

DESTRUCTING LOGOCENTRISM: SOME IMPLICATONS FOR MUSEUMS

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Abstract - *Die Kunstgeschichte ist Bullgeschichte*, Sir Charles Cocke Bustcake (1).

INTRODUCTION TO DESTRUCTION

My historical researches previously published in this distinguished journal (2) have amply demonstrated that the careful misinterpretation of deservedly neglected texts can markedly increase the mismanagement of museum collections today. Understanding the origins and common concerns of curatorship, that is, the intellectual misinterpretation of works of art, and art desecration, that is, the techniques of physical destruction of the collections, is particularly crucial to charting the future course of collections mismanagement. The Institute for Advanced Irrelevance can make an important contribution to this enterprise.

Recently, the interdisciplinary discipline of Advanced Irrelevance has degenerated further by adapting from the Liberal Arts the literary theory of Destruction, which has taught us that the subtext, that is, what a historical text does not say, is more significant than what it does say. It follows logically that statements mean the opposite of what their authors say they mean. As a result, to make a meaningful statement requires perverting its ostensible meaning to elucidate the meaning the author did not intend (3). Recently, D. Preziosi (known as B. Precious to his admirers) performed the important task of destructing art history (*Kunstgeschichte*) to prove that it is indeed *Bullgeschichte*, as Bustcake so fervently denied (4). This paper will argue that Preziosi's approach reduces curatorship to the same level as desecration. By examining the common historical roots of *Kunstgeschichte*, connoisseurship, and desecration, it becomes possible to separate the *Bull-* and *geschichtliche* components so that the latter will be clearly discernable. Then its essential qualities can be applied liberally to the museum professions today.

As a beginning, Preziosi states clearly that no one can know anything about art:

Art history can claim no final knowledge of object, no last word that is not subject to erasure or palimpsest, despite its operation in a discursive space carpented, historically, out of a lumberyard of lost words (5).

With equal lucidity, he points out that no one should try to say anything about it:

The notion of system is a logical (and often largely synchronic) abstraction, and, as such, an artifact of a particular perspective on a slice through complexly evolving and dynamically interdependent practices... The point here has been that, whatever the actual referential associations of artifacts,

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it is necessary to abandon the logocentric metaphors of reading objects as well as the entire chain of assumptions and orientations dependent upon that metaphor (6).

After identifying the logocentric paradigm as the source of the *bullgeschichtliche* principle that inevitably pervades all scholarship, Preziosi succeeds in creating a coherent Möbius strip of discourse:

The trap is what constitutes the discursive space of the discipline--the alignment of analyst toward analysand, the orienting of the panoptic gaze upon an anamorphic archive (7).

Thus logocentrism, the reduction of art to language, is propaedeutic to latent scientism, which escapes the notice of art scholars and leads them to the false conclusion that they are somehow different from art desecrators:

To understand the ideological double bindings that legitimize the discipline's operational protocols, one must glottochronologize the reificational movement that has lent the history of art history's art its characteristic fictionality. At once reductionist and scientific, the discipline manufactures this ideological fiction at a variety of sites--in textbooks, in institutes for Advanced Irrelevance, as well as in the erection of a class of imaginary spaces-as-history: museums (8).

How can Advanced Irrelevance help its sister discipline break out of its auto-referential paradigm and wrench its panoptic gaze away from the anamorphic archive? The answer is to use destructive methods to hunt the logocentric paradigm to its historical lair and destruct it so that it can never be re-assembled. Having gone back to the future, all subsequent discourse will be destroyed. Then talking about art instead of looking at it can start afresh. This process is not only an important contribution of Advanced Irrelevance to an increase in pure *Geschichte*, but should provide a paradigm for the field of art desecration, which is concerned with destructing actual works of art in museums to keep them safe from aesthetic appreciation. Destruction is thus the common ground between theory and practice in museum work, and, properly applied (that is, with sufficient *Geschichte* from government agencies), it can lead to the destruction of museums themselves.

BUSTCAKE BUSTED

But what is the origin of the logocentric paradigm? I found the answer while studying the career of Sir Charles Cocke Bustcake (1793-1865) and his wife Eliza (*née* Pigby and known affectionately as Miss Piggy; like Anthony Trollope's Rev. Obadiah Slope, *né* Slop, she may have changed her name for the sake of euphony. They deny introducing the logocentric paradigm to British art history. That is why the topic must be vigorously pursued.

