Abstract: This paper investigates Danto’s claims that the narrative of art is over. In this state, which Danto sees as ideal, art is free from any master narrative, and its direction cannot be predicted. The claim that art ought to remain in its current state—pluralistic, free and with no further historical development—is problematic. Danto is correct that late 20th c. art could not be explained through a single narrative, and the myriad forms art takes demonstrate its pluralism. But Danto’s claim that freedom is the outcome of inexplicability, and progress is measured by amenability to narrative, does not follow. Based on Gombrich’s theory of pictorial representation, I provide an alternative explanation of Danto’s claim that art no longer manifests the narrative of the era of art, arguing that the shift in art’s preferred form of presentation, though no longer supporting narrative explanation, is developing as a language of disclosure.

In the century following Hegel’s presentiment that art would find its end, Danto believed he found it on East 74th Street in Manhattan. Danto’s encounter with an exhibition at the Stable Gallery, piled high with instances of Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box, led him to a philosophical transformation. For Danto, these boxes – indistinguishable from their commercial counterparts except for size – signified the confluence of the art object and the object it is said to represent, an event that marked the end of an artistic era. The notion that identical objects should have a different ontological status – one being art, the other not – is crucial in Danto’s schema. Why do Warhol’s Brillo Boxes count as artworks while the original Brillo boxes, created by the artist James Harvey for retail purposes, do not? Danto’s philosophical definition of art turns on
Danto’s Narrative Philosophy of History and the End of Art

the questions posed by objects such as these, which he refers to as “indiscernibles.” For these works no longer attempt to define art; rather, they ask the question ‘Why is this art?’ This momentous shift, for Danto, signaled the end of the narrative of art, which for centuries focused on art as representation.

This paper investigates Danto’s claims that the narrative of art is over; thus, with the era of art at an end, art’s direction cannot be predicted, and art is free from any master narrative. Art can be whatever it will, and philosophy steps in to explain art’s meaning. The claim mirrors Hegel’s 19th c. proclamation that the spirit of art had spread its wings above art in its current form, passing over it toward the more conceptual form of philosophy. Much of what makes Danto’s (1986) theory so useful for understanding the art of today comes from Hegel (107). Danto’s essentialist definition of art as meaning embodied in a historically unique manner is taken directly from Hegel. Still, Danto’s theory of art is based on the narrative framework he develops in his earlier work, Analytical Philosophy of History, and he is careful that he borrows none of Hegel’s ‘metaphysics.’ In light of this, Danto’s philosophy of art is better appreciated by reading his narrative philosophy of history. The narrative framework he uses to interpret Hegel’s end of art thesis also yields his essentialist definition of art. Though contentious for some, it has done much to clarify the conceptual turn that contemporary art has taken. Nonetheless, I find the normative claim that art ought to remain in its current state—pluralistic, free and with no further historical development—problematic. Correctly claiming that art of the late 20th century was no longer explainable through any single narrative, the myriad forms art takes demonstrate its pluralism. But Danto’s assertions that freedom is the outcome of inexplicability and that progress is measured according to amenability to narrative do not necessarily follow from this ‘state of the arts’. Within the context of a discussion of Danto’s claim that the art of what he calls ‘post-history’ no longer manifests the narrative of the era of art, my aim is to provide an alternative explanation for the shift in art’s preferred form of presentation. The alternative I present shows that though art may no longer support a narrative explanation, it is developing as a language of disclosure, which, rather than inviting philosophy to bear the burden of art’s self-definition, as Danto claims, art’s increasingly conceptual nature is constituted by a philosophical (hermeneutical) process of self-understanding. Conceived as such, art is not ‘free to be whatever it wants to be,’ rather, art is in the process of forming the schema of a new aesthetic paradigm, the shift to which cannot now be narratively explained. A general explanation of art’s development can be given in philosophical terms. However, this collapses the historical narrative structure.

I begin with an overview of Danto’s narrative philosophy of history and its relation to his aesthetic theory. Then I discuss the changes that the art of the 19th c. underwent in terms of the theories of Danto and Ernst Gombrich, a theorist whom Danto held to have failed in his assessment of art’s metamorphosis. I aim to show that Danto’s claim stems more from a too-strict application of his analytical theory of historical narrative than ‘evidence’ suggesting that art has no historical development. For then, art would have no history, and hence no meaning. Gombrich’s theory could provide the foundation, unrecognized by Gombrich himself, for an
alternative reading of art’s move away from the representational format. Gombrich’s theory, though explicitly unconcerned with meaning, implicitly accounts for how the artist molds our perception by creating forms through which we understand the world. Linked to the mental set of the times, these schemata become a progressive language of disclosure. I contend that this ‘description’ of the ‘end of art,’ would still comport with Danto’s narrative theory of art.

1. Danto’s theory of art.

Danto answers the question posed by Brillo Box, ‘Why is this art?’ in two parts. First, Danto delimits the realm of art from that of the everyday with an essentialist definition which hinges on two Hegelian conditions: 1) the art object is ‘about something,’ rather than ‘being something’ and 2) this manifest intention or aboutness is embodied. Second, Danto adds the Hegelian notion that the meaning of an artwork is stamped by the iconography of the times. Thus, the art of different eras is understood to be incommensurate, even artworks that appear to have a common formal style. Defined as such, artworks are interpreted through the common, historically-indexed, conceptual layer he calls the “artworld.” For Danto (1964), “to see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (580).

