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AND THE IMAGE

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5.

Itay Sapir

The Destruction of Painting: an Art History for Art that resists History

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At the entrance to his inferno, Dante imagined the admonition «Abandon all hope, you who enter here»; at the entrance to his post-artistic infernal paradise, Danto could have placed the same warning.

One should perhaps be forgiven a rather miserable pun because it crystallises a problematic point in Danto's – Arthur Danto's – reasoning when he postulates «The End of Art»¹: even if we are convinced by the idea that art's aim can be thought of as self-reflective, that this aim is no more – but no less – than defining what art is, still, Danto's leap from this thesisidea to the claim that art as such a process has ended remains quite unexplained. Only by presuming that art had its *final* word by becoming philosophy can one be sure that the end has indeed arrived, but of course, as Danto himself reminds us, it is impossible to even imagine the future forms that art – or anything else – will adopt. Leaving aside, then, the insoluble question of art's future, there remains the more fertile meta-historical question: namely, why are so many art historians and theorists nowadays announcing 'the end', be it of art (Danto), of art theory (Burgin) or of art history (Belting)²? What makes our time so apt for apocalyptic theories of art?

¹ A. Danto, *The End of Art*, in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York, 1986, pp. 81-116.

² V. Burgin, *The End of Art Theory*, London, 1986; H.ans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, trans. C. Saltzweid and M. Cohen, Chicago, & London, 2003. The original German book was, indeed, called *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte*, though its first version had a question mark that left the issue more open.

The answer is already hinted at, in the double meaning of the term ‘art history’ itself, signifying as it does both the development of art as such and the ‘story’ we tell about it. The two are closely related, of course, as the narratives we invent about art depend on the routes taken by art itself at the time of writing, just as much as they reflect the ‘real’ past permutations of artistic creation. Thus, one tends to imagine the end of the history of art – the end of its evolution – when one’s narrative tools are unable to tell its story any longer; that is, when the *discipline* of art history is at a loss when facing the artistic events around it.

One would expect, then, that such an end would be announced from time to time, rather than being an unprecedented, unique phenomenon specific to our times. And in fact, this is indeed the case. One famous example is Nicolas Poussin’s declaration that his colleague and predecessor Michelangelo da Caravaggio came into this world «to destroy painting». Caravaggio, then, according to Poussin, could have put an end to the history of that particular art form, if not to the history of art in general³.

The two historical situations – Caravaggio’s and our own – are similar in at least one, crucial way: both emerge immediately following what seems to be a stabilisation, an institutionalisation, even a completion of art history and of the art historical practice. Caravaggio lived just a few decades after Vasari; the end of the Twentieth century followed the culmination of Art History’s Panofskian professionalisation, and inevitably had to deal with its aftermath. Not that Danto, Burgin and the other prophets of apocalypse adhere to the traditionalist currents in art history – on the contrary, they go against them in every possible way – but in announcing all these ‘ends’ they seem to throw out the baby of history with the positivist bathwater, thus discarding the possibility of history based on totally reconsidered premises⁴.

In any case, the moments of reassuring know-how and theoretical rest, of unquestioned principles and full-blooded teleology provided by mainstream art history, encountered a blatant resistance and a conceptual contradiction by art itself as it was changing contemporaneously. The question of late Twentieth century art and how it undermined not only Gombrich and

³ Another problem with Danto’s text is that it reduces art history *until* modernism to the pursuit of mimesis, thus leaving unmentioned complex cases like Caravaggio’s, and failing to account for much that happened in art between 1550 and 1900.

⁴ Discarding it *in theory*, that is: Danto, for instance, went on to write ‘After the End of Art’.

Panofsky but also Clement Greenberg is, unfortunately, too broad and fresh to be dealt with here, and it exceeds, moreover, my specific period of study. On the other hand, I believe that the case of Caravaggio can turn out to be very instructive, as a 'distant mirror', for understanding what is currently going on in art history as it tries to come to terms with the art of the present. Of special interest will be the way in which art history even today looks at Caravaggio, for it can thus be shown how his work *still* does not conform to accepted art historical frameworks. The latter, it may seem, changed little over the course of the last centuries, if the 'mainstream' is to be considered all that Art History, with a capital 'a', has to offer.

