

GRISELDA POLLOCK

57

ARTISTS MYTHOLOGIES AND MEDIA GENIUS, MADNESS AND ART HISTORY

IN THE GROWING marxist literature on the history of art considerable attention has been paid to the defaults of current art history: the failure of that discipline which purports to provide a *history* of art, to engage with, or even acknowledge, any but the most simplistic, recognisable notion of history let alone of production, class or ideology. Crucial questions have not been posed about *how* art history works to exclude from its fields of discourse history, class, ideology, to produce an ideological, 'pure' space for something called 'art', sealed off from and impenetrable to any attempt to locate art practice within a history of production and social relations. The absence of such work is critical on many accounts. It is a major impediment to radical practices within and on art history – for without an analysis of the ideologies of art history, radical studies of artistic production have no effect as an intervention. They can be represented by the art historical establishment as a marginal alternative dismissed as an unwarrantable extension of other academic disciplines, such as sociology, or as political ideologies, which are considered extrinsic to art history's 'proper' concerns. Above all, they are rejected as self-evidently anti-'art'. Without identifying the effects of art-historical ideologies as guarantees of dominant notions of art and the artist, the different kind of work on the history of this area of cultural production is prevented from having any effect on art history and other areas of cultural analysis and practice. That specific area of cultural production known as the history of art is marginalised. It is either dismissed by leftist populism as an elitist extension of

high culture or is simply unexamined through ignorance of either art history or its effects. Furthermore, when some attempts are made to reclaim art for history, they tend to occur within a liberal ideology of art as document of social history. This article is primarily an account of the dominance of the ideologies of art history across a wide and extended field of cultural discourse, sites of cultural consumption and areas of cultural practice. In this article I shall concentrate on the central constructions of art and the artist produced by art history and secured by its hegemonic role throughout this network. The prime area of attention is the figure of the artist. In 1949, the marxist art historian Frederick Antal wrote a paper 'Remarks on the Method of Art History'. He considered the historical development of the discipline and the various tendencies within different schools of art history which had emerged since the late nineteenth century. He concluded the survey, which is still pertinent, with the following observations:

Although lately it has become fashionable to introduce a few historical facts, these may only enter the art historical picture when confined to hackneyed political history, in a diluted form, which gives as little indication as possible of the existing structure of society and does not disturb the romantic twilight of the atmosphere. The last redoubt which will be held as long as possible is, of course, the most deep-rooted nineteenth century belief . . . of the incalculable nature of genius in art.¹

This core, against which all attempts to investigate modes and systems of representation and historical conditions of production (ie a social history of art) break, is signified by the most typical discursive forms of art historical research and writing – the monograph (a study of the artist's life and work), and the *catalogue raisonné* (the collection of the complete *oeuvre* of the artist whose coherence as an individual creator is produced by assembling all of his or (rarely) her work in an expressive totality). But there is more to this than collecting diverse fragments in order to unite them by a designated author, a category problematised and analysed by Foucault and taken up in recent debates in *Screen*.² The preoccupation with the individual artist is symptomatic of the work accomplished in art history – the production of an *artistic subject for works of art*. The subject constructed from the art work is then posited as the exclusive source of meaning – ie, of 'art', and the effect of this is to remove 'art' from historical or textual analysis by representing it solely as the 'expression' of the creative

1 F Antal, 'Remarks on the Method of Art History', reprinted in F Antal, *Essays in Romanticism and Classicism*, London 1966.

2 Foucault 'What is an author?' and S Clayton and J Curling 'On Authorship' *Screen* vol 20, no 1, 1979.

personality of the artist. Art is therefore neither public, social, nor a product of work. Art and the artist become reflexive, mystically bound into an unbreakable circuit which produces the artist as the subject of the art work and the art work as the means of contemplative access to that subject's 'transcendent' and creative subjectivity. The construction of an artistic subject for art is accomplished through current discursive structures – the *biographic*, which focuses exclusively on the individual, and the *narrative*, which produces coherent, linear, causal sequences through which an artistic subject is realised. I think it is useful to apply some of these categories of the analysis of narrative to the writing of art history, which not only narrates certain events but constitutes them as a narrative, subjected to a teleological impulse, while also enjoining 'narrativity' from the reader by the presentation of the events narrated in the coherence within the orders of temporality and causality. Art history can be therefore designated as a *literature* rather than a history or a historical discourse.

The material for my argument comes from a detailed case-study of a nineteenth century Dutch painter, Vincent Van Gogh (also cited as VG³), who occupies a special place in both art history and 'general knowledge'. VG is *the* well-known and popular artist. No other Western European painter is so universally familiar. More reproductions are sold of his work than any other artist of any country, school or period. Exhibitions of his work draw large crowds throughout the world from New York to Korea. He is the subject of innumerable books, films (like *Lust for Life* (1956)), novels, television documentaries and so on. A large museum is now dedicated to VG – the Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh in Amsterdam – and displays a permanent exhibition of his paintings and drawings while also selling books, postcards, calendars, slides and other memorabilia to tourists from all over the world. VG reproductions adorn school corridors and dentists' waiting rooms. An exhibition in 1979 at a museum in Groningen in the Netherlands documented a movement in the 1940s and 1950s for the improvement and modernisation of taste and decoration in working class homes. Reproductions of VG's paintings were conspicuous on the walls of these model homes.

This exceptional status and degree of popular knowledge can be relied upon as mediation between these publics and 'art' in general. For instance the title of a touring exhibition sent in 1979 by the Dutch Government to Japan and the Far East was packaged as *Dutch painting in the Century of Van Gogh*. On 14 November 1979,

3 I have called the artist either VG or Van Gogh, switching between the two, rather arbitrarily. I am aware, but as an attempt to distance myself from the artist, of whom it is the custom amongst VG scholars to speak in the familiar, Vincent. (He signed himself as Vincent, in part because his name is unpronounceable in any other language than Dutch, and in part in honour of the seventeenth century portraitist of the civic bourgeoisie with whom he intended to be compared, who also used only his forename, Rembrandt van Rijn.) In my article paintings are referred to with their *F* numbers — these are for easy reference in the *JB de La Faille catalogue raisonné* (Amsterdam 1970). Letters are prefixed by *LT* (ie letter to Theo) or *W* (ie letter to Wilhemina) as numbered in the *Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, New York, 1959, originally written in Dutch or French.

a large and expensive exhibition of European painting from 1880-1905 entitled *Post-Impressionism* opened at the Royal Academy in London. One example of attendant publicity for this show was the cover of the *Observer* Colour Supplement which reproduced a portrait by Van Gogh and was captioned:

The Post Impressionists – William Feaver on a major new show of paintings by Van Gogh and other artists.

Post-Impressionism, the designation of a period of art practice, is personalised and individualised as a group of artists, the Post-Impressionists. But it was the name Van Gogh, the artist represented by a characteristically accessible and humanist portrait, that was used as the publicity draw. This 'popularity', this status evidenced by the use of 'Van Gogh' as a signifier of artist, as a sign in an advertisement for an art exhibition, as the mediator between general publics and 'other artists', and indeed other art, present in this variety of sites and texts, indicates that 'Van Gogh' has become a paradigm of the 'modern artist'.

Closer reading of the variety of texts through which this figure 'Van Gogh' is constructed produces a more complex signification. Around his life and work what appears to be a particular form of discourse has developed – a special way of discussing the artist and his works which is presented as if it were only a response to, a reflection of, his exceptional special individuality, his genius. By investigating the constitution of this special discourse in art historical literature, and in many other texts which address 'Van Gogh', it is possible to show the contrary. These modes which offer themselves as appropriate and singular approaches to a discrete individual are, in effect, the paradigmatic modes of art history's construction of the artistic subject, and the category of art.

Although this argument is based in part on moving out of the area of art historical discourse and tracing 'Van Gogh' across a number of texts and representations, the important effect of this mapping out of the readings of VG is that it returns us to art history, to its curatorial role in culture, producing and ensuring particular constructions of art and definitions of the artist.

This can best be examined by taking two examples from art historical texts in which two authors who occupy respected and influential positions within art history have addressed the issue of VG's popular status and appeal, Novotny and Hammacher. In 1953 the Viennese art-historian, Fritz Novotny, published a study on 'The Popularity of Van Gogh'⁴ in which he attempted to refute the

4 F Novotny 'Die Popularität van Goghs' *Alte und Neue Kunst* vol 2 no 2 1953, translated and reprinted in B Welsh — Ovcharov *Van Gogh in Perspective*, New Jersey, 1974. In future references to Novotny it is this translation and edition I shall cite.



idea that Van Gogh's renown was falsely based on a fascination with his unhappy life. Novotny's article opens by quoting a 1947 radio broadcast in which it was argued that VG's popularity was spurious. It resulted from the over-exploitation of the human interest of his biography, the dramatic events of his life, his suicide, 'sentimental factors' and 'curiosity about his abnormalities'. However, as I shall show, the apparent distance between the popularising and the art historical correctives which follow is little more than appearance. What is at stake is power, control

over what is said and how it is said in order to retrieve VG from popular humanism – ‘he was a bit odd but really he suffered just like the rest of us’ and to relocate him in that special sphere, art, the domain of art history.

In Novotny’s opinion, Van Gogh’s popularity was genuinely ‘a quite extraordinary phenomenon – great art becomes popular in the true sense’. For Novotny it was VG’s greatness as an artist and the accessibility of his art that produced VG’s widespread appeal. Novotny discounted his life or personality as pertinent to an understanding of VG’s art. He sought to explain why ‘Van Gogh’s art has proven approachable for an astonishingly great number of people’. A number of problems inherent in Novotny’s formulations are immediately apparent – his categories of great art and popular appeal, his notion of an absolute separation between the personality of the man and the character of the artist, his constant surprise that great art should attract a great number of people, as if there were no interests and institutions at work in the manufacture of the books, the organisation of the ‘exhibitions, the production of broadcasts, and so on.