The focus of Danto’s aesthetic theory is more on ‘art’ than on artists. Thus, the artworld, one might speculate, is what the interior perspective of the Hegelian ‘spirit of art,’ or subjective Begriff, might be, if indeed it had an interior perspective. The “world,” as Danto defines it for subjects in their social and historical context, is an individual’s internal belief set. He uses this notion of world2 in his explanation of other minds. When we strive, in our time and in history past, to understand (not explain) the minds of others, we strive to understand their actions within a frame of reference grounded in their internal belief set; what they believe is rational based on the background presupposition of their historical place and time. We assess the interior of other minds as something external to us. But our own world is off limits to us. We simply refer to it as the truth of our world, with a rationale that is imperceptible to us. This notion of world is what the artist puts in the artwork through her style, manifesting the work, without being conscious of how, with the manner of the times (historical index). The artworld, I believe, would be by some analogy, the world of art.3 Thus, the artworld, reflecting the vagaries of history, provides the conceptual structure through which we interpret the art of any given time, including our own.

In our own time, which Danto (1997) refers to as “post-historical,” the artworld has internalized an infinitely pluralistic “style of using styles” (10). Whereas the past era of art conformed first to a representational style, then one of abstraction, and finally an age of manifestoes which

---

1 This essentialist definition is so minimal that some critics interpreted it as an anti-essentialist claim (Danto, 1997, 193).

2 Henceforth I will italicize world when I refer to Danto’s special usage of it.

3 Danto “tends to speak of art as the subject of self-knowledge” (Hilmer, 1998, 73).
Danto’s Narrative Philosophy of History and the End of Art

53

stylistically embodied art’s striving for self-definition, in the post-historical world of art, no style is better than any other. Danto understands that, in our time, the story of art has closed which leads to his claim that the “era of art” is over. This claim is better understood in terms of his narrative philosophy of history, which focuses on what Danto calls narrative sentences. Take the following example. In 1618, it could not have been stated that ‘The Thirty Years’ War has begun today.’ Only from the perspective of future historians, after the war’s completion, could one make reference to The Thirty Years’ War (Danto, 2007, 152). According to Danto, when narrative historical models are employed, the narrative structure is useful only when looking back in time. Thus, any attempt to project a historical theory into the future is little more than “prophecy” (9). Danto views the projects of all substantive (universal) philosophers history as flawed insofar as they make claims about the future that utilize knowledge of a universal history they cannot possibly have. These statements, which are not mere predictions, are made from the perspective of a future historian referring to the past. In these cases, historians use the narrative explanatory structure of history to make claims to which no historical facts correspond. Thus, narrative sentences are valid only when applied to events in the past, when future knowledge of the past is used to explain historical events. When narrative sentences are predicated as such, they are valid. The phenomenon of art history, the actions of the artists and the interpretations of the beholders, for Danto, also falls into the narrative framework. Because Danto is committed to the notion that the subject of art’s progress exists within a narrative historical framework, no forward-looking claims relating to it can be made (we cannot imagine the future of art). Understood in terms of historical narrative, with no more ‘art’ being made, philosophers can say with certainty what the past era of art-making stylistically entailed. With the styles of the era of art behind us, the culture of contemporary art allows that all styles be available to artists, though none can be inhabited as they were by artists of past eras. Because the style of each period is historically indexed, in Danto’s view, artworks entail temporally unique metaphors. Though the meanings of the artistic metaphors shift in time, they are interpretable, because they are understood through the continuity afforded through the legacy of artworld theories.

The connections that I have made thus far to Danto’s Analytical Philosophy of History are well known. Narrative sentences are explained on back cover of his book, and the notion of world and other minds is discussed in Transfiguration of the Commonplace (Danto, 1981, 9-11, 161-163, 200-201). With an understanding of these features of Danto’s narrative philosophy of history, one can understand, given the morphological changes that art underwent in the 20th century, how, with the claim that the narrative of art is over he can justify its essentialist definition. Also, given his explanations for a plurality of subjective worlds, current and past, which are manifest in the artist’s style, the notion that an artwork’s meaning is linked to historically indexed meanings is quite plausible. But Danto’s theory is significantly more complex than

---

4 I argue that art history is a process that does not always conform to a narrative framework (Snyder, 2010).
5 Danto added three chapters to Analytical Philosophy of History when it was re-released as Narration and Knowledge in 1985.
this, and looking more closely at his *Analytical Philosophy of History* allows for a reading of Danto that explains better the sea change of art, while remaining within the bounds of his own theory. Danto writes that his philosophy of history, as a theoretical work, can be applied to itself; thus, interpretation is embedded in the structure of the work (2007, xiv). One critique of his work, however, is that it doesn’t account particularly well for how the historian chooses among different historical explanations, for many different ‘*explanantia*’ can explain the same ‘*explanandum*’ (Ankersmit, 388).7