Vasari, notoriously, told the teleological story of the Italian Renaissance as the only story worth telling as far as art was concerned. Art reached a climax in the works of Raphael and in particular Michelangelo (Buonarroti, not Caravaggio), and its history has, indeed, ended. At the other temporal end of the Caravagguesque episode, Poussin expressed the same apprehension: after the Renaissance's peak, someone like Caravaggio could only destroy the qualities already achieved. To be sure, Poussin himself, being a painter, had some idea of how to make painting linger, and, in spite of the Caravaggist threat, he audaciously searched for – and, in his opinion, found – the necessary antidote. What is nonetheless clear, however, is that in art history as it was understood both by Vasari and by Poussin, Caravaggio just could not fit in. A different form of art history, a new art historical discourse was necessary to make sense of his art. At the beginning of the Twenty-first century, it seems that such a discourse has yet to be invented.

What is it, then, that makes Caravaggio's art so resistant to history? The answer spans several epistemological levels and several meanings of the word 'history'.

First, there is of course good old Alberti's *historia*, the basis – according to the art theorist's *On Painting* – of the art of painting, but also of any worthwhile composition considered individually. Italian Renaissance artists, in general, followed this basic rule, constructing their work around a preliminary story – a narrative text – and using the surface allotted them for the pictorial elaboration of the fundamental informational content included in that *historia*. Needless to say, this account of classical Renaissance art ignores much of what some currents of art history have uncovered in such supposedly textually-based works: subversive pictorial transgressions, wilful incoherencies, exegetic fantasy. The important point, however, is that painters from Giotto and up to Caravaggio produced works that *could* plausibly be interpreted as a

direct imitation of reality *and* as a direct transmission of narrative, informational content. I would claim that Caravaggio, whose work has indeed been interpreted in this way, could not have been plausibly considered a direct painter of *historiae* without some serious effort on the part of art historians *not to see* important parts of his paintings.

Caravaggio's works resist history first because they do not offer the viewer the basic coordinates of a well-built narrative, namely time and space. The former is somewhat difficult to grasp in pictorial terms, and involves metaphysical considerations on which I cannot elaborate now; the question of space, on the other hand, is quite straightforward and should suffice for my purpose. Take, for example, Here is *The taking of Christ*, now in Dublin (image 1). Where does this event, full of excitement and drama, take place? We do not know. We cannot know. In fact, literally speaking, it does not *take place* at all, as no place is indicated for the action to happen in. Only non-articulated darkness surrounds the depicted scene; the only locational information supplied to the spectator is a smooth, empty blackness. The rich web of interactions and relations between figures, architecture and landscape, so typical of Renaissance art, is here totally absent. To be sure, the existence of an exterior is hinted at, at least by the desperate cry of the person on the left to whoever can hear, but precisely who that might be, we can only guess – any environment is left out of our grasp as spectators of this pictorial event.

Caravaggio has deprived the scene of its context, and created instead an episode floating in an undefined space. The cold shoulder this turns to the knowledge-avid spectator is further enhanced by the impenetrable shield, another obstacle for our direct, immediate comprehension of 'what is going on', and by the curious-but-eventually-frustrated attitude of the figures themselves, especially of Caravaggio's *Doppelgänger Doppelgänger* trying to spread some light around, striving to see the crucial moment of Judas' kiss – and apparently arriving just too late and standing just too far to see anything. We are compelled, in a way, not only to 'identify' with him, but also to re-enact his thwarted act of seeing. If the painting was intended simply to 'tell a story', then it seems to have failed miserably.

It may seem delicate to pass from this 'resistance to history' – history understood as 'story', as it is in any case in most European languages except English – to the more general 'resistance to art history', the 'refusal' of a style of painting to be incorporated in the narrative continuum of this art's development. Nevertheless, I would like to claim that the two are aspects of one and the same phenomenon. It is not a coincidence that Vasari was both a

painter and the father of art history – or rather of a very specific tradition and concept of art history. The impulse to tell a coherent story *in* art is coextensive with the impulse to tell a coherent story *of* art – and often to position oneself clearly within such a history. The story of art is no different, in Vasarian eyes, from the heroic, teleological stories that art can tell. Arguably, there can still exist a coherent, convincing narrative of non-coherent or non-narrative art; be that as it may, this was not, historically, the case of the Italian Renaissance. By refusing straightforward, linear narrative painting, Caravaggio excluded himself from the narrative that, Hegelian *avant la lettre*, saw art as incessantly advancing towards the ultimate realisation of itself as narrative-turned-image. Caravaggio's art, rather than being another link in this glorified chain, was more of a break, an abyssal fall, a wholly new paradigm, so much so that it could not be understood if art was to be comprehended exclusively in terms of the existing framework. It could not but 'destroy painting' and all the efforts put into it over at least two centuries.

