

READING REMBRANDT

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Mieke Bal

Reading Rembrandt

Beyond the Word-Image
Opposition



Amsterdam Academic Archive

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PREFACE FOR THE AAA-EDITION

In the popular imagination, an archive is a refuge for forgotten objects awaiting revival. It is a place of dust and sleep, where committed historians hunt for hidden treasures. An archive such as the AAA-series of Amsterdam University Press transforms that image. Here, no dust, no forgetting. The books prepared to reemerge through this archive are not so much forgotten, but threatened with extinction while there is still a need for their availability. This archive is not even a place, but a state: a state of readiness. In the case of *Reading Rembrandt* this modified sense of the archive seems appropriate. The book has not been reprinted after its second edition in 1994, yet it continues a life on Xeroxed.

When I wrote this book I had no idea it would be such a scandal piece; a stumbling block for an entire discipline, for some, and a breath of fresh air for others. While one reviewer wrote that everyone ‘must read this book’, another warned against its danger. Both responses, and many in their wake, seemed a bit over the top. In fact, *Reading Rembrandt* was written in a much more modest spirit. I had become intrigued by relations between texts and the images allegedly made ‘after’ them. A strong example would be biblical images, seen as illustrations, more or less adequate but never fully ‘true’ to the complexities of the texts. Rembrandt’s work exemplifies cases of the opposite. Sometimes, the images, in their visual complexity, told me things about the text that, as a committed reader, I had not quite grasped. Rembrandt as a biblical scholar? This was the small revelation that got me going. I think the relationship between textual and visual ‘discourse’ has not been understood in all its subtleties, even today. As the subtitle intimates, I hope to look at Rembrandt’s images outside of, or beyond, the opposition that inevitably establishes hierarchical inequality between the media.

The continued relevance of this book concerns primarily the way we can ‘read’, or understand images. The word ‘reading’ in the book’s title indicates the emancipation of the image from its subordinate role of illustration, not its appropriation by linguistic imperialism. What the book attempts to map are ways of making visual meaning on the basis of our engagement with what we see when we stop to look at an image with more than fleeting attention. In addition to the historical study of origin and making, I believe that images ‘live’ within a social, cultural context, and speak to us in ways that are different from, but as important as, the way literary texts continue to engage us. The methodology of historical approaches is not exclusively nor fully equipped to analyze this aspect of meaning making in the present.

Another aspects of the book concerned the ‘aliveness,’ the ongoing vitality of the work left to us by that artist called ‘Rembrandt.’ The quotation marks indicate Rembrandt’s acutely felt presence in the contemporary world, not a historical or archaeological leftover from the past. This approach entailed undermining the boundary between ‘high’ art and other visual expressions. ‘Rembrandt’ is the name, the title, for the significance of ‘high art’ for ‘popular culture’. It exemplifies the importance in the present of things made in the past – and how the present continuously modifies its meaning.

In that present, many things in the social sphere are different from the seventeenth century. The relationships between citizen and church, to name but one example, has changed profoundly, and so have the relations between the sexes, between masters and servants, the meaning of 'child' and 'adult', and even, in terms of life expectancy, the meaning of 'life' itself. Yet, I argue that these images speak to these issues in terms of today's world. They inspire reflection, intellectual or affective engagement, even the transformation of contemporary ideas. The cultural text called 'Rembrandt', then, is alive, and kicking.

This aspect of the book has been misconstrued as a-historicism. This book is, to the contrary, deeply historical, but the history it performs is that of the late twentieth century. Its claim, in other words, is that the participation of the contemporary viewer in the construction of the meaning of age-old images is relevant for a sense of history as, simply put, *change over time*. It was this aspect that was most misunderstood. As a result, I devoted a later book entirely and explicitly to this question: Quoting Caravaggio can be seen as the product of the criticism brought to bear on *Reading Rembrandt*.

One issue that came up during my investigations of the images was the interest in, and what seemed identification with, women in social interactions. This gave the book a distinct feminist flavor, which had doubtlessly emerged, not from Rembrandt 'himself' – his alleged intentions – but from 'Rembrandt', the body of images floating around in the world today. I was not alone working in feminist art history, and many of the positive echoes I am still receiving in response to the book come from feminists who feel empowered by the book's methodological rigor and depth.