In the sections I examine, Danto attempts to resolve the problem of whether historians explain events and whether historical explanation entails general laws.8 The solution he finds in the application of his narrative philosophy of history has bearing on this claim that the narrative of art has ended. Danto addresses four possible stances taken toward the relation of history writing to general laws, noting that the theories he addresses are primarily concerned with the structure of the *explanans*. None of the positions look closely at the ‘anatomy’ of the *explanandum*. Danto (2007) contends that some *explananda* presuppose general laws, and some do not. In his mind, the two are interchangeable. So the question of general laws is linked to how the event is described (218).9 Phenomena may have multiple explanations. Phenomenon E may be explained with a description D, but it is always possible to find another description D’ that no longer explains E according to D. Danto uses the example of the flying of the American flag next to the Monégasque flag on the national holiday. There is an event, an *explanandum*, which requires explanation. Those familiar with the event’s context know that the prince has married someone who is American by birth. Thus, on the national holiday, both the American and the Monégasque flag are flown. But is there a general law in this explanation?

One of the first points relative to his theory of art regards his account of “redescription.” An event can be covered with a general law only if it is covered with a general description. But there are multiple descriptions for events, and they may not always fall under the covering law (Danto, 2007, 220). It does not follow that these events are not explainable by a general law – only unexplainable by general law in terms of the description given. To explain them requires redescription, and the redescription entails a covering law (220). Danto gives the following example:

a. The Monégasques put out American flags side by side with Monégasque flags.
b. The Monégasques were honoring a sovereign of American birth.
c. The members of one nation were honoring a sovereign of a different national origin from their own (221).

---

6 Cited from the Preface to the 1984 addition.
7 The *explanandum* is what needs to be explained. ‘Why is there smoke?’ The *explanans* is the explanation. ‘Because there is fire.’ Multiple *explanans* can explain one *explanandum* when precise information on the event is lacking.
8 The texts I have in mind are found in “The Problem of General Laws” and “The Role of Narratives.”
9 For Danto, only phenomena covered by description are capable of explanation.
The first description, $a$, is of the event before explanation (explanandum). The second, $b$, is the same event after it has been explained (explanans). “We may regard $c$, indeed, as the result of eliminating terms designating particular objects in favor of general designatory terms which include the originally designated objects amongst their extensions. I shall term $c$ the explanatum.” (221). The explanatum yields a new version of the description of the flag event that contains a covering law. This is a higher level of generalization. For Danto, it is the move from $a$ to $b$, which is difficult. It reframes the ‘phenomenon’. The same perceptual event ‘almost’ undergoes a transformation of perception. Objects in the visual field remain constant, but now we see them in a whole different set of relationships. The step from $b$ to $c$, the redescription, Danto argues, is easy, and strictly speaking, $b$ is an explanatum as well. However, it is concrete, while $c$ is abstract. (221). It is the abstract explanatum that puts the event under a covering law, which is redescribed because the explanans does not illuminate the general law (221). To derive the general law would entail a considerable amount of assumed knowledge, enough that one might never need the general law. However, if one were unaware of, in this case, Monégasque customs and history, the law would be opaque, and one would have to refer to it explicitly (222-223). Thus, Danto concludes that implicit general concepts, of which we are unaware, are embedded in explanation. Here, philosophers tend to say there is no general law or that one is not required. But when one cannot assimilate the phenomenon under a general concept, explanation is needed. This aspect of Danto’s theory, which seems to merge analytic philosophy with hermeneutics (Habermas, 1988, 33), is helpful in understanding his claim that art has ended.

A second facet of Danto’s Analytical Philosophy of History, important to his argument that art’s narrative no longer applies to contemporary art, is his discussion of class-types. A class-type is a category of event that can be predicted, but not specifically. For example, a kind person, it can be predicted, will behave kindly. But we may not know in exactly what way until after the kind act is performed. In this case one can confirm that the act was kind and fits into that class. Though predictive, there are “creative opportunities” in imagining which acts could fit into such a class (Danto, 2007, 226-231). Probably with his recent article “The Artworld” in mind, Danto uses the example of art objects. “It is this sort of situation, which, allows us to class, as works of art, things which do not necessarily resemble objects already classed as such, and which permits artists to pursue novelty which, should they succeed in finding it, does not automatically disqualify them from having produced a work of art” (226-227). With redescription, a rule that explains an event can be replaced with a rule of higher generalization, thus accounting for a broader range of members in a given class. When “history-as-record” is lacking, class-types will be employed in narrative as explanatory mechanisms that fill the gaps (226). I will argue later that the ‘redescription’ of art’s class-type led to Danto’s essentialist definition. The question I will pose is whether the

---

10 The covering law is: “Whenever a nation has a sovereign of a different national origin than its own citizens, those citizens will, on the appropriate occasions, honor that sovereign in some acceptable fashion” (Danto, 2007, 221).
level of generalization given in his essentialist definition could be replaced with another definition though not necessarily one of greater generality.