However, Novotny’s argument is not as radical a departure from the position he is criticising as it might at first appear. In the place of the psychobiographical overemphasis on Van Gogh’s life and personal misfortunes, he offers a reading of the paintings that is in fact profoundly psychobiographical. I use the term psychobiographical to characterise the psychologistic emphases which occur in both art historical and related literature on VG. These studies are not merely narrations of the events of VG’s life and work but psychological interpretations whose main drive is to discover the subjective ‘truth of the artist’.

Novotny constructs from the careful analysis of VG’s paintings and drawings an artistic subject, the personality of the painter. The distinction I perceive between Novotny and those he is criticising is one between the subjectivity of an individual expressing itself in painting and the subjectivity of a painter revealed through the paintings. The distinction may seem slight but the emphasis is crucial because what is at issue is the notion of an unhappy man who paints and, on the other hand, an artist into whose ‘artistness’ all other facets and circumstances of his living are subsumed. Novotny wrote in order to challenge the tendency to mistake Van Gogh’s *personal* biography for an artistic biography. And it is the production of that exclusively artistic subject that is the main project of art historical practice.

In place of, for example, Irving Stone's biography of a man who was an artist, *Lust for Life* (London 1935), the art historian produces the monograph which, while, in effect, not more than an *illustrated* biography, traces the life of a special kind of person, the artist, from life to death, within the narrow limits of only that which serves to render all that is narrated as signifiers of artistness. The monograph is paralleled by the *catalogue raisonné*, – the chronological ordering of the products of this 'artistness' through which can be reconstructed the linear development of an artistic biography. The *catalogue raisonné* also performs an economic function, for it is the main means by which art history services the art market through authentication, dating, and providing provenances ('pedigrees' of the painting's previous owners back to the moment it left the artist's workshop or studio), back to its creative origin. The economic value of a painting depends also on the status of its author. A painting by Rembrandt is more valuable than a work by a lesser known contemporary, primarily because a 'Rembrandt' has a documented place within an *oeuvre*, an *oeuvre* which has a subject – the 'Rembrandt' produced within the overlapping discourses of monograph and catalogue. It is easy to trace the correlation between the 'rediscovery' of a hitherto unknown artist, the production of a catalogue of all the known works by that artist, the publication of a monographic study and the rise and stabilisation of high prices for works by that artist on the art market.

The first *catalogue raisonné* of the work of VG was published in the 1920s, revised in the 1930s and re-edited and republished in a lavishly illustrated form in 1970. The introductory essay, by A M Hammacher, entitled *Van Gogh and the Words*, surveyed the main tendencies of Van Gogh literature since his death in 1890 to 1970. Hammacher also addressed the popular status of VG and asked:

Do people go in crowds to queue at exhibitions out of love of the myth of painting and sculpture, out of love for a style, or is it, where Van Gogh is concerned, a popularity that is aroused via the intermediary of Lust for Life? Are the words, Vincent's and other men's words, unavoidable on the way to the paintings.⁵

Such a passage raises further questions – it implies the possibility of a 'pure' response to and an unmediated experience of VG's paintings. Words, whether VG's or others, are seen as obstacles on the way to the paintings. Hammacher's text typifies

5 A Hammacher 'Van Gogh and the Words' in JB de La Faille and editors, *The Works of Vincent van Gogh – His Paintings and Drawings* (henceforward called the *Complete Works*), Amsterdam 1970.

an assumption which one encounters amongst artists, art students, art historians and in texts which pose themselves as 'radical' alternatives. Paintings are proffered as the repository of VG's meanings of and for himself, and the viewer is positioned as witness to him and his meanings, through direct visual or perceptual 'experience'.

In a subsequent passage, Hammacher expresses his pleasure at the spectacle of countless Japanese from the Emperor to shoeshine boys filing happily through the 1958 VG exhibition in Tokyo concluding 'One may safely forget the art slogans of "democracy" and "socialisation" [mis-translation for socialism I presume]' The genuine 'popularity' of VG is presented as having trans-class, trans-cultural accessibility. Bourgeois humanism – the category of man as a universal figure above and outside of class relations – is reproduced within the notion of art as the embodiment of an artistic subject which is available to direct perception. The multiplicity of readings of VG's paintings from different class and cultural positions are subsumed into a notion of his 'accessibility' sustained by the construction of art as a visual experience of a self exposed in paint on canvas.

It is here that we encounter the manoeuvres of art historical writing to secure the dominance of its discourses, its frames of reference, over all other words on art. The discipline lives by producing and selling its words – a *literature*; it disdains and seeks to displace all non-art-historically formulated words – like, for instance, Stone's fictional biography of VG. The regulated, institutionally trained, professional literature of art history uses its own words to produce a notion of art as ineffable, pristine, discrete – a non-verbal experience rooted in the difference of the artist, who is simultaneously distinct from other men and yet the epitome of universal man. It thus simultaneously separates art from social history and protects its own position as the privileged producer of a 'literature of art'.

If VG is produced as the paradigm of the artist, that place is supported by the assimilation of VG to another historical representation, the correspondence of 'madness' and 'art' – the myth of the mad genius. All aspects of VG's life story and the stylistic features of the work culminating in VG's self-mutilation and suicide has provided material to be reworked into a complex but familiar image of the madness of the artist – 'sensitive, tormented, yet incredibly brilliant' as an advertisement for a limited edition of gold medals struck with reproductions of VG's most famous paintings in a *Sunday Times* Colour Supplement aptly restated it.

The question presents itself: Why do we need VG as *mad genius*? This can best be considered by recognising that the notions of madness and art which produce the category 'mad genius' have little to do with clinical pathology or definitions of sanity, but circle around categories of difference, otherness, excess. They concern those special and distinct modes of being which set the artist ineffably apart. Some have argued that the madness attributed to the artist is a means of displacing the threat of rupture of discourse produced by artistic practices. I find this suspiciously romantic: it is already part of the myth of mad genius. For the present I want to suggest that the discourse on madness and art operates to sever art and artist from history and to render both unavailable to those without the specialised knowledge of its processes which art history claims for itself. The art historian, the trained professional, stands as the necessary mediator of art to the public: art historical words function as exegesis or translation; historical analysis is replaced by what Macherey designated as 'interpretative criticism'. This practice attempts to dismantle the art work or text to liberate and extract an immanent but singular meaning.

*Translation and reduction: focusing the apparent diversity of the work in a single signification. And: Thus we have posited the principles of an immanent criticism: the work encloses a meaning which must be released; the letter of the work is a mask, eloquent and deceptive which this meaning bears; a knowledge of the work is an ascent to this central unique meaning.*⁶

In terms of art history and tendencies to such interpretative criticism, the meaning extracted from an artistic text is that which produces as meaning an authorial subjectivity, the artist. The implication of genius and madness serves to secure that subjectivity as the revealed meaning of the work of art.

Art historical practice takes place within specific but diversified conditions of production – both the production of knowledge of definition for art, and the production of books and related commodities that purvey that knowledge. Van Gogh occupies a particular place in art publishing, not only in terms of large, expensive and weighty tomes, like the three volumes of his letters (often presented as diaries of an autobiography) translated and published in numerous languages, the *catalogue raisonné*, and the volumes of redatings of the letters and redating of the paintings with letter extracts, most of which cost in the region of £40-£50.

6 P Macherey. *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966). English translation, 1978.

All of these construct a linear, sequential narrative of VG's journey to death. The largest section of VG publications are those monographic studies simply entitled *Van Gogh*, with a portrait or self-portrait on the cover. These, with the proliferating essays of psychologistic and psycho-symbolic interpretations, far outnumber the relatively scarce studies of aspects of an artistic practice.

There are a number of historical factors that have made VG available for this appropriation, commencing with the reception and critical assessment of his work by Symbolist and Expressionist critics and artists, who first produced a 'Van Gogh' which would be a potential candidate for a place in art history. For instance, in Germany, the Expressionist movement took up the figure of VG not so much as an artistic resource, but as an artistic subject. He figured as hero in a novel like Meier Graefe's *Roman eines Göttsuchers* (1932) – and was subjected by authors and playwrights to dramatic characterisation in accordance with their own ideological and aesthetic positions. Carl Sternheim, for instance, published a short story *Gauguin and Van Gogh* in 1924 to argue a position current in German Expressionism. But even in one of the very first critical essays in France on VG, published before his death in January 1890 by a Symbolist critic, Albert Aurier, one finds the shape of his now established historical *persona* critically prefigured. The article was influentially entitled: *Les Isolés – Vincent Van Gogh* and was published in the first issue of *Mercure de France* in 1890.

It is permissible to make certain deductions from his works about Vincent Van Gogh, about his temperament as a man, or rather as an artist – a deduction which I could corroborate from biographical details if I wanted. What characterises his whole work is excess, of force, excess of nervous energy, of violence in expression. In his categorical affirmation of the character of things, in his often fearless simplifications of forms, in his insolence in challenging the sun head-on, in the vehement expression of his drawings and of his colour, even to the least particulars of his technique, he reveals himself as powerful, a male, a daredevil, frequently brutal and sometimes ingenuously delicate. And even more, one can guess from the almost orgiastic expressiveness of everything he has painted, here is a man of exaltation, an enemy of bourgeois sobriety and minutiae, a sort of drunken giant, a terrible and maddened genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, always rising to a level that comes close to pathological states.

