

Elisabeth Chaplin
Secretary & Visual Representation
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Critical writing about visual art

19

Art criticism has remained a hazardous combination of subjective judgment and formal analysis.

(Herbert Read, *Art and Alienation*, 1967)

1 INTRODUCTION AND EARLY WRITINGS

1 Thucydides; Pliny the Elder; Plutarch; Ghiberti; Vasari; Kant; Hegel

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 are concerned with the changing relationship between critical analysis and visual representation. Critical analysis operates on the assumption that its data are ideologically constructed and positioned,¹ whereas the notion of ideology is usually absent in empirical analysis. Traditionally, critical analysis has been overwhelmingly verbal, and, when applied to the field of visual representation, its theoretical object has been visual art.² My review and discussion of the critical literature in Chapter 1 centres on texts where some form of class analysis is applied to the field of visual art; and since the chapter focuses on verbal texts as such, it contains no visual material. There is a brief and selective historical introduction, which is followed by a section on Marx and subsequent Marxist writings on visual art. The second part of Chapter 1 focuses on connoisseurial art history. The reason for this diversion is that it would be difficult to discuss the work of recent critical writers without first considering this major target of their critique. The final section of this chapter looks at some of those class

¹ In this context 'critical analysis' should be distinguished from 'critical theory', which is frequently associated with the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School. I use the term 'critical' in a wider sense, to encompass Marxist and Marxist-related analyses which are not necessarily related to the Frankfurt School's particular tradition of social analysis.

My use of the term is also distinguished from the sense in which it is deployed in Michael Podro's *The Critical Historians of Art* (1982), where 'critical' denotes a certain type of nineteenth century German perspective on art. I refer to this text in the third part of this chapter.

² More recently, this has included photographs.

analyses which come under the label of 'The New Art History',³ and it also examines concurrent texts from the sociology of art. This review of verbal class analyses of visual art is not intended to be comprehensive, but it nevertheless aims to discuss those writers and their texts which are most significant for the present project.

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1972), written around 410 BC, established history as a distinct written discipline, and its influence on all subsequent historical accounts has been incalculable. The author's hope that an understanding of the past might help to clarify present and future situations was the reason he gave for writing the *History*; and its reliability is reinforced in contemporary political comedies. In the introduction, he says this about his aims and methods:

Either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. Not that even so the truth was easy to discover: different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories. And it may well be that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. (Thucydides 1972: 48)

While Thucydides' work was a blueprint for future historians, Pliny the Elder left the first written account of art in relation to the society he described. His *Natural History* (1991), completed in AD 77, was an encyclopaedic coverage of scientific matters. In describing the uses that Greek and Roman craftsmen made of minerals, precious stones and metals, he makes what is thought to be the earliest known reference to famous artists and their creations, to schools of art and to Roman architectural styles and technology. In the Middle Ages several of the larger monastic libraries had copies of this work, so that it was assured of a place in European literature, and thus came to influence the intellectual development of Western Europe.

Plutarch's *Vitae Parallelae* (1972-3) [c. AD 100] has also had a profound influence on that development, and for similar reasons: it was known in Europe by the sixteenth century, and was subsequently very popular for several centuries.⁴ It consists of twenty-two pairs of biographies of Greek and Roman soldiers, legislators, orators and statesmen. These biographies were designed to encourage mutual respect between Greeks and Romans. By exhibiting noble deeds and characters, the biographies were also intended to provide model patterns of behaviour for the future. Each pair of biographies

was chosen as far as possible for the similarity of the character or career of its two subjects, and each was followed by a formal comparison. Much of what is important to know about the Parthenon has been acquired from Plutarch's story of Pericles. But even more significantly, Plutarch's *Vitae Parallelae* has been the influential source of several methods for conceptualising and writing about material: first, the idea of writing individual biographies; second, the idea of treating character according to ethical principles; third, the idea of analysis by comparison; and fourth – as with Thucydides – the idea of the patterning of events.

Very broadly speaking, then, it can be argued that from these three ancient writers we have inherited the following: the very idea of history and of the patterning of events; the concept of art styles – associated with places and famous artists; the notion of individual biographies of the great and good; and the comparative method of analysis. In fifteenth-century Florence some of these areas were developed into the first 'modern' history of art: Lorenzo Ghiberti's *I Commentarii* (1958).⁵ This was directly influenced by fourteenth century humanist works such as Villani's *De Famosis Civibus*, continued as *Quattor Tommi Famosi* (1955), but both ultimately took Plutarch's *Vitae Parallelae* as a model for writing about the lives of famous artists. It has been suggested that one purpose of *I Commentarii* was to give status to Ghiberti's own work: he had the idea of attaching himself to aspects of history, antiquity and theory with the hope that this would make him seem learned, and worthy of respect.

However, just as Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* established history as a discipline, Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1927) which was completed in 1547, is argued to have done the same for art history. Vasari hoped that by writing about the work of artists of the present, and disseminating knowledge about them, this might help prevent the arts from falling 'to a like ruin and disorder' (a reference to the fall of the Greek and Roman civilizations) and would thereby establish a steady advance towards ultimate perfection. Progress in the arts is the underlying theme of his preface; but he cannot really account for a second flowering of the arts in Tuscany, and puts it down tentatively to a change in the air. The preface is followed by three main sections, each one of which, he tells us, represents a distinct school of artists, rather than a chronological arrangement. Each of these sections consists of a group of artistic biographies. Giotto and his work are positioned at the centre of the first section, Masaccio occupies the dominant position in the second section, and the high point of the third is the work of Leonardo. This basic manner of categorising Renaissance art has never changed. Vasari goes through the oeuvre of each of the artists whose life and work he describes. In doing so, he makes a whole series of attributions, thereby setting future art historians

³ This label probably derives from the title of a book edited by A. L. Rees and F. Borzello: *The New Art History* (1986)

⁴ Pliny the Elder was Roman, whereas Plutarch was Greek. They were near contemporaries.

⁵ According to the staff of the Courtauld Institute of Art in their translation of Ghiberti's *Commentaries* (1958).

the task of assessing their accuracy. And he even records studio conversation. Here is the start of connoisseurial art history, where focus is on the famous individual artist to whom work is attributed by experts and categorised according to its style. Vasari evaluates the artist's oeuvre in relation to the work of other artists who have been placed in the same stylistic category, and then assesses it according to a notion of progress towards the highest point of stylistic attainment in the arts. In all of this, he has apparently supplied both the content and an influential method of structuring Renaissance art history.

Immanuel Kant was eventually to use Vasari's account of studio processes in his writings on aesthetics. These writings have had a seminal influence; for although some of Kant's ideas on aesthetics had been anticipated, by Baumgarten and Addison for example, no one before had so thoroughly systematised the subject matter of philosophy.⁶ Consequently, his work has affected the basic assumptions of all those who read it and who subsequently aimed to supersede his approach. In the first place, in his reflections on the conditions of possible knowledge, Kant wished to locate the range of inevitable subjective conditions which make any theory in natural science possible and place limits upon that theory. His analysis led him to argue that embedded in the human subject, and constituted by basic faculties of the brain, are three *a priori* categories according to which our 'perception' decisively organises the incoherent profusion of sensations and impressions that bombard us from without. According to Kant, knowledge is constituted, perceived and organised according to the discrete spheres of scientific knowledge, aesthetics⁷ and morals. Subsequent writers have often used these three categories as the organisational framework for their own ideas, though they may not concede the *a priori* status of the categories. This categorisation leads to a drastic differentiation between kinds of thought – the scientific, the conceptual, and the intuitive thought associated with artistic genius; and it prepared the way for the distinction which has been made between facts and values.

The implications of making aesthetic thought into a separate category or faculty of the mind are immense, and lead to the idea that art is autonomous and therefore has an immanent development. It has led to the development of art theory in its own right, and has provided the theoretical underpinning for connoisseurship, theories of art for art's sake, and the modernist art theory of Clement Greenberg (1986) [1940]. In addition, Kant's notion that the artist has creative, intuitive, expressive powers (which unlike scientific understanding, are not susceptible of discursive exposition) underpins the

6 This section on Kant relates, principally, to ideas which originate in his three Critiques: *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1986) [1781], *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1996) [1788], *The Critique of Judgment* (1961) [1792].
7 His analysis led him to argue that aesthetic value exhibits itself in a sort of pleasure. However, it was a very special sort of pleasure. In order to attain to beauty, the pleasure must be 1) disinterested, 2) universal, 3) necessary in a uniquely specified way, and 4) must give the effect of purposiveness without actually being the satisfaction of a purpose.

Romantic notion of the artist, and the idea that art is ineffable, both of which are still widely accepted.

Furthermore, in his systematic scheme, Kant accorded aesthetics a pivotal position *between* the categories of science and morality. And he claimed that each type of knowledge – the aesthetic, the ethical and the scientific – is at the same time contributing to something larger and transcendent, in the sense that on this higher plane, aesthetics, morals and science are all linked in an ultimately 'pure knowledge'. His proposition that aesthetics occupies a position in the overall system between ethics and scientific knowledge prepared the ground for subsequent theories which have addressed the relationship between art and science as separate and autonomous forms of knowledge. This proposition also generated debates, still current, about the relationship between art and politics, and about the moral function of art.⁸

The idea of critique is a product of the Enlightenment, though the term is older still. It was first used by the Humanists and Reformers to describe the art of informed judgement, appropriate to the study of ancient texts. By Kant's time, the process of critique had acquired public force. To Kant, critique meant oppositional thinking in the sense of reflecting on the conditions of possible knowledge. But the term critique, as commonly used today, contains another meaning. It implies reflection on a system of constraints which are humanly produced: those distorting pressures to which individuals, or a group of individuals, or the human race as a whole, succumb in their process of self-formation. Critique in this sense has its root in the philosophical writings of Hegel.

Whereas Kant's statements are often hedged around with qualifications, Hegel seems to have had a vision of absolute truth, and he expounded it with confidence.⁹ The Hegelian system(s) claimed to provide a unitary solution to all of the problems of philosophy. It is a kind of spiritual monism which held that the *speculative* point of view, which transcends all particular and separate perspectives, must grasp the *one* truth, bringing back to its proper centre all of the problems of logic, metaphysics, and the philosophies of nature, law, history and culture (artistic, religious and philosophical). According to Hegel, this attitude is more than a formal method that remains extraneous to its own content. Rather, it represents the actual development of the Absolute, the all-embracing totality of reality, considered 'as Subject and not merely as Substance'. This Absolute first puts forth itself in the immediacy of its own inner consciousness and then negates this positing. It is thus now alienated

8 For example, a group of British philosophers (including Peter Dewes, Andrew Bowie, Jay Bernstein, Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne) is re-negotiating Kant's categories, especially the category of morals, in the light of developments in postmodern theory which signal the demise of the dominance of reason. Hence his presence is still felt in the basic organisation of thought. See, for example, A. Benjamin (1989), and J. Bernstein (1992).
9 This section on Hegel relates, principally, to ideas which originate in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) [1807], *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (1970) [1817], and *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, (1975) [1720-9].

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from its absolute self by its expression in the particularity and determinateness of the factual elements of life and culture. The Absolute finally regains itself, through the negation of the former negation that had constituted the finite world.

However, the formal *method* of exposition, dialectics, proved to be Hegel's signal contribution to subsequent developments in critical theory. To explain this in an everyday context, it often happens that in a discussion two people who at first present diametrically opposed points of view ultimately agree to reject their own partial views and to accept a new and broader view that does justice to the substance of each – the 'highest common denominator', as it were. Hegel believed that thinking always proceeds according to this pattern: positive thesis, antithesis, synthesis of the two former positions. Thus, thinking itself, as a process, has negativity as one of its constituent moments; and for Hegel, though not for most subsequent dialecticians, the finite is, as God's self-manifestation, part and parcel of the infinite itself.

Although Hegel's panoramic system had the merit of engaging philosophy in the consideration of all the problems of history and culture, it deprived each of the implicated elements and problems of its autonomy and particular authenticity; reducing them to symbolic manifestations of the one process, that of the Absolute Spirit's quest for and conquest of its own self. Such a speculative dialectical mediation between opposites, when directed to the more impending problems of the time, such as religion and politics, led ultimately to the evasion of the most urgent and imperious ideological demands, and was not easily able to escape the charge of ambiguity and opportunism.

At the specific level of Hegel's aesthetic philosophy, the same kind of criticism can be applied. He rejected rationalistic approaches and, like Kant, argued for a rigorous observance of the uniqueness and autonomy of art, ranking it with the highest of spiritual activities. However, he also rejected the idea that art leads towards a *future* transcendental perfection, since the spirit is (already) wholly immersed in reality, materialised in history. So how was art to be located within the overall speculative system? Hegel argued that in nature the spirit is not perfectly manifested, but that via the creative impulse of the artist's mind which possesses a god-like strength, the brittleness of raw nature is transformed and takes on the plasticity and harmony of Spirit: 'Art is nature twice-begotten, nature born again in the inventions of genius.' Thus art's source in the poetic imagination ensures its exaltation above crude, common, given facts. Considered in its relationship to earlier thought, Hegel's aesthetic is, and is intended to be, consummation. There is no want of art in his perfect cosmos, and as a consequence, no striving after new aims. Art is viewed as a phenomenon of the past: the history of art has no future.

In one way or another subsequent philosophers felt that the harmony of Hegel's system was too easily obtained. Yet his successors, each emphasising

one or another of the strands in his thought (conservative, revolutionary, religious, atheistic) have interpreted him variously and drawn inspiration from him. Marx, for example, took over the Hegelian notion of critique (and entailed in this, his method of dialectics), but turned idealism on its head and rooted the method in the real historical material world. And to take a more recent but less well-known example, the distinguished art and architectural historian, Nikolaus Pevsner, offers the following clue to the philosophical perspective which, he gives us to understand, underpins his approach to the history of architecture:

The birth of a civilisation coincides with the moment when a leading idea, a *leitmotif*, emerges for the first time, the idea which will in the course of the centuries to follow gather strength, spread, mature, mellow, and ultimately – this is fate, and must be faced – abandon the civilisation whose soul it had been. When this happens the civilisation dies, and another, somewhere else or from the same soil, grows up, starting out of its own prehistory into its own primitive dark age, and then developing its own essentially new ideology.

(Pevsner 1943: xi)

The great historical figures whose ideas I have briefly discussed in these opening pages, have – through their work – had a profound influence on the subsequent development of both the discipline of art history and critical theories of art. The next section focuses on the writings and ideas of some of the principal critical art theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

2 CRITICAL WRITINGS ABOUT VISUAL ART: CLASS ANALYSES I

Karl Marx; Georg Lukács; Antonio Gramsci; Louis Althusser; Max Raphael;
Theodor Adorno; Walter Benjamin; Arnold Hauser; Herbert Read

The great figures of early sociology . . . did not use photographs. From the beginning sociologists produced abstract images of society rather than literal renderings of particular social processes. It would have been just as reasonable, however, to use photographs to pursue certain research questions as it was to use descriptive surveys or statistics to pursue others. Karl Marx, for example, used Engels's descriptions of the English working class to provide detail and descriptive substance to his analyses of capitalism. Photographs such as were produced by Lewis Hine and Jacob Rits a few decades later would show the conditions of the working class (as well as the capitalist class), the urban squalor of the industrial city, the working conditions of children, and many other subjects that play a predominant role in Marx's analyses.

(Douglas Harper, 'Visual Sociology: Expanding Sociological Vision', *The American Sociologist*, 1988)

Karl Marx completed none of his major system-building works, and this can, in a sense, be seen as a reaction against the grandiose attempt by Hegel to systematise knowledge. Thus Marx and Engels left no formal aesthetic

It is within this framework that Marxist theorists, with their passionate involvement in humanity, 'Utopianism', and desire to make the irrational rational, can be situated. They take as their starting point the 'Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach': 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways: the point, however, is to *change* it' (Marx 1968: 30). Marxist artists and critics also aim to improve it.

