de poésie, même sans la tendance qui l'a toujours porteé à chercher dans l'image de la nature les vibrations de l'âme humain.

Today she is mostly forgotten among art historians. Her name does not appear in the bibliography of Anthony Blunt's history of French art 1500–1700, nor in Thomas Crow's study of the institutional contexts of French eighteenth century painting.[31] In the thirty-six volume *Dictionary of Art* (1996), only one brief paragraph is devoted to her.[32]

In part, Dilke's present obscurity reflects the weakness of late nineteenth century English art history compared with German academic art writing of that era.[33] Some English-language writers of that era are still read. Crowe and Cavalcaselle play a role in the development of connoisseurship; John Ruskin is a personality who fascinates, even now when much of his style of argumentation ceases to inspire conviction; Walter Pater interests modern academics who admire the literary distinction of his writing, and his subtle synthesis of German philosophizing about aesthetics. But compared with their German contemporaries, these writers all seem eccentric art historians. Dilke writes more like a typical present day art historian than Ruskin or Pater, but she has dropped out of the literature, without influencing present day debate. Emilia Dilke was unlucky, working in England before the rise of professional art history in that country. Her writing and life are fascinating to modern feminists, and to historians of art history. But it is hard to imagine her writing influencing present day art historians.

We may like to imagine the development of art history as a collaborative process in which every scholar can play a part. But that sense of things is not obviously true to the realities of the process. In its competitiveness, and its "stars," present day academic life mirrors the larger capitalist culture. Why indeed should it not when art history is so dependent upon those relatively few writers who successfully innovate? These innovators are rewarded appropriately. But relentless competition perhaps is not the whole story. Describing the institutional structure of philosophy, Thomas Nagel suggests that perhaps[34]

> we are engaged in a collective enterprise whose results can't always be easily traced. Some kind of marketplace of arguments and ideas may generate developments of value that wouldn't have been produced just by the greatest thinkers working individually and responding to each other.

As he indicates, whether this is a good description of academic philosophy remains an open question. But he does provide a suggestive vision of art history. Innovation in art history requires an interpretative community.

An interpretation does not simply exist, waiting to be found. It is a creation of the interpreter, who gathers information with the aim of getting us to see the work of art in a certain way. Highly complex interpretations require an elaborate support system. Were there not support for highly detailed commentary on individual artists, writers would not take the trouble to write out such accounts. Were publishers not able to provide many good quality illustrations, academic books would not discuss pictures in great detail. Were museums not able to organize large retrospectives, no one would have reason to gather the information found in catalogues of such exhibitions.

An interpreter's claims cannot be judged merely as abstract arguments, but must be understood in historical and political context. In identifying the importance of such concerns for the reception of novel interpretations, my six case studies surely show that the conflict of interpretations does not take place entirely apart from the political events outside of the academic world. But acknowledgment of the sociological influences on art historical interpretation is not at all incompatible with the achievement of objectivity. My analysis gives no support to the hope that ahistorical interpretative standards are possible. But that does not imply that we should become relativists. Interpretation is objective relative to the institutions which make interpretation possible. Given the goals and purposes art and its interpretation serve, it is not arbitrary that one interpretation attracts many scholars.

Such an appeal to interpretative communities leaves aside, it might seem, questions of truth. That there are shared beliefs about how to argue does not show that the arguments of a community lead to truth – otherwise Christians, Jews and Muslims all could legitimately conclude that the religious beliefs of their community all were true. But once we understand the way in which interpretations are constructed, then appealing to an ideal of abstract, ahistorical truth will seem less satisfactory. Art history writing has intersubjective validity when a community of historians takes it seriously. Each interpretation must be judged relative to the interests of an interpretative community. The art world is constituted by many such communities, with overlapping interests and disagreements.

The history of art history thus is like history in general – for it is history writ small. The historian seeks to understand why certain interpretations have triumphed over their rivals. The struggles of interpretations teach us about both art's history and our culture. Politics certainly often is involved. Tim Clark's triumph shows the desire of academic art historians for a leftist conception of early modernism, a way of projecting back into Manet's era the concerns of 1960s progressive politics. Norman Bryson's success demonstrates the felt need for conceptual innovation in art history. Like historical struggles, these battles amongst interpreters have unpredictable outcomes. Who would have expected that Clark's leftist views would have found so friendly a reception in a profession not traditionally politically radical, in a country which, unlike Europe, lacks prominent leftist parties? Who might have imagined that Bryson, a wonderfully imaginative literary scholar, would have such an influence within art history? Who could have predicted that Arthur Danto's work, essential for aestheticians, would become important for art critics?