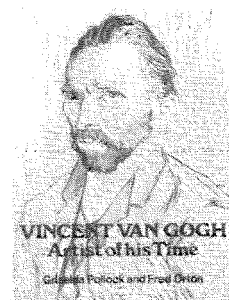
[my emphasis]

It is possible to make a checklist from Aurier's article of all the elements of the traditional myth of artist as mad genius. Aside from his own use of the term, there is 'excess', 'mania' and 'pathology'. These are coupled with the intention to find a biography and read the personality of this artistic subject off from the paintings in which it is so transparently expressed. Such a combination of myth and psychobiography not only informs later art historical readings but finds its fullest realisation within what Hammacher calls *la vie romancée* – the fictional biography or the romanticised life – terms which distinguish the popular fiction from art historical narrative.

Attempts to dislodge these readings of VG as the paradigmatic figure of artist and mad genius encounter not only traditions of interpretation, lodged within the discursive practices of art history, but the wide dispersion of such myths, the whole ideological project typified by the construct VG throughout all these facets of production of a literature of art. A further constraint is publishing practice.

In 1978 a colleague, Fred Orton, and I were approached by Phaidon Press to write a short book on Van Gogh for their series on major artists and important movements. The initial title suggested by the publishers was *Van Gogh: The Tortured Sun*; our alternative was rather more prosaic: *Rooted in the Soil – A Van Gogh Primer*. We suggested that the cover illustration should bespeak the book's intention to mark a different reading of VG which was to examine more closely the major concerns of the work and reassess its intervention in the history of modern art. Yet the book was published (in September 1978) with a cover showing a *Self Portrait* and the title *Vincent Van Gogh, Artist of his Time*. The latter represented a major concession to our 'novel' suggestion that a Van Gogh had lived and worked in a particular historical period and that this intriguing fact in some way pertained to our reading of his work. The decisions at Phaidon were not, we discovered, *editorial*. In order to sell yet another book on Van Gogh, the jacket and title had to conform to a brand identity and signify 'Van Gogh' – to present a recognisable and saleable commodity.

The opening words of our text made clear that we had laid aside biographic interest and considered his epileptic condition as irrelevant to the study of the work. However, we were sent a jacket blurb to proof which essentially said that 'everyone knows that Van Gogh went mad and killed himself but here is a new



interpretation of the artist's *work*'. In so far as we intended to provide an historical study of paintings and drawings in the form of a pictorial essay, a special distinction was drawn for our book by the publishers between 'the man' and his 'art'. But his familiar identity as the mad genius was placed as a kind of frame within which our alternative approach could be situated and contained.

One of the most prestigious academic journals in art history is the *Burlington Magazine* and its section for reviews of current publications is significantly entitled 'The Literature of Art'. There our book was reviewed in July 1979. The fact that we had attempted to locate VG within the historical moment 'of his time' presented considerable problems for the reviewer and necessitated a careful refutation:

Another recurrent theme in the essay is the notion that Vincent felt the 'need to assert a specific and increasingly anachronistic' (here a certain tendentiousness of thinking perhaps creeps in) 'view of the necessary relations between men and the earth'. This is seen as what above all else marks the 'underlying thematic unity' of his whole career whether directly expressed as in the Potato Eaters or dialectically as in the British Museum's F 1424 with its 'old' horse drawn buggy and its little railway train. It would be unjust and unfair to complain unduly of what may be felt to be a somewhat Procrustean application of social-historical conceptualisations. The authors are able to adduce contemporary documentation: and have not the space to develop their argument, but the ex post facto is here hovering in the wings.

Such a passage assumes once again that any historicising or socialising analysis is extrinsic (what writing of history isn't *ex post facto*?) to the self-evident integrity of art works. We are told that VG's practice is not there to be studied as cultural production within historical conditions. However, the problem is that that self-evidence, that givenness, the discrete integrity of art and artist, has, of course, to be produced, secured, and protected from those who argue for a history of artistic production, for art history as part of other histories, of the history of social relations and ideological representations.

Art history has to be recognised as a complex and paradoxical practice in which art is differentiated from all other areas of knowledge, secured by the positing of a centre, the artist as the cause of all art. Art is distanced from history – produced as an autonomous, transcendental condition of human subjectivity and

creativity. And, as importantly, art history is differentiated from all other discourses which attempt to reclaim art from that space and reconstitute it as a historically determined practice while deconstructing the centrality of the artist as subject of and for the work of art. Art history lays claim to this terrain through particular operations. In the second section of this article I want to examine in detail a variety of art historical and non-art historical areas, to trace the dispersion of its ideologies in a network of overlapping discourses which offer guarantees to art history.

II Van Gogh and the Pathological Syndrome

On July 29 1890 a Dutch painter named Vincent Van Gogh died from self-inflicted gunshot wounds. This event has determined the constructions of the artistic subject 'Van Gogh'. It is both the climax to and necessary closure of the narratives from which VG is produced. The suicide is taken to be an artificially significant event in terms of the artist who was both its agent and of whom it provides the explanation.

For some two or three years before July 1890 the Dutch painter is known to have suffered periodic fits during one of which he mutilated a small section of the lobe of his right ear. Speculations have been numerous on the nature and cause of these fits and associated actions. Because the painter spent a year in a mental asylum (May 1889-90) it has been readily assumed that VG was mentally ill. But in so far as the subject of this unspecified mental illness has been positioned as an artist, this madness, whether labelled schizophrenia, manic-depression or epilepsy, has been accommodated to and offered as support for a pre-existing artistic myth, that of mad genius.

In their book on the changing notions of the artist in European history since the sixteenth century, *Born Under Saturn* (Oxford 1963) R and M Wittkower provide a brief history of this category – including the Platonic idea of 'mania' – of artists as subject to an inspired and socially dangerous form of excessive behaviour, an unreasonable but creative madness which is synonymous with enthusiasm; and visionariness. They cite Seneca: 'There has never been great talent without a touch of madness' and Schopenhauer: 'Genius is nearer to madness than average intelligence'. But significantly, by the late nineteenth century, morbidity and death are added to the beliefs about the abnormal condition of great art, as in, for instance, an article in the *Popular Science Monthly* in 1893 entitled 'Genius and Suicide' in which we find 'that evidence

is not lacking that genius is a mortal condition'. The main elements of this category of artist to whom is ascribed mania, inspiration, insanity or creatively disordered intelligence, eccentricity or dangerous and abnormal behaviour, found new support in the modern period from the emergent discourses of psychiatry. But at the same time, in so far as there was already a category of madness associated with creativity, psychiatry could claim artists as subjects for their discourses. In the overlap of psychologies of creativity and art history the myth of the mad genius was reconstituted. The condition of art as akin to madness, as a socially disruptive force or a personally dangerous one is remade as *the* condition of the artist's creativity. The artistic *persona* takes precedence over either the private or the social *persona*. So in the case of VG, unspecified illness becomes doubly secured as artistic madness. It is treated not only as a facet of his artistness but a *confirmation of it*. Moreover the art, which of course arises from within this 'mad' artistic subject is examined not only for confirming signs of madness as a general condition of being an artist, but the particular styles and meanings of the art are seen to result exclusively from the maddened state of the producer. In some interpretations, this madness is presumed to be the cause of his creativity. So for instance, the sudden change to brilliant colour which occurred in his works after 1888, coincident with the first documented fits, is explained by the inspiring effect of 'descent' into madness.

A substantial area of the VG literature addresses VG from a psychiatric 'perspective' – what Hammacher labelled the 'pathological syndrome'. One of the first examples of this was published in 1922 by philosopher and psychiatrist, Karl Jaspers.⁷ In the next decades books and articles proliferated. There are two main tendencies in the literature on the pathological syndrome. The first is an attempt to diagnose VG's mental illness by conflating periodic fits with his uninterrupted activity as a painter to secure the image of the mad genius, and the second reveals a desire to correlate the interpretation of his art with a specific psychosis.

Jaspers deduced that VG was schizophrenic. His diagnosis was based in part on the limited number of paintings he had seen but predominantly on translations of VG's letters. In order to confirm his diagnosis Jaspers called for the preparation of a comprehensive *catalogue raisonné* of the paintings and drawings of VG. He would then have a sound chronological framework which would enable him to chart the development of the psychosis. In the absence of such a tool, Jaspers nonetheless attempted to divide Van Gogh's

7 K Jaspers *Strindberg and van Gogh*, Leipzig 1922. By 1931 the proliferation of conflicting interpretations enable A Hutter to publish an article 'De Vijf Diagnoses van de Ziekte van van Gogh' (The five Diagnoses of the illness of van Gogh) *Nederlandsche Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, 14th February 1931.

works into stylistic periods, to analyse the characteristics of each stage of his production, and to establish the relationship between stylistic changes and the symptoms of schizophrenia.

The last months of Van Gogh's life were spent in a northern French village, Auvers, where his palette softened, and the paintings evidence a greater dependence on tonality, as opposed to colour, and new methods of drawing in colour emerged. However, from Jaspers' conviction that VG was suffering a deteriorating psychotic condition these changes were interpreted as impoverished, unsure and monotonous. Having established the overall pattern of the years 1888-90 within which he detected the progressive signs of schizophrenia, Jaspers concluded his study with a significant passage which reveals the interaction of early twentieth century analyses of schizophrenia with traditional ideas, generalised and mythic, about the creative relationship of madness and genius:

In fact, through its release of certain forces, the mental sickness allowed for the onset of a period of productivity which previously had been precluded. The sickness freed him from certain inhibitions, the unconscious began to play a greater role and the constrictions of civilisation were cast aside. From this source as well, there developed certain similarities with dream experiences, with myths, and with the spiritual life of children . . . It is not only through this form of stimulation that an enhanced productivity is achieved, which also leads to the discovery of new means which are then added to the general artistic nomenclature, but also new powers are aroused. Such powers are, in themselves, intellectually viewed neither healthy nor sick, but they themselves flourish on the bedrock of sickness.