A last point emerges as Danto (2007) addresses a point of contention between the historical idealists (Geisteswissenschaften) and the proponents of the Covering Law Model, such as Hempel. Hempel noted (he received a great deal of criticism on this idea) that if we have historical explanation, and the past can be explained, then the future can also be explained because the same explanatory apparatus applies to future and past predications. The historical idealists adamantly disagreed. Freedom entailed human behavior not being explainable; thus, the inability to explain implied freedom (225). One of the downsides of needing to fill in the gaps of historical record is that the explanandum can have multiple explanantia, and one explanans can potentially refer to multiple explananda. In light of this, if we lacked historical record, an account of the past would be as general as an account of the future. Perhaps the end of the narrative of art, for Danto, was simply such a general account of art that it could account for almost any explanandum. With unpredictability comes freedom, but this would necessitate the concept of art being so general it could no longer sustain a master narrative.

2. The end of art.

For Danto, when art’s self-referential essence follows its historical progression to its limit, it reaches the point at which art asks the question of what it is. Subsequently, art as a disciplined production that attempts to “get something right” within the constraints of a common practice exists no more. In the future, everything is possible; there are no longer historical mandates: “one thing is as good as another.” In an atmosphere in which only “total tolerance” is defensible, philosophy must come to the aid of art in providing it an explanation and justification. A quandary arises in that art no longer knows what it is supposed to be when the object it represents is identical with the object of art. Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box exemplified this puzzling state of affairs. The question of why a box is art and another indistinguishable object is not turns on its origin. According to Danto’s essentialist theory, Warhol created the Brillo Box with the intention that it be art. Therefore, it was art. For Danto, the act of recognizing the artistic intention within an object signifies the viewer’s acceptance that there is something beyond the material objects to interpret. But interpretation of non-visual cues within the artwork demands a theory of art, which, according to Danto, is prerequisite to an artwork’s acceptance within the artworld.

The set of art theoretical concepts, as Danto sometimes refers to it, which determines what the artworld accepts or rejects, is a matter of historical context. The insertion into the type-class of artworks, which in prior eras could not have been perceived as art, such as Duchamp’s Fountain and Warhol’s Brillo Box, signaled that a change had come in the spirit with which art is made. For Hegel, the spirit of art reaches a historical terminus, at which point it is no longer able to articulate its truth in the material. While rejecting the metaphysics of Hegel’s epistemology, Danto sees its structure actualized in art history. Danto’s conceptually separate artworld is the central structure through which he straddles the
empiricist and the idealist realms, employing the narrative structure he developed in *Analytical Philosophy of History* that allows for general theories to be applied within their specific context.\(^{11}\)

In “The End of Art,” Danto compares the ‘end of art’ to the ‘end of history’ topic. The end of history, he notes, is not an apocalyptic end; rather, it would be the end of the struggles of human kind. Danto (1986) cites a prediction of Marx’s from *The German Ideology* that “tells us, I can be a hunter in the morning and a fisher in the afternoon and a critical critic in the evening” (112-113). When the struggles of history are over, there will be nothing more to fight for; everything will be done. Humanity can enjoy the fruits of past generations’ struggles and exist without alienation in commerce with fellow citizens. Though Danto (1986) never argues that history ends, he does argue that in its freedom, art can follow any style or take on any form. This defines the age of pluralism in art. “It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means” (114-115).

The Marxist notion of historical completion is associated with complete freedom of vocational choice. Likewise, Danto’s (1997) notion of post-historical art is associated with complete freedom in the choice of artistic styles. What ties art together is an essentialist theory: art must be about something, and its meaning must be materially manifest. At the same time, the artwork’s meaning is historically indexed. Though any style can be used—past forms of art can be revived and made current—the meanings inherent in each historical style are unique and incommensurate across historical periods (45). “Freedom ends in its own fulfillment,” (Danto, 1986, 114-115) but with the freedom to choose anything, art loses the meaning of historic struggle.

The question of how this style fits into the current definition of art echoes Danto’s account of redescription, replacing a general law of one account of art with another more general one. For Marx, the universal producer replaces the proletariat worker doing the specific task for the capitalist. This version of the human can perform any vocation she wishes, taking on many tasks as the day progresses. Analogously, as the class of objects allowed into the category of art increased, the level of generalization rose to the point where Danto could see his essentialist definition of embodied meaning. The brilliance of his narrative account is that it remains within the purview of language and the concepts employed to predicate time. He simply relies on the development of our concept of art being reflected in its narrative explanation. But the shift in art’s aim, to answering the question of ‘why is this art?’ , though representing an end of sorts, is not quite the end he postulates. Indeed, the question as to why something belongs in the class-type or not is the essential question asked when forming a rule for membership. To ask this question demands a level of self-reflection on the process of artistic creation that did not previously exist. Nonetheless, the freedom art attains in its state of inexplicability may be subject to another *explanatum*.