I have argued as if the distinction between professional and eccentric art history writing were absolute. But one consequence of my analysis is to deconstruct that distinction. Danto has argued that there is no important visual difference between Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the nearly identical box in the grocery. What makes Warhol's *Brillo Box* an artwork, he claims, is that an artist placed it in an art gallery. The mere appearance of *Brillo Box* does not reveal its nature. In order to be able to identify it as an artwork you must know its history. Danto is offering a very general philosophical argument. For Descartes there is no intrinsic difference between dreaming and waking experience. The intrinsic qualities of waking experience or of *Brillo Box* are not sufficient to reveal their true nature. Identifying the nature of waking experience or of art requires a philosophical argument. Let us apply Danto's analysis to art history writing.

There is no intrinsic difference between normal and eccentric art history. One and the same text would be read closely if published by an art historian and ignored if written by an outsider. Were Henry Lincoln published in *The Art Bulletin*, then the profession would come to grips with him. The difference between normal and eccentric art history is contextual. A serious art historian is a member of the community – an eccentric is not.

My Danto example is an ideal case, but within the recent Poussin literature consider four partial approximations to such an example.

Sheila McTighe claims that *Landscape with Orpheus* does not merely show its ostensive subject, but is a political allegory.[35] The picture depicts a classical landscape with mythical figures, but really is about French politics of Poussin's time. The ship stands for government by subterfuge; and so it is no accident that just before the painting arrived in Paris, Cardinal Mazarin staged the opera *Orfeo*, whose hero links cities with marriage. This allegorical interpretation supposes that the real meaning of the picture is something other than its literal significance. Part of McTighe's background evidence is an argument from silence. If Poussin's painting had this political meaning, then that could not be said in 1650. Poussin took an interest in politics, but nowhere did he ever suggest that any of his paintings were commentaries on contemporary events. McTighe's claim may seem eccentric, but she works within an established academic tradition. No less an authority than Anthony Blunt argued that Poussin often worked for a group of secretive heterodox initiates.[36] Blunt's Poussin, like Blunt himself, is both a member of the establishment and a secret subversive. But the revelations about Blunt's spying have not destroyed his reputation as an art historian. His way of thinking about Poussin has been taken up by other scholars who do not share his political interests.

The catalogue of Konrad Oberhuber's important 1988 exhibition of early Poussin is based in part upon theosophical readings. Many reviewers praised this exhibition.[37] Following Rudolf Steiner, Oberhuber discovered "that we rhythmically pass through various attitudes toward space in the course of our lives."[38]

The theory of Poussin's development which Oberhuber worked out independently "remained valid," he adds, "once I applied my new, more theoretical and abstract method."

In his 1984 Mellon lectures, Richard Wollheim presents an account of Poussin based in part upon the psycho-analytic doctrines of Melanie Klein.[39]

> In *The Garden of Eden* (1660s) that God turns his back upon Eve

> can be seen not just as an expression of His, but as a projection of her, unwillingness to know. In all this there is no evil: just the distempering, the disorientating, the blinding, effect of richness and abundance.

And in *The Flood* (also 1660s), the snake and water

> presses upon ... our unconscious memories ... of infantile sadism. For snake and water commemorate ... the two resources of destruction, of terror, that the infant once had at his disposal for the phantasized attacks upon the parental bodies ... biting gums or teeth, and burning urine.

Denis Mahon, in one uncharacteristic "note of pure fantasy" as he describes it, argues that *Poussin's Rebekah quenching the thirst of Eliezer at the Well* (1627) is autobiographical. Eliezer may be a stand-in for Poussin and his relationship with his patron, Cassiano dal Pozzo:[40]

> We see ... a youngish man, fatigued by his travels and exertions in the head of a Mediterranean summer's day, at length attaining his goal and receiving solace and refreshment from the well (pozzo) at the hands of a dignified and statuesque figure worthy of typifying the eternal city – in a setting which indeed evokes the environs of Rome.

McTighe, Oberhuber, Wollheim, and Mahon make eccentric observations within the bounds of academic discourse. They set their interpretations within the literature, and so open up the possibility for debate. Even scholars who reject Steiner's and Klein's ways of thinking may find that Oberhuber and Wollheim make claims worth debating; even those who doubt that Poussin alluded to politics of the day, or was an autobiographical painter, can think the arguments developed by McTighe and Mahon of interest. These interpretations enter into professional dialogue. Lincoln's analysis does not.

