

Giving Form To History

In this way the historian should no longer try to enter the past; rather, he should allow the past to enter his life.

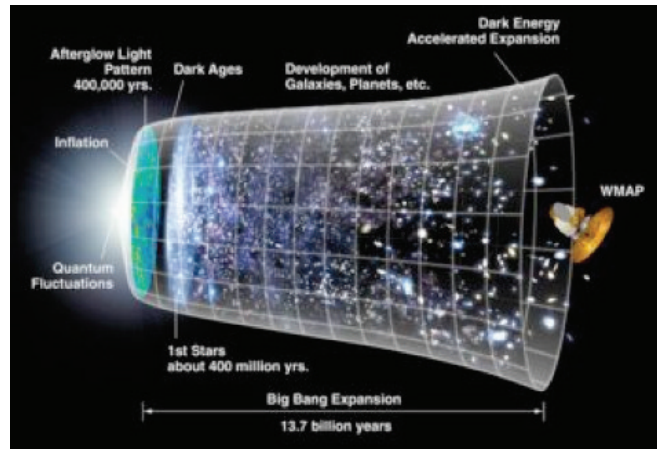
(Rolf Tiedman in Benjamim, W. 1999, 935)

A dad once asked his son 'The story or the warrior, who do you think is stronger?' 'The warrior' replied the son. 'You are wrong' said the father, 'the warrior might win a thousand battles but the story survives to tell the exploits of the warrior'.

(Traditional Nigerian)

'Making History' An exhibition showcasing the Society of Antiquaries at the Royal Academy¹ reminds us of a Biblical time-frame for History which still held sway in enlightened, modernizing Europe deep into the 19th Century, working on the assumption that the world was a matter of a few thousand years old. A complicated genealogy or family tree in the same exhibition attempts to justify the reign of King Henry VI by tracing his lineage and authority back to Adam and Eve. This is hand painted in red, winding, river-like, or tree-like lines, on a textile of which only a few meters of the much longer scroll is unrolled and made visible.

¹ *Making History: Antiquaries In Britain, 1707 - 2007* a touring exhibition, was held at London's Royal Academy 15 Sep. - 2 Dec. 2007.



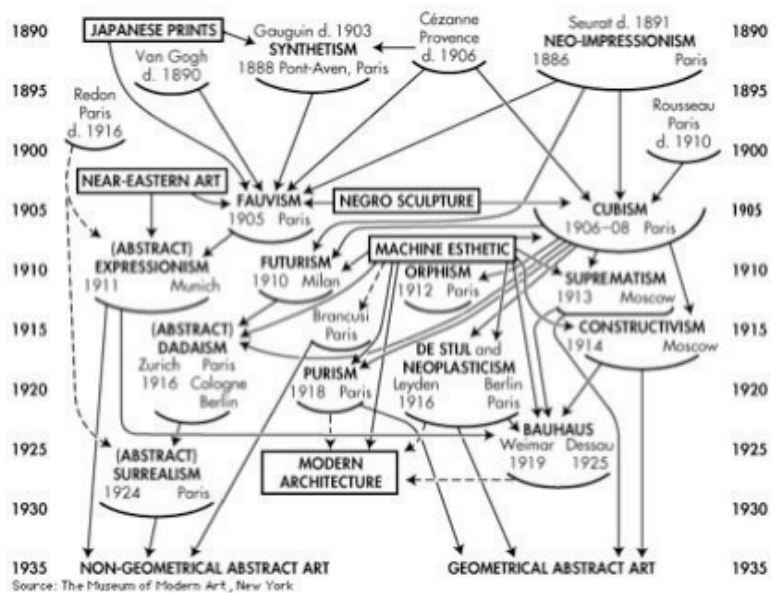
31. NASA, *Cosmic Chronology Diagram*

A more manageable form - albeit for a much greater period of time - appears in a NASA map, using a graphic that can be usefully and easily represented in the ubiquitous 21st century medium and context of A4 paper, or shown easily on 'Powerpoint'. Here, NASA, representing the USA, emulates Henry VI in the way that it plots a divine right, back to the big bang, while inspired formally, not by tree or river-like shapes but by something like a disposable coffee cup. What is perhaps most interesting in these examples is that what we call knowledge of time and History is changing so rapidly that it seems inherently unreliable, and, as a response to this uncertainty, every era and culture imposes form upon that time as History in order to gain a perspectival control, which in turn affords legitimacy and justifies power.