Georg Lukács (Born 1885) abandoned his initial researches into aesthetics and the arts when he joined the Communist Party in 1918 and became active in politics. But after retiring from the inner party, he began to write again; and this time, he wrote as a Marxist literary historian and aesthetician from a centrist, orthodox position. That is, he applied the generally accepted categories of Soviet Communist aesthetics to a vast realm of literary and philosophical subject matter. Lukács was a firm adherent of the view that ideologies and art works reflect the class which produced them, but at the same time he was intensely aware that the reflection theory downgrades the revolutionary potential of both art and ideology. Throughout his work he was beset by this contradiction, and he was forced in practice to combat the inertia it produces by proposing that:

Great artists have ever been pioneers in the advance of the human race. By their creative work they uncover previously unknown interconnections between things – interconnections which science and philosophy are able to put into exact form only much later.

(Lukács 1950: 114)

Thus, Lukács does not allow art or ideology to transcend its historical-class genesis, but in practice he appears to fall for simple idealism by proposing that art reflects future historical events. However, Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse and more recent critical writers have been influenced by his ability to pose fundamental questions for Marxist art history, and in a crucial sense this is where his importance lies. For example, T. H. Clark's influential article 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation', which helped to shape a new, social approach to art history in the 1970s, refocuses the minds of contemporary art historians on the fundamental questions which Lukács originally raised.¹⁰ Maynard Solomon comments: 'If we cannot always agree with his answers,

¹⁰ Clark quotes the following passage from Lukács' 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (1971a) [1922] in support of his own project:

And yet, as the really important historians of the nineteenth century such as Riegl, Dilthey and Dvorak could not fail to notice, the essence of history lies precisely in the changes undergone by those *structural forms* which are the focal points of man's interaction with environment at any given moment and which determine the objective nature of both his inner and outer life. But this only becomes objectively possible (and hence can only be adequately comprehended) when the individuality, the uniqueness of an epoch or an historical figure, etc. is grounded in the character of these structural forms, when it is discovered and exhibited in them and through them.

(Clark 1974: 526)

we are constantly aware that he knows all the questions – and on a level not surpassed by any other Marxist critic of the twentieth century' (Solomon 1979: 396).

By contrast Antonio Gramsci (Born 1891) came to reject economic determinism. This was as a result of re-examining the early works of Marx which have a utopian-socialist emphasis, a humanist and psychological dimension, in contrast to the later works which were fundamental to orthodox Communist thought. He then re-read these later works in the light of his understanding of the earlier ones, and came to the conclusion that what can be extrapolated from Marx's writings is that ideas have political power in their own right, and consequent upon this that the 'superstructure' is not just a reflection of the economic base.¹¹ He therefore argued that in order to overturn capitalism, revolutionary socialists had to do more than seize power – they had to build a counter-culture of their own. For they had to recognise that the contradiction of interests between social classes which capitalism generated in its economic base could be ameliorated by political and ideological initiatives in its superstructure. Capitalism was given stability, Gramsci argued, by its acceptance and articulation of a dominant set of pro-capitalist ideas put about by social institutions such as the media, education and trade unions; and it was this hegemony that had to be broken down. Two major tasks were entailed for socialism: 'To combat modern ideologies in their most refined form in order to create its own core of independent intellectuals; and to educate the masses of the people whose level of culture was medieval' (Solomon 1979: 266).

He observed that efforts had so far been directed almost exclusively towards the latter task, with the result that the general intellectual level at which Marxists were operating was crude. In order to break the hegemony of the capitalist class, the first of these tasks needed urgent attention. Accordingly, Marxists must attend to the development and refinement of their own intellectual arguments.

Gramsci's emphasis on the political importance and therefore relative independence of ideas has considerable implications for the status and role of the visual arts. The visual artist, like other intellectuals, can be seen as a potential contributor to the task of refining Marxist ideas in the combat against capitalist ideology. Gramsci's insistence that this task of countering capitalist hegemony is a general cultural matter gives visual art itself a certain critical status, and lends an urgency to critical visual art projects in the building of a counter-culture. It is at this point, perhaps, that we can first see the potential for a class analysis which is not confined to the verbal text.

¹¹ For these ideas, and those subsequently laid out in this section, see Gramsci (1971: especially 123–205).

In the late 1960s, Louis Althusser (born 1918) also took up the theme of the importance and power of ideas.¹² But unlike Gramsci, who emphasised the humanist aspect of Marxist theory, Althusser's perspective was an anti-humanist one. It focused, in part, on the structural relations of the various parts of the superstructure to each other and ultimately to the economic base. He argued that each part of the superstructure – the education system, the family, the legal system, the arts – is relatively autonomous in relation to the others and to the economic base; and that what joins them together, precluding their complete autonomy, and ensuring capitalist reproduction, is its ideology. Thus the notion of ideology occupies a key position in Althusser's thought. It is the glue which binds the different cultural components of society into an overall capitalist structure. But Althusser suggested that, at the same time, ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. It constructs identities or subject positions for us, and calls us into them in such a way that we then recognise these subject positions as our own. Thus he treated ideology as 'social relations', displacing notions of ideas or consciousness which had hitherto reduced ideology to a (mis)representation of the social in thought. 'Ideology' now appeared as the effect of definite institutions, practices and forms of subjectation, and as an indispensable mode of the organisation and conduct of social relations.

Althusser's theory also has considerable implications for the arts because the concept of the relative autonomy of superstructural components suggests that the arts exert ideological influence on behalf of capitalism. But whereas Gramsci's perspective indicates the artist as cultural producer, Althusser's anti-humanist perspective focuses on the work of art in the context of its reception; and he indicates that art works make us 'see', 'perceive' or 'feel' the reality of the ideology of the world they describe. During the course of an essay entitled 'Gremontni, Painter of the Abstract', he says:

Perhaps one might even suggest the following proposition, that as the specific function of the work of art is to make *visible* (*donner à voir*), by establishing a distance from it, the reality of the existing ideology (Of any one of its forms), the work of art *cannot fail to exercise* a directly ideological effect, that it therefore maintains far closer relations with ideology than any other *object*, and that it is impossible to think of the work of art, in its specifically aesthetic existence, without taking into account the privileged relation between it and ideology, i.e. *its direct and ineliminable ideological effect*.

(Althusser 1971: 291)

Thus, the *critical* visual art work has a specific and vital function to perform on behalf of the Marxist counter-culture. It prises us away from the existing ideology by opening our eyes to the identity which capitalism has constructed for us through the manner in which its visual structure and content announce their distance from that ideology.

¹² See, in particular, his essay, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1984).

However, critical writers on art have long been puzzled by Marx's question as to why Greek art often stands as a norm against which the quality of other art is measured, long after the demise of Greek society itself.¹³ Is art an opiate, a form of ideology like religion, which the ruling class uses to subdue the masses? Or does that scenario represent the reverse of art's 'true' essence, which is its liberatory potential? Max Raphael (born 1889) believed that Marx's most important declaration about art is that '... it is well known that some of its peaks by no means correspond to the general development of society; nor do they therefore to the material substructure, the skeleton as it were of its organisation' (Marx 1970: 149). Rather than building on the historicism of Marxism – its alleged revelation of an inevitable historical pattern – he focused on that aspect of it which enables concrete individuals to be sited within a general historical process. A classicist at heart, Raphael argued that, at the same time, we must historically analyse the conditions in which Greek art has been able to re-emerge at certain critical stages in the development of Christian art and assume a normative status. His writings constitute a critical sociology on behalf of visual art – a sociology which seeks to justify visual art's unique liberatory potential.

His theory, outlined below, is at the same time a practical plan. He aimed to place an improved critical apparatus at our disposal which would bring us into contact with the processes of conceptual production, turning us from readers or spectators into collaborators, turning our struggle to understand art into 'the struggle for a social order in which everyone will have the fullest opportunity to develop their creative capacities' (Raphael 1968: 204). Raphael's method was designed to be used by everyone.¹⁴ And it was intended to be applied minutely in single, particular, concrete instances. In his own analyses of prehistoric cave paintings, Rembrandt drawings, Picasso's *Guernica* and other works, he is considered by many to be a dialectical thinker of the first order. The following outline of Raphael's method draws extensively on John Tagg's article: 'The Method of Criticism and Its Objects in Max Raphael's Theory of Art' (1980).

Raphael was dissatisfied with the primitive state of art theory as he found it, but he maintained that art is not inherently opaque to scientific understanding; rather, he claimed that art theorists had imposed intellectual and theoretical limitations upon themselves which prevented them from encompassing the very complex situation which art presented for their analysis. His aim was to construct a scientific method of establishing – in the most general abstract terms – the artist's way of working. According to Raphael, this entailed a sociology of art which would relate the art work to the external socio-economic stage of the society in which it was constructed, and also –

¹³ This is posed in Marx's *Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy* (1970).

¹⁴ For example, by the working men and women of the Berlin Volkshochschule, to whom he taught his method of analysis for a short period.

Handwritten notes at the top of the page, including 'Althusser', 'Gramsci', 'Marx', and 'Raphael'.

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dialectically interrelated with this sociology – a 'science' of art which would provide a systematic analysis of the internal nature of the art work.

In addressing the problem of the general rules by which an art work is created, he made use of Husserl's phenomenological method of 'annihilating' the work of art, then asking what must be done to reconstitute it. In this way he aimed to recreate in consciousness the constituent stages by which it was made: that is, the artistic method. As Tagg puts it, the critic had to find a route from the created work to the way in which it had come about. Objectively, the method could be viewed as the life of content in the process of achieving form; subjectively, as the life of form in the process of acquiring a content.

Tagg explains that the manner in which this phenomenological analysis was to proceed was systematic and extended, passing through certain well-defined stages which correspond to stages in the process of artistic creation. In this process, the relatively constant elements had to be brought together or differentiated according to some given method, to give birth to an artistic form. The concrete mode of this process would depend on the economic basis, previous artistic development and other ideologies, and 'harmonious systematisation' (a concept deriving from Engels' treatment of the relationship of legal structures to the economic base) which lends the work relative autonomy.

To take the last of these factors first, Raphael argued that it is the task of the science of art to undertake the fullest (immanent) analysis of this tendency towards relative autonomy. In doing so it reveals three levels in works of art: the creation of form from its ultimate elements, the connection among forms according to compositional laws appropriate to the particular type of structural unity; and the unfolding of individual and total form from the abstract to concrete appearance. All these levels are closely interconnected. When the science of art has established the nature of a particular work's relative autonomy, the analyst next makes a systematic comparison of works of art from all periods and cultures, and this leads to an ideal type of work, as it were, in terms of its three constituent levels.

However, the resultant analysis would lead to formalism if this were not now dialectically interrelated with a sociology of art, giving a study of the economic and social conditions and the creative methods which were prevalent in any given era. And in addition, there remained those problems concerned with the variations in time undergone by the structures identified in the 'science of art'; and also the problem of assigning these structures a precise place within a scale of values. Raphael argued that the first of these problems was the concern of art history, and the second that of art criticism.

He considered that art history is never more than auxiliary to the sociology of art (though in a definite and definable relation with it). The reason for this is that the sociology of art rests on a material basis extraneous to art, and can account for the concrete particularity of each work of art, the

interaction of art with other ideologies, and art's reciprocal influence on the material basis; whereas art history, together with the 'science' of art and art criticism are all immanent studies: the studies of essence, evolution and value, respectively. Art criticism was to be concerned with values attributed to art of the past by a given epoch, with the values given as the norm for an epoch, and with what should be assimilated and reproduced. Art criticism thus shows the mistakes an epoch makes; it draws a division between true and 'sham' art. This dividing line changes and can be accounted for sociologically, but art criticism addresses what criteria divide true from sham art. Thus, Raphael believed that whereas some criteria belong only to a given period in history, others have a significance which transcends time. Art criticism therefore elucidates the relative and absolute elements in each work of art, empirically establishing the nature of their integration in it – so that a hierarchical order may be disclosed: 'an order which extends over an infinite path toward the goal of perfect congruence of form and content with what is concrete and abstract, relative and absolute in every given epoch' (Raphael 1933: 139). Raphael's belief in absolute values stands as a critique of the 'positionless position' of scepticism, as he terms it, 'which has no commitments'; and indeed of modern liberalism. Tagg points out that Raphael based his views, in this context, on his understanding of the Marxist theory of knowledge: what holds for truth holds for art, and what holds for totalities holds for individual creations. Lenin had previously argued that truth is at once relative and absolute, in the sense that the sum of relative truths is absolute truth; and Raphael introduced into this conception the idea that there are different degrees of approximation to an 'absolute' final value, and that within these limits we may speak of a hierarchy of values. More specifically:

Absolute signifies not only a fact's repeated action on the historical process, but also progressive development toward a goal ever closer to reality. And yet this goal, were it ever to be attained, would amount to a total congruence between reality and consciousness.

(Raphael 1933: 180–1)

This explains the sense in which Raphael could regard such a hierarchy of values as a reality beyond personal taste and the historically conditioned view of any single era. For he claimed that to deny the existence of universally valid criteria in evaluating art was not only to eschew one of the most self-evident problems but to destroy the world of values.

We are now led to ask: what are the relations between the relative independence of artistic creation (together with a scientific theory of art interpreting it) and economic conditions (together with a sociology of art elucidating these conditions)? In Raphael's *total* method, the dialectical

¹⁵ Malcolm Hughes points out that this area of values has since been developed via Freud and a theory of the subject. See, for example, Lyotard (1984).

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establish the contemporary value of individual art works in relation to each other, and thus to provide guidelines for a speculative market for them. In the eighteenth century, the vacuum was filled by the creation of aesthetics. So there arose the situation in which the art work – 'a social reality' as Adorno puts it – is constructed by capitalist society, and aesthetic theory establishes and legitimates its value.

It is important to add to this story of the development of the art work as capitalist commodity that for Adorno it has a fetishistic status. That is to say, the art work as a piece of painted canvas, for example, has come to evoke devotion and respect over and above its use-value as painted canvas. And it is this fetishistic quality of the painting which lends it artistic autonomy. But Adorno reminds us that under capitalism, the art work is constructed and institutionalised both as social commodity *and* as 'autonomous'. It thus has 'a dual essence'.

The artist is 'structured into society' as the agent for the production of an 'autonomous' work, and therefore comes to see and to know him/herself as that agent. To the artist, however, an art work is not autonomous because capitalist society has deemed it so. From his/her (and Adorno's) standpoint, the artwork s/he is creating strains towards autonomy as it strives to create for itself an *independence* from society and its system of aesthetic values. And in distancing itself from society, it comes to constitute a criticism of it. But the artist only has the *potential* to fulfil the role of producer of autonomous art object since art has a *dual* essence. The fact that as *commodity* the art work has an exchange value means that market forces continually exert pressure on the artist to produce a work that will sell well as a commodity and thus establish its exchange value. This pressure pulls the artist in the opposite direction from that in which s/he strains to produce an autonomous work, because to be autonomous, the work must refuse to conform with the requirements of the market. If the demands of the market are met, the art work's potential for distancing itself from capitalist society is lost. Moreover, the artist, having been constructed by capitalist society, is dependent on market forces and on his/her art work's relationship to the mechanism of exchange value in order to define the work's distance from it and therefore its relative autonomy.