I have repeatedly spoken of some commentaries as "eccentric." That word deserves some discussion. I once said to the historian Stephen Bann, "I admire your writing, but it is eccentric." "Fine," he replied, "but where is the center?" His question is a legitimate one, and so deserves an answer. The center is defined by the standards of your community, for truth in art historical interpretation is, in part, based upon convention. But such centers can move. As Jack Miles noted to me in discussion, in response to this argument:

> In general, a center is a midpoint with spokes outward to a group. On occasion, however, an individual of great ability may, in effect, assign himself the center spot and from there deign to define an eccentric into the circle thus defined.

That gives us reason to take seriously eccentric interpretations. But there is also another reason.

Even those unconventional accounts judged unconvincing are revealing for the historian of art. Just as Freud found abnormal mental experiences worth study in part because these experiences helped reveal the nature of normal mental activity, so something can be learned about the nature of art historical reasoning by scrutiny of the arguments of outsiders to the academic world. Foucault also adopts this procedure, as Michael Roth has observed:[41]

> I learned from Foucault that often to understand a phenomenon, it's extremely useful to look at its opposite. In writing on madness, Foucault is really interested in the Enlightenment.

Interpretations in an alien style reveal the difficulty of stepping, even momentarily, entirely outside of our own ways of thinking. If a historian's style be too alien, following the details of his reasoning seems a waste of time. Genuine dialogue with him is probably impossible. Art history would have to change a great deal for Lincoln's account to be accepted. Compared with him, Panofsky, Steinberg and Greenberg are but modest conceptual revolutionaries.

After the fact, it is relatively easy to trace the development of art history, as I have done in these six case studies. The more difficult task is doing something new. And yet, unless we art writers have the courage to try new approaches, we will be doomed to repeat ourselves endlessly. Truth in art history is grounded in the consensus of the community of scholars. But it is not easy to imagine very radical changes in the conventions which make this dialogue possible.[42]

NOTES

1 University Park and London, Pennsylvania State Press, 1991.

2 San Diego, Vela Press, 1994. I owe my knowledge of this example to Gary Schwartz. The literature of connoisseurship provides further examples of such 'outsider' art writing; see, for example, H. Hahn, *The Rape of LaBelle*, Kansas City, Frank Glenn Publishing Co., 1946.

3 See R. Geuss, "Introduction," Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. xxviii.

4 P. Schjeldahl, *Columns & Catalogues*, Great Barrington, Mass., The Figures, 1994, p. 121.

5 Much is to be learned about this problem from study of the reception of Leo Steinberg's work which, as well defended as it is by his erudition and persistence, often is responded to highly critically because it does not fit the existing paradigms. He has described this process instructively in "Animadversions: Michelangelo's Florentine Pietà: The Missing Leg Twenty Years After," *Art Bulletin*, 1989, vol. LXXI, no. 3, pp. 480–505. My earlier discussion of his work, and these issues, is "Panofsky, Leo Steinberg, David Carrier. The Problem of Objectivity in Art History," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1989, vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 333–47.
6 F. Kermode, *The Art of Telling: Essays on Fiction*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 158.
7 T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1970 (second edition), p. 103.
8 P. Rosenberg with L.-A. Prat, *Nicolas Poussin: 1594–1665*, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994, pp. 283–5, summarizes Panofsky's interpretation and responses to it.
9 H. Lincoln, *The Holy Place: The Mystery of Rennes-le-Château–Discovering the Eighth Wonder of the Ancient World*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1991.
10 M. Biagnenet, R. Leigh, H. Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, New York, Dell, 1983.
11 Henry Lincoln, *Key to the Sacred Pattern: The Untold Story of Rennes-le-Château*, New York, St. Martins Press, 1998, p. 174.
12 Wentwood, North Farm Road, High Brooms, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, England, Genisis Trading Co. Ltd, 1995, p. 24.
13 C. Wright, *Poussin: Paintings. A Catalogue Raisonné*, London, Harlequin Books, 1985, p. 189.
14 I told James Elkins about Lincoln. And so, since chapter eight of his *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?: On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity*, New York and London, Routledge, 1998, briefly discusses Lincoln's work, perhaps now Catharism will be discussed by other art historians.
15 J. Plesch, *Rembrandts within Rembrandts*, trans. E. Fitzgerald, London, Simpkin Marshall, 1953, pp. 16, 19, 21.
16 M. Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word–Image Opposition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 312, 313.
17 Earlier Meyer Schapiro and Theodore Reff identified some hidden images in Cézanne's paintings.
18 S. Geist, *Interpreting Cézanne*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 58–9.
19 *Arts*, February 1989, pp. 111–12. See also the review by John Rewald, "Cryptomorphs and Rebuses: A Double Disaster befalls Cézanne," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Mai–Juin 1989, pp. 249–56.
20 G. Mauner, *Manet: Peintre-Philosophe. A Study of the Painter's Themes*, University Park and London, Pennsylvania State Press, 1975, p. 161; T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1985, pp. 251, 252, 253.
21 R. Brilliant, *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1984, pp. 115–16.
22 N. Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1983, pp. xii, xiii, 139.
23 My review of *Vision and Painting* appeared in *Art in America*, 1983, vol. 71, no. 11, pp. 12–15.
24 E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961, pp. 381, 382.
25 Bryson, p. 44; Gombrich, p. 385.
26 Bryson, pp. 56–7; see the critical account in my *Artwriting*, Amherst, University of Mass. Press, 1987, pp. 82–7.