What is true of History may well be true of art history. We can look back into art history today and see powerful individuals crafting and bending history as they

go. London's Courtauld Institute displays not only prime examples of Post Impressionist painting but also the story of how Roger Fry and Samuel Courtauld, between them put the term 'Post Impressionism' on the art history map as part of a project to celebrate and establish the value of Cezanne's work – subsequently seen as pivotal in modern art history.

Anyone who has seen the above-mentioned family tree of Henry VI might agree that it bears similarities to a diagram made by Alfred H. Barr - director of the New York city Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s - as part of the scramble - partially inspired by Fry and Courtauld - to claim an understanding of the dynamically unfolding phenomenon of modern art.



32. Alfred H. Barr, Modern Art history diagram for *Cubism and Abstract Art* catalogue, 1936

In this diagram, arrows sweep and swerve like plans for an occupation; causal connections are made as the story is woven together into a satisfying piece of knowledge. Ultimately, the dragon of uncertainty is slain by modern graphics and everything is clearly labeled by *sans serif* fonts until the nervous curator and historian can rest assured that, despite the revolutionary eruptions of modernity and modernism, everything *does have* a place and remains *in place*.

The form given by Marcel Duchamp to his own personal art history -in the forbidding years of the late 1930s with European futures in increasing doubt-, is the *boite en valise* - now often considered a kind of museum or curatorial exercise. Here, Duchamp hand-made miniatures of his readymades and found appropriate ways to represent each of his varied approaches to art.

As an eccentric pragmatist more attuned to the 20th century's capitalist paradigm than to its opponents and alternatives, Duchamp modestly made his *oeuvre* into a selection of handy salesman's samples, ever-ready to travel lightly (as were many exiles from 1930s Europe) and potentially useful in the seduction of dealers. According to Duchamp's re-reasoning of the operations of artworks, each of these miniatures is capable of expanding, under scrutiny, and with imagination, like memory itself, back to its original scale, the primary ideas and

crucial 'concepts' that give the works value, remain, while size, craft, and materials (all rendered secondary by Duchamp's cerebral revolution) have changed. We can take this as a model of a way in which to represent History by making of it something manageably distilled into a reassuring story that we carry with us while subject to disorientation and violently changing times.^{2 3}



33. Marcel Duchamp, *Boite en Valise*, 1941

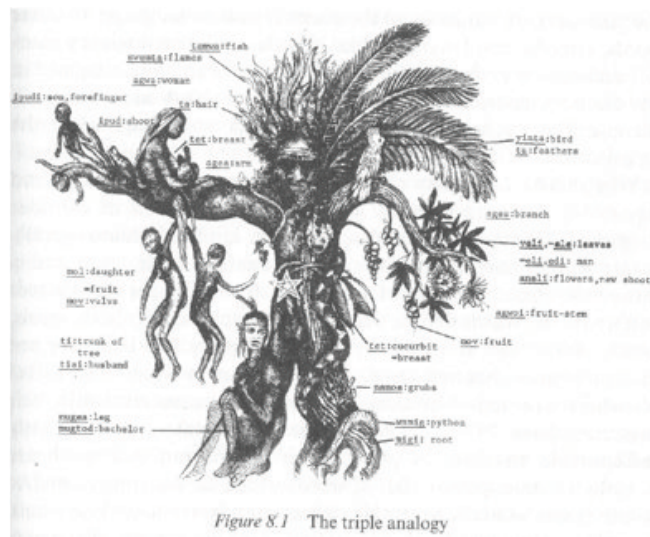
Forming a History of Art may seem relatively benign, it might give unity to a diverse *oeuvre*, it might affect art's value or the taste of the art audience, it might make certain artists and styles prominent while obscuring others, and, at its most serious, it might promote a particular cultural or nation-al perspective at the cost