But how does the artist set about achieving a degree of autonomy in the face of the threat of commodification? Adorno insists it is *not* by illustrating the social relations of capitalism; nor even by visually displaying some political critique of these relations. It is, at root, by transforming 'artistic material'. This is a key concept in Adorno's theory. Artistic material refers to 'all that the artist is confronted by, all that he must make a decision about, and that includes forms as well' (Adorno 1984: 213). It includes 'the stuff the artist controls and manipulates: words, colours, sounds – all the way up to connections of any kind and to the highly developed methods of integration he might use' (Adorno 1984: 213). It is the decisions that the artist makes

about how artistic materials are to be used, and the subsequent transformation of a specific set of ideas, paint and so forth into a new work, which determine the critical power of that work. Such a transformation is, however, constrained by and contingent upon the particular social character of the materials used; for material is 'always historical, never natural, [respective of what artists themselves might think]' (Adorno 1984: 214), and 'just as dependent upon technical changes as technique is upon materials worked upon by it' (Adorno 1984: 214). The artist must therefore tackle the problem of transforming the current socio/historical meanings and status of those materials in such a way that, in their new combination and use, they are now distanced from and point to the conventional nature of their deployment in previous art work. Here, Adorno stresses, we are, in effect, focusing on the work's *form*. Form is the key to understanding social content because 'the unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of aesthetic form' (Adorno 1984: 8). Thus the artist attempts to produce a work whose form, in an intimate yet dialectical relationship with its content, stands as critique of the form of previous art; and this is *analogous* to the manner in which a radical social movement critiques capitalism. Adorno argues that an important strategy in the artist's struggle to attain autonomy for his/her work is to transform artistic material in such a way that the work becomes unintelligible to the masses, and thus resistant to exchange value (to market forces). And the dialectic between the pull of exchange value and the counter-pull of autonomy (embodied in the artist's transformation of artistic materials according to the logic of the production of the artwork itself) is the driving motor of modernism.

Adorno's work addressed the distancing of art from popular culture. For him, art represented the last vestiges of freedom for the individual in a situation where rapid totalisation threatened. Although, in a sense, that distance between popular and high art still remains, we cannot now identify with Adorno's stance, which was, of course, a theoretical response to the specific events of the time in which he lived. As John Roberts says: 'Instead of being on the outside looking in, we are now on the inside looking out; mass culture is less something we enter under duress than the ground of our social being' (Roberts 1984: 28). Yet, in many ways, Adorno's aesthetic theory remains extremely powerful. Not least is the sense in which his emancipated, struggling 'high artist' can be interpreted as setting an example for all 'consciousness-raised' individuals who live their lives amidst the contradictions of capitalism. Furthermore, in the light of events taking place in the 1980s and 1990s in Eastern Europe and the demise of many aspects of socialism and of concepts entailed in the *idea* of socialism such as central planning, revolution, and 'the false consciousness of the masses', Adorno's particular critical attitude towards capitalism would seem to be far more appropriate than the utopian views held by some of his contemporaries. Finally, Adorno's work has subsequently proved to be of great importance

in current philosophical debates about the problem of modernity and the relationship of modernism to postmodernism.²⁰

Walter Benjamin (born 1892) has become one of the best known critical writers on the arts, though he was known only to a few other intellectuals in his lifetime. His work was very much influenced by the political theory and practice of his friend Bertolt Brecht, who insisted on the revolutionary role of art, the artist, and, by implication, the art critic. Benjamin's idea of the true revolutionary author is one who instructs in criticism, placing an improved critical apparatus at our disposal. Whereas Raphael thought that everyone has the potential, the critical intelligence, to analyse works of art and to assess their liberatory potential, Benjamin believed that critical intelligence resides in the always-threatened keeping of the very few. Here he was on common ground with Adorno and Horkheimer; though they did not share his and Brecht's view that 'not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history' (as Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*, 1970). However, Horkheimer paid Benjamin a small stipend after the death of his parents and the termination of private financial means; and in return, Benjamin submitted work for the Frankfurt School's *Festschrift für Sozialforschung*, which Horkheimer and Adorno edited. The young Adorno was an extraordinarily acute, perceptive critic of Benjamin's work (for example, foreseeing a potential collision between his surrealist, dream, fairy-tale images and the material basis of artistic production); although Adorno's remarks were sometimes damaging since he required Benjamin's work to fit in with the Frankfurt School emphasis on dialectics, and this tended to weaken it. Yet the correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin remains a document of utmost intellectual and literary interest today.²¹

Both writers shared an aversion to the concept of system and to the mode of discourse used to generate systematic works of grand theory. Benjamin's writings have been called labyrinthine, surpassing even Adorno's epigrammatic aphorisms in their brevity. In these writings, he acted almost like a medium for the transmission of ideas. He focused the insights of Marx and Engels, Brecht and Lukács, Freud and Valéry, Surrealism and Dada, Baudelaire and Fourier, Bergson and Proust upon the nature of art and the discrete art object. In a sense, his work arrived at a position analogous to the totality of Marx's and Engels' comments on art and literature – an aesthetics in process of 'becoming' but never quite 'arrived'.

Like Adorno, Benjamin was concerned that focusing on the art work as such tended to absolutise it, thereby concealing its character as a historical artefact born of specific social pressures and responding to specific social needs; and that this in turn produced the bourgeois viewpoint, which fetishised the art work, making it appear as a cultural monument. On the

²⁰ This is clearly shown, for example, in A. Benjamin (1989).

²¹ See Bloch, E., Lukács, G., Brecht, B., Benjamin, W., and Adorno, T. (1977: 110–34).

other hand, like Raphael, they both saw that a sociology of the arts bracketed out the problem of artistic quality, and did not address the work's internal dynamics and its manner of embodying social information. I have outlined Adorno's dialectical theory of the dual essence of art. Benjamin saw the task of art to be 'the creation of a *demand* which could be fully satisfied only later' (my emphasis) (Benjamin 1973: 239); and he wrote (following Breton) that every fundamentally new, pioneering creation of demands will carry beyond its goal. In other words, his vision of the role of art in society was utopian, but unlike Adorno's pessimistic view and elitist theory of the relationship of capitalist society to art's utopian potential, he saw art as bound up in a positive, practical sense with class relations: art's function was to lead society by awakening demands in the proletariat – demands which would impel that society toward a better organisation of their needs.

Benjamin's vision of the radical artist is indicated in 'The Author as Producer' (1934). Here he discusses the potential of photography to serve either ruling-class or working-class interests.²² He argues that the photographer all too often creates an object of enjoyment and consumption for 'modish commerce'; and that in order to produce work with a revolutionary use-value, the photographer-as-artist must attempt to transcend the limits imposed by specialisation in the capitalist process of production by devising new, alternative techniques capable of serving the interests of socialism and of countering the ruling class productive apparatus. When the photographer-as-artist produces work whose innovative 'political line and quality' is perceived by the proletariat, then they cannot but react to it, and in reacting to it they are *using* the work: that is, such a work awakens in them the realisation that they can demand the altered social conditions which it intimates. In his now well-known essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1973), Benjamin continues his discussion of modern techniques and their potential for achieving revolutionary change. He notes that advances in techniques of mechanical reproduction, especially in the areas of photography and film, have had the effect of replacing the unique art object by a plurality of copies. And in reproduction, the work's presence in time and space is lost, so that it loses its 'aura', its authority as a unique art object. (This all-important concept of 'aura' stems from Benjamin's preoccupation with Marx's concept of the 'fetishism of commodities'. Aura is commodity fetishism – it creates distance, mystifies, veils, invests with ritual content.) With the decay of the work's aura, Benjamin argues, 'tradition' is shattered, and with it the traditional values of the cultural heritage. Benjamin was a keen collector of fine objects and claimed that the collector always retains some traces of the fetishist, and by owning the work of art, shares in its ritual power. So for him personally, this decay of the work's aura was, in a sense, a matter of regret. But he gives more emphasis to the idea that with

²² 'The Author as Producer' originated as a lecture delivered at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris on 27 April 1934.

the passing of the work's aura goes the destruction of the basis in ritual for making art, and this opens up the possibility of making art on a different, political, basis. In sum, the defetishising of the art object as a result of technological change heralds the possibility of the politicisation of art; and in the context of Europe of the 1930s, Benjāmin saw such attempts to politicise art as a necessary defence against the fascist aestheticising of war and the racial myth.

'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' was closely criticised by Adorno in his capacity as co-editor of the Frankfurt School *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, although he eventually published it in a modified form (1936: V, 1). Yet this essay – which seeks to explain how the artist as producer plays a key part in awakening the frozen consciousness by re-presenting works of art, those petrified objects, from a revolutionary perspective – has become a key text in art criticism.

With the coming of the Second World War, many European Jewish intellectuals – including Adorno – emigrated either to Britain or to America, and this has had a profound and lasting effect on the scholarship of the two countries. Arnold Hauser was among those émigrés. A member of an influential Hungarian Marxist school,²³ he started to write *The Social History of Art* (1951) in the 1920s, but by the start of the Second World War it was still incomplete. He became a naturalised British subject in 1948, and the book was finally completed, translated into English and published in 1951. It was reissued in paperback in 1968, and this gave it a new lease of life, especially among younger British scholars.

The Social History of Art is an extraordinary work in its historical scope and in the breadth of its subject matter. Hauser treats the general origins, and history of visual art in the West from 'Prehistoric Times' to 'The Film Age'. In addition, he frequently compares the visual art of a particular period with other art forms – theatre, the novel, poetry – thus giving a broad view of the general cultural life of the time. But it is the work's macro-Marxist sociological approach which constituted its most definitive contribution to the intellectual life of the 1950s in Britain, when the work was first published. This approach influenced the thinking of many artists and art historians at a time when British art history, more or less in its infancy, favoured the monograph and tended to be connoisseurial. Hauser's text thus offered students of art and art history a critical approach, and it also allowed them to situate their specialist studies in a wider historical context.

Having said this, it may be apparent to the present-day reader that positivism, which was widespread in the 1950s, pervades Hauser's writings. Statements in the third-person passive conceal Hauser's opinions, and his prose style now seems assertive. Often, the simple labelling of art styles

²³ Which produced (amongst others) Georg Lukács, Zoltan Kodaly, Frederick Antal, and had a considerable influence on the work of Karl Mannheim.

transforms them into objective certainties; and there are no debates as to what counts as good or bad art; merely an assumption that we know quality when we see it. There is no introductory discussion of Hauser's methodology. Chapter 1 plunges straight in with the Old Stone Age. However, the first footnote lays out two opposing theories about the origins of art. The first, proposed by Gottfried Semper in 1860 and apparently favoured by conservatives at the time Hauser was writing, claimed that art is a by-product of craft, and that geometrically stylised forms which decorated domestic ware evolved into the earliest kind of art. Opposing this 'transfer of Darwinism to a field of cultural life' as Hauser puts it, was Alois Riegl, who proposed in 1893 that man had always had within him an urge to make art, and that artistic forms are found and achieved precisely in the struggle of purposive 'artistic intention' against our material conditions. Riegl argued that the earliest art must have been imitative of nature. Hauser strongly believes that Riegl's radical theory is correct, and that art is not a chance offshoot of practical necessity but that, on the contrary, it has an essential, eternal quality. And he sees Riegl's account as compatible with Marx's basic anthropology: the social production of art is a part of man's original socio-economic struggle against material conditions to achieve survival in society. Using this historical materialist account of man's desire and drive to produce art, Hauser proposes a dialectic between the mental and the material, between content and the means of expression, between the will and the substratum of the will.²⁴ Other remarks made during the course of the book help to clarify Hauser's Marxist approach. For instance, he suggests that Engels formulated one of the most important heuristic principles in the sociology of art when he claimed that artistic progressiveness and political conservatism are perfectly compatible and that every honest artist who describes reality faithfully and sincerely has an enlightening and emancipating influence on his age. This enables Hauser to avoid the problem of selecting or deselecting artists according to their apparent political intentions or choice of subject matter. And in response to Marx's puzzle about the paradox of historicity and timelessness in art, he argues that every work of art, even the most naturalistic, is an idealisation of reality – a legend, a kind of Utopia.

Hauser organises his data historically in relation to what he sees as important themes or periods, but from today's vantage point it seems that some topics are treated to the exclusion of others. For example, Impressionism and the Film are very fully discussed, but there is virtually no mention of the Russian Revolution, nor of Constructivist art. For a Marxist sociological history of art, these omissions are hard to understand. However, in respect to the periods and artists that Hauser does include, his macro-sociological perspective on art is consistently illuminating. For example, he says:

²⁴ This last pair of opposites shows Hauser's very high regard for Freud, whose theoretical approach he considers has much in common with that of Marx.

A continuous line can be traced from the Gothic to Impressionism comparable to the line leading from the late medieval economy to high capitalism; and modern man, who regards his whole existence as a struggle and a competition, who translates all being into motion and change, for whom experience of the world increasingly becomes experience of time, is the product of this bilateral, but fundamentally uniform development.

(Hauser 1951: 872)

Indeed, his detailed account of the age of Impressionism and how it meshes with the development of European capitalism in a sense prefigures the project of Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1982).

Hauser's attitude to twentieth century art is reluctantly elitist. He has no faith in the opinions of the masses:

Success with them is completely divorced from qualitative criteria. They do not react to what is artistically good or bad, but to impressions by which they feel themselves reassured or alarmed in their own sphere of existence . . . subject matter has to be attractive.

(Hauser 1951: 951)

And he notes that the more progressive and ambitious an artistic work, the less popular it is with contemporary audiences. Yet he puzzles about the fact that, as he sees it, only a young art can be fully appreciated, for as soon as it grows older, we need to be acquainted with the earlier stages in its development in order to understand it, and this is only available to other artists and specialists. He also explores the implications of contemporary responses to art works, noting that what initially appears optically strange can later develop into a visual convention. These topics continue to occupy sociologists and other writers on visual art.

While Arnold Hauser brought a Marxist approach to the entire history of Western art, the work of Herbert Read – roughly Hauser's contemporary – demonstrates the coming together of European critical thinking and the British empiricism of his day which was also permeated by positivist philosophy. In Read's writings, psychological, humanist and other strands temper his critical approach to the visual arts; strands which are characteristics of the non-critical approaches discussed in the next section of this chapter. Yet Max Raphael was sufficiently impressed by Read's publications to send him his own manuscripts for safe-keeping during the Second World War; and leftist British artists in the 1940–50s held him in very high esteem. Read published a great deal during his long life, during which time his theoretical approach to visual art gradually altered and developed. In the following discussion, certain key works are presented in chronological order.

The dramatic political events which were taking place when Read first wrote about art (1930–40s) inevitably influenced his ideas. However, in *Art Now* (1933) he vehemently denies that developments in art are directly

influenced by developments in a political regime, and he claims that modern art is evolving independently of social and political forces.

The Nazi regime dismissed artists and museum directors from their posts, modern paintings and sculpture were relegated to the cellars or suffered worse indignities. This was entirely the result of a rash and inconsiderate identification of modernism in art and communism in politics. . . . The revolutionary artist is not . . . to be identified with the revolutionary politician. He works on another plane where his activities are determined by that wider destiny which governs all the activities of the human spirit.

(Read 1933: 10)

In *Art and Society* (1937) Read claims that art is 'a mode of knowledge at once its own reality and its own end' (Read 1937: xiii) but argues that at the same time it 'contributes in its own right to that process of integration which we call a civilisation or a culture' (Read 1937: xiii). In a dialogue with the philosophies of Hegel and Marx, he now acknowledges that art is influenced by the material conditions of existence but argues that it is not merely a product of society in the economic and political sense. He claims that the ideology of each period is 'readymade', and mainly formed by religion. Thus art cannot straightforwardly contribute to or be influenced by ideologies, yet there is a certain give and take between ideology and artist. This is a dialectical process: 'Actually it is like a spark springing, at the right moment, between two opposite poles, one of which is the individual [artist], the other the society' (Read 1937: xiv). Like Hauser, he maintains that the typical art of a period is the art of the elite, but this does not depress him. He draws on Marx's conception of a classless society where elites have a place because they reflect the natural differentiation in people's talents and abilities, and should not therefore be suppressed. From this, he is able to argue that the artist is endowed with exceptional sensibilities and faculties of apprehension which set him apart, psychologically, from the majority of the population. Though many critical artists and sociologists today might balk at his essentialist psychology, they would surely admire his belief that

Art is a mode of expression . . . and the world of art is a system of knowledge as valuable to man – indeed more valuable – than the world of philosophy or the world of science. It is only when we have clearly recognised the function of art as a mode of knowledge parallel to the other modes by which man arrives at an understanding of his environment that we can begin to appreciate its significance in the history of mankind.

