

A realist theory of art history

Review of:

Ian Verstegen, *A Realist Theory of Art History (Ontological Explorations)*, London and New York: Routledge 2013, 192 pages, £89.72 hbk, ISBN-10: 0415531519, ISBN-13: 978-0415531511

Anti-realism—the view that reality is merely a cultural construct and that one’s membership of a culture or a linguistic group slices and structures one’s reality—exercised a huge impact on the humanities in the final decades of the twentieth century. More often than not, this impact had the unfortunate form of ideological, institutionally enforced, un-argued or poorly argued suppression of opposing views. We currently live in an epoch of gradual recovery from the excesses of that, intellectually remarkably barren and destructive, era; it is natural that one wants to test and re-examine positions that, until recently, have been ideologically suppressed. Ian Verstegen’s latest book is an effort to regain, in art history, the intellectual ground that was lost in recent decades. The impact of anti-realism in art history was more profound than in many other disciplines of the humanities. Arguably, in its sister discipline—architectural history—the impact of such views was meagre, possibly because the architectural academia provided an outlet for such perspectives in the form of work in architectural theory, where, indeed, the consequences were devastating. Nor did postmodernism in the philosophy of history make such radical anti-realist claims as it was the case in art history. Theorists such as Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit or Keith Jenkins did not deny reality itself and were prepared to accept that one could make individual true statements about it. Rather, their view was that connection with reality is lost once such statements are organised into narratives, because other forces (rhetoric, literary style, political agendas and so on) take over.¹ In art history, however, much more radical positions were articulated, for instance by Norman Bryson, for whom reality itself was always historically produced.² Also, Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art* with its influential claim that realism in painting merely derives from cultural inculcation had significant impact on the understanding of the relationship between a visual representation and its object. It provided grounds for radical relativism that

¹ Hayden White, *Metahistory. Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973, 6, note 5. Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991, 40. However, Keith Jenkins in *Refiguring history. New thoughts on an old discipline*, London: Routledge, 2004, 5, claims that ‘historians can just never get things right’. But he fails to explain whether this is a historical fact about historians that he has somehow got right. For Frank Ankersmit, see for instance his *Historical Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, 13. He also takes very clear position in his debate with Heikki Saari, ‘On Frank Ankersmit’s postmodernist theory of historical narrativity’, *Rethinking History* 9:1 (2005) 5-21, see the response by Frank Ankersmit, ‘Reply to Professor Saari’, *Rethinking History* 9:1 (2005) 23-33.

² Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting. The Logic of the Gaze*, London: Macmillan 1985, 13.

one could hardly attribute to a postmodernist philosopher of history such as Ankersmit.³

Considering this radical anti-realist tone of postmodernism in art history, it is not surprising that Versteegen's book concentrates on ontological problems. Anti-realism and the relativism that it breeds are notorious for their anti-humanist potential. If there is no reality, then everything is relative; if everything is relative, then it becomes impossible to condemn any kind of oppression. 'Ontology', Versteegen rightly points out, 'is not a philosophical pastime. It is the very basis of social emancipation'. (xv) The lack of consistency in ontological claims has indeed often been the weak side of the anti-realist camp: claims that reality is culturally constructed typically leave the ontology of culture, or other 'constructing' forces, unexplained. What is, after all, this 'culture' that exists outside reality and makes us believe in reality? Is it real itself? Is the claim that all knowledge is culturally induced itself a piece of such culturally induced knowledge? Notoriously, a theorist or a historian who subscribes to relativist anti-realism can sustain the position only by attributing oneself a privileged cognitive position in the world and its world history. The Introduction to *A Realist Theory of Art History* provides an insightful and entertaining analysis of such self-exempting attitudes. It also makes an important point regarding the origins of anti-realism: while one tends to see postmodernists aligned with continental authors such as Derrida, analytic philosophers such as Willard van Orman Quine or Michael Dummett certainly made significant contributions, or in other words, carry much responsibility for what happened with scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴

Versteegen's discussion of ontology is largely based on critical realism and the works of Roy Bhasker. While the perspective Versteegen provides is an original contribution, on the initial reading the book may leave the wrong impression that it is merely an application of critical realism to the philosophy of art history. This is unfortunate, and combined with Versteegen's tendency to make his presentations of arguments cryptic, it is likely to affect adversely the wider reception of the book. In other words, this is a book that states, but does not successfully promote, its author's views, as those who are sympathetic to positions similar to Versteegen's may have wanted. The reliance on critical realism means that from Versteegen's

³ Nelson Goodman *Languages of Art: an approach to a theory of symbols*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., Indianapolis 1976. Ankersmit's views are particularly interesting, because he embraces postmodernism while rejecting its radical relativist implications. See his exchange with Perez Zagorin, Frank Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', *History and Theory*, 28:1 (1989) 137-153. Perez Zagorin, 'Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations', *History and Theory*, 29:3 (1990), 263-274. Frank Ankersmit, 'Reply to Professor Zagorin', *History and Theory*, 29:3 (1990), 275-296, esp. 278, note 7. See also the attack on Ankersmit in Peter Icke, *Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause*, New York: Routledge 2012. See also Adam Timmins review with the author's response <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1245> accessed 1 September 2013.

⁴ The idea to see in Quine an anti-realist may be surprising to many contemporary analytic philosophers. In support of Versteegen's thesis one can cite Quine's essay 'The Problem of Meaning is Linguistics': '...there is in principle no separating language from the rest of the world, at least as conceived by the speaker. Basic differences in languages are bound up, as likely as not, with differences in the way in which the speakers articulate the world itself into things and properties, time and space, elements, forces, spirits, and so on. It is not clear even that it makes sense to think of words and syntax as varying from language to language while the content stays fixed...' in Willard van Orman Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, New York: Harper, 1961, 47-64, 61.

perspective the split between analytic and continental philosophy is largely irrelevant. The important theoretical distinction for critical realism is the one between so-called transitive and intransitive realms—that is, between ontology and epistemology. (19) Bhaskar used the term ‘epistemic fallacy’ for the tendency to mistake one’s observable experience of processes for the underlying mechanism beyond sensible reach. The rejection of this fallacy enables critical realists to state that a scientist or a historian can form fallible theories without assuming that these theories touch the intransitive nature of their objects. (19) An implication of critical realism is also the rejection of the understanding of truth as consensus (as has been proposed by some scholars); rather, truth is an ontological relation of satisfaction that may or may not obtain in a given case. (39) It is also accepted that reality belongs not only to objects that exist independently of human mind, but to various cultural objects that require humans for their existence as well. (20) For the realist, says Verstegen, the causal criterion of existence is more important—that is, the view that things that have causal power are real. (This has important implications when it comes to deciding about the attribution of reality to different types of entities.) The stratification of the world that Bhaskar proposed differentiates between mechanisms, events and experiences—they are all real, only events and experiences are actual and only experiences are empirical. (23) Realism thus described is a meta-theory; it says how the strata of reality are structured, but it does not tell us how to write history. (44) Critical realism also rejects the identification of explanation and prediction. Art historical objects are intransitively there, whether one studies them or not; since intransitive objects have a variety of properties that are actualised in different contexts, the result is *relationism* as opposed to relativism. (30-31) Verstegen also differentiates between facets and scales: facets refer to some individual parts that constitute a whole of an historical account (agriculture, warfare) while scales pertain to the relationship between the histories of parts and wider entities (the history of Tuscany versus the history of Italy). (33) The book also analyses a series of theoretical problems of art historiography from the position of critical realism: this includes for instance, various types of historiographical narratives, the speculative philosophy of history (41-47), style (67-69) and general and special history (51-72). Discussions of examples (Burckhardt, research on Duccio or Caravaggio) help elucidate some of Verstegen’s cryptic formulations in other parts of the book.