Jaspers links sickness with increased productivity, liberation, and imagination. Psychosis is connected with a particular kind of creativity – creativity perceived as a departure from the adult conscious norm, from civilised restraint, into the liberation of the unconscious – paralleling the child, the dream, the myth. It is both asocial and primitive.

In 1932 Françoise Minkowska disputed Jaspers' diagnosis. Following the opinions of his doctors in the South of France, Peyron and Rey, she concluded that VG suffered from epilepsy. Her analysis is, however, based more directly on his paintings (VG's doctors of course studied the patient who presented himself for treatment and whom they forbade, for the most part, to paint

8 F Minkowska 'Van Gogh: Les Relations entre Sa Vie, Sa Maladie et Son Oeuvre' *L'Evolution Psychiatrique* no 3, 1953. (Minkowska extended her analyses in *Van Gogh, Sa Vie, Sa Maladie et Son Oeuvre* Paris 1963.)

during the time he spent under their care). Teleological inevitability marks Minkowska's readings and so in the search for evidence to support her diagnosis she looked to the pattern of his work, concluding thus her discussion of what she took to be his last painting:

Without doubt, in this his final work, the artist had given striking symbolic expression to opposing, inner forces. In our own prosaic manner we can say that these two movements, one of elevation and one of fall, form the structural basis of the epileptic manifestations, just as the two polarities form the base of the epileptoid condition.⁸

In her formal analysis of the paintings she perceives signs which parallel the epileptic condition she assigns to the artist. In opposition to Jaspers, Minkowska does not seek to establish periodisation and stylistic change. Epilepsy is not progressive or deteriorating. Instead she tries to isolate a psychotic condition in the structural and compositional elements of one and all of his paintings. However, both these authors concur more than they differ. Minkowska and Jaspers' choice of diagnosis is determined on the basis of presumed characteristics of VG's art. Further, the psychiatric readings, however different in conclusion, both echo typical art historical procedures – periodisation, chronology, or formalist analysis. They both attempt to establish parallels between the nature of art and the condition of psychosis. Finally both accept that art and psychosis are not only compatible but reflexive – the latter being responsible for the emergence of a distinctive and individual artistic character – VG's style.

This process by which all potentially disparate or conflicting elements of the life and work of VG are unified and rendered coherent is exemplified in another indicative passage from Minkowska:

The life, the psychosis, the oeuvre of Van Gogh form an indivisible unity. Thus, I am unable to speak of a basic stylistic change. In this instance psychosis has not destroyed or modified anything profoundly. In its liberating role, it adds a new note by embodying at its summit the inner tragedy of the artist. [my emphasis]

The specific identity of and categorical distinctions between the social and historical circumstance of an individual's life (Life), the production and meanings of objects, paintings and drawings

(*oeuvre*), the intrusive, disruptive and non-productive force of mental illness (psychosis) are thus effaced. Like Jaspers, Minkowska sees VG's condition as liberating and productive, but she adds a new effect – revelation. The unity of life and work that is asserted and the positive effect attributed to the psychosis on that life and work serve a common function to give access to the inner tragedy of the artist, and thus to make visible the organising subjectivity of the artist.

Such texts can both be criticised for the inadequacy and lack of rigour in diagnoses as well as for the invocation of mythic notions about the artist. But what is most striking and relevant for my purposes is the correspondence between the psychiatric analysis of an artist and the typical modes of art history. The premises may differ but the effects are not dissimilar – a chronological and in some cases teleological approach, the reading of paintings for the signs of the artist, the production of the artistic subject from the traces of his work, the unification of all experiences and products of an historical individual, Van Gogh, as the seamless unity of the artist.

An accurate diagnosis of the condition from which the Dutch painter suffered is necessary, not because I am suggesting that there is a real and different VG to be reclaimed from the myth, nor because I am simply suggesting that these authors did not do their research properly, but for the reason that on the terrain of biography or, more correctly, psychobiography, within which that Van Gogh is constituted, historical material can be adduced which categorically disallows the kind of totalisation that is the project and effect of this literature.

The doctors Rey and Peyron, first in the hospital at Arles and later in the clinic at St Rémy, consistently believed that Van Gogh was an epileptic.⁹ In letters to his family and particularly his brother Theo, Van Gogh exhibited considerable interest in this condition. These texts, as documents, were available to earlier writers and their words are decisive. According to them the attacks were clearly terrifying and disturbing experiences. But in a letter from the asylum of 1889 (LT 592) Van Gogh wrote that the doctors had been reassuring. Not only did others experience the hallucinations and hearing of voices but had been known to injure themselves in a similar manner; one epileptic had also attacked his own ear. Some months later Van Gogh wrote:

9 See letter to his sister Wilhemina (W 4) 1889 'The physician here has been to Paris and went to see Theo. He told him that he did not consider me a lunatic, but that the crises that I have are of an epileptic nature'

- 10 Margaret Ochocki
Van Gogh a
Psychological
Study B.A. Thesis
Sunderland
Polytechnic 1979
chapter 2, Epilepsy
pp 14-20. See also
D Scott *About
Epilepsy* (1969)
B Bihari 'Marshall
McCluhan
and the
Behavioral
Sciences' *Art
Language* vol 1 no
3, 1970, p 15 ff.

- 11 In W 11, Van Gogh
told his sister that
he had had four
crises and three
fainting fits, some
of which can be
dated by other
evidence to
December 1888,
February 1889,
July 1889, January
1890 and 24th
February 1890. It
is also possible
that he had either
a crisis or a
breakdown of
some sort in Paris
in the late summer
of 1887.

I think Dr Peyron is right when he says that I am not strictly mad for my mind is absolutely normal in the intervals, even more so than before. But during the attacks it is terrible, then I lose consciousness of everything. But that spurs me on to work and to seriousness, like a miner who is always in danger and makes haste in what he does. (LT 610, October 1889).

Recent research has supported this contemporary diagnosis, which has always been recognised by those not involved directly in the VG industry. However, two forms of epilepsy have been suggested: some believe that Van Gogh suffered from what is known as psycho-motor epilepsy, probably caused by slight brain damage at birth; a recent essay by Margaret Ochocki¹⁰ convincingly argued that VG may have developed symptomatic epilepsy through his consumption of absinthe, which VG first encountered when he moved to Paris in 1886. He was known to take it in vast quantities as a substitute for food during his time in Arles (1888-9). In both psycho-motor and symptomatic epilepsy the effects are similar, that is to say, periodic and intense attacks of a few minutes' duration, preceded by seconds or minutes during which perceptions and sensations may undergo a change, succeeded by longer periods of lethargy and exhaustion lasting perhaps a month at the most and followed by complete recovery. Between 1887 and 1890 Van Gogh suffered approximately seven fits, some of which were experienced only as spells of faintness.¹¹ Their incidence is therefore confined to a brief period in his mid-thirties. They were of limited duration and occurred in some cases only on visits from the asylum to Arles where VG may well have drunk absinthe. It is also worth noting, as Ochocki does, that the common treatment in the late nineteenth century was the prescription of bromide, itself now known to be a possible inciter of epileptic attacks. Bromide can accumulate in the body and contribute to a later development of 'nervous disorders' after the treatment had ceased.

Such knowledge of the poisonous nature of absinthe or the deleterious effects of bromide, which we now have, was not current in the nineteenth century although the connection between alcohol and epilepsy is hinted at in one of VG's letters (LT 585). The ways in which VG and his doctors could make sense of or represent this condition were therefore historically specific and the term that recurs is that of a 'nervous condition'. VG himself was positioned within historical practices and discourses which proposed some correspondences between abnormal conditions, excess and the practice of art, or the life of an artist. It is not surprising

that Van Gogh should have taken note of an article in *Le Figaro* about another artist who suffered from a 'nervous condition' which is now known to have been psycho-motor epilepsy, namely the Russian author, Dostoyevsky. In a novel, *The Idiot* (1868) Dostoyevsky offered a representation of the condition of psycho-motor epilepsy through the character of Prince Mishkin. At one point in the novel this character is given an interior monologue in which he tries to describe the state that occurred just prior to the onset of an epileptic fit. It is worth quoting from:

He was thinking, incidentally, that there was a moment or two in his epileptic conditions almost before the fit itself . . . when suddenly amid the sadness, the spiritual darkness and depression, his brain seemed to catch fire at brief moments, and with an extraordinary momentum his vital forces were strained to the utmost all at once. His sensation of being alive and his awareness increased tenfold at those moments which flashed by like lightning . . . All his agitation, all his doubts and worries seemed composed in a twinkling, culminating in a great calm, full of serene and harmonious joy and hope, full of understanding and the knowledge of the final cause . . . for it was not abnormal and fantastic visions he saw at that moment, as under the influence of hashish, opium or spirits, which debased the reason and distorted the mind. He could reason sanely about it when the attack was over and he was well again. Those moments were merely an intense heightening of awareness – if this condition had to be expressed in a word – of awareness and at the same time of the most direct sensation of one's own existence to the most intense degree.

Such a representation does not offer us a truth about epilepsy, but a way of reading it which points to a very different set of possibilities with regard to VG and the epileptic condition. It is absolutely impossible to determine what use VG may have made of the visions he may have had preceding the onset of one of the few fits he endured. Such representations as we do have in the texts of the letters tend to correspond with Dostoyevsky's picture of brief moments which could be reconsidered and reworked during the prevailing periods of lucidity and calm. VG's letters speak of other kinds of experiences, religious visions, for instance, which he found loathsome and rejected, or times when a fit came on but he was able to complete a painting on which he was working before unconsciousness overcame him. It is unwarrantable, however, to argue that the condition determined what or how he painted. VG cannot be positioned as mad in the sense of a continuous or pro-

gressive alteration of mental states; but as epileptic Van Gogh was subject to rare but periodic inconveniences (terrifying as the onset of a fit may have been), of attacks which rendered him momentarily unconscious, exhausted and *unable to paint* until the effects wore off.