In the age after the end of art, art can exist in pluralism having unbounded freedom of choice; it can be whatever it wants to be. This is true for both Danto and Hegel, but in Hegel’s account, it is because spirit

---

\(^{11}\) Habermas sees Danto as reconciling analytic philosophy with hermeneutics (Habermas,1972, 273).
can no longer manifest itself in the material. Thus, spirit leaves art without its unified directive. For Danto, there are no longer limits on what can be art, but it is not out of lack of overarching directive, but because of the lack of a need for such a directive. In Danto’s eyes this is the nature of pluralism in its ‘ideal’ state (Horowitz and Huhn, 1998, 12).\(^\text{12}\) It is this point that I call into question. Indeed, art in our time is pluralistic. I do not judge this aspect of the world of art to be negative, nor do I consider it to be art’s final form. In the following pages, I present a narrative of 20\(^{th}\) c. art that allows for another description of the state of pluralism in art that maintains Danto’s narrative account of history and a non-essentialist version of his theory of embodied meaning. First, I will examine the schematic theory of art presented by Ernst Gombrich and the explanation that his theory provides for representational art’s move toward abstraction, even though he himself did not apply it. Second, I will look at the ramifications a different reading would have on the claim that the narrative of art had ended. I will argue that though the narrative of art ended, the progress of art is not complete; the disruption that the form of art underwent, nonetheless, did not conform to a narrative explanation. Art at this point is more amenable to philosophical explanation, but art’s form may change such that the body of work presented as art and the artworld are once again amenable to narrative. The story of the era of art may pick up again, albeit in a different chapter.

3. Gombrich’s story of art.

In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich presents the history of pictorial image-making as the development of representational art in terms of a progression of trial and error attempts to perfect the mimetic image. Gombrich’s approach draws on the epistemological theories of his colleague, Karl Popper. Popper held that there are no such things as proven scientific theories; rather, there are only theories that have not yet been disproved. Loosely following Popper’s method, Gombrich’s theory provides an alternative to Danto’s account of the relationship between philosophy and art. The story of art Gombrich tells is one that recognizes and explains the historical development of art, and its shift away from representationalism in the 20\(^{th}\) c. which, in this context is the *explanandum*, presenting an *explanans* that is different from Danto’s. One of Gombrich’s central aims is to show that art must have a history, and that the history comes from the communication of visual images appropriated and changed over time, apparently making and matching. Gombrich also documents the development of the language of art, or “schemata” as he refers to it, used for communication and expression of the ideas of the artists to their audience. In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich holds that he is providing evidence for the hypothesis he presented in his historical work, *The Story of Art*. In this book, Gombrich (1960) tells us,

I had sketched the development of representation from the conceptual methods of the primitives and the Egyptians, who relied on ‘what they knew’, to the achievements of

\(^{12}\) In Danto’s early writings on the end of art, he seems to lament this end. In later writings he upholds it as an ideal.
It is the ‘conceptual’ distinction between ‘knowing’ and ‘seeing’, between our judgment and our perception, that Gombrich addresses in his history of art and theory of pictorial representation.

From the impressionists to the expressionists to the cubists to the abstract impressionists, a series of changes took place, according to Gombrich (1995), because the artistic forms, the schemata of the times, could no longer express what the artists wanted (538-539). They abandoned the schemata of tradition, but they still sought to express what they felt the artists of the past had been expressing with a new set of schemata. Danto and Gombrich may find reluctant commonality in the relation of the schemata to what is expressed and how implicit laws are used in articulating historical narrative. Though I acknowledge the difference between narrative and schemata, each relies on background presuppositions, what Danto calls world, and Gombrich the “mental set.” What is relative to the change in how art is understood and received is this: the general law must be explicitly stated if an event’s explanation relies on implicit general laws and customs with which one is not familiar. So it is with the schemata. If they are not connected to a form of expression that speaks to one’s world, then they will be ineffective as art.

Danto is critical of Gombrich’s focus on pictorial representation, noting that he misses the appeal to judgment. But what Gombrich does not miss is that art is attempting to transmit a message from the artist to the beholder. Though the viewer need not interpret art in the exact sense it was created, it still must be interpreted within an understandable framework. It is in this understandable framework, a cognitive system of reference, that the progressive transmission of culture takes place. Gombrich’s opposition to theories, like Hegel’s, which present transmission of culture through “cultural totalities,” makes his approach one of the few viable alternatives (Horowitz, 1998, 315-318).

Danto (1997) argues, perhaps correctly, that Gombrich’s theory of making and matching, based on Popper’s model of trial and error hypotheses testing, does not correspond adequately to visual representation because our scientific theories need not match our visual perception. In fact, tested scientific hypotheses may, in accord with Plato’s criticism of the illusionist painters, run counter to what we see (49-50). If we concede this point to Danto, though we may do damage to parts of Gombrich’s theory that could only apply to visual art, we gain insofar as we are seeking a theory that could correspond to a notion of artistic creation in which art is matched to something, but perhaps not the world of visual representation (Woodfield, 2011, 1-25). Gombrich writes that the task of the serious artist has become very difficult in abstract painting. How does one arrange two squares on a canvas with no precedent? “For the painter of the Madonna knew what he was aiming at. He had tradition as his guide and the number of decisions with which he was confronted was limited” (1995, 583).
Modern artists still used the language of art to suggest, but the changing parameters of the mental set, the limits of style, meant that what they sought to convey in the 20th c. is far removed from what they suggested in the age of Vasari. The task of the new art of the modern age, according to Mondrian, is “the pure expression of that incomprehensible force that is universally active” (80).