² Here we also invoke the memory of the briefcase carried by Walter Benjamin in 1940 on his last journey across French mountains to the Spanish border, and which was said by Benjamin to contain documents important to history but which subsequently disappeared. See Fitko, L. In: Benjamin, W. 1999, 946-954)

³ The 20th Century Freudian subject also relies upon personal history with which to form, reform, reconsider the disassembled ruptured and traumatised self.

of obscuring others. While Duchamp's is a self-reflexive, intimately subjective History, Barr, Fry and Courtauld - caught-up in the hot confidence of forming the burgeoning modern narrative - are perhaps unaware of just *how* selective and empowering their overarching perspectives are, and for this ignorance we might today ridicule them, or, with a quasi-Christian generosity, 'forgive them for they know not what they do'.

We can at least compare their attempts to form art history with the following image, illustrative of the anthropological art history method of the British social anthropologist Alfred Gell, (1945-1997) and here used to refer to an increasing tendency of recent, globally-conscious, post-colonial and postmodern art histories, seeking other forms and perspectives by which to approach an understanding of art and its history more relevant to 21st century concerns.



34. Alfred Gell, *The Triple Analogy*, 1999

If we turn away from art history and towards art's view of History itself, we may assume that the stakes become somewhat higher. In Post Modern times, when every phenomenon has the potential to claim a 'meta' status, to occupy a hyper-reality, and take its place within a relativism resulting from a critique of value difference, Barr's map looks slightly comic and so much less authoritative now as to appear almost arbitrary. From a feminist perspective, a post-colonial perspective, a multicultural, 'Hi-Lo' or ahistorical perspective, Barr's graphic and linear attempts to command, direct, and establish the complex narratives and relationships, appear merely local, simplistic, and defensive.



35. Simon Patterson, *The Great Bear*, 1992

Postmodern artist Simon Patterson lampooned such procedures by subverting the London Underground map and giving lines and stations to intersecting

cultural categories - e.g. Philosophers or Renaissance painters for one line, and famous footballers for another line- and allowing these varied historical figures to potentially encounter each other at major junctions where surprising possibilities might result from their insertion into this subverted piece of classic, modern organizational form, a form which - it is worth noting at this point - we know to be untrue, and which is yet an extremely useful representation.

To diverge further from art and to come closer to History itself, we can now explore forms and History in relation to a specific cultural and national History, the History of South Africa and its recently dis-assembled apartheid regime. Since the euphoria of the early 1990s, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, won a democratic election, and formed a forgiving 'rainbow' government incorporating all minorities, the government has come under -perhaps inevitable - criticism for the slow pace of significant social change. However, something on which little expense has been spared - and this is *not* a criticism - is History, which pivots around two 'state-of-the-art' museums in the township of Soweto.

The Apartheid Museum and the nearby Hector Pieterse Museum tell the same history, *as* a story, and in slightly different ways, to visiting schoolchildren, local residents, visitors from Johannesburg and the rest of the country, and to travelers from all over the world increasingly interested in sites of historical trauma as tourist destinations (a phenomenon that Walter Benjamin would surely have been

interested to have witnessed and to have reflected upon). The Apartheid Museum gives us the whole emotive story of how the apartheid regime came into existence, of how it thrived and eventually succumbed to forces of social justice and racial equality. The Hector Pieterse Museum focuses on what might be called a turning point or fulcrum of that story. The story is extremely emotive, and the Apartheid Museum is cleverly designed using a blend of Hi-Tech and Brutalism, to lead visitors up, down, around and through, dark and sometimes dismal spaces, while video recordings spark tears, anger and disbelief before offering relief and joy, as the story of a horrifying, and disturbingly recent oppression turns to one of victory and we are delivered into the light of brighter, more open spaces by the thoughtful architecture.