Such arguments and alternative readings, however, are not sufficient to refute the construction of Van Gogh as mad artist, precisely because the base of that construction is neither clinical pathology nor readings of historical evidence. The pathological syndrome is both a support for and arises within the dominant narrative and psychobiographical structures of the literature we call art history.

III 'Ways of Reading'

I mentioned earlier that Karl Jaspers' interpretation of VG called for the production of a *catalogue raisonné*, the chronological ordering of the complete works which could provide access to the psychic and artistic profile of VG. In the majority of studies of VG general discussion of his crises of fits is subsumed into an exclusive concentration on the two most *dramatic* incidents, posed as revealing self-mutilations. In one, a small section of an ear lobe (*not* the whole ear) was sliced at the height of a crisis in December 1888. The other is the quiet and determined suicide which has been constructed from the act of shooting himself in the stomach in July 1890.

An article in *Horizon*¹² put forward a quite convincing argument that VG would not have died had a doctor been called in time. Morgan, rather unwarrantably, points the finger at the homeopathic doctor Gachet, under whose auspices VG was staying in Auvers, for not having brought in proper medical treatment for what were not fatal gunshot wounds. It has always been assumed that Van Gogh shot himself in the lower lungs or stomach and not his heart because of the disturbed and therefore incompetent state he was in. But it is not beyond the bounds of reasonable conjecture that VG actually shot himself, not to kill himself, but to bind his brother and sole source of financial support to him more closely, to blackmail him as he had done many times before in order to ensure VG's own financial security. His death may have been no more than a fatal mistake.

However, these two disparate and probably inexplicable events provide material for the myth. They are conflated to signify the suffering and the madness of the artist. They have become vital

12 T Morgan 'The Strange End of Vincent Van Gogh', *Horizon* vol 16 Autumn 1974.

clues to the interpretation of his painting, because his madness is subsumed into the fact of his being an artist. But since this suicide put an end to his painting as well as to his life it has been necessary to rewrite the narrative of Van Gogh's artistic practice as leading inevitably towards that death.

In order to explore the ramifications of the above I want to look at the one painting by VG that occupies a crucial place in the literature on VG, serving as the visual and psychological climax of art historical, fictional, filmic representations of his life and work.

There is only one painting by Van Gogh (known as *Crows over the Wheatfields* Amsterdam Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh) that immediately offers itself for misrecognition as symbolic of personal anguish, psychological dissolution and loss of power. Until a relatively recent thesis established a correct dating of the paintings of VG's last months, this one painting was universally assumed to be the last work and testament.¹³ Indeed so over-determined was this work that it was used to signify Van Gogh on the cover of the 1970 *catalogue raisonné*. It was, in fact, painted in the first week of July 1890 and not on July 27, the date on which he wounded himself, two days before he bled to death. The last major Van Gogh exhibition in England was held in the Hayward Gallery in 1968. The sequence of the hanging was not only strictly chronological but dramatic in its effects. The visitor was taken on a journey through VG's life and struggle and the exhibition concluded with two canvases, one of which was *Crows Over The Wheatfields* for which the catalogue entry disingenuously reads:

This painting is not in fact Vincent's last work, though the force of the imagery makes it appropriate for the position..

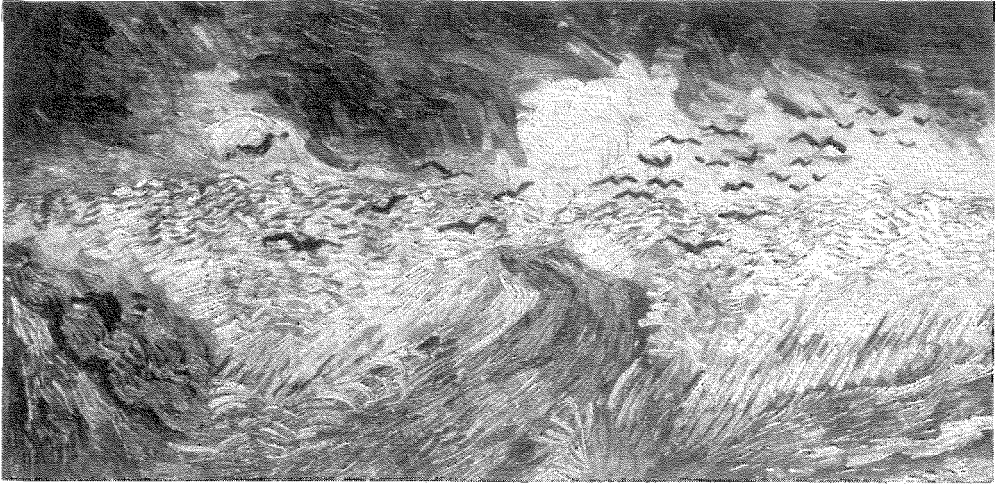
To give some impression of the kind of exegesis to which this painting has been subjected I quote three examples from different kinds of literature.

Françoise Minkowska¹⁴

There is here a heavy and menacing sky which weighs down upon the earth, as if wishing to crush it. The field of wheat moves tumultuously as if wishing to escape the embrace of the hostile force watching over it. It makes a desperate attempt to raise itself towards the sky, but the descending black crows accentuate further the imminence of destruction, the fall, the annihilation. Everything is engulfed in the inevitable shock. All resistance is useless. Van Gogh put an end to his life and work.

13 D Outhwaite *The Auvers Period of Vincent van Gogh* MA Thesis London University 1969.

14 Minkowska, op cit.



*Crows over the
Wheatfields* 1980
F779

'The World of Van Gogh' Time and Life Books (1968)

*The sky is a deep and angry blue that overpowers the two clouds on the horizon. The foreground is an ill-defined crossroads. The wheat itself rises like an angry sky to contend with the stormy sky. In this picture Van Gogh painted what he must have felt – the world was closing in on him and the roads of escape were blocked. (caption to reproduction of *Crows over the Wheatfields*).*

Meyer Schapiro 'On a Painting of Van Gogh'¹⁵

*In the *Crows over the Wheatfields* these centres have fallen apart . . . the great shining sun has broken up into a dark and scattered mass without a centre, the black crows which advance from the horizon toward the foreground, reversing in their approach the spectator's normal passage into the distance; he is, so to speak, their focus, their vanishing point. In their zigzag lines they approximate with increasing evidence the unstable wavy form of the three roads, uniting on one transverse movement the contrary directions of the human paths and the sinister flock. But the stable, familiar earth, interlocked with the paths, seems to resist perspective control. The artist's will is confused, the world moves towards him, he cannot move towards the world. It is as if he felt himself completely blocked, but also saw an ominous fate approaching.*

Meyer Schapiro occupies an interesting position in art history – he wrote for the left-wing magazine *Partisan Review* in the 1930s, has published articles on the semiological analysis of medieval art and is now enjoying somewhat belated reappraisal in both marxist and establishment art historical circles. In 1953 he published an article in *Anthropology Today* entitled 'Style' in which he assessed the range of positions in the analysis of artistic style and his concluding section on 'explanations of style by forms of social

15 Meyer Schapiro, 'On a Painting of Van Gogh' *View* series 7 no 1, 1946, reprinted in *Van Gogh in Perspective*, 1974, and Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries*, London, 1978.

life' based on a development of marxist theory is that which he himself endorsed in this text:

Only broadly sketched in Marx's work, the theory has rarely been applied systematically in a true spirit of investigation such as we see in Marx's economic writings . . . A theory of style adequate to the psychological and historical problem has still to be created. It waits for a deeper knowledge of the principles of form, construction and expression and for a unified theory of the processes of social life in which the practical means of life as well as emotional behaviour are compromised.

It is therefore pertinent to examine Schapiro's text not only as a representative academic art historical text. Its significance lies in the fact that in the work of this art historian, who can be claimed for a position within the attempted development of a marxist art history, we can detect the operations of those tendencies in art history which I have indicated as categorically opposed to a marxist conception of history and artistic production.

The article opens thus:

Among Van Gogh's paintings the Crows over the Wheatfields is for me the deepest avowal. It was painted a few days before his suicide, and in the letter in which he speaks of it we recognise the same mood as in the picture.

As an art historian concerned with the principles of style, form and expression, Schapiro's subsequent discussion of the painting begins with an outline of the syntax of the work; he attends to its construction – the disrupted perspective, the organisation of colour and the animated facture (that is the mode of application of paint and its effects). He initially remarks upon the format of the canvas used, a doublesquare format measuring 50 x 100 cm. He finds the shape strange, causing a disturbing inversion of the perspective lines. The doublesquare 50 x 100 canvas was, in fact, the most typical of Van Gogh's canvas sizes in the period during which *Crows over the Wheatfields* was painted (see for example F 770, F 771, F 772, F 773, F 775, F 776, F 777, F779). Also canvases were by this date mass-produced, their sizes determined by production processes.

Schapiro further draws attention to the colour sequence but he presents it as 'symbolic' of defensive enumeration, an exertion of control over Van Gogh's experience of personal disintegration. Moreover Schapiro tries to locate the painting in the context of VG's letters of the period in which the work is discussed. He has to admit that there is some discrepancy between his anxiety-

ridden interpretation and VG's statements about the painting's purpose – to show the restorative forces he perceived in the country while painting the picture. The explanation proposed by Schapiro runs like this: faced with his personal experience of disintegration, symbolised by the 'pathetic disarray' of the perspective in the canvas, Van Gogh used painting as a means of defending himself against his own fears:

Just as a man in neurotic distress counts and enumerates to hold onto things securely and to fight a compulsion, Van Gogh in his extremity of anguish discovers an arithmetical order of colours and shapes to resist decomposition.

