

To what end? Eschatology in art historiography

Jeanne-Marie Musto

By way of introduction to the following essays it will be worthwhile to consider how the theme of eschatology relates to the historiography of art history, and to outline a few of the varied ways in which these essays address this theme.¹ To study eschatology in art historical texts is to study the revelations or the resolution that mark their explicit or implied goals. It is, in this respect, to investigate a feature inherent to any story. To discuss ends with regard to stories about artworks in particular brings to mind recent explorations of an 'end of art' that have been inspired by, and continue, the Hegelian philosophical tradition.² Those explorations as such do not, however, constitute the purpose of bringing these essays together. The essays presented here focus instead on ends as a component of both the texts they investigate and the interpretive matrix that surrounds them. Empiricists and postmodernists interested in narrative concerns debate the existence of non-fiction – which is what most art historiography purports to be. Prescinding the question of whether historical accounts are necessarily fictional, the narrative techniques employed in writing them tend to be less inventive than those employed in works written as fiction. Perhaps these circumstances account for the relative paucity of narratological considerations of art historiography. All the same, narrative components shape historiographies whether or not they are fictional and whether or not these components are used inventively.

It may be that the conventional nature of narrative leads writers who try to describe events external to their texts (including most writers of art historiography) to overlook their narratives' artifices more readily than do writers of fiction. To counter that tendency, in comparison with art historians, contemporary historians have been placing greater emphasis on attending to the impact of narrative components on their work. Mary Fulbrook, for example, is among those who stress that historians should weigh carefully how emplotment shapes their writing.³ Her

¹ The essays that follow were first brought together in February 2013 at a session of the annual conference of the College Art Association entitled 'To what end? Eschatology in art historiography', which I chaired. I would like to thank, in particular, Lauren Stark of the College Art Association for her assistance with organising the session, and Richard Woodfield, editor of this journal, for his assistance with the publication of the session's papers.

² For more on this discourse, with citations, see the introductory paragraphs of Henrik Karge's essay 'Projecting the future in German art historiography of the nineteenth century: Franz Kugler, Karl Schnaase, and Gottfried Semper', in this journal.

³ Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory*, London: Routledge, 2002, 175. For an attempt to briefly summarize debates between empiricists and post-modernists (and their implications) see also: Mary Fulbrook,

work exemplifies a focus on reforming current practice that has grown out of widespread discontent with traditional modes of history writing. While this discontent has led to an abundance of new chronological, geographical and cultural perspectives, close analysis of the narrative components of earlier historiographies and their impact on particular avenues of research has received less attention.

With regard to art historiography, analysis of the ends of art might be framed in more narrowly narratological terms as analysis of the fate of the protagonist. To integrate this conceptualization of the theme with the broader cultural or spiritual significance commonly attributed to art and its ends (including, of course, by Hegel), I have borrowed the essentially theological term 'eschatology'. More than the study of goals and resolutions internal to given texts, this term invokes their aspiration to wider cultural, or even quasi-religious, import. In texts presented and evaluated as non-fiction the aspiration to inform, and perhaps transform, the reader is generally central, and the narrative structure strongly determines the extent to which it succeeds.

Hegel did not use the term 'eschatology'. Because his particular understanding of history, which has been termed 'realized eschatology', still offers a touchstone for this theme, it deserves closer consideration.⁴ Hegel understood the union of God and humanity – that is, from his perspective, the goal of creation – as having already been fully realized in Jesus. Since that time humanity has been seeking to extend that union and so to achieve perfect freedom for all. In other words, although he viewed the 'end of art' in his day as pointing to freedom's progress, he understood this progress as reaching towards a culmination realized in the past. Several of the essays that follow similarly describe art as struggling to maintain or extend an earlier culmination.

As Henrik Karge points out, nineteenth-century art might well, like the art of today, be described as having taken a 'temporal turn'. This lends it, and its interpretation, special relevance to twenty-first century discussions. Nineteenth-century art historians did not, however, follow Hegel's lead by equating the retrospective character of art in their century with a loss of vitality. Interpreting these art historians through Hegel's lens has tended to diminish understanding of their work. Leading impulses were provided instead by art historians such as Karl Schnaase and Gottfried Semper, who decried efforts to impose new styles on contemporary art. They saw such imposition as foreign to art's internal developmental process. Semper's eschatology did still share at least one commonality with Hegel's. In deriving art's universal and eternal archetypes from

'Why all historical accounts are inevitably theoretical, but some are preferable to others,' *Historically Speaking*, 5:2, November 2003, 12-15.

⁴ For a succinct overview with bibliography, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Modernity, history and eschatology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 493-99, esp. 496.

what he took to be humanity's first artistic endeavours, he, too, described all future art as extending and more fully expressing that which has already been realized.

Eugène Delacroix's and Paul Chenavard's deeply contemplated eschatological visions, examined by David O'Brien, also present art as having been fully realized in the past. For these artists, it was the art of the Renaissance that had achieved this. Yet Renaissance art did not provide archetypes of endless artistic promise or point towards human freedom. Nor did it provide a positive prognosis for the future. These artists envisioned realized eschatologies but, contrary to the realization envisioned by Hegel, this left humanity to move ever further from its highest achievement. Delacroix was unsure of future developments but sure that, despite overall decline, individual geniuses of his day could still create art of the highest quality. Chenavard was more dubious of the present and certain of an anticlimactic – even apocalyptic – future. A fascinating aspect of these troublesome visions, so clearly articulated by O'Brien, is that they appear also to have operated on a deeper, personal level: not only as art historiography, but also as artist's autobiography.