Providing an opening in a confining disciplinary orthodoxy is perhaps the book's most enduring accomplishment. If one feels limited by a decades-old methodology of iconography and connoisseurship, how can one draw on other principles of academic standards? In this domain, *Reading Rembrandt* has not yet exhausted its relevance. It is fortunate that the number of art historians with more open-ended curiosities has increased dramatically since the book first appeared. What this book harbors is not an anything-goes indifference to method but, on the contrary, a keen awareness that opening boundaries is only possible if unquestioned dogmas can be persuaded by rigorous alternatives.

Finally, the historical moment of today, after the 'pictorial turn' of which this book has been an active element in the 1990s, matters. Within and outside the university, people have noticed the increased cultural importance and presence of visual imagery. Some lament this, other applaud it; but nothing can undo it. This change has called for sophisticated methodologies to understand the power of images and their contribution to the formation of ideas. My guess is that today, the need for examples of methodological reflection on what it means to 'read' an image – to understand what it has to say, and do, on its own, visual terms – has increased along with the presence of visual expressions.

All these reasons together seem to justify the placement, if that is the right word, of this book in the archive called AAA. I am, of course, grateful to Amsterdam University Press and its director Saskia de Vries, for this opportunity to revive the book. I am also

grateful for the possibility to accommodate the interest it has never ceased to generate. It is gratifying to see happen on a small scale to my book what that book argued to happen to all things made in the past. Publishing this book in the AAA series, then, is an instance of what I like to call, with a wink, a 'preposterous history'. It is my hope that some readers, knowing my later work, will now read this book with a retrospective spirit, acknowledging that some of the criticisms brought against it were based on misreadings, while other criticisms still remain to be articulated. I look forward to see my thoughts of old challenged again, from within today's cultural and academic situation.

Mieke Bal

January 2006

For Ernst

READING "REMBRANDT"

Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition explores the potential for interdisciplinary methodology between literature and visual art. In a series of close analyses of works by "Rembrandt," and of texts related to those works, Mieke Bal questions the traditional boundaries between literary and visual analysis, and examines "Rembrandt"'s complex handling of gender and the representation of women in "Rembrandt"'s painting.

Although *Reading "Rembrandt"*'s methods originate outside the history of art, this book demonstrates the author's sensitivity to the visual aspects of "Rembrandt"'s work. Through the analyses, the works by "Rembrandt" gain in depth and interest, and an original perspective on the role of visuality in our culture emerges, which ultimately has consequences for our views of gender, the artist, and the act of reading.

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PREFACE

We can never understand a picture unless we grasp the ways in which it shows what cannot be seen. (W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology*, 1985:39)

The world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic, it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too. (Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 1979:75)

As a result both of their oppression, their specularization and their forced confrontation with their own lack, Fassbinder's male characters acquire the capacity to become something other than what the male subject has classically been – to slip out from under the phallic sign, away from the paternal function. (Kaja Silverman, "Fassbinder and Lacan," 1989:80)

I began by dropping the picture theory of language and ended by adopting the language theory of pictures. (Nelson Goodman, "The Way the World Is," in *Problems and Projects*, 1972:31–2)

THIS study is the result of an adventure across borders. Coming from the field of literary studies, I began to work on visual art in relation to literature, because I felt increasingly dissatisfied with the generalizing assumptions about literature on which this field operates, which often struck me as not specific at all to the object of inquiry. However, locked up within the academic field of "literary studies," I did not find it easy to gain the necessary perspective on assumptions so widely shared by students in that field. Studying images has made me aware of how strongly privileging the word impedes insight into the enormous influence of visual images on thought, imagination, and social interaction in our culture. Even art historians in their writing, I was surprised to notice, in certain ways and often unawares, privilege the verbal. At the same time, having sensitized myself to visual elements in literature and literary criticism, I could not remain blind to the fact that the overt emphasis on the word hardly conceals an overwhelmingly visual dimension in our culture, including both literature and the study of it. This prompted me to study systematically the interplay of visual and verbal elements.

Several lectures given to audiences in literature and art history have provided me with the serious feedback needed to develop my ideas and to interact with scholars of other fields, primarily art history, but also film studies. This generous and open-minded response in art historical and literary gatherings has convinced me that a fruitful dialogue between the two disciplines is possible and welcome, and that common concerns can be addressed in an increasingly common language. Unfortunately, I cannot begin to enumerate all the people who have been important to this study.