In Johannesburg's currently wary and skeptical climate, a cynic might say that the museums are propagandist and heavy-handed in their formation of this History, but, given their temporal and physical proximity to the traumatic events they describe, and the deeply-felt emotions which motivate their project, it is hard to imagine how else this story can be told - at this time at least. Nevertheless, the story is here convincingly pinned into form and into place by intelligently staged, designed, and selected, information, artifacts and tableaux.

But let's now briefly *tell* the story. It is a good story, though it is a story of something bad that leads to something better, and that 'leading' *is* the story, the

story that led the country from something bad to something better over a period of almost 50 years, and which the visitor now takes-in, by scrutinising and imaginatively unfolding miniaturised representations in one or two hours.

Note that the all-important story not only outlives and records the events that inspire it, but also, in some way precedes, inspires, or gives-rise-to those events i.e. we could say that it is the story that *led* the country even before the story itself was completed and formed. What we might call the 'spirit' of the revolution, of any revolution, the spirit of necessary change, the spirit of progress, this is itself a story - albeit 'in outline', a story whose form cries out for appropriate events, content, to fill and fulfill it. In this respect we might also say that the story and all its events seem to be *made for* the museum rather than the other way around. We could also go further and imagine that what we call 'the world' is really just a magnificent machine made from stories and made for the purpose of making stories.

But the story of course also has independence from the state-funded museum, and remains in the mouths, hearts and minds of the people, in a state of flux, which is maybe its truest and most accurate form. Like all good stories it can be told from memory and like all such stories it has been told before, and each time it is told it is a little different, a little less 'accurate', as even if the words remain the same the world in which they are spoken will have changed. The clearer the *form* of the story becomes the more convincing its contents and meaning

become, and therefore we could say, like the London Underground map, a story can become increasingly useful and reliable the *less* accurate it becomes.

A policy of 'apartheid' (or 'separateness') was installed, as what the South African government, in 1947 (i.e. with knowledge of Nazi atrocities) openly referred to as a 'final solution'.⁴ This justified the *de*struction of black and mixed urban communities and the *con*struction of vast suburban townships like Soweto where people were forced to live in tiny, uniform houses without electricity or any public transport other than a limited train service which could bring necessary labour into the city in the morning and then out again in the evening. There was a curfew for black people in the all-white city, and so, to not comply with this strict mechanistic schedule was dangerous and could even be fatal, as many black people died mysteriously during apartheid once they found themselves in police custody.

Where black and mixed communities had previously thrived in the city, houses were bulldozed, making space to build leafy white developments with wide drives and large private houses. Meanwhile, in Soweto, every house remains today the same, or very similar, for as far as the eye can see, and consists of four walls, four small rooms, a roof and an outside toilet, all of which, from the outset of this unprecedented example of social and racial engineering, became overcrowded.

⁴ Within the apartheid Museum exhibition a video recording of a speech being made by Mr Verwoerd during his 1947 election campaign shows that he was elected on a promise of implanting a 'final solution'.

Education for blacks under apartheid was also strategically minimal, the prime minister himself stated that it should purposefully qualify black people only for 'a menial role in society',⁵ there being no desire on the part of whites for blacks to be in any way mobile; i.e. neither in terms of social aspiration nor geographic location. Furthermore, when children *were* taught they were taught in the Afrikaans language of the oppressive minority - a version of Flemish or Dutch - not in English, and not in any of the many indigenous languages of the region.

In 1976, after nearly thirty years of apartheid rule, children in Soweto schools aged between eight and eighteen, requested that they be taught in English - in this way hoping to find a way to communicate with the world beyond the confining culture of apartheid. They made small, unsuccessful protests in their schools, but on the night of June 15th 1976 pupils of several schools secretly made placards for a march the following day about which they informed neither their parents nor their teachers. They would march to *insist upon* being taught in English.