The theories of both Popper and Gombrich, in Danto’s (1997) words, “are concerned with the ‘growth’ of knowledge, and hence with a historical process representable via a narrative” (49-50). But to borrow an argument from Habermas (1979), the structure of narrative historical explanation might not apply to a practical process. When a phenomenon is completed, such as a technological innovation or an epoch in history, it can be written about as history. But if a process is still in play, such as the development of evolutionary functions, it can’t have a history as such (17). If Gombrich focuses on the process of artistic creation, described within a historical context as a specific process or competency, it might not be amenable to narrative description. The process of creation exhibits different developmental levels that emerge regardless of the precise historical circumstance. In this sense, the continuity with the past is not broken. Rather, Gombrich’s (1987) theoretical account of artistic development revolves, in the case of explaining the shift of art from modernism to that of post-history, around an explanation of how artists react in terms of the practice of art. He speculates that “what has been called the history of ‘seeing’ is really the history of a learning process through which a socially coherent public was trained by the artist to respond in a given manner to certain abbreviated signs” (246). Thus, the reaction to the erosion of the narrative structures discussed by Danto is “the articulation of an action-orienting self-understanding” (Habermas, 1977, 351). Viewed in this way, the dissipation of the narrative structures of modernism can be understood as challenges to the narrative representation of the world’s system of cognitive reference brought on by 20th c. societal changes.

Gombrich (1995) observes that traditional visual schemata were discarded in order to better match what artists are expressing (538-9, 563). But artists persist in a form of making and matching, appropriating material from the images and icons of contemporary life, to develop the new schemata that are vehicles of historical cultural expression. This material is then matched to a symbolic medium through which artists hope to effectively convey their message. When representation fails to transmit, as was the case in the late modern period, the medium and syntax of art may shift, but the fundamental process and the utilization of the world’s preunderstandings as resources in the play of reflective creation have not changed.

Writing on sprezzatura, Gombrich (1960) discovered that the relationship between the artist and the viewer develops, with the artist supplying the viewer with just enough to evoke their imaginative capacity, inviting them into the creative process. “The artist gives the beholder increasingly ‘more to do’, he draws him into the magic circle of creation and allows him to experience something of the thrill of ‘making’ which had once been the privilege of the artist” (202). This process played a role in the movement away from optical fidelity in painting as the demands of the impressionists pushed their viewers even further from this standard. This,
Danto’s Narrative Philosophy of History and the End of Art

in Gombrich’s eyes, was a turning point, which led to the “conundrums” of the 20th c. art. The viewer’s intellect is increasingly challenged, and the artists lured the audience to search their imagination for the artwork’s unexpressed message.


For Danto, changes in the conditions of artistic creation and appreciation are mediated through the artworld. Similarly, Gombrich (1960) explains the transformation of late modern art in terms the mental set. For Gombrich, the use of the mental set in artistic creation presupposes that “the beholders’ identification with the artist must find its counterpart in the artist’s identification with the beholder” (234). However, technological progress and expansion of global trade that occurred during the industrial revolution undermined this relationship. A rejection of the traditional values that differentiated art from craft, based on the rules of the academy, disrupted the link between the nonconformist artist and the patrons who wished to see ‘official art’. “The break in tradition had thrown open to them an unlimited field of choice” (Gombrich, 1995, 501).

Danto asserts that Gombrich’s theory fails when artists no longer attempt to match their representations to perceptions of reality. “Had Modernism not occurred,” Danto (1986) makes clear, “there would have been little to fault in Gombrich’s analysis; but the operations of ‘making and matching’ do not easily capture the shift from the impressionists to the postimpressionists, or from Cézanne to the cubists to the fauves” (3).

Gombrich pushes his theory to show that artists in the high modern period really were making and matching in some sense. Agreeing with Danto, Gombrich does not explain well the transition to post-historical art. According to Danto (1997), the whole quandary of perceptually making and matching disappears when the indiscernible art objects of Duchamp and Warhol arrive in the artworld. There is no illusion—you see what you see, and for Danto, Gombrich’s framework does not allow him to take Duchamp, one of the most important artists of the 20th c., seriously (198). Despite the prima facie correctness of Danto’s claim, the unlimited field of choice is the starting point for Danto’s own claims about the nature of art.

Though Gombrich’s taste, and perhaps his perception of art’s boundaries, prevented him from taking Duchamp seriously, his theory brings to the table a stronger explanatory capability than Danto’s, insofar as it recognizes the progressive development of the communicability of the ‘concepts’ of the artworld. This is due to Danto’s theory’s failure to recognize the hermeneutical component implicit in the communicability of artistic schemata. This task Danto leaves to the philosopher and the art critic. But the lack of communicability, the “incommensurability in which one thing just comes after another thing,” is what, for Danto (1986), makes Expression Theory unviable (107). Certainly, as Danto claims, art must have continuity because “art is a transitional stage in the coming of a certain kind of knowledge” (107). The emergence of what for Danto is art’s final form is not in line with a narrative in which art’s progress has concluded because, I hold, with the emergence of a new phase, we see a new development, and along with it the ability to understand art’s past in terms of art’s present. The completion of the shift away from the old
brings a higher understanding, not the ultimate inexplicability, of art’s development. But, as Danto argues, when art is free to do as it ‘damn well pleases,’ leaving the task of its definition to the philosophy of art and of explanation to the critics, art, in and of itself, has lost its communicative capacity and enters into a symbiotic, and static, relationship with philosophy.