(Read 1937: xix)

The critical strand in Read's approach to art is rather lost in *Education through Art* (1943). In this positivist work, Read aims to show that the production and reception of works of art are linked to laws of nature. Drawing on publications by contemporary psychologists, he suggests that four different types of mental activity can be associated with four distinct types of personality, giving rise to four basic 'natural' styles in art. He

psychological types

(See 1)

establishes a chain which links form in art to beauty, and then to nature, to mathematics, to universal laws, and finally to objectivity. Subjectivity is also linked into this chain via Eysenck's work which connects feelings with physiological features of the human body. By contrast with Hauser's critical approach, which although also positivistic in tone, entails a historical dimension and a utopianism, Read's current attempt to show that the creation and the understanding of different types of art are bound up with natural laws and scientific certainty would seem to weaken a historical approach, and it heavily reinforces his previous reluctance to associate the development of visual art in any direct fashion with economic and political change or progress.

Twenty-four years later, Read's *Art and Alienation* (1967) engages with more recent European critical thinking. One of the essays in this book is a response to two works by Herbert Marcuse: *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One-dimensional Man* (1964). In the essay, Read's mature ideas about the relationship of art to modern society are set out against those of Marcuse and, in a more general sense, the Frankfurt School. Unlike Benjamin, Marcuse holds a fundamentally pessimistic view of capitalism's developing technologies. He argues that they will undermine the very basis of artistic alienation and will subsume art into a one-dimensional culture of harmonising commercialism, ultimately threatening to overpower the struggles of critical thinkers in their task to create the (Hegelian) new Subject. Read is also critical of modern society and of the position it accords to art, but he emphasises the effect on the *individual* psyche of increased technological specialisation and also of the demise of religion. He argues that the mass of the population is being forced into dreary occupations which dull the imagination and cause the individual to experience himself as alienated (and here, he uses the term 'alienation' in a psychological rather than a structural Marxist sense). And while Marcuse presents a general theoretical view of the arts in our technological civilisation, Read tends towards empiricism: in his finest writings, he addresses specific art works, often contemporary abstract ones, and informs an art-historical interpretation with his particular political viewpoint. For he believed that through the correct understanding of great works of art, which such interpretations help us to achieve, we become empowered to perceive fundamental truths about ourselves. He consequently argued that we must produce a society which will be sure to nurture those exceptional individuals who have the artistic imagination to show us that truth. For Read, art is not directly about the struggle against capitalism as such; it is concerned, in a wider, humanist and even metaphysical sense, with the mystery of existence. Art is bound up with the individual psyche.

A major centenary exhibition, entitled 'Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art' (Leeds City Art Galleries 1992-3) focused on the art and design promoted by Read during his long lifetime. The event, and responses to it, provides a postscript to this section. The accompanying catalogue begins to

set Read's work in a different political context: it suggests that his insistence that modern art contributed to a new humanist order stemmed from an effort not to be identified with the communist cause, nor – on the other hand – with fascism. While the Leeds project is largely celebratory, critics of the exhibition (e.g. James Hall, *Guardian*, 6 December 1992) suggest that, in retrospect, the manner in which Read's theoretical approach altered during his lifetime can now be seen not so much as a 'development' but a hedging of bets resulting from a basic lack of critical discrimination and commitment, a desire to be accepted as intellectually and politically correct.

In this section, I have briefly examined the theoretical writings of Marx and several other critical theorists whose subsequent developments of his class analysis of capitalism either directly or indirectly address the area of visual art. In the next section, I present the ideas of some 'liberal' – non-Marxist – writers on art, who were working roughly between 1880 and 1980. Their ideas were to become a major target of criticism for those theorists of art who are represented in the final section of this chapter.

3 NON-CRITICAL WRITINGS ABOUT VISUAL ART: CONNOISSEURSHIP, HUMANISM

Heinrich Wölfflin; Bernard Berenson; Erwin Panofsky; The Courtauld Institute of Art (c. 1950-70); Ernst Gombrich

The writings of Heinrich Wölfflin (born 1864) have had considerable influence on several generations of art historians. Herbert Read, in his introduction to the English translation (1953) of Wölfflin's *Classic Art* (1899), suggested that when Wölfflin died in 1945, aged 81, it could be said of him that he had found art criticism a subjective chaos and left it a science. In 1893, Wölfflin succeeded Jacob Burckhardt in the chair of art history at the University of Basle. Though Burckhardt's generalisations about paintings appeared convincing, later art historians objected that he had no *method* by which he could classify the phenomena of art; no measure by which his personal prejudices might be controlled. During his lifetime, Wölfflin went a long way towards establishing such a systematic method in art-historical criticism. According to Read, he kept his eye steadily fixed on the work of art and began to analyse what he saw, and to classify the results of such visual analysis. He was searching for a conception of art history which would avoid both the superficiality of a subjective interpretation of art and the artifice of a purely formalistic type of art criticism. He started this task in *Classic Art* and completed it in *Principles of Art History* (1950) [1915]. His formalistic 'principles', based on the analysis of the visual experience of works of art, consist of a set of five contrary concepts: linear and painterly, plane and recession,

closed and open form, multiplicity and unity, absolute and relative clarity of subject matter. When applied to works of art, Wölfflin claimed that this set of concepts elicited the specifics of their composition, which could thus be explained and classified. In addition, he argued that by using these five categories, or principles, the analyst could perceive the way in which the technique or style of a drawing or painting drew upon, responded to and developed the technique or style of a previous work. Thus the idea of a consequential visual development, via the artist's hand – as it were – underpins his approach.

The descriptive skill, the economy and perspicacity of Wölfflin's schemata or ideal types are still admired by many art historians. However, Read argues that they are based on, and applicable to, one kind of art only – the figurative art of the humanist tradition; and that they have no application to earlier traditions such as the Byzantine or the Egyptian, and even less to various types of modern art. The theoretical force or status of Wölfflin's concepts has also been challenged. For he claimed that this categorisation shows the nature of the artist's *own* achievement, his own contribution, as opposed to the impact of cultural conditions on his work; and that this contribution on the part of the artist accounts for the historical transformation of art. Michael Podro, in *The Critical Historians of Art* (1982) argues that a quasi-immanent visual (art) development of this kind cannot be possible, since the effect of the contingent and non-visual cultural factors on the production of a visual art work cannot be ignored. A similar position is adopted by sociologists of science when arguing against the claim that scientific knowledge has an immanent development. However, Podro comments that though the painter's exercise of his medium may be more complex than the aligning of his material to the world which is suggested by Wölfflin's five categories, nevertheless the kind of factors he defines are central to the painter's project, and are relatively less variable than the other complexities which may be involved.

Read informs us that Bernhard Berenson (born 1865) was much influenced by Wölfflin's categories. As a result of reading Wölfflin, Berenson was persuaded to look extremely carefully at a painting, and to analyse what he saw. He was also influenced by the work of Morelli, a trained comparative anatomist who made morphological comparisons in pictures between details of parts of the sitters' bodies – in particular their ears – which seemed to Morelli to offer objective criteria for authorship, and to justify his method as scientific. Berenson, however, suggested that such details as legs and arms were significant only so far as they were not vehicles of expression. He became increasingly concerned with 'level' and 'type' of quality, and with an analysis of style.

After Berenson's first visit to Italy, he published *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1948) [1930]. In it he argued that his epoch was instinctively in

sympathy with that of the Renaissance, and that painters currently working could learn a great deal from fifteenth century art. He distinguishes many different Italian Renaissance painters, and each is judged from 'genius' through to 'mediocre'; for example: 'We must judge Moroni, then, as a portrait painter pure and simple; although even here his place is not with the highest' (Berenson 1948: 315). Berenson thus emphasises the artist's individuality. In general, he presents it as those essential qualities considered specific to that artist and revealed by his entire production; while the social contextualisation of that oeuvre is entirely ignored. Berenson's contribution to art theory is largely based on his concept of 'tactile values', or plasticity, by which he meant the ability to make a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object look rounded, touchable, possessing depth. He argued that paintings of the Renaissance possessed this quality in various degrees (following Vasari, he claimed, for example, that Giotto was a man of genius), although in his opinion Italy has subsequently failed to produce a single great artist.

The Italian Painters of the Renaissance was accompanied by the famous 'Lists' of those pictures that Berenson accepted as authentic. It is on these lists, in part, that his reputation as a connoisseur is based. The origins of connoisseurship lie in the Renaissance, but the term has been particularly associated with Berenson's professional pursuits.²⁵ In general terms, connoisseurship consists in part of establishing the authorship of a work of art on the basis of comparison with known works; and it is also concerned with establishing the authenticity of such a work. In addition, the connoisseur may go on to assess the work's quality or intrinsic value, again by comparison with other objects of the same kind. The role that Berenson played in the history of taste and collecting is remarkable, and as a result, the concept of connoisseurship became particularly associated with his activities. By the early twentieth century, American millionaires were beginning to acquire masterpieces – or so they hoped – of Italian art. Berenson stimulated and guided this interest in Italian art; and, as the leading expert on it, he authenticated paintings for dealers and collectors. He appears to have regarded it as his mission to send to the United States as many Italian works of art as he could persuade collectors to acquire. Aided by the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act of 1909, which allowed for duty-free import of works of art over twenty years old, Berenson's success may be measured by the fact that there are now more Italian Renaissance paintings in America than anywhere else except for their place of origin. His mission was also aided by the political interests of American capitalism. The American businessmen Samuel and Russ Kress sponsored the republication of *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* in illustrated editions, with the intention that this should regenerate the interest of the American public in traditional as opposed to radical values.²⁶

²⁵ See Brown (1979: 13–29).

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 23.

Mid-nineteenth century photographers had begun to make a systematic record of works of art, for at the time – and for many years subsequently – photographs were believed to be objective reproductions of the originals that they depicted.²⁷ This helps to explain why Berenson made much use of black and white photographs in his attributions, saying they were excellent for comparative purposes.²⁸ His custom was to inscribe an artist's name on the back of a photograph of an art work, which was sometimes accompanied by a letter expanding on his attribution. He unquestionably overpraised pictures in whose acquisition he had a stake;²⁹ and the extent to which his involvement with the trade affected his judgments of works of art has since become subject to much debate. In addition, it is unfortunate for his reputation as a disinterested scholar that he lived on into a world in which another major type of connoisseur arose. By the late twentieth century, with art history a well-established academic discipline and works of art now mostly in museums, connoisseurs have become university-trained curators. The present curatorial type of connoisseur displays the traditional concerns of her/his forerunners, but she does so more clearly for the institution by which she is employed and without personal monetary gain beyond a fixed salary.

As a young man, Erwin Panofsky published a series of papers – the first in 1915 – dealing with the problem of method in art history. In Podro's *The Critical Historians of Art*, he features as the last of those German intellectuals working between 1827 and 1927 whose concerns and procedures were responses to Hegel's philosophy of art. Podro argues that Panofsky revived the Hegelian project of constructing an absolute viewpoint from which to regard the art of the past, a viewpoint from which the inner structure of all works of art could be made clear; and that in this project, he was following Wölfflin and Riegl, though he rejected their assumptions that there were certain innate principles of the mind which could guide our interpretation of works of art. Podro discusses Panofsky's attempt to construct a systematic art historical method which links the subjectivity of the interpreter – and of the artist – with the objectivity of the object of study, centrally focusing on the notion of the coherence of the art work. Panofsky set himself the task, in other words, of constructing an *a priori* system of interpretation which would locate a particular mind–world relation within any particular work. This mind–world relation was seen both as the source of the work's internal

27 William Ivins, in his influential *Prints and Visual Communication* (1953), claimed that until the invention of photography, there had been no way of making pictures of objects that could serve as a basis for connoisseurship, but that photographs were true reproductions, and could therefore fulfil that function.

28 The Courtauld Institute's *Win Library* and *Survey of Pictures in British Country Houses*, which are collections of (predominantly) black and white photographs of art works used mainly for teaching purposes, indicate the still current connoisseurial approach to art history.

29 Brown, *op. cit.*: 25.

coordination and also as unifying it with surrounding culture. It is characterised in the introduction to *Studies in Iconology* (1939) as an essential tendency of the human mind.

However, in mid-career Panofsky's life and thought were subjected to profound change. In 1933, he was ousted from his professorship at Hamburg by the Nazis, and he emigrated to the United States. He took up lectureships at Princeton and New York Universities, and continued writing and publishing for another twenty years. From then onwards, the English language was to be his vehicle of communication. In 1955, Doubleday Anchor published *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, a paperback selection of his articles; thus making them widely available to an English-speaking public. These papers span thirty years of his scholarship; and some were completely rewritten by Panofsky for this publication while others were revised and brought up to date. The introduction, which has greatly influenced English-speaking art historians, is entitled 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline'; and at times it gives the impression of a quite different author from the one that Podro discusses. So does the epilogue, 'Art History in the United States', for in it Panofsky expresses a dislike of German thought and language: 'The German language unfortunately permits a fairly trivial thought to declaim from behind a woolen curtain of apparent profundity and, conversely, a multitude of meanings to lurk behind one term' (Panofsky 1955: 329). He goes on to suggest that for the German immigrant scholar, it has been a blessing to come into contact and occasionally into conflict with an Anglo-Saxon positivism which is 'in principle, distrustful of abstract speculation' (Panofsky 1955: 329). These views are more strongly expressed and their implications further developed in the writings of his younger fellow-countryman, Ernst Gombrich (see below).

In 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline', the relationship between art history and connoisseurship is discussed. Panofsky claims that the difference between them is a matter of emphasis: 'The connoisseur might be defined as a laconic art historian, and the art historian as a loquacious connoisseur' (Panofsky 1955: 20). One wonders what Podro's German critical art historians would have made of this statement. Certainly it represents the kernel of what the 'new' critical art historians (discussed in section 4 of this chapter) set out to demolish; they argue that the art historian, in this sense, is merely a lackey of the capitalist system. Even the ideas which Panofsky had previously expressed in German, as part of the Hegelian project, now seem to take on a different meaning in this English text. Associating himself with humanism, he emphasises that this system of thought classically differentiates the arts from the sciences, and concerns itself with the former. He explains that the humanist rejects authority, and instead tolerates – indeed respects – the individual, his thought and actions. And in addition, the humanist respects tradition because it is real and objective, and can be studied, and if necessary, reinstated. Thus, the

humanist historian of art has a key role to play as the theorist of cultural records which have come down to us in the form of works of art. Art history 'must describe the stylistic peculiarities, neither as measurable or otherwise determinable data, nor as stimuli of subjective reactions, but as that which bears witness to artistic "intentions"' Panofsky 1955: 20). However, 'The artist has alternatives. . . . Thus it appears that the terms used by the art historian interpret the stylistic peculiarities of the work as specific solutions of generic "artistic problems"' (Panofsky 1955: 21). Here, we can see the influence of Wölfflin's emphasis that the art historian should empathise with the artist whose work he is studying; and in the generalised art-historical project which Panofsky outlines in this essay, there are similar traces of an attempt to produce a 'totalising theory'. However, the humanist art historian, as Panofsky describes him, often sounds more like an Anglo-Saxon empiricist; while the privileging of the artist's intentions has been criticised by later Marxist art historians on the grounds that it represents a romantic ideology which is associated with capitalist connoisseurship.