On the morning of 16th June, in the Soweto schools, when it was time to sing a daily hymn in the Afrikaans language, the children began singing instead a black

⁵ 'They were "riots looking for a place to happen", in the words of a *Sunday Times* editorial, and stemmed from a spirit of revolt among youth which was partly rooted in their dislike of the Bantu Education system, to which Dr Verwoerd had publicly and very explicitly referred in earlier years as education for a menial place in society'. (Davenport, T.H.R & Saunders, C. 2000, 449)

African's song, and this was the secretly arranged signal between them that the march would indeed take place. By the end of that day, several of the children had been shot dead by the police. Hector Pieterse, aged thirteen, was the first, or one of the first, to die. The place where he fell is now marked with a substantial monument *and* the museum named after him. The events of that day are seen as pivotal, in that this children's crusade began the newly focused and assertive struggle against apartheid which eventually resulted in South Africa being expelled from the British Commonwealth, suffering sanctions imposed by United Nations countries, and engaging in a guerrilla war with an international dimension led by the ANC who finally overcame apartheid by forcing the Afrikaans into a democratic election nearly fifty years after apartheid began and fifteen years after the children's march of June 1976.

This is the story told today in Soweto's new museums. We have re-told the story, which is just one of the many that you might hear today in South Africa, all of which are part of the one *big* story that, in one way or another no-one stops talking about or thinking about as the country searches to find its *own* form and to heal deep and bitter wounds. White Afrikaans have their own stories of course which also give form to History. Some may best be forgotten and, under the unprecedented terms of the transition of power, may also be forgiven. But, to take just one small example that *is* perhaps worth remembering (in light, at least,

of our theme here), we can make reference to a book, titled *Genealogical Register of the South African People*, published in 1966:

it researched the limits of the South African nation in terms of intermarriage and genealogy [...] it draws a *white* limit, a racial boundary, despite the apparently inclusive term South African people. There is palpable relief in South African Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd's preface to the book: 'That the people remained white', he marvels, 'in spite of exceptional circumstances, is [...] remarkable'.

(Verwoerd, H.F. in Malherbe, D.F. du Stellenbosch in: Chipkin, I. 2007, 29-30)

Though its aims are repugnant and its conviction apparently deluded, this genealogy can be seen to serve the same *formal* purpose as all our other examples. This 'genealogical register', like the family tree, the Biblical history, the Nasa map, the museum's story, Barr's diagram, or Duchamp's *boite en valise*, is yet another form given to another history and designed with the intention of legitimising a present and presenting a legitimacy - even though it is based on the howling *illegitimacy* of a tiny percentage of colonizing oppressors describing themselves as '*the* South African people' and thereby insisting that everyone else in the country, *despite their indigenous heritage*, is either *not part* of its people, or simply not 'people'. Again we are reminded that inaccuracy is no bar to usefulness.

Historians must always hesitate before the responsibility and authority they wield in writing, because History is made by, and remains in, their hands. Every

History needs its form or its debate with form, a shape and style that make its contents plausible and repeatable. The apartheid museum needs its architects and designers along with the influence of numerous video and installation artists, to make its stories clear and to make its points with impact. There is a level of History that is scientific, involving research and a search for objectivity, but there is also its form and the crucial art *by which it is* formed.



36. Hiraki Sawa, Detail from *Hako*, Chisenhale Gallery Installation, 2007

The forms we give to history will - it may seem from our examples - always be influenced by the empirical world, whether it be the influence of the forms of rivers or trees, of briefcases, coffee-cups or maps. We have seen how artists have played a role in influencing our perception of History by lending to it their

own changing ideas of form. Here we can detail a few contemporary artists who might perpetuate this legacy. In an installation at London's Chisenhale Gallery,⁶ Hiraki Sawa used digital film techniques to break an enigmatic story into a number of sub-narratives which the viewer formed only by moving about the large room, occasionally making narrative connections via a kind of 'parallax' whereby certain, apparently disparate sub-narratives would suddenly 'line-up' or synchronise, thereby illuminating the whole.