This book originated from what was in many ways the most pleasurable teaching experience of my career: the twelve lectures I was invited to give as Northrop Frye professor at the University of Toronto. When invited to hold that chair in theory of literature for 1987, I asked if I could do it on "Rembrandt." The unqualifiedly positive answer was evidence of the interest, in literary studies, in things visual. Among the group of faithful interlocutors, graduate students and faculty, I owe special gratitude to Milena Doleželova Veringerova, Linda Hutcheon, and Peter Nesselroth. But the development of those lectures into a book could not have been accomplished without my colleagues and students at the University of Rochester. In addition to the people in the Comparative Literature Program, I wish to mention especially those who participated in the creation of the Program in Comparative Arts: Norman Bryson, Michael Holly, the late Craig Owens, Constance Penley, Grace Seiberling, Kaja Silverman, and Sharon Willis. The creation of that program ran parallel to the writing of this book. It retarded my progress on the book when the inevitable bureaucratic procedures claimed priority, but it also provided major inspiration by fostering the intellectual environment I shared with these colleagues: one that was stimulating, challenging, demanding, and friendly. Major inspiration came especially from Kaja Silverman from both her work and her conversation. It is impossible to acknowledge her influence fully; pursuing the same goal, she had often thought through problems with which I had only intuitively grappled. Her friendship and intellectual generosity have been crucial to me.

I don't know how to thank two people who have been particularly important, maybe without knowing just how important. The first is Michael Holly. Should I thank her as chair of the Art History Department who gave me a second home department, or as the person who was most deeply involved in the creation of the Program in Comparative Arts from its inception, or as the friend who supported me at bad moments, or as the scholar who kept asking me the questions that I kept trying to evade? The second is Norman Bryson. Should I thank him as a colleague, or as editor of the series "Cambridge New Art History and Criticism"; as a friend, a continuous interlocutor, a source of inspiration from beginning to end; or as a person who managed to keep all these functions neatly separated?

On several occasions, I have profited from the generous advice

of Svetlana Alpers, Evelyn Fox-Keller, Ria Lemaire, Jan van Luxemburg, Henk van Os, Simon Schama, and many others. Very special help at just the right moment came from Elisabeth Bronfen. Thanks to her painstaking efforts to make sense of unreadable drafts and the inspiring interaction with her, this book has been finished much earlier than it would have been otherwise. In the final stage, the discussions in the Summer Institute "Theory and Interpretation in the Visual Arts," sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and organized by Michael Holly and Keith Moxey, have been crucial to the formulation of important issues underlying this book. The continuous challenge from the participants, and in particular from coorganizer Keith Moxey, was just what I needed. I dare not hope that my view of social context will satisfy Keith now, but it was articulated in dialogue with his.

Claudia Swann gave the final version a critical eye from the perspective of the technicalities of art history. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for the end result. Jane Carter deserves very special thanks. She was the very best editor I have ever had the pleasure to work with, did several rounds of style editing of the entire book that were incredibly precise, strong, and creative. I won't confess to what small disasters her work has been subjected, only that she put up with them cheerfully. Without her invaluable help, the text would not have reached the degree of readability it presently enjoys.

The University of Rochester allowed me to take more leaves of absence than my colleagues and students would have liked; I am grateful to all those concerned, for their tolerance. The J. Paul Getty Foundation awarded me a senior research grant to complete the manuscript in its final stage, and to prepare a revised version in Dutch.

Very special and continuous help and encouragement came from Ernst van Alphen, without whom I never would have persevered. His lessons in looking were as valuable as his relentless criticism and his never failing support. Since he is also my most eager and sharp reader, I cannot but dedicate this book to him.

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

READING
“REMBRANDT”

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-

front the visual works with a variety of verbal works, from different genres and contexts, and with different types of relations to the visual works. It is those relations, rather than the particular texts and works, that I wish to discuss. I take Rembrandt to stand for an exemplary painter in "high culture" and not as a particularly discursive or narrative artist. This art lends itself, therefore, to the kind of questions I wish to ask, without "begging" them.

The juxtaposition, in an interpretive venture, of verbal and visual "texts" has among many other advantages that of making the student of visual art and literature aware, not so much of those aspects of the works that inhere in the medium but more importantly of those that do not. This kind of interpretive juxtaposition can generate insight into the strategies of representation and of interpretation, as distinct from medium-bound devices, and can help generate a broader perspective on other cultural issues. This book is designed to explore some of the possibilities of this field of study.