27 *The Journal of Philosophy*, 15 October 1964, vol. LXI, no. 19, pp. 571–84.
28 See C. Eisler, "Lady Dilke (1840–1904): The Six Lives of an Art Historian," in C. Richter Sherman and A.M. Holcomb, ed., *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820–1979*, Westport, Connecticut, and London, Greenwood Press, 1981, ch. 6. The fullest recent study, K. Israel, *Names and Stories: Emilia Dilke and Victorian Culture*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, has relatively little to say about her art history writing. Elizabeth Mansfield drew my attention to Dilke's relevance to my present argument.
29 Lady Dilke, *French Painters of the XVIIIth Century*, London, George Bell, 1899, p. 91.
30 Mme Mark Pattison, *Claude Lorrain. Sa via et des oeuvres*, Paris, Librairie de l'art, 1884, p. 183.
31 A. Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France 1500 to 1700*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1973 (second edition revised); T.E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985. But she is in the exhaustive bibliography of the exhibition catalogue by M. Morgan Grasselli and P. Rosenberg, *Watteau 1684–1721*, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1984.
32 *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. J. Turner, London, Macmillan, 1996, vol. 8, pp. 895–6.
33 My account draws upon E. Mansfield, "The Victorian *Grand Siècle*: Ideology as Art History," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Spring 2000, pp. 133–47.
34 T. Nagel, *Other Minds: Critical Essays 1969–1994*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 10.
35 S. McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 65–6.
36 On Blunt's politics in relation to his art history writing see M. Kitson, "Anthony Blunt's Nicolas Poussin in context," in K. Scott and G. Warwick, eds, *Commemorating Poussin: Reception and Interpretation of the Artist*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, Ch. 8.
37 "Early Poussin in Rome: The Origins of French Classicism, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth," *Arts*, March 1989, pp. 63–7.
38 Konrad Oberhuber, *Poussin: The Early Years in Rome. The Origins of French Classicism*, New York, Hudson Hills, 1988, p. 15.
39 R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 228, 230.
40 "The dossier of a picture: Nicolas Poussin's 'Rebecca al Pozzo'," *Apollo*, March 1965, vol. 81, pp. 202–3. See the discussion in the catalogue entry, G. Finaldi and M. Kitson, *Discovering the Italian Baroque: The Denis Mahon Collection*, London, National Gallery, 1997, pp. 150–1.
41 "Talking with Alexander Nehamas," *Bomb*, Fall 1998, no. 65, pp. 36–41.
42 I thank Marianne Novy, Paul Barolsky, Arthur Danto, Steven Marcus, Elizabeth Mansfield, Jack Miles, and Michael Roth for comments on earlier drafts. Gary Schwartz made very detailed critical suggestions on the portion of this chapter given in the session he organized at the CAA convention, February 2000. In 1989, when I was working on Poussin, Professor Nancy Brown, my wife Marianne Novy's teacher, gave me *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. A few years later, Marianne and our daughter Liz went to the Cathar country. The food is great, the scenery magnificent, the climbing challenging. I dedicate this paper to Nancy and Gary, for her gift and his generous comments made it possible.