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The Bustcakes discredited the German scholar David Passavant for transmitting the paradigm on one of his visits to England in the 1840's. While Bustcake privately embraced German logocentrism, he veiled his enthusiasm behind racist statements, calling the Germans "an over-thinking people, who accumulate knowledge for its own sake just as the English accumulate money"(9). On the other hand, Eliza, found that Passavant was a problem at dinner parties, which as everyone knows, were central to the development of a taste for boiled mutton in England:(10)

His English leaves a vacuum in the mind, and he won't speak a word of anything else; we venture to correct such English words as we understand. Our dinner party is over: there were ten men to six ladies, but I managed that each man should have a piece of a lady, except 'Old Passy', who knew no difference (11).

It is clear from the foregoing, especially the last sentence, that Old Passy was an android, a Chatty Passy Doll through which the Bustcakes uttered the eleven different things that constitute the logocentric paradigm (12). But was there a real Chatty Connoisseur whose *bullgeschichtliche* views the Bustcakes were promulgating?

The answer is to be found in a hitherto unknown text which Eliza Bustcake denied translating when she visited Germany in the 1830's. Only recently have I succeeded in conjuring this manuscript, which contains the germs of the Logocentric Paradigm. It is *How to Become a Connoisseur in Three Hours* by J.H. Detmold (13). As homage to my mentor, B. Precious, I here present the most insignificant portions of this work with a few obfuscating comments.

DETMOLD DETONATED

Detmold noted that interest in art had increased rapidly in his native Hannover. There was no lack of artists, paintings, and dealers; but no one actually knew how to talk about art (*Kunst*). The public felt this lack (*Mangel*) most painfully (*sehr schmerzlich*). How could anyone make a judgement (*Urteil*)? (14) The galleries were filled to overflowing with persons craving to be told what to think (*denken*). They were dismayed to be told that connoisseurship required aesthetic sensitivity and time-consuming study. Therefore, in a truly democratic spirit, Detmold devised a shortcut. Surely Detmold consciously anticipated Preziosi when he consoled the public with the assurance that no one knows what art really is (being careful to distinguish *Dasein* from *das Seienden*) (15). Art is whatever one wants it to be! It's only a flowery phrase; the only difference between it and philosophy being that art makes no claim to truth (*Wahrheit*) (16). However, one does need to know a few rules so that enjoying art can be placed on the same level as playing bridge (17).

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The problem then, as now, was that in the beginning people were confused by the experts and tended to doubt that they could ever be connoisseurs. However, Detmold offers guidelines that can give anyone an idea of what to say at an exhibition. Does that picture over in the corner strike your fancy? Oh! but it's hung very high: it can't be any good. Another hangs under it in good light: that one, surely, isn't bad. There hangs another which can be praised since it already has a good reputation. On the other hand, it is always safe to gaze at a picture without saying anything, to show how deeply one is thinking.

But, Detmold continues, it's more satisfying to be able to say something without fear of contradiction. Generally in life one can get by with such comments as "Good" (*gut*), "Bad" (*schlecht*), "Beautiful" (*schön*), or "Ugly" (*hässlich*) but these are not reasoned judgements. For if one says, "This picture is good" the problem could arise that someone will ask *why*. One can't just say, "This picture is good because I like it." For personal enjoyment of the work is irrelevant to forming a judgement of it. So it's better to say, "This picture is pleasing (or displeasing) to me." For if one says, "The picture is good", one is speaking of the picture and must justify the statement; whereas, if one says "It pleases me," one is speaking of one's own feeling. Most people confuse these two things, but the true connoisseur does not. He knows his opinion is unassailable if he speaks only of his own feelings, which cannot be contradicted or even detected by others. On the other hand, a feeling is not a judgement, and the latter can only be based on the work itself.

Note that this is the beginning of Logocentrism: one's own feeling is dismissed as irrelevant, and only Reason and language can provide the real experience of the work. It is only a short step from Detmold's position to the modern one, that the work itself should be eliminated and only *bullgeschichtliche* talk remain.