In *Art History as a Humanistic Discipline*, Panofsky explains that what differentiates works of art from the natural phenomena with which scientists deal is that the former demand to be experienced aesthetically. And it is the unity of materialised form, idea (subject matter in the case of the visual art work) and content which is realised in the intuitive aesthetic experience. Obviously the naive beholder has a different experience from that of the humanist art historian, who is not only conscious of the constituents of the aesthetic experience, but also 'primes' his intuition by acquiring as much factual information about the art work as possible in advance. Thus the art historian combines intuitive aesthetic recreation and archaeological (empirical) research. Archaeological research is blind and empty without aesthetic recreation, and aesthetic recreation is irrational and often misguided without archaeological research. But "leaning against one another", these two can support the system that makes sense' (Panofsky 1955: 19), that is, a historical synopsis.

These two, 'leaning against one another', are probably descendants of the 'mind-world relation' which featured in Panofsky's early Hegelian project to construct an *a priori* system of interpretation which would locate a particular mind-world relation within any particular work, expressing both the nature of the work's internal coherence and its relationship with surrounding culture. Yet in another way, Panofsky's text can be read as a kind of practical guide for the would-be empirical Anglo-Saxon art historian.

John Tagg (1975) is deeply critical of Panofsky's art-historical approach, and emphasises the extent to which Panofsky's writings have influenced British art history. For example, he argues that Panofsky's work reinforces the English attitude to the visual arts which sees them as furnishing decoration, distraction, delight for the senses but never the mind; and where the art historian's job amounts to cataloguing. He contrasts this approach with the German art historical tradition:

which developed in a very different social and intellectual context and in which we find studies of art based on a philosophical aesthetic, drawing on general philosophy, sociology and psychology, and seeking to unify them in a synthetic art historical method.

(Tagg 1975: 3)

At the time he wrote this, Tagg presumably did not know the 'early' Panofsky, whose largely untranslated German texts Podro had yet to analyse and publish (in *The Critical Historians of Art*, 1982). As a result of undertaking that later analysis, Podro was to claim that in no writer was the conception of art as like knowledge so elaborately developed as by Panofsky.

Some conclusions of a more general nature can be drawn from this brief examination of Panofsky's history – or histories – of art. First, his work tends to disturb the generally held view that European 'Geist philosophy' and British and American empiricism are incompatible. But second, and on another level, what Panofsky 'stands for' presents a very interesting sociological study, since his publications indicated very clearly the influence of social context on the formation of theory and ideas. In the context of Hegelian scholarship in Germany, he attempted to produce an absolutist theoretical stance in relation to art. But after emigrating to the United States, the very fact of writing in English – and in an intellectual context of empiricism and positivism – changed his approach considerably. When the commentaries upon his work are considered in conjunction with his own publications, we find a veritable tangle of intellectual positions. It is only when all these texts are taken cumulatively, in the contexts of changing historical, geographical, political and intellectual circumstances, that it becomes possible to start to understand the contradictory theoretical approaches that have been associated with the name of Erwin Panofsky; and in the process, to glimpse something of the complexity of intellectual thought in relation to visual art in the West over the past seventy years.

John Tagg associated Panofsky with a specifically English type of art history. English art history was synonymous, for more than thirty years, with the prestigious Courtauld Institute of Art in London, whose influence in Britain and elsewhere has been huge. I now turn to a discussion of it; and this discussion relates for the most part to the period of its greatest influence, 1950–70.³⁰ A department of the University of London, the Courtauld Institute was founded in 1931, and until the 1960s it was the only place in Britain offering an undergraduate course in art history – although Cambridge, and later Oxford, offered components of art history in a general history degree course. A large part of Samuel Courtauld's unparalleled collection of French late nineteenth-century paintings was displayed on the premises at 20 Portman

³⁰ This section is, to a certain extent, based on the memories of Stephen Chaplin who was an undergraduate student at the Courtauld Institute from 1955 to 1958, and a deputy librarian from 1958 to 1960, and on my own experience as a secretary at the Institute from 1959 to 1961.

Square, London (until the collection was removed in 1960 to a purpose-built gallery); and this gave the Institute – itself one of the finest examples of the work of the brothers Adam in London – an extraordinarily ‘authentic’ quality. In the post-war years ‘the Courtauld’, as it was known, was an elite establishment whose approach to art history was widely accepted.

It has been closely allied with the Warburg Institute, whose library was evacuated from Germany shortly before the Second World War and came almost by chance to England rather than to the United States. The Warburg was originally founded by Aby Warburg in Hamburg in the early 1920s for the study of antique thought in the post-antique world. The story of its evacuation, and that of its German refugee staff and their philosophical outlook (the ethos of *Geistesgeschichte*), suggests certain parallels with the history of the Frankfurt Institute. Distinguished Warburg professors – Rudolph Wittkower, Leopold Eitinger and Ernst Gombrich (see below) – all lectured at the Courtauld Institute in the 1950–60s.

Anthony Blunt started teaching at the Courtauld in 1934, and became its third director in 1947. He was appointed Surveyor of the King's Pictures in 1945, a post he held until 1972. In the 1930s his writings on art showed a definite Marxist tendency; yet by the 1950s the Courtauld, very much under his influence,³¹ was associated with an art history which was formalist and ‘value-free’, while it adopted a generally humanist attitude towards artists and their production. With hindsight, this stance is perhaps unsurprising, given the Cold War climate of the 1950s and early 1960s; but it also helped to provide a cover for Blunt's espionage activities, which were publicly exposed in 1979. Certainly, the training which students received was not political in an overt sense. The relationship of art to politics was never explicitly made. For example, Johannes Wilde³² who as a refugee from Germany had been accused during his internment on the Isle of Man of ‘signalling to submarines’, would show students Rubens' drawings of hands in order to impress on them the quality of ‘good’ art. On the other hand, the subject matter of certain of Blunt's lectures, Picasso's *Guernica* and Rouault's *Misere*, for example, indicates concern with human hardship.

But ‘good’ art was the order of the day; particularly the art of the Italian Renaissance, and British art from 1530 to the present. The emphasis on Italian Renaissance art stemmed from the legacy of Vasari, Wölfflin, Berenson and many other scholars: quite simply, this was the area in which most art-historical research had been undertaken, and most value judgments made. Italian Renaissance art was seen as the very foundation of excellence in Western art. British art was another matter. From its inception, one of the Institute's ‘special aims had been to develop research on British Art’

³¹ Stephen Rees-Jones, the Courtauld's scientific expert said: ‘After he [Blunt] became Director of the Courtauld in 1947 he ruled it like a medieval court. He was the prince and we were the court’ (Renrose and Freeman 1986: 295).

³² For ten years Deputy Director of the Courtauld Institute.

(Courtauld Institute of Art Prospectus 1950), and its library and collections of reproductions had been planned with that purpose in view’ (op. cit.). Students were expected to become curators of British provincial art galleries and museums; and consequently the study of British art and of Italian Renaissance art were compulsory. Optional courses on ‘Special Periods’ were also offered; for example, ‘European art c. 1700–90’ and ‘European art c. 1790–1880’.

Indeed, periodisation was a crucial feature of the Courtauld's conception of art history. Western art (with a pronounced emphasis on European painting) was divided up into historical periods, which were seen to develop one out of another. In the ‘photograph paper’ of the final examination, students followed a set procedure: date the work in terms of century, then place according to country, then school, then town, then family, then workshop, then particular artist, then precise date. The job was done if and when you could say, for example: Leonardo, 1505. In detail, this entailed analysing the specific work in terms of its iconography – and students without a knowledge of the Bible were disadvantaged. It also involved an analysis of the work's morphology, and a knowledge of changes in form over time. This was taught in lectures, following Wölfflin, via the comparative method using two slide screens.

‘Good’ art was evaluated with reference to the perceived skill of the artist, and the resultant beauty of the object in terms of its formal attributes and quality of drawing. Scholars tended to identify with the creativity of the artist on a personal basis. Getting inside the mind of the artist, one was thought to be in a position to understand and appreciate his aims; then looking at the work, one could assess the manner in which – and the degree to which – these aims had been accomplished.

Thus, European art history was conceptualised and taught as a series of landmarks. A number of outstanding, authenticated works – arranged according to periodised stylistic groups relating to specific countries – was seen as contributing to the continuity of development of Western art, century by century, up to the present day. An artist's oeuvre, consisting of a chronological list of first authenticated then unauthenticated works, was drawn together as part of the process of charting this ‘art history’; and the monograph was a standard publication. Any information about the social context of the artist and his work was given as an introductory or background supplement; its purpose was solely to enhance the Courtauld conception of art history. Patronage, particularly by Italian Renaissance popes, received some attention; but in an hour's lecture on, for example, Leonardo, one-twelfth of the time – a brief introduction – would be spent on so-called background. Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art* – in the library but not on any reading list – proved an eye-opener to students who came across this alternative account.

Subsequent accusations that the ‘Courtauld method’ was only concerned with the ‘pure visibility phenomenon’, and that its political stance was

concealed, are to a large extent justified – indeed in the case of Anthony Blunt, the relationship of art to politics turned out to be spectacularly Byzantine. But some small rejoinders should be made. First, Wilde and several other academic staff were determined to try to teach art history from sources: for example, to read Vasari on the Italian Renaissance. Second, the courses on British art did have more social content, perhaps because of the centrality of such figures as Hogarth and Blake. But, by and large, this prestigious establishment continued for many years to turn out art historians who, as Mark Roskill says (1974), knew that their profession was concerned with style, attributions, dating, authenticity, rarity, reconstruction, the detection of forgery, the rediscovery of forgotten artists and the meaning of pictures.

Ernst Gombrich was director of the Warburg Institute from 1959 to 1976. He provides a different kind of account of the development of visual representation – one which is based on the psychology of recognition and how the skills of invoking it are learned' (Podro 1982: 215). This has introduced a new set of concerns into the analysis of painting. A starting point for Gombrich is that: 'If art were only a matter of personal vision there could be no history of art. . . . The art historian's trade rests on the conviction once formulated by Wölfflin, that "not everything is possible in every period"' (Gombrich 1960: 4). Gombrich claims that we can communicate with a fair degree of assurance what we mean by 'baroque' (organ loft) or 'impressionist' (painting), but he objects to the idea that Wölfflin's categories, if applied to an art work, would produce an objective or even a sufficient analysis of the work. In *Norm and Form* (1966) he warns that

the labels we use must of necessity differ from those which our colleagues who work in the field of entomology fix on their beetles or butterflies. In the discussion of works of art, description can never be completely divorced from criticism. The perplexities which art historians have encountered in their debates about styles and periods are due to this lack of distinction between form and norm. . . . [They] must never forget that language is a man-made thing, inherently capable of adjustment, and that *aesthetic categories* are not *natural classes*. (Gombrich 1966: 81)

However, Gombrich appears to believe that in nature there *are* 'natural classes'; in other words, that science is neutral and objective, and that the scientist's job is to discover these classes. This positivistic notion of science, and the method of proposing a tentative hypothesis and modifying that hypothesis in the light of experimentation are inherited from his philosophical mentor, Karl Popper. Working within this positivist ethos, Gombrich's aim has been to apply the idea of a 'scientific' measure – in the sense of a psychological theory of perception and optics – to art works. He sees the artist as inheriting certain visual skills and conventions, and learning (by trial and error) to develop others, by which to invoke a plausible illusion of the reality he seeks to represent. And the art writer's job is to discuss the

artist's problems of representing reality in a language that makes sense to both of them and also to the science-based student of perception. Proof of the relative success of this project lies in the fact that *Illusion in Nature and Art* (jointly edited by Gombrich and the psychologist R. L. Gregory, 1973) is often classified in university libraries under psychology.

Gombrich's work has been widely admired, but *because* of its popularity and consequent effect on attitudes towards art, it has also attracted the kind of criticism that Read made of Wölfflin's categories; namely, the idea that the artist develops plausible illusions of the reality he seeks to represent which cannot be straightforwardly applied to abstract art – though this is actually to oversimplify the richness and complexity of Gombrich's oeuvre, another strand of which contains the argument that the contemporary general public is to blame for just expecting 'new Art', and for not giving present day artists specific tasks to perform. Nevertheless, some abstract artists practising today consider that Gombrich is partly responsible for the unpopularity of abstract art in Britain.³³ His work has also been heavily criticised by social art historians, who object to the idea of a neutral science and deplore the political implications of his humanist psychology. They argue that a capitalist meta-theory is inherent in an approach which focuses on the individual's acquisition of skills and visual conventions, and that this is unacceptable because it ignores what they see as the crucial role played by ideology in the construction of subject positions and therefore of the subject. However, Rees and Borzello, in their introduction to *The New Art History* (1986) note that radical scholars abroad tend to value Gombrich's writings alongside those of Jacques Derrida. In Britain, where Gombrich is currently seen as tradition personified among radical art historians, this comparison would seem to be unimaginable. His belief that Popper's account of the way science works is eminently applicable to the story of visual discoveries in art is what distinguishes his often complex and subtle work from that of the critical historians discussed by Podro (1982), and also from that of the social historians of art discussed in the next section.

4 CRITICAL WRITINGS ABOUT VISUAL ART: CLASS ANALYSES II

Principal works discussed:

- T. H. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848–1851*, 1973a
Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution, 1973b
 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1974
 Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, 1978
 Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, 1981
 Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, 'Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prairie de la

³³ I am grateful to Tam Giles for this observation.

Representation', in *Modern Art and Modernism*, 1982
 Paul Wood, 'Art and Politics in a Workers' State', in *Art History*, 8, 1, 1985
 John Tagg, 'Art History and Difference', in *The New Art History*, 1986

During the 1960s, capitalism in Britain was yielding a comfortable surplus. Such events are often associated with a loosening of the financial belt and a tendency for the political regime to move leftwards. In 1964, the Labour Party was returned to power for six years. During this time, it revised and expanded the education system. For example, it introduced a two-tier system of higher education by establishing the new polytechnics. There was subsequently a heightened political awareness among British students, which was fuelled by the Paris riots of 1968. Although the wave of student revolts in the wake of those riots eventually died down, and a Conservative government was returned to power in Britain in 1970, the previous political upheavals had the effect of producing more lasting intellectual changes. For example, the *New Left Review*, founded in 1960, became increasingly influential; and in the late 1960s Birmingham University set up its Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which began to translate and publish French theoretical texts on semiotics, and to give a broader social and political meaning to the concept of culture. By the beginning of the 1970s, the women's liberation movement was gathering momentum; and in the field of visual art, women's sense of themselves as artists began to alter. Previously conceiving of themselves simply as women artists, they now began consciously to develop new forms of practice with a political and moral purpose, and that purpose was to expose and destroy patriarchy. At roughly the same time, the film and media journal *Screen* began to have a widespread impact on the intellectual vanguard. Reacting against what it saw as the political failure of the libertarian 1960s, *Screen* adopted the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser. This envisages theorising as intellectual labour, and thus the door was opened for Marxists, until then excluded from British academic life, which had hitherto been affected by the Cold War climate, to come in and start revitalising the arid intellectual ground on the Left. *Screen* promoted the little-known ideas of the Russian Formalists and the Brecht-Benjamin circle; it introduced semiotics from Saussure to Barthes; and it presented the post-Freudian psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan.

This leftwards-shifting intellectual climate produced a new socio-political approach to art history.³⁴ In 1973, T. H. Clark – who had received his post-graduate training at the Courtauld Institute – published two books: *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848–1851* (1973a), and *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (1973b). The titles alone give a clear enough indication that Clark's interest in art was politically rooted. However, it was his article in the *Times Literary Supplement* the

³⁴ This is discussed by the contributors to *The New Art History* (Rees and Borzello 1986).

following year, 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation' (1974), which unambiguously called for a new approach to art history. The article is deeply critical of Courtauld-taught, connoisseurial art history, which Clark argued had become manservant of the art market; checking dates for the dealers and providing pedigrees for rich collectors. He further suggested that iconography had deteriorated from examining the conditions in which an artist met an ideology into desultory theme chasing. Clark wanted to go back to a period before the 'pure visibility phenomenon' had taken hold: to re-examine the work of nineteenth-century European art historians who saw visual art as part of the wider social spectrum.