Painting is presented as a cathartic process, through which the painter defends himself against himself. VG's painting, according to Schapiro, was an act of high intelligence which forestalled the oncoming collapse. Until 'In the end his despair destroyed him'. Schapiro's analysis is more penetrating, the language of formal analysis and interpretation is more sophisticated than the direct expressionist reading in the Time-Life book. The art historian introduces a problem, however. He allows for paradox, even for disjunctures, but only on the superficial level of apparent conflicts of the evidence. He proffers more knowledge. He searches back into earlier periods to find how VG viewed the act of painting. But nonetheless Schapiro's account is merely a more compelling and sustained investigation into and presentation of the artist's subjectivity. For although VG's art and state of mind are placed in a different relationship (for instance, he is presented as neurotic and tormented, a man more like other men, rather than beyond the edge of reason; his art is the site of VG's resistance to himself) it is still VG's despair, unexamined and safely couched in the seductive language of emotional excess that destroys the artist and therefore explains this painting. Not only is the work once again bound back into the subjectivity of VG, but the work itself serves as its index and revelation. The meaning of the painting results exclusively from psychological causes within VG as revealed by a parallel investigation of other paintings and verbal texts for such symptoms.

So what else could we find in the painting, what other 'VG'? What I want to propose is not merely another 'interpretation', nor a sign by sign analysis of the elements, colour, size, perspective, crows, wheatfields, the country and so on. Rather I want to disrupt and counter these dominant 'expressionist', 'symbolic', 'senti-

mentalist' – interpretations based on narrative and biographical modes of interpretative criticism and provide some suggestions for the ways in which one can locate art historical work on Van Gogh. Instead of offering the paintings to be consumed as articulations of a personality, they have to be located as practices within historically determined and therefore class constituted positions. The search for unities has to be abandoned.

Crows Over the Wheatfields was produced in the early months of July 1890, by the painter Van Gogh. But, apart from the paintings, Van Gogh also wrote an extended body of texts in the form of letters addressed to his brother Theo Van Gogh, an art dealer in Paris and sole source of financial support for VG's continuing practice as a painter. These texts are a supporting discourse produced by the painter within the uncertain conditions of art practice in late nineteenth century Europe. In them the work of VG as painter is represented by Van Gogh the writer. They can be read, not as direct historical evidence for the paintings, but as parallel historical texts which are part of a network of practices and representations. Inevitably they provide information from which the account I can provide is drawn; in doing so I have used a 'historical' mode of writing but it should be clear that the presence of an already constituted account, so full, so seductive, so reflexive creates real problems in writing or speaking about VG. But without these texts the history we could write would be different and VG would be a very different sort of figure in art historical discourses.

Crows Over the Wheatfields is dated to early July 1890. In the last weeks of June, VG had visited Paris to see his brother and family. Theo was on the verge of a nervous collapse, partly as a result of a renewed phase of difficulties with his employers, the large Parisian firm, Boussod et Valadon & Cie who saw little profit in patronage of unsaleable artists with whom Theo Van Gogh was commercially engaged, and also as a result of early symptoms of the general paralysis of the insane that finally killed him in 1891. Theo Van Gogh was the sole financial support for his wife, young son and VG himself, and also sent money to members of his family in Holland. His son was ill, his job was in jeopardy. VG returned to Auvers extremely worried about his own future. See, for instance, LT 640 after visit to Paris early July:

Back here I still feel very sad and continue to feel the storm which threatens you weighing on me. What is to be done – you see I

generally try to be cheerful, but my life is also threatened at the very roots, my steps are also wavering. [My emphasis.]

Note the construction intended to ingratiate himself with Theo but ensure that Theo is aware of the implications for him, Vincent. VG painted three canvases shortly after his return to Auvers, all on the same doublesquare format, two of which were called 'Vast Fields of Wheat under Troubled Skies'. (F 778 and F 779 Amsterdam Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh) and the third he called 'Daubigny's Garden' (F 776 or 777 New York Kramarsky Trust or Basle Offentliches Kunstsammlung) the garden of the house in which the French 'Barbizon' landscape painter Charles Daubigny (1817-1878) had lived and worked in Auvers. All three paintings are about 50 x 100 cm. The painting F 779 is more commonly known as *Crows over the Wheatfields*.

Writing to Theo of these canvases, on 9 July VG stated:

They are vast stretches of wheat under troubled skies and I did not need to go out of my way to express sadness and extreme loneliness. I hope you will see them soon – for I hope to bring them to Paris as soon as possible, since I almost think that these canvases will say what I cannot say in words, the health and restorative forces that I see in the country. (LT 649.)

All three paintings were painted for his brother. The letter invites Theo to be moved by the 'sadness and loneliness' that he, Vincent, was experiencing. The painting was addressed to Theo in a language which Theo, who had been subjected to Van Gogh's cryptic and metaphoric verbal and visual communications for ten years, was meant to decode as both a warning and an invitation.

One could call wheatfields a 'major sign' in VG's *oeuvre*. He painted twelve canvases of them in June-July 1890 alone; 20 in the previous summer in St Rémy, 12 in 1888 in Arles, and from the Dutch years 1883-1885 they are very numerous. One of the first was painted in Drenthe, a remote Northern province in Holland, in the autumn of 1883, when Theo once before threatened to give up his job, and 'abandon' Vincent to his own fortunes; when Van Gogh first decided that he was a painter and made his first essays in the painting of landscape in the manner of Daubigny.

A few general remarks about paintings and drawings of wheatfields will provide a working picture. Many of them have a high horizon line, some show storms of rain slashing across the wheat



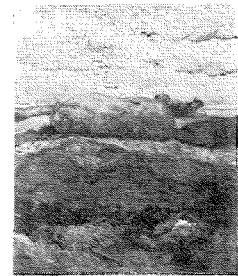
or corn, others place flocks of birds over the fields. All these devices are part of VG's rather unsuccessful attempt to master the established language of picturesque landscape painting. They also belong to his major project as an artist, derived from the positions he took up in Drenthe in 1883, that the painting of the life and work and seasonal rhythms of the country in the manner of Millet and other French landscape painters was the core of modern art. See LT 418 July 1885:

Just think over whether you do not find this true. They started with peasant's or labourer's figure as 'genre', but at the present, with Millet the great master as leader, this is the very core of modern art.

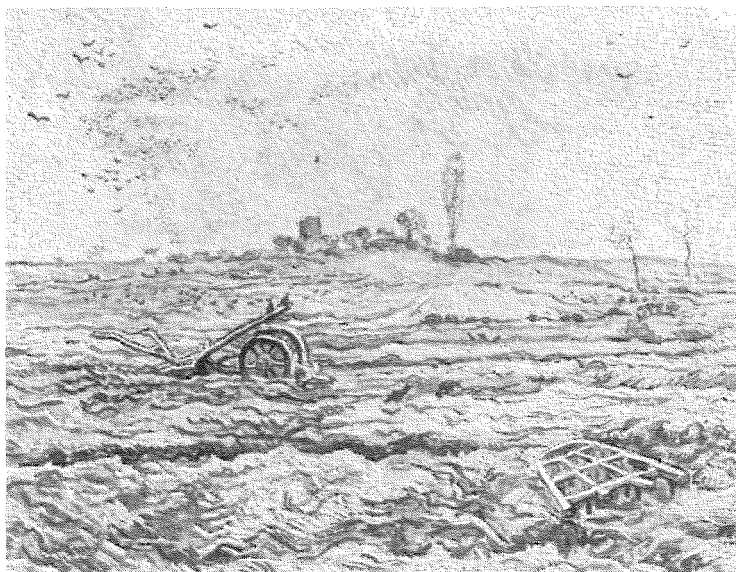
and W 4 1889, about Barbizon painters as the true modern artists and continuing leaders of European art, and LT 593 on 'the eternal youth and unsurpassed example' of Barbizon painters.

So wheatfields belong in a wide context of cycles of paintings in which seasons are signified by typical forms of agricultural work associated with them and reintroduced into nineteenth century modes of representation through painters like Millet and the novelist Zola. Especially in the novel *La Terre* (1888) Zola attached metaphorical significance to agricultural tasks as signs of growth, life and death, signifiers in a cyclical conception of human life and society. For VG, for instance, the wheatfield with reaper signified the yearly death of the harvest and therefore of humanity (LT 617), while the sower was his biblical opposite. VG's enterprises in

Fields with Blue sky
1890 F778



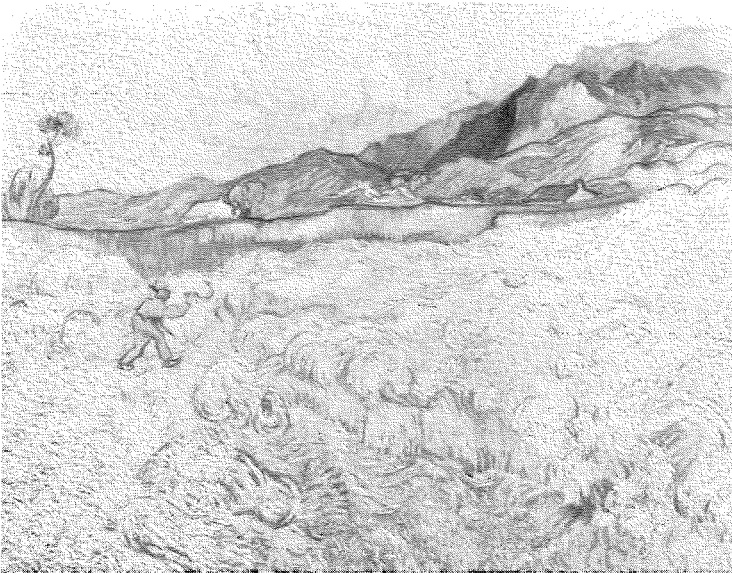
*Landscape with
haystack under a rainy
sky 1888 F 563*



*The Plough (after
Millet) 1889 F632*

this mode stem directly from the use he made of the series of wood engravings of the *Twelve Labours of the Field* and *Four Hours of the Day* by Millet, which VG copied as a preliminary exercise in drawing in 1880-81 and to which he had returned in the autumn of 1889. By that date in addition to reworking the wood engravings in the medium of oil painting he had copied a print of a painting by Millet *The Harrow* (F 632) which shows a vast, desolate and empty field under snow over which a flock of crows are wheeling. The painting included cornstakes and a darkening sky. Direct copies occur relatively rarely in Van Gogh's work. When they do, they serve an explicit purpose to reassert an allegiance to the work of certain artists whom VG took to be the key figures in a tradition of painting he wanted to revive and continue. It is rather more common to find an intentional utilisation of motifs which activate reference to paintings and the positions occupied by the painters. These artists' work not only provided VG with a model for his own work and its subject matter. They were invoked and reworked as part of his attempt to retrieve the meanings, and indirectly the conditions, of social life proposed through forms of painting that had arisen prior to capitalist industrialisation.