To return to our text, Detmold offers the following example of a judgement based on objective criteria (18). Note his rigorous deduction. If a work is very brown, it is brown because it is *geschichtliche* (19), and if it is truly *scheisslich*, it is of the Realist school, and if it is of the Realist school, it must be good: therefore, the picture is good. In this way, Detmold adds, the connoisseur achieves true fulfillment, not only as a connoisseur, but as a person. He mistrusts his feeling and uses his intellect to undermine it. Soon he feels nothing and only judges, and that is real connoisseurship. After all, the fine arts exist to be judged, not experienced. It is often said, Detmold continues, that the fine arts should be enjoyed. But it is not from the works themselves that pleasure comes, but from the activity of judging them. One should derive pleasure only from talking about art. For feeling is stupidity (*Dummheit*). It has already been shown that feelings are not the objects of judgment, therefore they have no value. Any nitwit (*Dummkopf*) can feel. Addressing the Moral Majority, Detmold quotes their precursor Ovid:

Dicisse fideliter artes, Emollit mores nec sinit esse feros...(20)

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Detmold then asks rhetorically, what is a connoisseur? The answer: one who understands art. But it was stated at the outset that no one understands art, so how can there be connoisseurs? The resolution of this antinomy of Pure Reason (21) lies in comparing the connoisseur to the art-lover or *amateur*. The latter has feelings; the former does not. And "understanding" can mean either understanding emotionally or intellectually. Since the former, as already demonstrated, is counterproductive, it follows that the essence of connoisseurship is logocentrism, or, in Detmold's terms, *Kunstkenner-Phraseologie*: knowing what to say and when to say it.

A true connoisseur must be able to say eleven different things: this is the crucial link between Detmold and the Chatty Passy android. Detmold points out that just as one can learn English or French in three hours (22), so can one learn the language of connoisseurship, since it is pure jargon (23). One does not have to waste time learning any profound theories of art or even the meaning of the phrases. However, a few definitions are necessary.

First, Detmold perceptively draws a distinction between painting (*Malerei*) and sculpture (*Plastik*) (24). He foresaw the common ground of technical studies and interpretation that characterize modern museum studies in his discussion of judging sculpture: its value depends wholly on its materials. These can be stone, metal, wood, clay, wax, plaster, or sugar (25). Although on purely logical grounds a good work can be made from a poor material, this never occurs in the empirical world. Thus the connoisseur is safe in concluding that any work executed in marble is praiseworthy; but if it is made of alabaster, it is surely bad. Plasters are usually good because no one would bother to make a cast of a poor original. Wood sculptures, if old, are usually good. If the work is metal (excepting silver), one can be enthusiastic about it (especially if it is bronze). Works in sugar are always in good taste. Judging other materials should not be attempted.

Judging paintings is more difficult. First it is necessary to recognize that painting is based on drawing, and to describe drawing, the connoisseur can choose either the word "correct" (*korrekt*) or "incorrect" (*unkorrekt*). However, both cannot be used in the same sentence. Painting, like sculpture, can also be classified by material, such as oil, watercolour, or pastel. However, it is clear from the foregoing that the material is not a sufficient basis for judging a painting. To add to the difficulty, paintings can be furtherclassified by subject, such as portrait, landscape, or history.

Detmold then makes the crucial point that connoisseurs are superior to artists, for painters do not think in such categories. Rather, they are content with the low-level activities of seeing, painting what pleases them, and enjoying their work. But classifications are necessary to create much-needed gaps in knowledge and debates about definitions and terms. Otherwise, what would fill scholarly journals?

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How then are the kinds of paintings defined? A history subject is created by painting a good-looking model and giving him a Greek name chosen at random (26). On the other hand, a genre scene is any painting that is not a history, portrait, or landscape. Portraits are easier to discuss than landscapes. There are only two categories to remember: male and female. Also, if the frame is attractive, the portrait is probably a good one.

However, as in learning any language, one must proceed from individual words to sentences. Here Detmold's logocentrism shifts subtly but definitively from implicitness to explicitness, and the link between logocentrism and scientism becomes equally exposed to the discerning reader. For Detmold claims that learning connoisseurship is learning a phraseology; furthermore, that learning a phraseology is the same as learning a science (*Wissenschaft*). In all such cases, one can confuse one's audience by uttering the right significant phrases. Their meanings are unimportant (27). Only eleven different phrases are required. Why eleven? Then Detmold, with an expletive that must be deleted here, proves mathematically that eleven is the minimum number of judgements required to create total confusion in discourse.