Realization in the future, realization not delimited by place or time, realization in the past, with or without impending apocalypse: Karge's and O'Brien's essays amply demonstrate the drama and variety of nineteenth-century visions of human achievement indexed by art. All, however, stand in stark contrast to the distinctly modernist approach taken in Roger Fry's writings, analysed by Ben Harvey. Fry fully re-conceptualized art's place in human fulfilment. For Fry, the artist cannot provide fulfilment by virtue of his or her artworks as such. The viewer must access it through observing them in silent contemplation. Words distance viewers from the transcendence that an artwork (at least, an accomplished one) provides. This modernist form of transcendence echoes Hegel's union of human and divine more closely than does the fulfilment described by any other of the artists and scholars under discussion here. As Harvey notes, it may have a religious background. At the same time, it is devoid of religious content and rooted in present possibility, and not the distant past, nor the distant future.

Fry doesn't only recommend silence. As Harvey demonstrates, he also uses it as a narrative device. In so doing, Fry undermines, or attempts to undermine, the causality and, by extension, the moral weight that the narrative urge itself ascribes to sequences of events.⁵ But more than undermining what he has already written, Fry's answer undermines any narrative that might follow. "Antistory" is the term that Seymour Chatman employs for another modernist device that attempts to counter the causality inherent in sequencing.⁶ In antistories, sequencing is intentionally manipulated to either undermine implied causality or to use it to

⁵ On the inherent causality implied by even the simplest sequencing of events see Seymour Chatman, "Sequence, contingency, causality," *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978, 45-48.

⁶ Chatman, 'Stories and antistories', *Story and Discourse*, 56-59.

unforeseen effect. The antistory has a following in current art-historical writing: Alex Nagel's *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* provides an example.⁷ To date, however, the effort to escape or undermine implied causality has not led most art historians to embrace either silence or antistories.

Inasmuch as the "narrative urge" is, in most circumstances, inescapable, its silent ascription of causality deserves all the more scrutiny. Michael André Bernstein has addressed the inherent moral implications of narrative sequencing by drawing on the sombre example of Holocaust accounts. He terms 'backshadowing' the tendency to invest the past with meanings that are based on the author's knowledge of a future that was not pre-ordained.⁸ Backshadowing creates a situation in which people are retroactively judged on the basis of circumstances that, according to the hindsight provided by a given narrative context, they should have foreseen. Writing off the full contingency of a given historical moment can make for compelling narrative but it removes agency, and thus complexity, from those who experienced that moment. The final essay in this collection investigates art historiographical problems that derive from similarly structured retroactive judgements.⁹

Turning to the Cold War, Robert Born overlays two levels of analysis, both of which might be termed eschatological. On the one hand, he investigates several general histories of art written in the former East bloc and in the West, and considers the extent to which they present politically determined narrative trajectories. On the other, he examines retroactive judgements of these histories and their authors. Focusing on the work of Arnold Hauser and Mikail Alpatov, Born demonstrates that these scholars, although working in the East bloc, were not impervious to ideas from beyond that intellectual sphere and produced scholarship valued in the West. At times, moreover, Western scholars have been slower to access and apprehend the value of such East bloc scholarship than East bloc scholars have been to access and apprehend the value of even staunchly anti-Communist scholars, such as Ernst Gombrich. In tracing the ways in which each scholar's complicated career defies Cold War rhetoric, Born helps to return integrity as well as agency to those whose work remains caught within that rhetoric's simplistic grasp.

⁷ Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2012.

⁸ Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994.

⁹ Publication of the fourth paper in this session, Jenny Doussan's "Exceptional Aesthetics: Art Historiography Between Benjamin and Schmitt," is expected at a later date. Of the session's essays, it most directly corresponds with Bernstein's concerns because it pertains to historiographical developments that are difficult to retrace without attending to the shadow of the Holocaust. Eschatology enters into her arguments on various levels. One concerns the question of what Walter Benjamin meant by 'a Baroque eschatology', and whether or not he affirmed that such an eschatology existed. This is a key concern for Doussan's broader argument, which questions how the intellectual relationship between Benjamin and his interlocutor Carl Schmitt has been interpreted.

The diversity of the following essays speaks to the potential of eschatological and, more broadly, of narrative themes for investigating the purposes and challenges of writing about art. If an 'end of art' per se is not of direct concern here, Hegel's concept of realized eschatology – an endpoint situated in the past – opens a window onto the temporal difficulty and moral weight inherent in the seemingly straightforward effort to study last things. None of these essays describes an unambiguous progression towards a foregone conclusion. What is more, each considers the theme of eschatology from more than one perspective. In addition to the perspective directly espoused by the historiography under discussion, these include interpretive context, narrative structure, autobiography, and political framework. Because it consists essentially of stories about stories about art, art historiography must consider multiple perspectives. The variety of ways in which this theme comes into play here is, however, surprising. The essays offer alternative endpoints and progressions that cut through the reductive schema of later eras. Together they reveal not only the creativity of earlier artists and scholars but also their relevance to questions being asked anew of art and its historiography today.

Jeanne-Marie Musto is a Visiting Fellow at Fordham University's Center for Medieval Studies, has taught in Philadelphia and Tennessee and received fellowships from the Kress and Fulbright Foundations. Currently she is completing a study entitled "East or West?: Byzantine Architecture and Geopolitical Identity in Nineteenth-Century Central Europe." The following discussion introduces essays produced for a conference session inspired by her desire to explore how narrative structures impact art historiography.

musto.jeannemarie@gmail.com