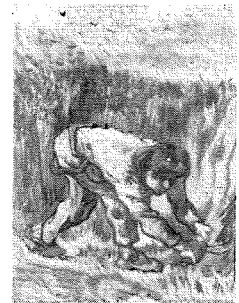
It is important to consider VG's position within the class structure of Dutch society in the late nineteenth century. The old civic bourgeoisie or burgher class had assumed political, economic and



*Wheatfield with
reaper* 1889 F 618

social dominance in the United Provinces (now called the Netherlands) with the development of mercantile capitalism in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century this civic patriciate opposed industrialisation (railways and early industry in the Netherlands were financed largely by foreign capital) and modernisation (national integration of the provinces). The complex manoeuvres in both VG's paintings and letters have to be read with reference to the conflicts within the *bourgeoisies* of the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. Liberal bourgeois elements were in government after the revision of the constitution in 1848. It is clear from innumerable letters that VG perceived these elements as leading Holland into decline and decadence. He aligned himself with the traditional civic burgher ruling class whose dominance and interests were being challenged economically and politically both from within the Netherlands as well as from international capitalism.

Misrecognition of these determinations coupled with the refusal of the notion of class as a structural determinant has allowed VG's use of 'Millet' as a model and the agricultural labour in subject matter represented by what he called 'peasant painting' to be assimilated to humanist bourgeois interpretations such as that proposed by Schapiro of another famous signifier of VG, *The Potato Eaters* (Amsterdam Rijksmuseum Van Gogh) of which he wrote:



*The Reaper (after
Millet)* 1889 F 687



The Potato-Eaters
1885 F82

Conceived as a summation of Van Gogh's work and study up to that time (1885), it also expresses most strongly his social and moral feelings. He was a painter of peasants, not for the sake of their picturesqueness – although he was moved by their whole aspect – but from a deep affinity and solidarity with poor people, whose lives, like his own, were burdened with care.

In addition to the use of emotional explanation so firmly reinforced by the language of this passage, one sees at work here the processes of binding the work and the artist together by proposing a unity of interests between the artist and the fictions of his own work, who are taken (mistaken) for real people, real peasants rather than as images produced by a bourgeois painter using members of the rural proletariat who modelled for money during periods of prolonged unemployment. This process is even more apparent in a Schapiro passage on a painting of a weaver at a loom from the same text:

Van Gogh gave to the image of the worker at the machine a high solemnity and power. In the earnest skilful weaver, he felt, no doubt, a kinship with his own artistic work.

VG's reworking of systems of representation available in the late nineteenth century, using prints of paintings by Millet, paintings by Daubigny and so on, in combination with VG's practice of painting directly from the motif and the model, produced contradictions and disjunctures in his practice. When he set up his easel in front of a scene, VG saw that scene both in terms of modes of representation current fifty and even two hundred years previously (seventeenth century Dutch art). He painted the scene before him in order that it might represent his own civic, mercantilist bourgeois reaction to 'progress' and modern urban society. However, he encountered great difficulties as a result of this. The paintings rarely worked to represent that position, and in doubt Van Gogh reverted to virtual imitation of such painter's work as he *could* reproduce. One of these was Daubigny, who had lived and worked in Auvers and who painted broad fields of corn on wide horizontal canvases, usually in a *doublesquare* format (100 x 200 cm) with high horizon lines, compressed space, shallow depth of field. There are for instance two paintings now in the Kroeller-Mueller Museum in Otterlo entitled *Cornfield Under a Stormy Sky* and *Young Corn*. In the former a path leads centrally into the fields of corn only to disappear in their midst. In the

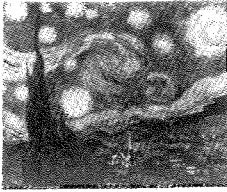


latter the painting is divided in the centre horizontally between heavy sky and billowing wheat and a path enters the field centrally but disappears into it while to either side rough, unsown ground skirts the field to be closed off by the stalks of the growing corn. In 1873 Daubigny had exhibited at the Paris Salon, which Van Gogh had visited, a vast and snowy scene entitled simply *Snow of Winter* (100 x 200 cm) (Paris, Louvre). There, in a vast and empty expanse of snow-covered ground, a dark clump of trees stand out and a flock of crows roost in their bare branches or peck the frozen earth beneath. Van Gogh associated flocks of crows with both Daubigny and Millet, for in a letter of September 1880 he had written of a winter scene in Belgium,

Daubigny Snow of Winter 1873

I also noticed flocks of crows made famous in the paintings of Daubigny and Millet. (LT 136.)

Crows and wheatfields had not only an extensive context within Van Gogh's practice, but a purpose within his vocabulary and a place within the representational formula of a particular group of late nineteenth century painters. In dwelling on these motifs I am hoping to indicate something of the complexity of a single Van Gogh painting, the multiplicity and potential range of meanings signified by a few motifs within one such landscape; a set of resonances which has to be unravelled across a variety of texts and within a reconstruction of VG's highly ambitious and problematic project as an artist in the 1880s in France and Holland. In order to return to the painting in question it is necessary to place VG's use of landscape painting in relation to the signification of the city for



Starry Night 1889
F 612

him, as centre of speculative commerce in opposition to the organic, natural world. In a letter of October 1883, Van Gogh had written to Theo one of many diatribes against the city in the hope of persuading Theo not to emigrate to America but join him in the country and become a painter. The argument was posed in the idealist terms of Nature opposed to the city, signifying modern urban industrial society, and characterised above all by a market economy. He was thus attempting to persuade Theo to leave the world of dealing and speculation in the art market and partake in the great Carlylian worship of supernatural nature.

Van Gogh read Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1831) in 1883, from which he derived the vocabulary for articulating his idealist and pantheistic conceptions of nature, and within which he remained fixed until the last years, painting, for instance, the famous *Starry Night* (1889 F 612 New York Museum of Modern Art) according to Carlyle's prescriptive symbolism:

Then sawest thou this fair Universe, were it the meanest province thereof, is in very deed the star-domed city of God; that through every star and every blade of grass, and most through every living soul, the glory of a present God still beams. But Nature, which is the Time-Vesture of God, and reveals Him to the Wise, hides Him from the foolish.

In LT 332 of 1883, this formulation occurs:

If at the same time you wandered through the cornfields and moors, to renew what you yourself express as 'I used to feel part of nature; now I do not feel that way any longer'. Let me tell you, brother, that I myself experience so deeply, so very deeply what you say there. That I have been through a period of nervous, arid overstraining – there were days when I could not see anything in the most beautiful landscape just because I did not feel part of it. It is the street and the office and the care and the nerves that make it so.



Wheatfield with the Alps in background
1888 F 411

Rural analogies were adopted and adapted for a longing to return to an eternal order, signified by the idea of nature. In a later letter to Theo we find:

But in order to grow you must be rooted in the earth. So I tell you don't wither on the sidewalk. You will say there are plants that grow in the city – that may be but you are corn and your place is in the cornfield. (LT 336.)

In VG's letters one finds a wealth of material which throws light on the events of June 1890 and suggests a way of reading the 'statement' made by a painting of crows over a wheatfield accompanied by a letter, both addressed to Theo. Both were intended to convey 'the health and restorative forces' of the country.

In the letters of the later part of July 1890 up to and including the one apparently found on VG after his death, the difficulty of relations between living artists and the dealers in 'dead artists' was repeatedly addressed. VG constructed Theo as a different kind of dealer, stressing his unique and 'creative' contribution to the making of modern art, namely the work of VG himself, through his continuing financial support. However, the letters suggest that VG represented these difficult conditions of art practice to himself in terms of public misunderstanding, ideologies of vanguardism and the search for what he called 'sympathetic' lovers of art. A previous threat of withdrawal of Theo's financial support had occurred in 1883 and in the letters of autumn 1883 the absurd ignorance of public opinion on art is compared to the croaking of ravens. (LT 339). I am not suggesting that crows or ravens or any other birds of prey simply equal dealers or 'absurd' public opinion – that would be to collapse the letters into the paintings – but such a conjunction of concerns and metaphors throws light on the network of signs and meanings which structured VG's texts and which must condition the way we make readings of VG paintings. At the same time, it points to the problems that were inherent in the artist's attempts to produce meaning through the signifying process of painting in and against the signifying processes of writing. The painting, *Crows over the Wheatfields* of July 1890, far from being presented, therefore, as the culminating climax of a sequential narrative, the revelation of the artist, has to be approached as a complicated text, which calls for a different kind of work, not of narration or interpretation, but decoding. Attention has to be paid to broad fields of nineteenth century discourse, to the conditions of production, to practices of representation which are not coherent, legible or consistent but uncertain, and contradictory.