The primary assumption underlying the book is that the culture in which works of art and literature emerge and function does not impose a strict distinction between the verbal and the visual domain. In cultural life, the two domains are constantly intertwined. In order to assess what a work means for the culture in which it circulates, we therefore need to overcome the artificial boundaries that form the basis of academic disciplines.

A second assumption underlying this work is that art is both entirely artificial – that is, not "natural" – and entirely real – that is, not separated from the ideological constructions that determine the social decisions made by people every day. Hence, nothing about art is innocent: It is neither inevitable, nor without consequences. In order to drive this point home, for example, Chapter 2, entitled "Visual Rhetoric," discusses the issues of rhetoric and rape in the Western representational regime, the one through the other.

Two other, intertwined assumptions need some comment. The one holds that any analysis and interpretation of visual or verbal works of art, even historical interpretations, are necessarily and by virtue of the semiotic status of art informed by the views, standards, ideologies, and background – in other words, by the subjectivity – of the person doing the analysis. Not that attempts to recover the past are futile; rather they tend to displace the issue of the epistemological status of the knowledge they produce and thus undermine the status of their own results. Most historical interpretation aims at restoring the author's intentions. But by obliterating and repressing the subjectivity of the analyst, the author's alleged intentions are burdened with, and sometimes buried under, projections by the former passed off as intentions of the latter. Thus intention and meaning, and work and analyst, are conflated.²

The question is not just whether "pure" historical knowledge is possible – and the answer has to be negative, even to historians less skeptical than Hayden White.³ We must also ask what is to be gained

by making explicit what happens when one tries. This study attempts to explore some aspects of that question by focusing here and there on the gestures of critical readers, foregrounding this difficulty, by endorsing a radically reception-oriented approach.

One can argue that the historical endeavor is not exhausted by the surprisingly tenacious search for intentions. But today a more sophisticated historical inquiry into the work and workings of a body of visual material would define the underlying historical question in a more social sense, as a search for the social situation and context out of which the work emerged. This inquiry includes economical and political factors and their influence on the structure of public life as analyzed, for example, by T. J. Clark; as well as what Martin Jay would call the "scopic regime," or Svetlana Alpers the visual culture of the time.¹ All these elements together constitute the answer to the question "What made this possible?" This question situates the work in a social situation rather than in an individual genius. I acknowledge the value of such inquiry, which, indeed, I find indispensable.

Yet social history does not escape the problem of the presence of the critic as inseparable from historical knowledge. In addition, the very concept of context is as problematic as that of text. Jonathan Culler formulates the problem acutely when he writes:

But the notion of context frequently oversimplifies rather than enriches discussion, since the opposition between an act and its context seems to presume that the context is given and determines the meaning of the act. We know, of course, that things are not so simple: context is not fundamentally different from what it contextualizes; context is not given but produced: what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of a context is determined by events. Yet when we use the term *context* we slip back into the simple model it proposes. (Culler, 1988:xiv)

Context, in other words, is a text and thus presents the same difficulty of interpretation as any other text. The context cannot define the work's meaning because context itself defies unambiguous interpretation as much as the work. Culler goes on to argue that an alternative to the notion of context is that of framing:

Since the phenomena criticism deals with are signs, forms with socially-constituted meanings, one might try to think not of context but of the framing of signs: how are signs constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of value, semiotic mechanisms? (Culler, 1988:xiv)

This is, *de facto*, what Pollock (1988) as well as Alpers, Clark, and many others are doing, at least on the sender's side. But this still does not solve the question of meaning.

I would like to explore what the question "What *made* this possible?" fails to address by changing it into "What *makes* this possible?" – referring not to the work as a given but to its existence as both affect and effect. The meaning of the work is now situated

as an effect of meaning. This effect is complicated by the social construction of visuality, the modalities of looking that we are trained to adopt, and the variability of identifications."

Another, related assumption that underlies this study concerns the status of the artist as genius and of art as "high art." The choice of works by Rembrandt as the central body of visual art for this study may seem provocative. But although his authorship is currently under pressure, the status of his art goes unquestioned. True, some Rembrandt critics (the members of the Rembrandt Research Project are among them; see Bruyn et al., 1982), voluntarily question the quality of some of the works, and even take pride in their demythologizing attitude. Yet the very fact that these aesthetic criticisms lead to rejection of the authenticity of the works as "Rembrandts" provides evidence of the basically unchallenged status of both author as genius and of aesthetic quality as determinable. Hence these acts of judgment rest on the possibility to delimit "high art" from other art. An ever "higher," purer Rembrandt is thus safeguarded.