The important problem that a project like cannot avoid pertains to the nature of the entities to which reality is attributed. Claims about robust ontology necessarily come pre-packaged with metaphysical dilemmas: agreeing that there are *some* things in Heaven and Earth, does not commit one to accepting that *all* things a language can name really are. The crucial dilemma is the boundary between what is really real and that which is not (or exists only as derivative of that which is real). Verstegen introduces the problem by observing that ‘one must not construe the only *bona fide* objects to be physical objects’. (36) Institutions, unitary events and concrete individual styles could be objects too. Sometimes administrative borders between states coincide with natural boundary, such as a river, while sometimes they are merely conventional—but they are no less real in this latter case. (36) The existence of such social facts indeed should not be controversial and their nature and functioning has been comprehensively analysed by John Searle in his *The*

Construction of Social Reality. Verstegen's approach is to introduce 'methodological institutionalism' — as opposed to both methodological individualism and holism.⁵ He describes methodological institutionalism as the view 'that there are societal facts that are supervenient above individuals and that society is composed of societal facts, not individuals'. (61) In other words, individuals are excluded from the constitution of society, while the difference between this position and methodological holism (the view that only collectives are real, while the existence of individuals is derivative from their membership of a group), hinges on the meaning of the critical word 'supervenies'. This means, Verstegen explains, that societal facts 'provide a superstructure to a society that persists while individuals come and go'. (61) While the USA Congress 'depends for its existence on the existence of its members, it is also greater than them. When a congressman dies, his position does not. There are rules for the replacement of members, which continue to populate the group'. (61) Verstegen further infers that cultural objects similarly rely upon individuals for their creation, but once in existence, they 'tend to acquire a life on their own'. (62) He relies on David Hall, Michael Ghiselin and Jonathan Gilmore in order to relativize the concept of an individual. A biological species need not be seen as a class of entities of which individual beings are members; what humans are is then defined via certain causal connections with other human beings. (67) Artistic styles (as well as philosophy, technology and so on) could then also be regarded as individuals: impressionism is an event and individual impressionist artists are its parts. (67)

It would be interesting to know how Verstegen's position differs from that of early-twentieth century German historicism: Ernst Troeltsch, in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, talked about collectives as individuals while for Friedrich Meinecke the historicist 'individualising way of thinking' consisted in treating groups and

⁵ For the distinction between holism and individualism see for instance Ernest Gellner, 'Holism versus Individualism in History and Sociology' in Patrick Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History*, Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959, 489-503, 491. Individualism

does not wish to allow that the Whole could ever be a cause, and [insists] that explanations which make [it] appear that it is can be translated into other. ... The holistic counter-argument works in reverse; if something (a) is a causal factor and (b) cannot be reduced, then in some sense it 'really and independently exists'.

Similarly J. W. N. Watkins, 'Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences' in Gardiner, *Theories of History*, 503-515, 505 describes the individualist position as the view that

we shall not have arrived at rock-bottom explanations of such large-scale phenomena until we have reduced an account of them to statements about the dispositions, resources and inter-relations of individuals.

On the holist view, however,

social systems constitute 'wholes' at least in the sense that some of their large-scale behaviour is governed by macro-laws which are essentially *sociological* in the sense that they are *sui generis* and not to be explained as mere regularities or tendencies resulting from the behaviour of interacting individuals.