In the article, Clark argued that the kinds of problems addressed by Georg Lukács, and certain other European critical historians of art,³⁵ should be reconsidered. What are the conditions of artistic creation? What are the artist's resources? What do we mean when we talk of an artist's materials? Do some 'materials' determine the use of others? Clark noted that questions like these had subsequently been turned by art historians into a concern with 'methods', formal analysis, 'iconography'. He aimed to develop a new social history of art which re-addressed those problems and re-established the dialectical thinking of the earlier art historians; arguing that a revival of such questions in the light of new insights from contemporary cultural theory would allow art historians to situate visual art more firmly within a much wider theoretical context.

In 1974, Clark was appointed Professor of the History of Art at the University of Leeds. He subsequently formed a department of staff who had been thinking along similar lines,³⁶ and in 1975 Leeds University initiated an MA course in the social history of art. Around this time, several of the polytechnics (subsequently styled universities) were also becoming established as centres for 'new art history'; and in 1979, Middlesex Polytechnic published the first issue of *Block*, which quickly became a forum for debate about cultural theory and the social history of art. In the words of John Tagg, the new social art historians set out

to undertake an analytical description of a concrete historical moment and the specific nexus of conditions which are, at once, those under which the artist's consciousness is formed and the artist's work created, and those within which the artist's work has public meaning. This nexus is itself sited within a specific ideological field and informed by a general social conflict.

(Tagg 1975: 5)

The first of the two books that Clark published in 1973, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848–1851*, is a study of the years following the 1848 Revolution, and in particular of four artists who tried to cope with the unfamiliar situation in which art and politics could not escape

³⁵ He mentions Heinrich Wölfflin, Max Dvorak, Erwin Panofsky, Aby Warburg, Fritz Saxl and Julius von Schlosser.

³⁶ Its members included Terry Atkinson, Fred Orton, Griselda Pollock and John Tagg.

each other. It centres on the painting and politics of Daumier, Millet and Delacroix, and the writings of Baudelaire. Clark shows that in their attitudes to revolution, these four artists had little in common, and that the intentions of the first three were not to produce revolutionary art; though he demonstrates that their work is often more closely tied into the context of politics than might be apparent at first sight. Underlying the study are questions about when art becomes political, and how it becomes politically effective. How can an artist use the conditions of artistic production without being defined by them? How can he produce an art work which does not stay in the studio or end up on a drawing-room wall? How to bypass the art market? How to destroy the conventional art public and invent a new one? How to make art 'popular'? How to exploit one's privacy, and the insights it allowed, and yet escape from it? Clark indicates that in a second book he will discuss the work of Courbet who, for a short while, almost achieved the impossible by finding answers to these questions. But he stresses that art's effectiveness, in political terms, is limited to the realm of ideology. And although a political struggle always involves competing ideologies, it is only occasionally that within a political struggle ideologies take on exceptional importance. When that happens, works of art can attack.

Which leads us to *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, Clark's second publication in 1973. To call this a companion volume to *Image of the People* is to conventionalise the fascinating relationship between the two works, and to dispel the invitation to explore that relationship dialectically. By producing two books almost concurrently, which focus on the same short period of time in France, Clark is demonstrating his method of situating works of art in a highly complex, fluctuating socio-political structure, and showing how the history of art cannot be seen apart from history as a whole.

Chapter 1, 'On the Social History of Art', sets out his theoretical position. He argues that a social-historical analysis of Courbet's painting between the years 1848 and 1851 must involve explanation of the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes. But importantly, concrete transactions are involved, which means that the study must also be historically specific. For it is the artist himself who makes the encounter with history and its specific determinations. Thus Clark's social history of art sets out to discover the general nature of the structures that the artist encounters; but it also seeks to locate the specific conditions of one such meeting in the making of an art work at a particular place and at a precise historical juncture. Clark argues that this process of situating the specific in the light of wider social and political processes entails working with a multiplicity of perspectives. It also entails dialectical writing – the method of his European mentors.

Within this conceptual framework involving interaction between struc-

ture and agency, the making of a work of art becomes a series of actions in but also *on* history. Such a work may become intelligible only within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning; but Clark argues that in its turn, it can alter and at times disrupt these structures. A work of art may have ideology (those ideas, images, and values which are generally accepted) as its material, but it works that material; it gives it a new form, and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology. Clark believes – and convincingly demonstrates – that something approaching this dual process was achieved in the context of the public's response to Courbet's painting, *Burial at Ornans* (1849–50), exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1851.

Clark's treatment of *Burial at Ornans*³⁷ entails detailed historical analysis of contemporary responses to the work itself and to the wider social situation of political and economic upheaval in France after the 1848 revolution. This painting emerges not as an illustration of 'revolution', but as the depiction of a specific occasion at which the artist and members of his family were present. Yet the political overlaps with the personal in this work. Contemporary records show that Courbet's family was new bourgeois – peasant stock recently made good. They lived at Ornans in the valley of the Doubs, and Courbet, who had left to try to establish himself as a painter in Paris, paid fairly frequent visits home. His parents experienced an ambivalence which stemmed from their social position between peasant and bourgeois classes, while he himself alternated between country life and Parisian society with its Salon-buying public. Clark argues that this picture shows Courbet's home community in an ambiguous way, for some of the mourners depicted in this burial scene sport dress-coats, whilst others who are less directly involved wear their working smocks. However, the audience for the work – the buying public – was in Paris. Clark explains that for those who had recently emigrated to Paris from the countryside and were struggling to achieve urban bourgeois status, it was important to maintain the myth of order in the countryside, of rural unity, of a one-class society in which peasant and master work in harmony; for by enforcing distinctions and eliminating ambiguities, the bourgeois category was strengthened. He argues that Courbet exploded that myth by muddying the boundaries between town and country. *Burial at Ornans* shows the Parisian bourgeois institution of a grand formal burial in conjunction with identifiable members of a specific country community whose peasants had recently suffered terrible deprivations.

But Clark argues that the responses made to this work when it was hung at the 1851 Paris Salon tell us more: the writings of contemporary art critics indicate that they did not know what to make of the work; they evidently found it disturbing but were unable to pin this feeling down in words. It was not the romantic rural scene wanted by the right; it was not the picture of peasant suffering and hardship which would have satisfied the left. It had a

³⁷ Other paintings are also considered, but *Burial at Ornans* is given the most extended analytical treatment.

lack of open declared significance. However, contemporary sources also show that *Burial at Ornans* spoke to the wider Parisian society, who appear to have greeted it with a mixture of outrage and enthusiasm. And far from being a cohesive, rich, sophisticated bourgeoisie, this society appears to have consisted of a disparate, ill-assorted group of people to whom the work meant different things. Clark suggests that in this work, Courbet challenged the contemporary aesthetic ideologies by suggesting a new relationship to popular art. He did not use popular art in order to further the development of high art, but the opposite – he exploited high art in order to revive popular art, this picture was for the people, and they responded. It was not for connoisseurs.

In the end *Burial at Ornans* was assimilated into the art milieu, but for a time it had troubled that public which it excluded. One contemporary writer sarcastically called it 'socialist painting', 'an engine of revolution'. However, Clark argues that for a short while, it was precisely that. Courbet, an inarticulate, naive, instinctive painter, was able to cut through the complexities entailed in radical writing. Embedded so deep in the matter it describes, so accurately in its sense of what disturbs its public, the painting effectively questioned and stirred up social boundaries when, in the perceptions of its viewers, to keep these clear meant the difference between peace and war. Clark argues that Courbet put his finger on the shifting political situation of the moment and disturbed it.

There have been criticisms of Clark's writings. Some have asked just how new his approach really is; claiming, for example, that a social history of Dutch art has always been practised in Holland; and arguing that a thin red line of social art historians can be traced right through the years when the Courtauld method predominated.³⁸ One might also ask why Clark invokes past art historians such as Wölfflin, Dyvorak and Panofsky rather than Adorno and Raphael whose approaches were so much more sociological, and indeed dialectical. In addition, Paul Overy (1986) suggests that Clark's more recent publication, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (1985), is in many ways curiously conventional and unchallenging, for there the author attends to exactly the same artists that concern other texts on later French nineteenth-century painting: Manet, Seurat, the Impressionists, Degas – to the exclusion, for example, of Gustave Caillebotte, who was both artist and patron, and therefore of great interest to a social art historian. Indeed, Overy suggests that the American art theorist Clement Greenberg still appears to be the touchstone of the new art history,³⁹ as he is of modernism – that bastion of the pure visibility approach; and that if art history is genuinely to renew itself, it will have to look elsewhere.

However, it is clear that Clark's ideas spoke to many in the 1970–80s; and

38 A. Hauser; F. Antal; F. Klingender; M. Baxendale.

39 On the evidence of Greenberg's contribution to the television programmes associated with the Open University course, *Modern Art and Modernism*, A315; and his interview with T. H. Clark in *Art Monthly* (Greenberg 1984a, 1984b, 1984c).

that an art history which persists in ignoring the missing dimension of lived social relations is no longer as dominant as it was. I shall show that others have since developed his theoretical position, and that the context in which the artist and viewer are seen as class-related producers of meaning has been broadened to encompass consideration of other types of social stratification. In addition, the conventional category of 'art' has been scrutinised, and the implications of the new art history's theoretical stance for its own practice within the wider political scene have also been explored.

In 1973 (the year that 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation' appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*) *Art History and Class Struggle* by Nicos Hadjinicolaou was published in France. It was available in English translation in 1978, and quickly became important to critical sociologists of art, for it was one of the very few contemporary works which examined systematically the implications of a Marxist approach to the production of visual art at a time when the new social approach to art history had yet to make an impact on adjacent disciplines.

Hadjinicolaou's is a historical materialist approach, and he takes as the starting point of his analysis Marx's statement that 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' (Marx 1968: 35). The production of visual art works is therefore a class practice; it is an aspect of class struggle. Hadjinicolaou argues that the subject matter of the science (i.e. the historical materialist treatment) of art history is the history of the production of pictures in the context of class struggle. The concept of ideology is central to his subsequent analysis. Following Althusser (1984), ideology is taken to signify the imaginary relation between men and their conditions of existence. It is a system of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts) through which men and women live their relation to their conditions of existence. So ideology is at once an allusion to the real world and an illusion of it. Hadjinicolaou distinguishes between those positive, dominant ideologies which support and reinforce the status quo, and critical ideologies which are more or less openly opposed to particular class practices or class ideologies.

It follows that pictures cannot be produced in an ideological vacuum, and Hadjinicolaou is particularly concerned with the ideological sphere relating to the production of pictures. He notes that traditionally 'art' and 'style' have been very closely linked. Indeed, he argues that style is considered as a kind of kernel which contains the essence of art, and in this sense, style would seem to be the subject matter of art history. Whilst most bourgeois art historians have an a-social conception of style, a minority do treat style as the outcome of society's ideas, expressed through the medium of the artist. Frederic Antal indeed, argues that style always belongs to a class or a section of a class.⁴⁰ Hadjinicolaou accepts this notion of style, and then substitutes the term 'visual ideology', which he defines as

40 In *Florentine Painting and its Social Background* (1948: 4).

A specific combination of the formal and thematic elements of a picture through which people express the way they relate their lives to the conditions of their existence, a combination which constitutes a particular form of the overall ideology of a social class.

(Hadjinicolaou 1978: 95–6)

'Visual ideology' is the central concept in *Art History and Class Struggle*, and Hadjinicolaou now proceeds to put it to work in his 'scientific' approach to art history. He argues that each class or layer or section of a class ought to have at each historical moment its own visual ideology, given the particular vision each has of itself, of other classes and of society in general. However, since the ideology of the ruling class has always been so powerful, he concludes that its visual ideologies have strongly permeated the visual ideologies of the dominated classes, and the latter may in practice have been greatly distorted. Indeed, he suspects that in certain periods, the dominated class never had a developed visual ideology of its own, and consequently did not produce visual art works at all. He suggests that if we speak of class struggle as the struggle of competing styles in the production of visual art works:

It must be recognised that this 'struggle' takes place more often between the visual ideologies of layers or sections of the same class or of the ruling classes than between the visual ideologies of the ruling classes and the dominated classes. [Author's emphases]

(Hadjinicolaou 1978: 102)

He thinks it is fair to suggest that the history of the production of pictures up to our own times is the history of ruling-class visual ideologies. Roger Taylor, in *An Enemy of the People* (1978), also argues that art has largely been the concern of the ruling class, and while he concludes that the working class would consequently be well advised to have nothing to do with it, Hadjinicolaou, in the tradition of critical theorists, argues that certain visual art works do contain the potential to bring about political change.

This argument is based on his view of the relationship of visual ideology to knowledge. He claims that visual ideology, with its double aspect of comprehension–misapprehension and illusion–allusion to reality, can bear no relation to the scientific knowledge (i.e. the historical materialist analysis) of reality. Visual ideology and scientific knowledge are two distinct realities which do not coincide. However, in the sense that there are both positive and critical ideologies, there are also positive and critical visual ideologies. Whilst all collective visual ideologies are positive and apply to most visual art works, an individual picture which belongs to a collective positive visual ideology may at the same time manifest a critical visual ideology. Hadjinicolaou shows, for example in an analysis of Rembrandt's *Rape of Ganymede* (1635) and Hogarth's *Marriage à la Mode: I. Signing the Contract* (1745), that these are both paintings which, either by choice of subject matter or treatment of it, criticise contemporary ruling-class ideas and

have disturbed bourgeois art historians, while at the same time each belongs to a collective positive visual ideology. He argues that by presenting both a dominant and a critical ideology on the same canvas, works such as these help viewers to glimpse the dominant ideology of the period in which they were painted, and to give us an understanding of the class struggles that were taking place at the time (cf. Clark's analysis of Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*). And our understanding – this experience – does constitute a kind of felt knowledge, but it requires the art historian's intervention to transform it into scientific knowledge.

Finally, Hadjinicolaou turns to the question of the relationship between visual ideology and aesthetic effect. He denies the existence of any 'independent' aesthetic effect, claiming that there is a correlation between the pleasure felt by the spectator on viewing a picture, and the picture's visual ideology: aesthetic effect is the pleasure felt by the observer when he recognises himself in a picture's visual ideology. And since that picture may contain different values, it may appeal to one person and not to another. Yet aesthetic judgments which evaluate works of art differently and which pronounce on their 'aesthetic effect' or 'beauty' always derive from the aesthetic ideologies of social groups. Aesthetics, *per se*, is doomed because it is a discipline without subject matter: "What is beauty?" or "Why is this work beautiful?" must be replaced by the materialist question "By whom, when and for what reasons was this work thought beautiful?" (Hadjinicolaou 1978: 183).

Clark would agree, yet at the same time, his dialectical approach seems by comparison to place less of a theoretical straitjacket on visual art works. This is because empirical analysis is an integral part of Clark's method: it reveals precisely how the production of a specific work of art, in all its various and surprising detail, becomes a series of actions in and also on history. By contrast, Hadjinicolaou's approach is deductive: the concept of 'ideology' entails that of 'visual ideology', and 'visual ideology' entails analysis of the formal and thematic elements of a picture. In this theorisation of visual art within an historical materialist framework, the art works themselves seem to recede as the strong theoretical framework is projected on to them.⁴¹ And in fact, overall, the relationship of 'visual ideology' to 'style' does not seem to be very clear.⁴² In addition, Hadjinicolaou's development of historical

⁴¹ One might argue that most texts which start out from a heavily theorised viewpoint tend to produce less compelling and vivid critical insights about visual art in society than those based in critical art practice or critical art history, because the latter are usually concerned with specific art works, and when close attention is not paid to the visual work, any sense of its potential *visual* power tends to recede.