In the wake of a growing awareness of the mechanisms of exclusion inherent in both these notions of authorship and of aesthetic quality, a number of attitudes have come to prevail instead. One very powerful attitude has been to reject the preoccupation with the works of geniuses altogether, turning toward the products of popular culture, formerly denigrated as "low art" and today valued as more representative evidence of the cultural life of the people. Examples among many are Keith Moxey's (1989) study of popular early German woodcuts and Nathalie Kampen's (1981) study of sculpture in the Roman provinces, and, in an altogether different domain, the current revaluation of the nineteenth-century "sentimental novel," on which more appears in Chapter 5. The successful work in film studies, a field that deservedly has a leading position in cultural studies, ignores the boundaries between artistic and popular film and analyzes both indiscriminately.¹ Another approach is to criticize "high art" as ideologically flawed, examining racism, sexism, classism in canonical works, and, subsidiarily, in art history and literary criticism (e.g., Said, 1978; Gates, 1985; Trinh, 1989).

In spite of the obvious importance of those endeavors, there seems to be room for a third attitude, which I can formulate most briefly as a paradox: "High art" is part of popular culture. In other words, I am interested in why a culture, largely but not exclusively colonized by the cultural leaders who have the power to impose their taste and stakes, continues to respond to a set body of works of art; I am also interested in what kind of response that body of works elicits. These works may be part of the elitist culture, but the responses they elicit are not. Issues like the relationship between storytelling and voyeurism; the thematic centrality of the nude as an object of vision, as well as a source of blindness, of the impotence to see; transparent representation and its limits – all are pervasively present in contemporary Western culture. It is my claim that the

works traditionally attributed to Rembrandt elicit a response to, and reflection on, issues like these.

The opposition high-low is intrinsic not to the object under scrutiny but to the assumptions we bring to these (or any) works. Thus bringing the concerns of popular culture to bear on works of "high" culture debunks the latter and undermines the opposition between them. A similar dichotomy exists in feminist criticism: Is it necessary to expend ever more attention on the works of the male canon instead of looking at works by women? There, too, I would argue that both endeavors need to be pursued in tandem.⁸

To a certain extent, a culture makes its art and its artists. It is to be expected, then, that the art also makes the culture, by initiating or addressing issues that pertain to the culture at large. Thus I will argue, in Chapter 4, that the relationship between looking and power, which pervades this culture where positions in visual art are quite strongly gendered, is both exemplified and addressed by the works attributed to Rembrandt. The sections "Viewer," "Voyeurism," and "Focalizer" address current theories of the gaze, of spectatorship, and confront these with literary theories of point of view and focalization. The story of *Susanna and the Elders*, which thematizes looking, makes a good case.

That many of these works are now in the process of being disavowed as part of the Rembrandt corpus does not bother me; it rather supports my argument that "Rembrandt" is a cultural text, rather than a historical reality. "Rembrandt" constitutes these works *and* the response to them, responses that range from their mistaken (?) attribution to attempts to challenge their authenticity on the basis of a holistic and elitist concept of authorship. In this study, the name of an author is meant as a shorthand for this complex of readings of certain works *as* works by a particular artist. In order to keep in mind this definition of the author, I shall put the name "Rembrandt" in quotation marks, as the title of a text, whenever I am using the name in my own argument. I shall avoid using quotation marks when I render the views of others, lest using them would distort these views.⁹

This book represents an attempt to reflect systematically on these and a number of other related issues, which today receive ever wider attention, yet have not been pulled together. I hope to knit these strands together into a reception-oriented perspective of cultural critique. This book is based, not on a denial of difference between verbal and visual art, but on a provisional bracketing of the question as to what that difference might possibly be. Shifting attention from the question of intrinsic properties to that of response, the focus will be on the interaction between the visual and verbal "behavior" of those who deal with, process, or consume the works of art. The book is reading-oriented; the transfer of approaches traditionally limited to analyzing works of visual or of verbal art to the other is primarily to enrich the methods of analysis and interpretation currently in use, as well as to promote the reader's

self-awareness as a critic. Each chapter focuses on a theoretical problem. For example: What can we do with rhetoric for the interpretation of visual images? How can images narrate? What are the status and the effect of a represented viewer in visual and literary art? These will be discussed as an issue of cultural criticism.