One of the most convincing recent accounts of the ever-fluctuating relations between art and its history is Michael Ann Holly's *Past Looking*, in which the author shows how historians' writing is influenced – Holly prefers the term «prefigured» – by the rhetorical structures of the artworks they discuss⁵. In the examples chosen by Holly – Burckhardt and the Renaissance, Wölfflin and the Baroque among others – this link is easily demonstrable. It means, of course, that something in the historian's account was indeed profoundly 'right', because the vision he proposed was inherently adequate for the work in question, was already 'there' even before the process of interpretation began. In Caravaggio's case, however, something went terribly wrong.

There is, to be sure, an adequacy between the rhetoric of most writing *about* Caravaggio and the rhetorical structure this writing *imputes* to the painter's work. The scientific stance of the history-writing, filled with factual affirmations pronounced in a positive, confident tone, seems to stem from Caravaggio's own 'Realism', from his acute observation and immediate, direct representation of reality.

The conventional wisdom, not to say superstition, regarding Caravaggio's 'direct, immediate Realism' is much too broad a theme to tackle in this paper. What is important to emphasise is the way in which 'Holly's rule', the similarity between object and its interpretation, and the truth-value it is said

⁵ M.A. Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, Ithaca, & London, 1996.

to ensure the latter, was here short-circuited by Caravaggio's violent break with the past and by the rhetorical regime he invented, one characterized precisely by a resistance to verbal rhetoric and knowledge. The general discourse about Caravaggio, exemplified in numerous books, articles and exhibitions as recent as the one shown currently in the National Gallery of London, invented a paradoxically enlightened Caravaggio, a Caravaggio who could fit into 'art history'⁶; the price has been an ever-widening 'blind spot' that evacuated from the paintings, for example, the ubiquity of large, unarticulated black surfaces, the ambiguous gaze-relations between the depicted figures, and the consistent impoverishment and reduction of the phenomenological richness of human perceptions into minimal, theatrical compositions.

For Caravaggio's art defies not only coherent narrativity. It is also the site of a subversion of knowledge, of a proliferating '*non-savoir*'. Narrative is, after all, a specific case of knowledge, one form in which information can be organised, but Caravaggio's Tenebrism goes further than a simple rejection of linear narratives. It could have, for example, replaced such narratives by adopting description *à la* Svetlana Alpers or by using the expressive force of colour and its power to inform the painterly matter. But what did happen, in fact, was that Caravaggio drowned centuries of the *disegno* vs. *colorito*, or Florence vs. Venice debate, by simply flooding it with black paint. For if legible, intelligible meaning was annihilated under his heavy shadows, so was the suggestive power of a varied and subtle colour-scheme. In the important part of Caravaggio's paintings in which nothing but black paint is to be seen, both *disegno* and *colorito* timidly shrink to invisibility under the unprecedented power of that newborn beast: the *non-savoir*, the 'non-knowledge'. Moreover, this resistance to knowledge is emerging in a period that engendered other forms of *non-savoir*, such as Montaigne's scepticism and Giordano Bruno's insistence on the infinity of the universe – and, thus, on its inaccessibility to exhaustive, systematic knowledge.

Caravaggio's art, then, negates knowledge; at least some of its aspects do, for we are still, with him, at a stage in which the possibility is only hinted at, we are at the beginning of a long process that will culminate, perhaps, with Malevich's *White on White*. The epistemological obstacles in *The Taking of Christ*, first and foremost the surrounding darkness, have no reference in the conventional sense; they withhold any information apart from the mate-

⁶ The exhibition is *Caravaggio: The Final Years*, that started in Naples and arrived in London in the spring of 2005.

rial presence of paint on the canvas. They are, in Georges Didi-Huberman's terms, *visual*, for they are neither visible – strictly speaking there is nothing there to see – nor invisible – for the layer of black paint *is* undeniably there, in front of our eyes⁷. But the history of the visual requires a wholly renewed toolbox: the attempts to apply to it methods developed to deal with other, 'scientifically definable' categories has led, among other results, to a misunderstanding of all that was new and interesting in Caravaggio's artistic revolution.

If the important element of Caravaggio's art for a future 'art history', can be named 'the visual', a realm of pure ocularity far removed from – and in no need of – reference and mimesis, then one might conclude that this future art history, or rather this non-art-history, already exists: visual studies, or visual culture, have of course been with us for several decades by now. But the study of visual culture, even though it was developed as an alternative and antithesis to traditional art history, tackles an altogether different problem of the somewhat stultified discipline: it questionstackles the definition of *art*. Simply put, whereas visual culture – or, for that matter, image theory – questions the exclusivity of the objects discussed by art history, I am more interested here in challenging the other, sometimes forgotten component of the discipline's name: history.