5. Seeking a new schematic.

Gombrich’s claim that the rejection of the schemata leads to loss of communicability, except for the recognition of the need for the philosopher to communicate on the behalf of art, is commensurate with much of Danto’s aesthetic theory. The trial and error process of making and matching, insofar as it is extant in the generation of novelty in the language of art, is still a useful explanatory tool for the analysis of artistic production. Although this would be going beyond the aims of Danto’s aesthetic theory. I hold that the trial and error process of art’s schematic development can be applied in a manner that is not in contradiction with Danto’s theory of embodied meaning, historically applied, when taken out of the visual context of likeness and put into the context of art’s communicative aims. The communicative aims of art, as discussed above, would constitute a process through which the style (mental set or cognitive reference system, to express it in terms common to the thinkers addressed in this work) is understood by artist and beholder alike, though not explicitly in their everyday employment. Art communicates the background structures of our cultural pre-understandings, using them indirectly, so that the structures become susceptible to critique and alteration in the interplay of artist and audience through the medium of the artwork. Gombrich (1995) states, “All artistic discoveries are discoveries not of likenesses but of equivalences which enable us to see reality in terms of an image and an image in terms of reality” (345). The artists of the high modern epoch strove to achieve their aims through depiction of equivalences. They sought equivalences reflected in their social order, and, as the efficacy of the equivalence they used faded, the building blocks of their depiction appeared to be stepping beyond the traditional forms of mimetic art. The representational forms of tradition had provided art with metaphysically charged icons that sufficed to endow the viewing world with unified images for almost a millennium. With the decline of the great religious and mythical narratives that drove the early modern period, the artists who sought to express issues of metaphysical significance took on the very difficult task of depicting an absolute for which no clear concept existed. But even artists who strove to articulate issues of current social significance, without venturing into the realm of the transcendent, found the language of early modern art lacking in its expressive capability.

Nonetheless, the non-objective expressionist painters continued to make and match to the modern environment. Though they refused to provide the viewer with anything obviously identifiable, the intuitive viewer could see the tangle of modern industry reflected in the snarled imagery of their paintings (Gombrich, 1960, 287). The message that artists wanted to implant in art was still poignant, as Cézanne had noted, he still wanted to express in his art the “grandeur” of prior masters. The methods
that artists had once had available were no longer viable (Gombrich, 1995, 345). Abstract painters such as Piet Mondrian and Ben Nicholson attempted to express the ordered precepts of universal law. Alexander Calder’s sculptural mobiles sought to reflect the mysterious equilibratory balance and motion of the universe (581-583).

Having rejected both universal and narrative accounts of history, artists set out to create a new set of schemata. Gombrich wanted to show that in periods of making and matching there is no difference between perception and illusion; people merely hypothesize what they see, and these visual hypotheses are accepted until otherwise disproved. But the power of art, the hermeneutic of understanding, occurs when an ‘illusion’ is used in attempting to match an ideal or notion that is not in the visible world, despite the immediate problems the paradigm of making and matching appears to face. This period of transition can prove difficult for art. The power of art and metaphor to create new myths and dissolve old categories is considerable, but with the failure of traditional schemata to express an emerging or unknowable ideal, the search for new forms of expression—new schemata—outstrips the artist’s ability to communicate, as Mondrian put it, “the new art” for the new age. This is not an end point, however; it is a critical moment in what Habermas refers to as hermeneutic anticipation. But in this case the process of self-understanding employed within the framework of practically oriented knowledge is itself undergoing transition (Habermas, 1977, 351). It is at this point that the world-disclosive functions of art, as Habermas and others would describe them, play a critical role in redressing the orientation of the social system of reference.

