NARRATIVE FALLACY AND A FRIDGE MAGNET

At the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

Between 1880 and 1890 Vincent Van Gogh produced over 2000 artworks, and, so the story goes, died in poverty and mental illness, never having sold anything. Thereafter his genius was gradually discovered and he was acknowledged as a key figure in the history of art. Tortured and misunderstood genius – archetype and myth.

There's a new exhibition about the end of this life of intensity and dedication to truth and art – what was it when he cut off his ear? – [Link].

My own version of this story came through Hollywood's *Lust for Life* which I saw in the mid 1960s. I think I remember Kirk Douglas writhing on the ground in a hay field squeezing out lashings of chrome yellow from a paint tube. (Maybe he even ate

the paint, and maybe this wasn’t in the film at all, but it is certainly quite an objective correlative).

Kirk Douglas as Vincent Van Gogh

Until this museum visit, I hadn’t realized that the construction of this familiar story was undertaken by his sister-in-law, Jo Bonger, and nephew, another Vincent Willem. Theo Van Gogh had supported his brother Vincent’s studies and curated his

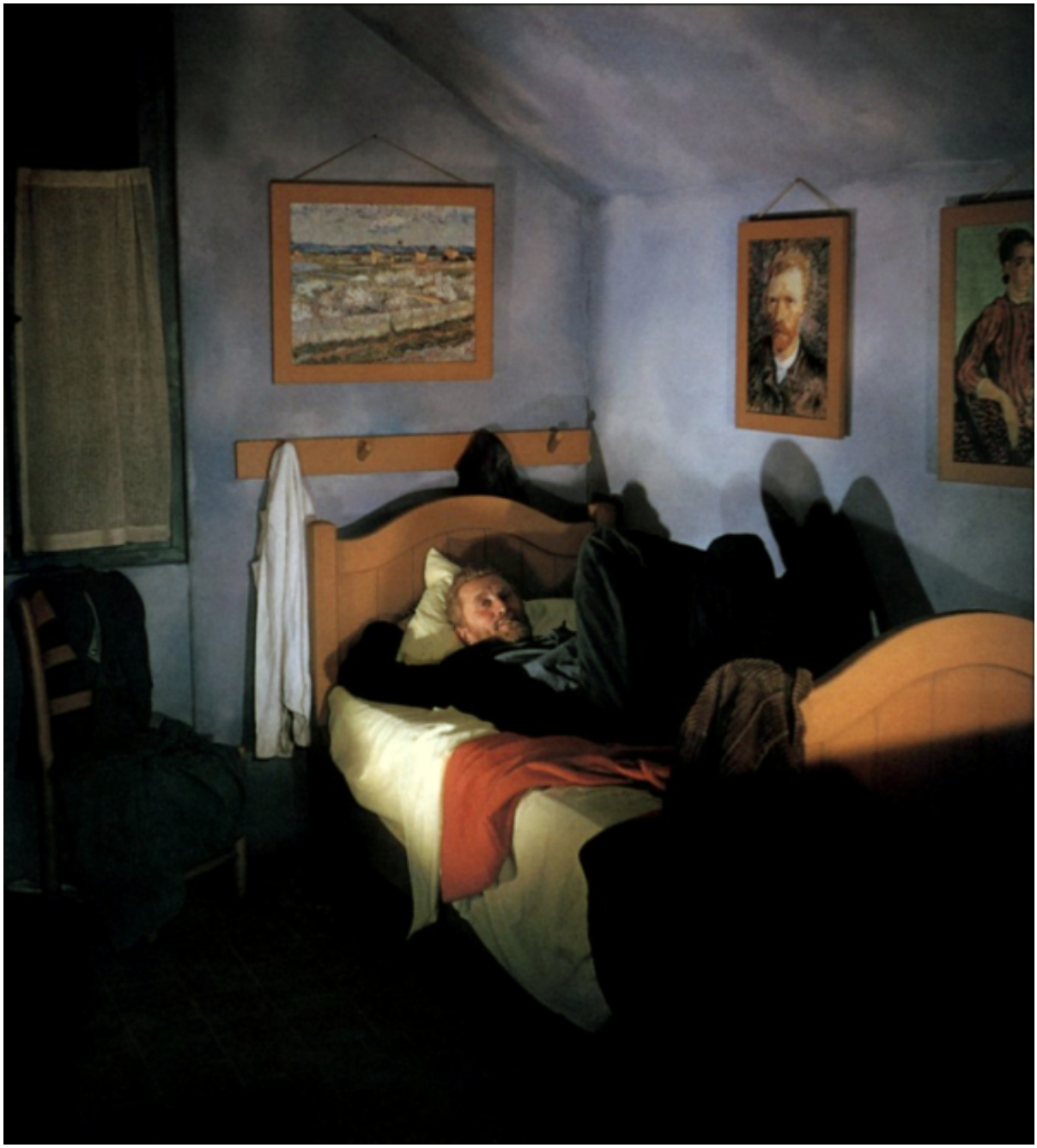
work, but died soon after him in 1890. Jo, Theo's wife, inherited all the drawings, paintings and letters, along with Vincent and Theo's collection of work by contemporaries (they had been art dealers). She set about bringing her brother-in-law's oeuvre to the attention of the public via exhibitions and sales. She also prepared Vincent's letters to Theo for publication in 1914, under the simple title *Brieven aan zijn broeder* (Letters to His Brother) – this established a new kind of insight into artistic production. In 1925 the legend and collection passed to the nephew, a pioneer management consultant, who astutely maintained the integrity of the collection, curated the story, set up a charitable foundation, and founded the museum that opened in 1973.

Irving Stone had written the best selling "Lust for Life" in 1934. In the wake of the success of *Moulin Rouge*, John Huston's 1952 film about Toulouse-Lautrec, another tortured artistic genius, MGM backed Vincente Minnelli's version of Stone's novel. *Moulin Rouge* was shot on expensive three-strip Technicolor; Minnelli realized the importance of color and used Agfa film stock, rather than MGM's usual (and cheaper) Eastman color, in order to secure the right shades of yellow. New clips and photographs were shot of Van Gogh's paintings [Link – Emanuel Levy]. In the movie it's almost as if you're looking at back-lit transparencies – the kind of luminous reproduction we're very used to now on our retina display iPhones and iPads.

The feeling of modern color. Color quiddity – objective correlative.

And the power of storytelling.

Another story might be that Van Gogh was a dedicated and obsessive mature student who did everything you could to learn an art – impressively so. But then I wouldn't have been able to buy my new fridge magnet.



Vincent’s double, my bright new 3D fridge magnet, and darkly brooding Kirk Douglas/Vincent Van Gogh in that bedroom.

On technicolor and heritage – [Link]