IV 'Lust for Life' – Artist and Media

Despite the resistance by art history to the production of discourses outside of its privileged place in the literature of art, particular discursive structures, both narrative and psychobiographical, are common to both the texts of *la vie romancée*, the popular fictional biography, and art history. It is perhaps the coincidence of narra-

16 There is a great deal of work to be done on the status of the VG myth in America in the 1950s and on the role of VG within Minnelli's *oeuvre*, both in relation to melodrama and in terms of the artist and the figures of the neurotic.

tive structures which render art history and Stone's novel *Lust for Life* translatable into filmic narrative. In this section I want to consider the construction of Van Gogh in another site of the production of representations of the artist, the film, *Lust for Life*. This was directed by Vincente Minnelli in 1955 for MGM with Kirk Douglas in the lead role. It was based upon Stone's novel, one of the prime texts in Hammacher's category, *la vie romancée*, the popular fictive biography. At the same time, the film *Lust for Life* operates in a different area of consumption and can therefore be examined as an example of dispersion of the effects of art historical discourse.

MGM had bought the film rights to Stone's novel but the option was due to expire in December 1955. Stone, anticipating the revocation of the rights, was already planning a film version of his own, as was Kirk Douglas who was preparing through his own production company a film on Van Gogh's life in which he would star. The film was in fact made by MGM in five months between June and December 1955 and was released in 1956.¹⁶

Minnelli believed Van Gogh had been hereditarily insane and saw motifs in his work as symbols. The sun, for instance, was a symbol of the repressed turmoil of 'the maelstrom he was always fighting'. Such a reading serves to set Van Gogh apart while subjecting him to voyeuristic representation – the artist as irrecuperably mad and driven towards self-destruction while the art remains as his testament of struggle – echoing that reading made by Schapiro discussed above. It is hardly surprising to find that the culminating climax of the film is a representation of Van Gogh shooting himself in the wheatfield as he tries to paint the *Crows over the Wheatfields*.

According to Minnelli the film received the best reviews of any of his pictures. *Time* magazine concluded that it was 'Hollywood's most profound exploration of artistic life'. Indeed the film was sold as a biography, collapsing the artistic work into personality. The *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote 'something of a Van Gogh painting inhabits this sincere and absorbing biography of that strange and disturbed man'. Such an effect was no doubt strengthened by all the meanings the star Kirk Douglas brought into the visual reconstruction of Van Gogh and it is tempting to recall in relation to Douglas' screen *persona*, Aurier's words describing Van Gogh: 'Powerful, a male, a daredevil frequently brutal, sometimes ingenuously delicate'.


Dissenting voices were raised, however – the *Time* critic took issue with the Minnelli presentation of VG as mad, commenting

that VG was known to be epileptic, adding, 'Van Gogh's epilepsy halted his painting but does not explain it'. This critic also draws attention to effects of the narrative necessities and drives of the filmic process:

The film captures the fierce drive and bitter tragedy of the life of Van Gogh . . . But because the Hollywood story builds relentlessly to Van Gogh's ear slicing for its climax . . . Lust for Life falls midway between being a first rate art film and a high pitched melodrama.

In Minnelli's film the narrative economy of the film drives towards the climax of self-mutilation and release through the death which is anticipated by a series of personal rejections and physical sufferings and mutilations. It lingers over the minor incident in which

*M.G.M. presents the Life Story of
one of the World's Greatest Artists!*



See **KIRK DOUGLAS** as **VINCENT Van GOGH**

in M.G.M.'s
Lust for Life

ANTHONY QUINN
JAMES DONALD PAMELA BROWN
IN CINEMASCOPE AND TECHNICOLOR

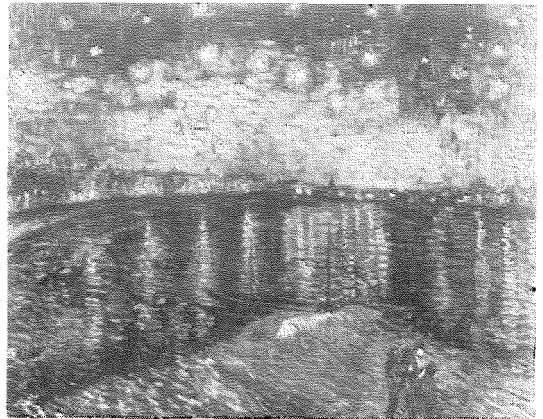
NOW SHOWING
AT THE **CURZON CINEMA**



Night Café 1888
F 463



Lust for Life



Starry Night on the Rhône 1888 F 474

VG is said to have put his hand into a flame to prove the durability of his love for his cousin, draws out the suspense of VG's dramatic attempt on Gauguin's life, situates the build up to the cutting of his own ear through brutal music and lush, reddened colour. Just prior to that event, Van Gogh/Douglas is placed before a mirror so that his attack on himself is constituted as a rejection of himself by himself. His final releasing act of suicide is located within one of own paintings, the wheatfields with the crows. His last words as he dies are 'I want to go home', a phrase which not only effects the closure of his life but the filmic narrative; it releases him and the audience.

The film tries to visualise VG's life in terms of his paintings. We are shown reconstructions of scenes he painted. They are not only offered to us as he painted them, without any suggestion of meditating practice, but serve to render transparent this same process of mystification of production with regard to the film's construction. On the one hand we see him opening a window in Arles onto an orchard in blossom which dissolves into VG paintings of blossoms, as if they were no more than his inner mental images as he looked at the scene and not *representations* made of a scene. Alternatively his paintings are carefully and faithfully reconstructed as *sets*, so that Van Gogh becomes virtually a figure in his own paintings. Much is made of his sitting like one of the all-night prowlers in the reddened interior of the *Night Café* (F 463 New Haven Yale University Art Gallery), a painting *à propos* of which he, the fascinated bourgeois *flâneur* in working class haunts, stated that it was a place one (but not we the bourgeois) could go mad in. The film 'places' VG, eliding his imputed state of mind with his own paintings, refusing to recognise those works as representation and as practice – realising in full the effects of the written texts on VG.

In the text already quoted Schapiro made much of the disturbing perspective he thought he saw in the *Crows over the Wheatfields* painting. Marks in the painting which signify birds are spoken of as if they were real animate birds flying around the painting, yet simultaneously operate on a connotational level as harbingers of death (Schapiro refers to these birds as 'figures of death'). The effect is apparently produced by distortion of single point perspective, or its reversal. Within the realist conventions of the film *Lust for Life* such illusions of real objects in motion can be produced, and the photographic single-point perspective systems operate to direct this represented motion towards the spectator of the film.



In the penultimate episode of the film *Van Gogh/Kirk Douglas* is shown painting this painting, a scene of extensive wheatfields around which crows are hovering. His work as a painter is thus presented at one level as direct transcription from a real scene. Suddenly, however, the crows move in, but not towards the spectator. They close in on the figure of Van Gogh whom they harass and attack. The artist is positioned as the object of the attack. The effect of this is to contain the attack within the perspective system of the film and to shift a scene of painter and motif into a different connotative reading – to signify VG's disturbed state, to make the signs of his paintings the signifiers of his mental condition which is then played out, dramatically. Van Gogh gives up his painting and, scribbling a note which reads (roughly) 'I cannot take any more' shoots himself.

In *Lust for Life*, the spectator is positioned as viewer of pictures produced by photographic representations through which Van Gogh is placed as a figure in his own landscape paintings. At the same time, these landscapes are offered as externalised, visualised images of the artist's 'inner' landscape. These dual processes not only foreclose notions of the production of art as a signifying system but propose that the meanings of works of art are available to direct visual experience which can be represented unproblematically, simply reconstructed in a film. Through the narrative organisation of a filmic biography, lavishly illustrated and illustrating, what is realised and confirmed is the construct of the artist as the effect of his works, the hero of the story, the character whose 'truth' is to be sought and visualised, reconstructed and made plain. The unity of artist and art, a unifying classless subjectivity, paralleling the psychobiographical impetus of art history as manifested in the texts on VG quoted above is accomplished within cinematic representation in *Lust for Life*. That such a coincident representation is both possible and accepted, with only the minor qualifications from critics that I quoted above, is itself significant. The translation from art history to *la vie romancée* and to the film *Lust for Life* is founded upon not only the dispersion of art history's ideological figure of the artist as cause and effect of art, but upon the discursive structures through which such ideologies are produced, the literature of art, the narrative practices of art history.

Conclusion

The purpose of my analysis of some of the discursive practices, structures and categories of art history and their dispersion across a range of practices of representation, exceeds, as I suggested at the beginning of this article, the internal problems of the practice of a marxist social history of art. That art history can be analysed as a practice of 'interpretative criticism', a hegemonic practice, the site of the production of bourgeois ideas about art and artist, is of course central to identifying the modes and manoeuvres by which art is evacuated from history, history from art history, precluded even. Marxist art historical work faces above all the problem of historicising a specific practice of representation but of a particular mode – visual representation. This means producing modes of analysis both appropriate to the historical specificity of that practice while simultaneously deconstructing the notion of art as a visual experience. Take for instance the reviewer of the work of feminist artists like Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller and Alexis Hunter at the Hayward Annual Exhibition in 1978, Tim Hilton, who considered their work the weakest part of the show:

Much of this is instructive, in its way, but it is not instructive to the eye. In many ways one is encouraged to read this exhibition rather than experience it visually 'Times Literary Supplement' (27 June 1978).

The effects of an informed marxist intervention will itself exceed the discrete domain of art history, however because of the effects of art historical discourses beyond art history's apparent boundaries – into art practice, art criticism, representations of art and the artist, indeed into current conditions of the production of art. It is time we began to take art history seriously as a significant site of marxist work and challenge the bourgeois ideologies of art and artist on the terrain in which their hegemony is produced and secured.