As is well known, historicism, especially as developed in the Nineteenth Century, ideologically created the historical disciplinescience as a linearly narrative, causal and positivistic science. Institutionalised Art history, and for that matter also most theories of 'visual culture' as a coherent synchronic entity, generally adopted these characteristics, critically contestable in themselves, that is for history, and even less convincing as tools for the analysis of art, the development of which does not follow the logics of cause and effect, or the coherency of a well-built narrative. In the case of Caravaggio, it is the painter's historical position that cannot be explained by any such coherent tale.

On the other hand, Caravaggio's status as creator of 'art' has never been contested; even Poussin, perhaps unwittingly, approved of such a status: only a work of art, operating in the functional grid and in the social web defining art and relating to it, could 'destroy art'. A non-artistic image, or an image whose artistic status is left undetermined, would not be able to influence negatively the very existence, or the prestige of painting-as-art. In any case, the

⁷ Cf. G. Didi-Huberman, *La peinture incarnée*, Paris 1985; Id., *Devant l'image*, Paris 1990.

problem does not lie there: Art History itself, in the last decades, has already incorporated into its exclusive sphere of jurisdiction images whose status as art remains disputable and ultimately quite irrelevant – the anthropological branches of art history do just that – without solving by so doing the historical problem of Caravaggio's artistic significance. The positioning of his paintings in a wider, more open field of images and image-making is certainly a worthwhile undertaking, but given that the images he created were made as artworks and were always perceived as such, concentrating exclusively on their role as 'simply' images will do no more than eluding the fundamental question: namely, how can one write the *history*, the Art History, of such an unexpected, seemingly independent, incommensurable irruption of artistic genius?

In spite of what may have seemed to be an all-encompassing indictment of Art History's dealings with Caravaggio, there have been, of course, some very interesting, even brilliant attempts to deal precisely with Caravaggio's resistance to 'ordinary' historical narration and to the reductive, simplistic treatment of time that such narration often entails. Those accounts, themselves acts of art-historical resistance, often came, not surprisingly, from scholars who were not exactly, or not at all, art historians. Three examples are *To Destroy Painting* by Louis Marin, *Caravaggio's Secrets* by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, and *Quoting Caravaggio* by Mieke Bal⁸. Are these books works of art history? Of course they are, as they place Caravaggio in a complex, multi-layered historical texture and structure. But none of these books is a work of 'capital-lettered' Art History, the kind that organises exhibitions, attributes paintings to painters and tells us how Caravaggio's emergence was nothing but the logical consequence of any number of prior elements ranging from Lombard naturalism, through anti-mannerism, to Venetian colourism. Quantitatively, the latter art historical practices remain by far the majority, whereas Caravaggio's art calls for historiographic renewal, for a more complex treatment of the intricacies of space and time in the texture of history. Such complexity, allowing Warburgian *Nachleben*, anachronism as developed by Didi-Huberman, Pre-posterous history as practiced by Mieke Bal, or psychoanalytical, symptomal time, is always an important contribution to art history, but it is particularly necessary in cases like that of Caravaggio.

⁸ L. Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, Chicago 1995; L. Bersani, U. Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Cambridge, Mass., London 1998; M. Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago, London 1999.

And perhaps it is needed just as much in the case of contemporary art, that is of late-twentieth, early twenty-first century art, visual culture, image-making or what have you. Let me go back, in my conclusion, to the question with which I set out, the question we came here to discuss: what kind of art history can be adequate for our times? Is art history still possible, plausible, interesting?

In our so-called 'Information Age', one could say that art tackles precisely these two issues: the question of age – that is, of the specificity of our time, its relation to the past and the future – and the question of information. These two, interrelated issues were also very much at stake in the context of that distant Caravaggesque mirror, with its undermining of *past* Renaissance principles governing the transmission of *information* in a work of art. To be sure, contemporary art is to a certain extent exempt free of the traditionalist hold dominating Caravaggio studies to these day. However, the persistence of art historical prejudices both encourages new methods and disciplines that propose good answers, but to other, different questions – as in the case of visual culture and image studies – and provokes the apocalyptic mood that I referred to at the outset of my paper. It is not art history that is dead, nor art that has reached an end. Rather, it is some specific kinds or methods of art history, the lineage of Vasari-Winkelman-Panofsky, that should be reconsidered. Not that this has never been done: in fact, decades of New Art History seem to prove the opposite. But renouncing either 'history' or 'art' altogether cannot be considered a completely satisfying solution. There must be a way for incorporating new praxis in a way that does not elude the question of art and that recognises the complexity of the question of history. When this way is found, it will become clear that neither the history of art nor its historiography have really reached a premature 'end'.