collectives as historical individuals irreducible to biographical humans.⁶ Verstegen likens styles to societies in the sense that both are made up of individuals (humans or artworks). He then says that 'one can affirm the existence of both a society and a style based on their effects, which are not possible with the summed behaviour of a number of people or artworks'. (68) Causation, as mentioned earlier, is really the crucial issue: if institutions do not have effects that are irreducible to the effects of the actions of the individual humans which constitute them, then methodological institutionalism will collapse into individualism. Verstegen's cryptic, seven lines long justification of his position is to introduce (what *de facto* amounts to) the Aristotelian theory of causes, and propose that 'it is possible' to treat relationships between people and artworks as material causes; structures binding them would be formal causes and this would still leave 'people' (presumably, human individuals) as the efficient causes. (68) When he then says that 'This gets at the 'productive' power of institutions without granting them efficient existence' (69), one can only be puzzled about how (in what sense) institutions can be 'productive' without being efficient causes? More profoundly, one cannot avoid Aristotelian metaphysics if one *de facto* relies on the Aristotelian theory of causes and, since modern science does not operate with material and formal causes but reduces all causation to efficient causes, the introduction of material and formal causation requires the wholesale rejection of modern scientific worldview. Arguably, this is a huge step to take in order to save the concept of style, which can be anyhow saved probably by other, less heroic, means. Vice-versa, if the material and formal causation that Verstegen postulates can be reduced to efficient causes, then we are back to individualism.

Erwin Panofsky pointed out that the individualism-holism dilemma in historiography is inseparable from the metaphysical dilemma about free will.⁷ If one admits that human beings have free will (or merely admits that free will is an irresolvable metaphysical dilemma) then one cannot say that the actions of historical figures were determined and can be explained by membership of the collectives they belonged to. More generally, one can never state why individuals did the things they did, for they could have opted to act differently. Rather, one can describe what enabled and motivated their actions. Efficient causality and responsibility in the realm of social actions in that case rest firmly in the hands of human individuals – and there is no other kind of causation. There are only beliefs, motivations, wills, decisions and actions of individuals. Consider again an institution such as the USA Congress. It is certainly not constituted by a specific group of congressmen and it does not cease to exist when their time in office expires. Institutions exist as relationships between the actions of participating individuals,

⁶ Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme. Erstes Buch: Das logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr 1922, 32-33 and also 120: "Individuell" bedeutet hier nicht den Gegensatz gegen Gesellschaft oder Typus oder Masse oder Gesamtzusammenhang, sondern den Gegensatz gegen die Abstraktheit des allgemeinen Gesetzes, also die Einmaligkeit, Unwiederholbarkeit und Besonderheit der historischen Gegenstände, mögen sie nun eine Epoche, eine Kulturtenenz, einen Staat, ein Volk, Massenzustände, Klassenrichtungen oder eine einzelne Person betreffen.' For Meinecke see his *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, Munich: Leibniz Verlag, 1946, 5 and 50 as well as Walter Hoffer, *Geschichtsschreibung und Weltanschauung; Betrachtungen zum Werk Friedrich Meineckes*, Munich: Oldenburg, 1950, 66.

⁷ Erwin Panofsky, 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline', in Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1955, 1-25.

and it is the beliefs, wills and motivations of these participating individuals (not only congressmen, but also voters, typists, librarians and so on) that keep the institution going through their actions. The word 'Congress' refers to the totality of these beliefs, wills and actions. The rules for the replacement of congressmen and their implementation, have no existence apart from the thoughts, beliefs, motivations and actions of these participating individuals: if all individual voters decided to boycott the elections, the institution could not continue to exist. Similar reasoning applies to artistic styles: they result from interaction between artists, patrons and everyone else who contributes. For instance, the changes in printing technology that enabled the printing of architectural details contributed substantially to the codification of the classical orders in the late Renaissance.

After many years of dogmatic anti-realism, Verstegen's book is an important and brave breakthrough in the philosophy of art history. The problems it formulates are going to stay with us in the years to come. It is likely that they point in the direction of future debates in the field. One would have appreciated if the book were more approachable (especially for postgraduate art history students) and its ideas slightly more elaborated. Insofar as one wants to see the field of art history liberated from the remnants of the ideologies that have done so much harm to scholarship in recent decades, clarity and accessibility are of paramount importance.

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