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Reading Rembrandt

Beyond the Word-Image
Opposition



Amsterdam Academic Archive

INTRODUCTION

This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. (Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1905:325)

BALANCING VISION AND NARRATIVE

VERMEER'S *Woman Holding a Balance*, housed in the National Gallery in Washington, represents a woman in a blue dress, holding a balance above a table; on the wall, in the background, is a painting of the *Last Judgment*. Light streams in from a stained-glass window at the upper left. It is a strikingly still painting. It avoids narrative – both the anecdotal and the dynamic. Instead it presents an image in terms of visual rhythm, equilibrium, balanced contrasts, and subtle lighting (Figure 0.1). As Arthur Wheelock, Jr. (1981:106–7) remarks, the painting stands in marked contrast to other works on related themes. In those other works the woman tends to look greedily at the precious objects on the table, whereas here she is self-absorbed. In those others the pans of the balance, here empty, tend to be heaped with gold or pearls so that action is implied. In this work the parallel between the *Last Judgment*, hung on the wall behind her, and the woman's act of weighing/judging is elaborated on the basis of similarity, not of narrativized contrast.

Svetlana Alpers, I assume from her *Art of Describing* (1985), would call this a descriptive painting. It is a painting that appeals to visuality if ever there was one, a case for Alpers's opposition to Italian infatuation with narrativity. Any attempt to read the painting as a narrative can only misread it. It is a surface carefully balanced for visual experience, where the appeal to visuality is worked out in the tiniest details. On the upper left part of the painting, in the white wall near the represented *Last Judgment*, is a nail, and near that nail, a hole in the wall. The minutely detailed work of painting is so highly emphasized in these tiny details that both inside the hole and next to the nail we can see a shadow. The soft, warm light streaming in from the window on the upper left touches these two irregularities in the wall, as if to demonstrate that realistic description of the world seen knows no limits.

This light also generates other details in the overall darkness of

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the painting. The woman's dress underneath the mantle is foregrounded by it; between the two fur rims a slice of orange tissue protrudes, showing the dress's color that is in shadow. The dress may be in keeping with the fashion of the times, but for some viewers, questions may keep nagging: Why this soft light, why this striking color and shape, why does it fall *here*? These questions may lead one to interpret this detail: Since the part of the dress that is illuminated is the one that covers her womb, it may, through metonymy, come to represent the slit that opens the womb – her navel. And if we focus particularly on this element, we may come to associate the woman in this painting with the pregnant madonna as represented in the Italian Renaissance.⁹ The woman's hairdress and the blue color of her mantle then may be taken to underscore the visual similarity in the distribution of surface space between her and God in the represented *Last Judgment*. An ordinary Dutch woman for some, an allegorical figure representing *Vanitas* for others, she may become Mary for those who pursue the interpretive game further. To some viewers who notice this detail, such an association will appeal; to others it won't. The point is not to



0.1 Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance* ca. 1662–4 (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art)

convince readers of its appropriateness, or its truth, but to offer the speculative possibility.

For me it was the nail and the hole that the light made visible, produced; that instigated a burst of speculative fertility. When I saw this nail, the hole, and the shadows, I was fascinated; I could not keep my eyes off them. Why are they there? I asked myself. Are these merely meaningless details that Roland Barthes would chalk up to an "effect of the real"? Are these the signs that make a connotation of realism shift to the place of denotation because there is no denotative meaning available? Or do they point to a change in the significance of the *Last Judgment*? Do they suggest that the represented painting which, according to Wheelock, is there to balance the work, to foreground the similarity, the rhyme, between God and this woman, has been displaced from an earlier, "original" position to a better, visually more convincing balance, leaving only the telltale trace of a nail hole? As it is, the woman stands right below God, a position that emphasizes the similarity between judging and weighing. Also, the separation between the blessed and the doomed is obliterated by her position, suggesting, perhaps, that the line between good and evil is a fine one. But in the midst of this speculative flourish, I am caught up short by the remembrance that we are looking at a painting of this balance, not at a real room. The painter surely did not need to *paint* the nail and the hole, even if, in setting up his studio, he actually may have displaced the *Last Judgment*.

If the room were a real room, the hole and the nail would evince traces of the effort to hang the painting in the right place. As such, they demonstrate the materiality of the difficulty and delicacy of balancing. Hanging a painting in exactly the right place is a delicate business, and the result is of the utmost visual importance. For the representation of this statement on visual balance, the nail alone would not do the trick; the failure of the first attempt to balance the represented painting correctly must be shown through an attempt still prior to it. The hole is the record of this prior attempt. The suggestion that the *Last Judgment* was initially unbalanced, with balancing as its very subject matter, threatens to unbalance the painting as a whole. While the metaphoric connection between the idea of judgment and this woman's activity is tightened by the final result, the difficulty of balancing and of judging is thus foregrounded.

In the painting, narrativity so blatantly absent on first – and even second – glance is found to have been inserted by means of a sign that makes a statement on visuality. The visual experience that encodes the iconic association between woman and God is not displaced but, on the contrary, underscored by this narrative aspect. We imagine someone trying to hang the painting in exactly the right place. We are suddenly aware of the woman's artificial pose: Instead of changing the painting's position, the artist arranging his studio could simply have changed the woman's place, or his own

angle of vision. All of a sudden something is happening, the still scene begins to move, and the spell of stillness is broken.

The nail and the hole, both visual elements to which no iconographic meaning is attached, unsettle the poetic description and the passively admiring gaze that it triggered, and dynamize the activity of the viewer. Whereas before the discovery of these details the viewer could gaze at the work in wonder, now he or she is aware of his or her imaginative addition in the very act of looking. The work no longer stands alone; now the viewer must acknowledge that he or she makes it work, and that the surface is no longer still but tells the story of its making. That is what narrativity does to a work of art, be it visual or literary. Attracting attention to the work of representation as well as to the work of reading or viewing, the nail and the hole are traces of the *work of art*, in all senses of that expression and in all its specificity.

This, then, raises questions about the place of narrative in visual art. Narrativity is generally considered an aspect of verbal art, which can be mobilized in visual art under great representational pressure only. Something comparable is alleged for visual imagery, which literature strives for but can never completely realize. I propose to shift the terms of these questions and reconsider the typically medium-bound terms of interpretive scholarship – like spectatorship, storytelling, rhetoric, reading, discursivity, and visibility – as aspects rather than essences, and each art's specific strategies to deal with these aspects, as modes rather than systems.

This study, then, is concerned with theoretical and interpretive problems pertaining to relations between verbal and visual art. Shifting attention from the study of the medium-bound, allegedly intrinsic properties of each domain to the question of reception, allows a systematic scrutiny of the ways in which the arts function in a culture where the public is constantly surrounded by images, yet trained to privilege words over images. Dehierarchying the arts, and dispossessing a mythified author of a work given over to public use, this study is situated within the rapidly growing field of critical studies of culture. My goal is to contribute to cultural theory, to a different understanding of the powerful effects of certain works of art, and to the teachability of the arts across departments.

THE SUBJECT OF THIS STUDY

This study centers upon Rembrandt. Each chapter confronts one or more of his works with texts related to them in various ways: as "source" or pre-text, as response, as thematic companion or counterpart, as theoretical subtext, surrounding context, or as critical rewriting. As for the verbal works selected, the choice is purposefully eclectic, not only to balance the concentration on visual images all by one artist but also because the arguments I am developing are theoretical rather than corpus-bound. I wanted to con-