In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche held that there could be no art without myth, the structure that gave great art its capacity to create an illusion. Realizing the need for a revived mythology, he thought that the genius of Wagner could create for Germany a new myth, through which its spirit could be reborn. He ultimately rejected this embarrassing notion and gave up on the notion of new myth. With it, he abandoned the notion that myth, the collectively developed schematic template for relevant aesthetic experience, is the language that makes art real, and communicable, to the audience. The artists of the modern period despairs of the tools with which they communicated, and they added more. As Gombrich (1960) states, if our schemata and their categories become too flexible, they will not serve their purpose (287). Gombrich holds that “The artist, no less than the writer, needs vocabulary before he can embark on a ‘copy’ of reality” (88). Indeed, some starting point is needed in order to grasp the “flux of experience.” Hegel noted that the beat of music is what takes us out of the flux of infinitude and evokes spirit’s capacity to differentiate the moments, allowing spirit to reflect back on itself before reengaging in the dialectic. Still, the artists of the post-historical era had to create a new vocabulary, make a new beat, in order to grasp the flux of the new age. Gombrich recognizes this shift away from the representational image. “The growing awareness that art offers a key to the mind as well as to the outer world has led to a radical change of interest on the part of the artist. It is a legitimate shift, I believe, but it would be a pity if these fresh explorations failed to profit from the lessons of tradition” (360). Gombrich notes that when a new word is added to a language, it is understood within the context of an
already developed language. But language made up of only new words and new syntax would be unintelligible (324). The downside of the vast array of choices that the artist has today is that the language of art comes close to being unintelligible. Limits, according to Gombrich, do serve a purpose in achieving communicability because “where everything is possible and nothing unexpected, communication must break down. It is because art operates with a structured style governed by technique and the schemata of tradition that representation could become the instrument not only of information but also expression” (376).

Danto argues that critics should step in to interpret the meaning of post-historical art due to art’s freedom from stylistic necessity, but not due to illegibility. When the critic must interpret, however, art loses its power to communicate its message through the power that is uniquely art’s, which is to suggest enough, or just enough, to the viewer such that they are able to construct a thought, an image, or an epiphany which could not be articulated through prose in its everyday use.


The broader aim of this essay is not necessarily to convince the reader that art is like a language, but I hope to have made a strong argument that it is at some level a communicative hermeneutical practice. Danto’s own account of art’s analytic need for interpretation upholds this point. I have argued that, on terms comporting with Danto’s Analytical Philosophy of History, we could choose another explanation for the collapse of the narrative of art in our time. One weakness of Danto’s theory of history is that it does not provide strong criteria for choosing one explanation over another. This problem comes in part because he focuses on narrative sentences, not narratives as a whole (Ankersmit, 387-388). A second criticism is seen in how Danto defines his “subject of change.” A narrative must have a subject which undergoes a change; otherwise, there is nothing that is explained, such as a change in attitude or status. These must be linked to actual subjects, like Napoleon or Caesar. Nonetheless, Danto employs his narrative sentences, from time to time, on subjects that do not actually correspond to anything in reality. In the statement, “Petrarch opened the Renaissance,” there is no actual subject for the Renaissance. These are periods that historians postulate to help organize our historical understanding. A statement employing such terms must use the historian’s narrative frame of reference—her hermeneutic of the past, to use them (Ankersmit, 390). Though this may be an oversight of Danto’s (2007) theory, it shows how the historian adds order to the chaos of history, perhaps one of the transcendental conditions for historical knowledge in general. Nonetheless, these categories are our creation; we organize history, and in some sense this is arbitrary (142).13 These two factors, the arbitrariness of categorical organization, and the fact that they have no subject of change, can be auspiciously employed in arguing why an alternative explanans can be valid without altering the framework of Danto’s narrative account of history, or his theory of art. As noted above,

13 “Complete description then presupposes a narrative organization, and the narrative organization is something we do” (Danto, 2007, 142).
this does not involve a reinterpretation of the facts of art history, rather, these facts are ‘transfigured’ so they are seen in the light of a different historical explanation, one that uses a slightly different ‘general law’ to account for the class-type of art.

The account I presented above, citing Gombrich’s account of the incomprehensibility of a system of artistic schemata that have taken on too many new artistic terms, is consistent with Danto’s account of the class of art-objects reaching a tipping point, as too many new styles are added. Art’s freedom is based on the fact that it can no longer be explained by its class-type. If Hempel’s claim, ‘if you can explain the past, you can explain the future’, holds true, it follows that freedom lies in inexplicability. The inexplicability of the form of art, the inability of a class-type to reliably explain what might be next, despite the fact that this category is open ended, came about through a change in artistic vocabulary. This change resulted in a collapse of the narrative of art, due perhaps to the need of a new aesthetic vocabulary that was more intuitive to the viewers of art at the end of the modern era. The division relied on here to explain historical eras may be used just for organizational purposes, but they can still be valuable, perhaps even essential for historians. They are, however, subject to revision. Danto’s account of the era of art is subject to revision; the progress of art has yet to be concluded. The normative claim that art’s pluralism is ideal—the utopian end that Danto suggests—can be rejected as an aesthetic ideal without rejecting the notion that a pluralistic approach represents an improvement in the broader normative understanding of the human condition. This ‘increased capacity’ corresponds to a process that may not be amenable to narrative explanation. Thus, the world of art enters into a period of ‘incomprehensibility’. The narrative of art is imploded by this change, and can no longer be explained in light of the narrative of the past. Danto’s theory explains this, and this could be interpreted as the end of the era of art. Art’s separation from its narrative also invites the aid of theorists, who are better equipped to interpret a process of development from a theoretical perspective. The era which entails a style of making styles may well be the path of art in the future, but I suggest that when the shift of world or mental set and schemata have caught up with the changes they are undergoing, the world of art may once again be amenable to narrative explanation. I don’t think plurality prevents this, but the merging of narratives can indeed produce a chaos that will take time for historians to organize, and artists to depict.
Works Cited