Moreover, while each of the looped sub-narratives momentarily came to rest between loops, the physical apparatus of the screen on which they were projected was clearly referred-to by a projection of white, molded wallpaper which momentarily replaced the sub-narrative's illusions of other times and places and snapped the viewer back in to the presence and awareness of the mechanism responsible for the illusions. This adamant reminder of the event that we presently occupy, and also of the practicalities behind the 'magic' created by the artist with digital film, eventually conceded once more to the return of the looped sub-narrative. While still composed of rectangles, Sawa's installation disperses and temporalises the controlling modernist grid and helps us think of the way that a kind of historicising 'parallax' invariably allows present perspectives to 'align' certain sub-narratives into an overarching narrative. Meanwhile, his work also seems to insist that, however we are caught-up in the stories that we make and

⁶ Held between 5th September and 14th October 2007.

tell, the here and now should never be forgotten - even if it may not yet have its own story or form within which we can lose or divert ourselves.



37. Saskia Olde-Wolbers, *Placebo*, 2002

The artist Saskia Olde Wolbers blatantly, yet nonetheless mysteriously, juxtaposes forms and stories in her work in a strange dialectic. The visual forms often appear abstract, complex and subject to morphological dynamics, while the spoken narratives that accompany them evolve in parallel, clearly and simply, and the two offer each other an elusive, yet somehow satisfying relationship. Here it is as if the story offers itself to the form and the form to the story, while each exists autonomously without need of the other and are here brought together almost arbitrarily by the artist as if to insist that neither element - form or story - should be complacent about its identity but should always be open and ready to be questioned by its other, *an* other. In the piece illustrated above the

artist has used a found object which is essentially a grille or grid (a birdcage) and repeatedly immersed it in paint, filming the resulting encounter between static grid (as an *arch* form) and fluid paint (formlessness), thus also making allusion to the history of painting -its surfaces, abstraction into monochromes and geometries through modernism, its own dialogue between 'thing' and event.

But what is most useful for our argument is that the forms Olde-Wolbers proffers - made via unexpected subversions of everyday materials- appear far more complex and mobile than any we have thus-far seen, and might therefore provide History with appropriate models to replace those outmoded by the passing of modernism and the 20th century. The fact that Olde-Wolbers not only uses 20th century strategies (e.g. Dada) of found or readymade objects, but also film, to present these possible forms, echoes Deleuze's reminders that new technologies, such as Cinema, give us not only new kinds of image but new possibilities and forms of thought. Here, we are claiming the same point for the possibilities of thinking History.



38. Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993



39. Katsushika Hokusai, *Ejiri in Suruga Province (A Sudden Gust of Wind)*, 1830-35

The artist Jeff Wall replays Art History's stories and links their forms to contemporary political issues. As he does so, he appears to support our implicit argument that, whereas the motive for the production of History is always political (in that it concerns the present) the forms given to History, to stories, and to events, have always been and continue to be the responsibility of art. We could say that art history will always be a history of the art of History.



40. Thomas Struth, *San Zaccaria*, 1995

The artist Thomas Struth shows how we offer our *own* forms, literally and symbolically, to History, by increasingly inhabiting its spectacle, as awed, Lilliputian subjects, in a way that seems anodyne compared to the conceits of Enlightenment that hoped to master History as an external object. The figures in Struth's pictures are also post modern, differing in their perspective from the conceits of modernity, which regarded History as a beast to be harnessed and steered. Today, we seem to crawl around on the dead body of this exhausted or slain monster, living out ahistorical, consumerist lives; touring the surface of History's carcass. History, no matter how unsavory, can become an aspect of leisure and pleasure, and, despite the professed aims of the museum, the more we make a spectacle of History the more we diminish its reality, relevance, and relation to a present which is correspondingly diminished.