Detmold adds that once the basic patterns are learned, they can be combined in various ways to create an indefinite number of utterances. If one has trouble learning them, he or she should keep a dish of bonbons to hand and so bind *utile* (utility) and *dulci* (pleasure): by commenting on each bonbon, students will find that the language of connoisseurship passes unconsciously and effortlessly into their minds.

THE ELEVEN PHRASES

1. "One must pronounce this picture excellent".
 Detmold's comment: There is one good thing about a generally positive judgement. Should there be another connoisseur nearby with more knowledge or more money, who contradicts this statement, you can always say that you were referring to the picture next to the one you were really talking about. Or, you can say your praise was ironic, and irony is always obfuscating (28).
2. "This picture is very bad."
Detmold's comment: If you want to criticize a picture, it is always safe, for if someone contradicts you, you can always offer to help him or her see their error. Or, you can simply say, "This cannot be compared with the creations of Raphael."
3. "In this picture, the artist has solved a very difficult problem very well."
 No comment is necessary.
4. "This artist is noted for his/her study of a) good colouring; b) the Antique; c) Nature."
Detmold's comment: choose a), b) or c) as applicable.
 Exercise: add suitable words (see Introduction if necessary).

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5. "This picture is characterized by fundamental study of Nature, great diligence of execution, great feeling for colour, and harmony. It's such a pity that the total impression of the whole is ruined by such an ugly frame."
6. "The light in this painting is handled very well, and the bright colours of the military uniforms are integrated into the simple effect of the whole. Unfortunately, the artist has forgotten the rules of perspective in the bayonets of the middle distance. Still, the glazing of the swords of the lancers in the foreground shows careful study of the colouring of the old Venetian school."
Detmold's comment: "School" is the connoisseur's favourite word. Use it as often as possible.
7. "The correctness of the drawing, the grace of the composition, the poetry of feeling, the life-like and powerful colouring, the vigorous impasto, and the subtle chiaroscuro raise this picture to such a high level that nothing can be compared to it. It is a picture from Sassoferrato's best period, an example of his fifth style; it is well-preserved and not darkened" (29).
Detmold's comment: "Impasto" is a thick paint layer, from the noun "pasty" (as in Cornish).
8. "This picture would be praiseworthy, if only it were finished."
9. "The price of this picture is much too high" (30).
Detmold's comment: The appraisal of pictures is the favourite occupation of connoisseurs. If the painting is being sold, the price will be higher than it is when the painting is being bought.
10. "This picture displays colouring that can only be achieved by overpainting it many times" (31).
11. "The motifs in this delicate miniature strongly resemble a fresco by Andrea del Sarto in the Chapel of St. Jacopo in Florence. But one must go to Italy to confirm this" (32).
12. (Optional) "This picture is too brightly coloured, and is therefore bad."
Author's comment: This statement confirms my argument in a previous article that pictures must be allowed to darken with time until they can no longer be seen (33).

CONCLUSION

The fact that all the statements attributed to Old Passy are found in Detmold's texts shows inconclusively that he was not their source. Clearly, Chatty Passy was an android and the Bustcakes programmed him to set the course of connoisseurship for the next 150 years. Now that the true source of the Logocentric Paradigm is known, we can go back

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to the future and destruct the anamorphic archive which has prevented conservators and curators from recognizing their common goal: destructing first the historical meaning of works of art, then destructing the works themselves, and finally what Preziosi has called the Disneylands of history: our art museums. Clearly Bustcake did not call for the cleansing of the Augean Stables of *Bullgeschichte*: it's time to apply the pure *Geschichte* to our artistic institutions.

As for the bankruptcy of the old *Bullgeschichte*, we must let our intellectual leader have the last word:

From its coimplicative beginnings, the regnant logocentric ideology of art history made it a site for juridico-legal rectification of the idea of the nation-state, playing the preppie to some hippy, only to be punked and yupped in turn. In its more recent guises, art history is grounded in the same metaphorical substratum: in metaphors whose metaphoricity has been metamorphosed beyond recognition. The question for our time is, can such rhetorical protocols be co-carpented with the postmodern critique of historicism and signification? (33)