⁴² This is perhaps because in analyses of individual pictures, Hadjinicolaou uses the term 'visual ideology' to refer variously to visual form (including colour), choice of subject matter, and the manner in which the artist treats the subject matter; and as a result, the sense of a clear link between visual ideology and what is generally understood by the style of a picture, even a socially rooted notion of style, becomes rather tenuous.

materialism does not adequately theorise the artist as active producer, even the producer of a painting which contains a critical visual ideology is virtually a socio-political construct. By comparison, the dialectical approaches of both Raphael and Adorno provide a fuller theoretical account of the critical artist's potential role, in which he struggles to distance himself from society and to produce art which is critical of it.

We should also consider the status of Hadjinicolaou's 'scientific' stance, which he is careful to differentiate from 'critical ideology'. Fairly recent developments in the sociology of scientific knowledge have shown that science, however this is defined, is not epistemologically privileged.⁴³ And historical materialism, whether associated with science or not, can no longer be regarded as guaranteeing the 'truth' about anything, even though it may be systematic in its approach. In the preface to the English edition of *Art History and Class Struggle* (1978), Hadjinicolaou notes that the book had already reached the printers when it was pointed out to him that he had used the male gender throughout. He comments that he was astonished to find this was correct:

The fact that I have used instinctively the male gender when speaking of a profession where probably the majority of the people exercising it are women, the fact that I did this contrary to my conscious opinions; the fact that no one has noticed it up to now among those responsible for the publishing of the book in other languages, as well as this English edition, proves to what extent even so-called progressive people are victims of some very old and reactionary attitudes.

(Hadjinicolaou 1978: 2)

However, he does not explore the implications of his comments. The fact that he now sees he has been a victim of 'some very old and reactionary attitudes' is tantamount to an admission that his theoretical stance is, after all, a type of ideological stance – though different in kind from those analysed in his book; and thus from the start his epistemological claims have been relativised. We are led to speculate that a class analysis of visual art, though important, might not constitute a sufficient critical treatment of the subject.

Three years after Hadjinicolaou's *Art History and Class Struggle* appeared in English translation, Janet Wolff published *The Social Production of Art* (1981).⁴⁴ In her introduction she says that she agrees with most of Hadjinicolaou's account of the history of art and of the ideological nature of

⁴³ See, for example, Mulkey (1979).

⁴⁴ She has now produced a second edition. This leaves the original text unaltered save for a ten-page Afterword, which reviews and restates the main issues raised in the book in the light of developments which have occurred since the publication of the first edition. In the Afterword to the second edition, Wolff states that she has not changed her mind on any of the main claims she originally made, and believes the book may still be useful as a review of some of the most important ways in which art is a social product. For this reason, I have not felt it necessary to modify my own discussion of *The Social Production of Art* which was prepared prior to the publication of the second edition. However, those interested in pursuing Wolff's arguments, as a result of reading my account, should, of course, turn to the second edition of her book.

painting, and will advance many of his arguments herself. In her opinion, historical materialism offers the best currently available (i.e. 1981) analysis of society, despite its omission of the analysis of sexual divisions and the oppression of women.⁴⁵

However, Wolff's sociological treatment of art is rather different from Hadjinicolaou's. To start with, he is concerned specifically with the history of visual art, whereas she addresses the wider field of all the arts. And while Hadjinicolaou's work does not cite many other critical texts on the arts, Wolff's does the opposite: there is a large number of references and footnotes to other authors' theoretical contributions throughout the book. Her works more or less deductively from basic Marxist premises while she tends to eclecticism. It is impressive to find such a wide grasp of the current theoretical state of play – especially in the areas of critical sociology and social philosophy. It is very useful to have hermeneutic theory, semiotics and the phenomenology of perception all compared on a particular issue, such as the active role of the cultural consumer. And although Wolff says that the book is not intended as a textbook, sociology of art students have found it useful. This is because various theories that they have assimilated elsewhere are here synthesised and assessed in relation to the arts. By the same token, because of the very number of theoretical strands that are woven into the basic framework, it would be quite impossible to give an overview of the book's contents which did justice to it. Peter Dormer, reviewing it in *Art Monthly*, says:

The presentation of her views as an inevitable conclusion to a closely argued sociology of art is chimerical. . . . The sociology of art, as represented in this book, is little more than a bundle of conjectures that are interesting but unproven and tied together by footnotes and references.

Art Monthly (Dormer 1982: 33-4)

This seems harsh, but her project does come over as an attempt to make a coherent job of weaving the various theoretical strands into an overall historical materialist framework; and consequently we seem to be viewing the arts through a long theoretical telescope, in which the specific features of visual art works, at any rate, seem distant (rather as they did in Hadjinicolaou's model), occluded by the mechanism of the telescope itself. I will briefly refer to the topics in the order in which she deals with them.

First, she argues that the notion of 'artistic creativity' as some kind of divine gift is a myth created by the Romantic movement, one of the consequences of the prominence that capitalism gives to the notion of individualism. Wolff emphasises that artists are not a special case. They are products of society just like everyone else, and should be seen in terms of the economic, social and cultural factors which direct individuals and determine their work. Indeed, 'any concept of "artistic creativity" which denies

⁴⁵ Wolff has since written a good deal on women and the arts. For example, see her essay 'Postmodern Theory and Feminist Art Practice' (1990: 187-208).

this is metaphysical and cannot be sustained' (Wolff 1981: 9). Here she is arguing the classic sociological case against what sociologists believe is the taken-for-granted view of artists. But Dornier (see above) objects that no contemporary visual art practitioners and critics he knows believe in divine inspiration, and that she has set up a 'straw-stuffed artist person' in order to knock it down and make her case appear stronger. Sociology students may feel on familiar ground but art personnel evidently don't.

Wolff's second topic is the social production of art. Just as there is no justification for allowing the artist a special status, she argues that neither can we condone philosophies which maintain the autonomy and universal quality of works of art. She applauds 'recent critics' like Clark, who emphasise that the relation of art to ideology must be a central part of any analysis of works of art. A focus on social divisions and their economic bases has rendered the origin and reception of art works more comprehensible. But the corollary of this emphasis, she notes, is a curious lack of interest in institutional factors involved in the production of art, and in the actual processes through which art – and its ideology – are constructed. She refers specifically to such factors as the development of technology, patronage, recruitment and training of artists, and wider economic influences like the impact by multi-national capital on production and its costs. Critical art writers may have ignored institutional influences on the production of art, but this is not true of 'empirical' sociologists, for example Becker (1982). However, Wolff has grave reservations about such empiricist studies for she argues that, unlike historical materialist analyses, their political stance is not made explicit; it is naturalised, suppressed.

Wolff's third chapter is called 'Art as Ideology'. Her definition of ideology is 'deliberately agnostic', as opposed to the Althusserian inflection that Hadjinicolaou accords the term. For her, ideology consists of the ideas and beliefs people have, which are systematically related to their actual and material conditions of existence. She rejects the simplistic notion that an art work's 'ideology' reflects the economic base of the society in which it is produced. She is also dissatisfied with Lukács' and Goldmann's more sophisticated versions of this idea: that there is a complex interrelationship between economic base and superstructure which includes the spheres of ideologies and aesthetics, but that, ultimately, the economic base determines the superstructure. This model is still uni-directional and therefore ultimately denies the possibility of any autonomy to the aesthetic sphere. Instead, and drawing on semiotic theory, Wolff focuses on the idea that aesthetic codes operate as mediating influences between ideology and particular works of art by interposing themselves as sets of rules and conventions which shape cultural products and which must be used by artists and cultural producers. So the novel or painting re-works current ideology in aesthetic form, in accordance with the rules and conventions of contemporary artistic production. This means that the ideological nature of art is mediated in two ways: through the material and social conditions in which works of art are

produced, and through the existing aesthetic codes and conventions in which they are constructed. Drawing on recent research in this area, Wolff argues that the relationship of art to ideology has proved to be very complex; and she criticises John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) for putting forth a crude and oversimplified argument to the effect that painting is not innocent of political and economic considerations. However, she notes that 'This book's intervention into the discipline of art history has proved to be extremely critical and influential, and it has stimulated a good deal of more detailed analysis' (Wolff 1981: 56). This raises an important point. One of the reasons why Berger's book has proved so influential is because his writing is very sensitive to the specific art works which he allows to *inform* and *enrich* his theoretical position. In other words, his analysis does not 'pin down' art theoretically, as Wolff's sometimes seems to do: instead, art work and theory are dialectically linked. His own experience as a producer of visual art – one might almost say his artist's eye – helps him to analyse Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, and to give a vivid, critical account of the ideological nature of this oil painting. As Panofsky remarked, quoting Flaubert: 'le bon Dieu est dans le détail' (Panofsky 1955: 1).

Pursuing further her discussion of the relationship of ideology to art, Wolff now focuses on the question of aesthetic autonomy and cultural politics. Although semiotic theory shows that art reworks ideology, using aesthetic codes and conventions, the question arises as to how these codes and conventions have come about. For example, are they independent of the economic base, and if so, how? She notes that in several ways the arts are susceptible to cross-cultural influences and not just to those from the economic sphere. And importantly, as we have seen, there has been a persistent belief on the part of certain artists, critics – and censors – in the transformative power of art. How does this belief in the autonomy of art square with the base/superstructure relationship, which is, after all, a crucial aspect of historical materialism? Wolff argues that if we regard the radical potential of art itself as being historically determined, then there is no contradiction between the view that art is socially and ideologically constructed, and the idea that artistic and cultural intervention in politics is a possibility. In order to theorise this position, she draws on Althusser's notion that the superstructure is relatively autonomous and has its own specific effectivity. Following Althusser, we can see that cultural production – as art on the level of ideology and of the superstructure – is relatively autonomous; that is, its codes and conventions can be more or less independent of economic determination, and in some cases can also be historically effective and a force for change. Wolff notes that certain cultural theorists, especially Adorno, Marcuse and Brecht, have emphasised that it is through the development of new artistic forms – rather than in the content of art works – that relative autonomy and thus the potential to transform society is attained. But she rightly emphasises that ultimately the debates about political content,

or radical form, or subversion of codes, all centre on the question of audiences. How will they be affected, and who are they? The techniques and styles of cultural intervention are therefore closely related to the context and conditions of its occurrence. And the possibility for the reception of radical culture is itself determined by the economic base, and by the extent and type of autonomy accorded to general and aesthetic ideology by the stage of development of that society. Wolff argues for a populist rather than an elitist view of arts' relationship to its audience, for: "It is "popular consciousness" which is essential to the stability of our present society, and which is also vital to any ideological change, from the recognition and rejection of sexism to the understanding of the class nature of society" (Wolff 1981: 92-3).

This leads her to a consideration of the *interpretations* that cultural consumers make, and to emphasise that they are actively involved in the construction of the work of art, in the sense of complementing and completing it. She stresses that we cannot think of the 'text' as having a fixed and objective meaning. But if this is so, and a 'correct', 'objective' interpretation is out of the question, is the author's interpretation in any way privileged? While deploring a psychologistic emphasis on the author as individual, and any project which attempts to recover a work's 'original meaning', Wolff argues that authorial meaning does indeed have some sort of priority over other readings because it historically informs the present reading of the text. However, she maintains that we need to go beyond interpretation; and that critical social science does this because it *explains* meanings and ideologies by examining them in the context of the specific historical socio-economic structure in which they occur. At the same time, she argues, critical sociology is reflexive, in the sense that it makes explicit its own assumptions and their social location, rather than hiding behind a false notion of value-freedom. As a result, there arises the possibility of a new kind of objectivity. I agree that the social analyst's standpoint should be reflexively sound and available for inspection, but whether historical materialism is superior to other perspectives in these respects is a matter for debate. However, Wolff is right to add that there is a general sense in which we can never get outside our own social position because we cannot get outside language. And she emphasises that there is always a dynamic interrelationship between writer, reader and text. But the polysemic nature of texts that this implies, along with the importance of the role of the reader, sits uneasily with the Marxist conception of the materialist basis of aesthetics, with its emphasis on production rather than reception. Wolff claims that the sociology of art cannot assume the priority of production over consumption, or vice versa: 'As Marx makes clear . . . production and consumption produce and determine each other in a number of ways' (Wolff 1981: 114-15).

Her final chapter, 'The Death of the Author' examines a series of theoretical positions in which the artist, or author, is increasingly marginalised.

Foucault, for example, shows that there is a problem in deciding exactly what, or who, an author is:

Just as we have ways of determining which of an author's productions to include in his or her oeuvre (drafts, marginalia, letters, or notes concerning domestic matters), so we also have ways of deciding which attributes or facts of the person's life to take as relevant to that person as author. In both cases, these practices are prescribed by the discourse of literary history. (Wolff 1981: 122)

Whilst Wolff cannot agree with Barthes that the author should be theorised out, she argues that the sociology of art must include a theory of the artist/subject where, *pace* Foucault, the subject is stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse. In order to construct and clarify such a theory of the subject, she calls upon the more general approaches of Althusser and Lacan. Althusser claims that the idea that man has a subjective essence is a bourgeois myth. He argues that even before its birth a child is always already a subject; it is appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected', once it has been conceived. But by what mechanism is Althusser's 'subject' constituted by ideology? Here Wolff invokes Lacan's development of psychoanalytic theory: subjects are constituted in ideology via the child's subjection to language. Furthermore, because psychoanalysis divides the conscious from the unconscious, it can indicate how the erratic and devious presence of the unconscious insists on heterogeneity and contradictions within the (speaking) subject itself. Despite dissatisfaction with the reified status that Lacan accords to language and sign systems (how were they themselves constituted?), Wolff argues that his work, together with that of Althusser, begins to indicate how a satisfactory theory of the subject might be built up. And she maintains that a theory of the subject as agent must be an integral aspect of any sociology, including a sociology of art. For here, the author as constituted in language, ideology and social relations retain a central relevance.

The Social Production of Art is in many ways a theoretical *tour de force*. But to those, like Peter Dormer, who inhabit the world of art rather than the world of sociology, the book has a conception of art which does not seem very relevant. This entails some serious problems, one of which is Wolff's treatment of aesthetics. In both her introduction and conclusion, she admits that she does not know the answer to the problem of 'beauty' or of 'artistic merit', but does not believe they are reducible to social and political factors – as certain critical sociologies would have us believe. However, she argues that 'greatness', when perceived sociologically, becomes more analysable: 'The accredited judges of art and arbiters of taste are themselves socially defined and constituted, and bring to bear in their judgements specific ideological and positional values' (Wolff 1981: 139). Although this is true,

I would contend that it is no longer possible to say in general terms that art is about 'beauty' or 'artistic merit'. Nor would I assume that the task of constructing a satisfactory critical account should be presumed to lie solely with verbalisers (e.g. sociologists). The work of the verbal theorists examined in this chapter amounts to a strong case for the idea that visual artists can themselves produce critical work. (And although the art work's potential to transform society may itself be historically situated, by the same token, so is Wolff's own account.) Visual art is not a static and cordoned-off entity whose artefacts await either 'appreciation' or critical analysis by verbalisers like sociologists. Some of the most interesting visual art work today constitutes an 'internal' critique of the concept of aesthetic beauty. It may, for example, satirise 'bourgeois' art styles by parodying them.⁴⁶ In so doing, such works critique capitalist aesthetics, and thereby contribute to a wider critique of bourgeois society. But they also demand to be judged *as* art works because in subverting bourgeois aesthetic codes, they are at the same time *using* and *developing* alternative codes. Critical art practice therefore forces a different kind of relationship between itself and verbally based disciplines such as sociology; one in which the two are, in a broad sense, working together on a common project of critical analysis. (And in this context, I would agree with Lyotard (1984: 30) that the verbal theorist has a lot to learn from the visual artist.) This means that it is rather misleading to say, as Wolff does in her conclusion, that the relative value of different works is determined within the discourse of art and aesthetics, and is not amenable to appropriation by a different discourse (sociology). The two spheres are not entirely separate: much critical art practice is now informed by sociology, among other disciplines, just as sociologists are themselves experimenting with 'new literary forms'.⁴⁷ The very term 'cultural production', which Wolff favours, helps us to conceptualise this merging process. And in any case, recent work in the sociology of scientific knowledge which shows that sociology – among other things – influences the content of scientific knowledge, makes it seem implausible that 'aesthetic value', whatever that is taken to mean, should still remain a special case.

Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prairie de la Représentation' by Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock (1982: 285–304) demonstrates the type of alternative art-historical approach demanded by Clark in 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation'. But whereas in the latter, Clark's criticism was levelled in a general sense at Courtauld-type 'bourgeois' art history, Orton and Pollock clearly state that *modernist* art history is the object of their critique. Les Données Bretonnantes, then, sets out to oppose a more precisely defined body of theory. However, in the introduction to *Modern Art and Modernism*:

A Critical Anthology (1982) – in which this article is published – its editors say:

One issue which does seem to distinguish Modernist theories from those critical texts and methods which we have grouped under the heading of 'Art and Society' is that the issue of the class character of culture is seen as crucial in the latter, while it is generally not raised at all in the former. (Frascina and Harrison 1982: 2)

This suggests, then, that in common to both 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation' and Les Données Bretonnantes' is a concern with the class character of culture, and an opposition to depoliticised art history.

In their article, Orton and Pollock claim that the modernist art history espoused by the art establishment in the early 1980s offered a developmental, unilinear progression, an illusion of continuity. The article is in part a scathing attack on this ideology and in part a demonstration of the authors' alternative approach to art history; and these two aspects are intertwined in a fairly aggressive and at times emotionally charged piece of scholarship. The authors are deeply critical of the establishment's continued use of the term 'Post-Impressionism' to characterise the work of the artists Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat and Cézanne. They note that the term was originally coined by Roger Fry in 1910, was revived by John Rewald in the 1950s, and is pressed into service again by Alan Bowness in his introductory catalogue essay for the exhibition of *Post-Impressionism: Cross-Currents in European Painting* (1979–80). They say that initially the term 'Post-Impressionism', as used in modernist art-historical discourse, indicated 'a reaction against that which preceded it, a reaction which instantly fragmented into various competing and disparate alternatives' (Orton and Pollock 1982: 285). The authors ask why the term 'Post-Impressionism' is still used in this sense when it is admitted by those who use it to be both vague and useless as a categorising device. They claim that deploying the term has enabled modernist art historians to evade the 'intricate network of visual and textual discourses and representations in specifiable and changing historical conditions' (Orton and Pollock, 1982: 287). Instead, a movement has been conjured up – an art-historically coherent entity – in which the works of these four artists are presented in terms of 'mythologies of magical creativity and mythic genius' (Orton and Pollock, 1982: 287).

In the first section of 'Les Données Bretonnantes', then, the authors accuse the Royal Academy exhibition organisers in general terms of grossly simplifying and distorting historical complexities in their treatment of the paintings of Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat and Cézanne. Orton and Pollock then seek to empirically reconstruct that complexity in order to justify those accusations. They take as their starting point a reference in the Royal Academy Exhibition Guide to what its organisers term 'an interlude in the exhibition' (Orton and Pollock 1982: 288) where paintings on the theme of 'the French province of Brittany' (Orton and Pollock 1982: 288) are shown. Orton and Pollock set

⁴⁶ For example, the work of Terry Atkinson shown in the exhibition, *Approaches to Realism* (1990).

⁴⁷ See Chapter 6.

themselves the task of revealing just how much this bland categorisation of the 'Brittany paintings' conceals. Following Clark, they begin by asking the kinds of questions entailed by a *social* history of art. What were the works made for? Whom were they made for? To do what kind of job? What do they mean? Do they achieve meaning? How were they understood by their producers, their first viewers, their first public? Asking these questions leads them to explore the ways in which the land-use and therefore the landscape of Brittany altered during the nineteenth century, in the context of the changing economic and social geography in France and beyond. They show how these changes affected the various perceptions of Brittany which were held by its natives, by city dwellers, by urban tourists, by each of the artists and in relation to their knowledge of each other's work, and by the audiences for whom the works were probably intended. In this way, they painstakingly reconstruct the subject matter of each of the paintings they discuss in the light of the complex set of alternative meanings which those works must have attracted when they were first shown. Like Clark, in his analysis of Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*, Orton and Pollock draw on a wide range of contemporary documents. And in a broader sense, they also work dialectically; alternating between a detailed empirical study of the local situation and an examination of the wider structural changes taking place at the time, allowing each of these dimensions to inform and modify the other with regard to their specific art historical problem. This method enables them to *demonstrate* that 'in the "Literature of Art" these complex social realities are absented, and modernist art history is built upon and structured by that evasion' (Orton and Pollock 1982: 302).

'Les Données Bretonnantes' is polemically charged. Its militaristic vocabulary and dense, concept-crowded prose themselves constitute an effective strategy in its authors' assault upon the simplifications and the distortions which modernist art history is shown to produce. Indeed, the belief that this tradition has promoted a whole series of devious intellectual exercises permeates the article.

An art movement or style which is associated with revolution by 'the people' against political authority holds a very particular kind of fascination for the critical art writer. 'Art and Politics in a Workers' State' by Paul Wood (1985: 105-24) is a review of Christina Lodder's (1983) *Russian Constructivism*; and Wood's evident fascination with the period of the Russian Revolution helps to fuel this powerful text. It is reminiscent, in some ways, of Clark's treatment of art and revolution in mid-nineteenth-century France; but 'Art and Politics in a Workers' State' has its own distinctive contribution to make to the growing corpus of critical art-historical texts. I shall show that Wood's general methodology brings 'the new art history' closer to the approach, if not the interests, of some of the empirical sociologists whose work is discussed in the second half of this book.

While applauding Lodder's very extensive researches, Wood argues that in one important sense her account does not differ from previous art historical accounts of Russian Constructivism, all of which were intent on prising Constructivist art away from its political context in order to annex it for American or Western modernism. He argues, like Wolff, that to treat the political as contingent upon a primary and inviolate 'art' will not do. For 'bricks cannot be made without straw and art cannot be made without social relations' (Wood 1985: 109). However, the broadly socio-philosophical metatheory underpinning Wolff's text does not allow her to extend her sociological critique into the realms of aesthetic experience and aesthetic evaluation. But Wood's text, which is underpinned by a Marxist *historical* approach, argues that the most satisfactory account of Russian Constructivism is achieved by drawing on the most recent and informed accounts of the economic and political context in which Constructivist art was produced and received; and this approach consequently may entail a critique of bourgeois aesthetics. However, for Wood such an approach does not deny a *relatively autonomous* status for art. He points out that the quality and meaning of an art object are not fixed by the political context in which it is produced: if a political regime fails, as happened in Russia in the early 1920s, for example, or if artists fail to understand the philosophy of the regime, it does not follow that the objects they produce are useless or meaningless. What is important is that they were made under the philosophical, social, political, economic demands of that regime. And since any given ideological position will generate projects ranging from the exceptional to the ordinary, discussions about form, and formal analysis, become crucial. What is important to the social art historian is that such discussions will have originally taken place within a cultural discourse in which the works refer to, or perhaps, by extension, 'represent' that discourse.

Like Orton and Pollock, Wood engages in the critical analysis of *texts*; in this case, previous art-historical accounts of Russian Constructivism. However, what is notable about his approach is that it shows that bourgeois accounts of Russian Constructivism, by the very way they are textually constructed, are ideologically permeated so that they tend to appear inevitable, natural, self-evidently right. As a result, they may avoid having to *argue* a case, and thus avoid having their arguments refuted. Sentence construction is vital, for key terms can be situated in verbal contexts that naturalise them and render them static. Choice of terminology is crucial: terms such as 'the masses', 'sensibility', 'regime', 'avant-garde', 'artists', even 'art historians' already have taken-for-granted meanings which can be utilised to reinforce a modernist account of Constructivism; while others - 'artistic climate', for example - have their own built-in suggestion of naturalism. Wood argues that the ultimate purpose of these textual strategies which service bourgeois art-historical accounts is to put Constructivism 'at point X on the curve of modern art' (Wood 1985: 106).

Empirical sociologists of scientific knowledge (SSK) analyse formal scientific research reports in order to reveal the textual devices which authors routinely use to convince readers of the objective status of their scientific 'findings'. But empirical sociology is *relativist*, in the sense that it seeks to show how textual devices shape the meaning of *any* scientific text.⁴⁸ Wood's approach is historical and critically selective; his target is more precise. He wants to show how the textual *strategies* (rather than devices) deployed in 'bourgeois' art-historical accounts generate an *incorrect* account of the art in question. He cites an article by John Bowlt (1984) which refers to a multiplicity of art styles in Russia during the 1920s. Wood argues that Bowlt's use of the plurality thesis (many art styles during one political regime) is a strategy which makes the relationship between politics and art seem contingent; and that this therefore has the effect of strengthening and generally reinforcing the bourgeois notion of artistic autonomy. It seems that for Wood there can be a *true* account (and certain histories of the period such as Nigel Harris's 'Mao and Marx' (1976) are accorded special status); whereas for empirical sociologists there is no true or right account, but rather a plurality of socially constructed accounts.

These two approaches are also concerned with the problem of whether a body of knowledge has an *internal*, immanent development or whether, on the other hand, it is inevitably influenced by and bound up with *external*, contingent factors. Wood is uneasy with Lodder's tendency to perpetuate the division between the internal development of Constructivism and the external (political and economic) influences on it; and he seeks to show that external influences have a fundamental effect on the social production of the art work itself. For, as he argues: 'The fact that social relations of production are transformed in Russia in the revolution means that "the meaning" of practices and products is changed too' (Wood 1985: 109). Nevertheless, he retains these two categories; for example, he does not criticise Lodder's remark that Rodchenko's work, by 1920, had produced *within the logic of formal investigation* an ideological standpoint which became central to utilitarian Constructivist work. Rather than reject a differentiation between internal and external determinants, Wood posits a dialectic between them: 'Politics doubtless cannot explain art, but then neither can art explain itself alone' (Wood 1985: 109). By so doing, that is by the use of a strategy of his own, he can retain the notion of 'internal development', and consequently the relative autonomy of art. SSKers, who seek to deny any special *epistemological* status for scientific knowledge, have abolished the distinction between internal development and external influence because case studies have convinced them that it is quite untenable.⁴⁹

However, their methodology also shares Wood's concern with 'the facts'. Wood applauds Lodder for unearthing so many new ones. The old-style

⁴⁸ See, for example, Gilbert and Mulkey (1984: 39–62 and 63–89).
⁴⁹ See Holton (1988), and Mulkey (op. cit.).

positivist social scientists collected facts; indeed, one reason why they never used the term ideology (which is centrally important to Wood) was because they argued that scientific objectivity obtained at all times and in all places: it was outside history. Ideology is still irrelevant to the post-positivist sociologist who continues to operate within an a-historical framework; yet s/he would now argue that the 'facts' themselves are socially contingent and impregnated with theory: at the very least, they have to be noticed from a mass of other 'facts', selected by the researcher as worthy of note, and then extracted and strung together by way of textual devices, or strategies. This problematises the empirical status of the fact. SSKers would not support Wood's apparent belief that facts have a clear existence apart from the context in which they are textually deployed.

The parallels and divergences between Wood's approach and that of SSKers are intriguing to map out. However, we should treat Wood's text first and foremost as a demonstration of the fact that built into bourgeois histories of Constructivist art are textual strategies which convey the impression that art is autonomous and that Constructivist art forms part of the immanent development of modernism. While his historical researches enable him to show that Constructivist art cannot be separated from the complex political and economic context in which it was produced, and that what previous accounts have left out demands investigation and explanation, his deconstructions of bourgeois accounts of Constructivism indicate that the latter have distorted the political context in which that art was produced. This suggests that one purpose of *all* historical accounts including Wood's – is to get 'the story' told in such a way that it serves specific ideological ends; and that this is routinely achieved by the use of textual strategies.

Wood's own text operates on several levels. First, it offers a general method for critical art historians: textual analysis will reveal the strategies by which previous bourgeois art-historical accounts have annexed art for an autonomous 'aesthetic' realm. A critical history of art, on the other hand, will be informed by critical histories of the political and economic contexts in which art is produced. It will show how these overlapping contexts determine what art is produced but do not dictate its value as art. On a second level Wood is sketching out the history of Russian Constructivism. He is trying to find out, in as much detail as possible, what the period of political and economic transition from capitalism to socialism in Russia in the 1920s was like – in all its muddle and complexity, experimentation and revision. He wants to examine the different and changing relationships of the individual Constructivist artists to the turmoil of events which took place during that period, and to understand how these affected their lives and work. But at the same time, Wood's own Marxist political stance shapes his task of critiquing bourgeois textual strategies, and directs the construction of the 'right' history of Russian Constructivism: 'It is not possible to understand what happened to these artists without understanding what happened to

their revolution; and neither a watered-down stalinism nor an academic liberalism provides the equipment for that' (Wood 1985: 118). He ends by noting that Rodchenko wrote home from Paris: 'One is either a capitalist or a communist. There is no third way' (Wood 1985: 122). Wood asserts – in 1985 – that this is still true. Now it is important, as Wolff has argued, that the analyst reveal his/her own political stance, for this provides the basis on which arguments – available for inspection by others – can be built. However, the demise of socialism in Eastern Europe makes a rethinking of this particular 'either/or' stance imperative.

In 'Art History and Difference', John Tagg (1986) casts a critical eye over the ways in which the new social art history has changed and developed during its first ten years. He observes that in 1974, Clark's was a central unified project. This intervention into the discipline of art history was informed by a conjunction of Marxism and art history. But Tagg argues that it has since become clear that a single methodological solution to all art history's ills does not follow from this. For class analysis has been developed to include (indeed in some cases it has been replaced by) analyses reflecting the interests of other oppressed groups of people, notably women. Opening up the field in this way has shown how complex it is, and in Tagg's opinion there is a danger of underestimating the problem of categorising different critical analyses together.

He also considers the object of study of the new art history. He comments that many social art historians are conservative in that they still tend to think that their object of study consists of discrete artefacts, whereas it is, in fact, the *relations* between particular cultural products, particular meanings and particular conditions of existence. It follows that we should not be asking what an object expresses: instead, we should be investigating its effect, in terms of these relations.

Tagg's main argument is that the new art history cannot really become effective as critique until it has wrought a radical change in its *own* relationship to the existing system of education, and to the wider political structure of British society. He observes that it has remained almost entirely within the university campus, and has made no effective links with other cultural bodies such as the National Trust, leisure services and school teaching, with the result that when financial cuts were made in the universities, new art historians were axed, leaving just fewer of them in place: a so-called radical movement has simply grafted itself on to an existing network, and when times are lean it pays the price. Tagg argues that if this movement is to be politically effective, it must know 'how it is touched by and touches in turn this dispersed structure of governance' (Tagg 1986: 171) so that it can effect new relations and thereby attempt to establish a firmer hold. Political critique does not end at the lecture-room door: the problem of where to practice is as pressing as the problem of methodology.

This historical survey of accounts which offer critical analyses in relation to visual art, and of 'conventional' art-historical approaches, constitutes the first part of the story of 'sociology and visual representation' from within the critical paradigm. The accounts I have discussed are all distinguished by the fact that analysis is *verbal*, and the object of that analysis, either directly or indirectly, is *visual art*. The critical accounts are *class* analyses. In Chapter 2, I show how photography (and critical accounts relating to it), semiotic theory and feminism have each played a part in altering the relationship between sociological understanding and visual representation.