What is *not* diminished in this procedure is of course spectacle, consumerism, tourism, all of which only grow in stature by proving themselves capable of encompassing any challenge (whether from present or the past) to their monopolistic colonisation of the popular imagination.



41. Johannes Phokela, *Percussion Piece on Mount Serious*, 1998

Johannes Phokela, a South African artist who grew up in Soweto in the 1970s and was thus forced to learn to read, write, and paint by candlelight, today repeatedly illuminates matters of form while re-painting and remixing those 17th century Dutch and Flemish painters whose work shared the period in which the first Dutch and Flemish settlers began the colonial expropriations which would lead to apartheid. Phokela's work therefore 'short-circuits' History's formed narratives, refusing to allow the established perspective of Western Art History to obscure distasteful political factors which made its apotheoses possible. Instead,

Phokela actively reawakens these political factors in the form of 'counter narratives' and as part of the unfinished business of a long search for justice.

The artists to whom we have we have referred engage with History from a non-specialist, and therefore oblique, perspective, but remind us, adamantly, that History *has been formed* and that therefore there are infinite and imaginative ways by which to *reform* History, even while the purpose of every History is ultimately to clarify, not History itself (which we might say does not exist) but our present perspective on historical events.

An important point to which we have alluded above remains as yet unresolved or inadequately considered, and that is the question of the increased conviction and reliability given to History by forms that are nonetheless *inaccurate*. Perhaps the best way to develop this is to shoulder responsibility for the fact that, when we speak of forms in relation to History we not only invoke the concept of 'the story' but also, in other ways, depart from any more scientific vision of the discipline (or the disciplined vision of the science). Where we speak of form we rather speak of art that will always in some way inform any science. For example, we could consider the numerous crafted, idiosyncratic objects, used over the centuries as essential to the proving of scientific hypotheses.⁷ Or, the very syntax and

⁷ Oxford's Museum of Scientific Instruments provides excellent evidence of this dependent relationship of Art, Science, object and idea.

grammar within which, and by which, scientific discoveries are made convincing when they are published.

Art, though it may flirt with ideals, is never unduly concerned with accuracy but sees its duty as finding the means by which to convince a subject, rather than aspiring to be the passive object of and for a subject. Art is therefore an attack that is a best form of defense, but in its dialogue with materials and processes, art is continuously forced to acknowledge, in a way that easily becomes self-reflexive, the inventiveness and arbitrariness of the forms it gives to ideas. In the relation of forms to History art will always be a *rhetoric* helping science to sustain - however momentarily, or enduringly - the illusion of an accurate and reliable truth that can be used to orient us within an otherwise worryingly formless environment.

This orientation allows us to proceed and perhaps even to progress, if only from one inaccurate form (and its corresponding sensation of orientation) to another. It is not therefore necessary that the forms we give to History be judged accurate or not, as our present perspective must - by definition - be incongruous to the past it represents. What is crucial, and has hopefully been demonstrated in the examples above, whereby a form has been chosen and given to History, is that, in and for their time, forms utilise appropriate reference to the contemporary

environment in such a way as to make whichever legitimizing History wishes to be told, sufficiently current and thereby credible.

Finally, we can use these discoveries to illuminate our broader, underlying, or parallel question regarding the writing of philosophy and our attempts to understand what is loving (*philos*) and what is convincingly wise (*sophia*).⁸ Where art forms History it is clearly a rhetorical and formal device with no commitment, in itself, to truth. Nevertheless, without the form given to History by art (and even artifice) History will have no conviction, no sense of legitimacy by which to convince us of its truth. And what we say here of History is clearly applicable to the production of Philosophy in writing.

⁸ *sophia*, throughout this dissertation, will be interpreted and deployed as meaning not so much 'wisdom' but the ability, tendency, or wish *to convince and to be* convinced of the presence of wisdom. Thus, *Philos - sophy* becomes a love of the art of convincing while acknowledging the immeasurable increment of hesitation that lies between believing and not believing, between words and faith.