REFERENCES

1. Bustcake denied authorship of this statement; therefore, according to the first rule of destructing the historical record, he must have said it, but meant the opposite. Bustcake's role in promoting logocentrism will be discussed below.
2. It is the only one that ever accepts them. (Not for much longer, lady! Ed.)
3. The *locus classicus* is Jacopo Perdità, *The Falsehood in Painting* (Whatsapoint: Nihilist Press, 1990).
4. Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
5. *Ibid.*, 155.
6. *Ibid.*, 153.
7. *Ibid.*, 108.
8. *Ibid.*, 43.
9. B. Twitney-Geyser (ed.), *What Bustcake Never Said* (Whatsapoint: Mendacious Press, 1989), p. 830.
10. This is the source of the "brown sauce" which English collectors applied to their Old Masters; its removal was controversial. The Comet Cleanser Corp. have sponsored a contest for the fastest and most complete removal of this substance. However, there are those who argue that such patina should never be removed, since Renaissance artists anticipated its later application in planning the colouring of their works.
11. Eliza Pigby, *My Secret Life* (London: 1890), p. 433.
12. For details of androidology, the reader is referred to *Blade Runner* (Hollywood, 1986), which clearly had this instance as a precedent.

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13. Johann Hermann Detmold, *Die Kunst, in drei Stunden ein Kunstkenner zu werden*, 1834 (reprinted Berlin: Rütten und Loening, 1954).
14. To be confused with I. Kant's brother I. Kan, *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, a work which needs no destruction since it is unreadable.
15. I owe this insight into the dialectical thought of Heidegger to the Institute for Advanced Irrelevance's *Dasein* (Being) Swimming Club. It would be unbecoming for a swimming club to call itself *Das Seienden*.
16. The modern destructionist would add that philosophy and science are every bit as *bullgeschichtliche* as art!
17. Modern museum educators take heart: Detmold foresaw that it would be possible to elevate art exhibitions to the intellectual and spiritual level of Canada's Wonderland.
18. It goes without saying that this is the source of the false faith in science that, as Preziosi notes, forms the basis for modern *Kunstgeschichte* (i.e. *Bullgeschichte*, as Bustcake was the first to point out).
19. Here it is necessary to point out that *geschichtliche* can mean either "historical" or *scheisslich*.
20. Translation: Treu die Künste gelernet zu haben/Verfeinert die Sitten und verscheucht all Wildheit, or (loosely rendered), study art and scare away your craziness. However, neither Detmold nor Preziosi addresses craziness as the prerequisite to proper destructionist interpretation.
21. I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781. It has been noted that "Belief-ful realism" (Tillich's phase) does not shine with a steady glow in Kant but wavers between fits of "faith" and fits of pique.
22. Clearly, Detmold was a precursor of Pierre Trudeau.
23. Pre-destructionists, otherwise known as Structuralists, will here perceive a link between Detmold's concept of phraseology and Foucault's *langage*. In his words, "No composition, no decomposition, no analysis into identities and differences can now justify the connection of representations one to another." See *Les mots et les choses*, p. 984.
24. Detmold had an amazing premonition of the invention of synthetic materials.
25. Incredibly, Detmold omitted Canadian content: ice.
26. Here a computer programme would be useful.
27. Detmold here is clearly in the mainstream of the sociology of science, which destructs science with the unassailable argument that all truth is purely a socially-destructed convention. This insight has been heartening to the destruction of the humanities, since it demonstrates that science and the humanities are equally meaningless. This is the founding principle of Whatsapoint University.
28. Clearly, Detmold was not only the first logocentrist, but also the first destructionist.

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29. Note that this statement denies the aesthetic importance of "patina". Therefore the Golden Glow imparted by Time the Painter should never be destructed...or is it the other way around? Even the most ironic destructionists can get turned around while following the Möbius strip of discourse to its end.
30. Public museum administrators must remember this one, else a house-painter might duplicate a painting and point out that the materials cost \$1.98 and a child of six could do it. See the scholarly work on this problem edited by J.R. Graves-Smith and George Melly, *A Child of Six Could Do It!* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1973), *passim*; but see particularly pp. 78-79.
31. Note this intimate historical connection between *Kunstgeschichte* and the desecration of paintings.
32. Elaborate justifications for expensive trips abroad, paid by the employer, are another application of the *bullgeschichtliche* principle to art desecration.
33. See this author's "Made to be Ravished", *Recent Setbacks in Conservation* (1987) 2, 5-9.
34. Preziosi, *op. cit.*, p. 17. Or, to put it another way, "...a loosely fitted seam inexorably leads to the promiscuous insertion of interrogative wedges." (*ibid.*, p. 27.)

BIOGRAPHY

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