In order to be teachable, the approach needs to be elaborated through detailed analyses of works of art whose artistic status in the culture in which they function is undeniable. Therefore, the book will also contain a number of interpretations as well as discussions of extant interpretations of works of art. In these interpretive analyses, the relationship between (i.e., the approaches to) verbal and visual arts, and between the work and the world, will be explored with the help of specific examples. No claim to exhaustiveness is intended, nor are my interpretations meant to suggest that alternative or conflicting interpretations are invalid. On the contrary, conflicting meanings are, in my view, what art is about.

The book is designed to pursue a number of intertwined goals. First, I shall practice "reading" – that is, describing and interpreting images and stories both verbal and visual. At the same time, I shall reflect on what "reading" means. I shall reflect on the relationship between literature and the visual arts, a relationship between different, but not opposed, ways of producing signs and meaning. Thus I shall pursue insight into the rhetorical and pictorial devices used in the two arts. At the same time, I shall explore the different ways in which works by "Rembrandt" and certain verbal texts are or can be related. These reflections will point toward unexpected but crucial relationships between technical and ideological issues. Although each of the chapters of this book deals with a particular theoretical point, three issues derived from the above assumptions recur and intersect with the main points to constitute a subtext, uniting the various reflections. These three issues are the choice of "Rembrandt" in an anti-individualist study; the status of interpretation in a reception-oriented study; and the choice of certain terms of analysis, some of which have been compromised by their use in misogynist analyses, in a feminist study. I shall begin by discussing the first two of these issues, and, after presenting the various chapters in light of these, conclude with a brief discussion of the third.

WHY "REMBRANDT"?

In our culture, painting is art *par excellence*, and in a capitalist society, that excellence is taken quite literally, not only in the form of prices reached at auction, but also in the central position painting retains institutionally and ideologically within Western culture. There is nothing in the literary institution, for example, that really compares with the *museum*.¹

Within the institution of art "Rembrandt" is a most representative figure, fetching among the highest prices ever paid per canvas, with

the authenticity of the works – their autographic reliability – fully determining their worth. "Rembrandt" scholarship has become a paradoxical power; without being invested with power itself, it makes or breaks fortunes. If only for these reasons, "Rembrandt" presents a challenge to the analyst. Forgetting "Rembrandt" in order to pay more attention to popular works would leave these institutional aspects unchallenged.

A second answer to the question Why "Rembrandt"? can be found in his period. This artist belongs to an era still innocent of Freudianism – an innocence that makes his work a proper object for a psychoanalytic criticism that wishes to avoid circularity. There may not be in "Rembrandt" 's painting such wonderful coincidence of discourse as was the case with Freud and Sophocles.⁴ But equally prestigious, and in many ways equally tragic, complex, and riddled with riddles, "Rembrandt" 's visual art, nevertheless, constitutes a suitable challenge to psychoanalysis.

A third answer to Why "Rembrandt"? rests in the *kind* of art his corpus contains. "Rembrandt" 's art being figurative, it presents us with both a problem and an opportunity. Representational art is "about" something and thus is open to reductionism. The reductionism that threatens the analysis of art is threefold: the reductionism of geneticism, as in intentionalist art history and classical psychoanalysis; the reductionism of interpretation, as in the unificatory tendencies of positivistic analysis; the reductionism of logocentrism, of "reading" the image only for its (monolithic) meaning. On the other hand, these tendencies can and should be challenged in their turn, and thus we come to our opportunity. By retaining the kind of openness and vulnerability described above, we can escape reductionism and engage a liberating analysis. "Rembrandt" is appropriate for exploring the ways in which interdisciplinary analysis can counter the tendency to reductionism.

A fourth answer to our question can be elicited by remembering that "Rembrandt" belongs to a tradition that considers skill the primary asset for a painter, an asset far more crucial than the "touch of craziness" that classical psychoanalytic criticism, as heir to the Romantic tradition, so often presupposes. With so little known about his life, and with that "knowledge" so riddled with romantic presuppositions that wild speculations about his neuroses can only be ridiculous, we are left only with what remains on the canvas and what can be inferred from the texts that frame the canvases. This state of affairs protects the enterprise of criticism against another well-known trap, what we might call the pseudobiographical fallacy. On the other hand, at least Rembrandt scholarship has been enlivened by Schwartz's "nasty" account of Rembrandt's person (Schwartz, 1985) and more profoundly by Alpers's (1988) book. Therefore, this kind of scholarship at the very least escapes the problem lying in wait for the many respectful but not sufficiently distanced studies that get bogged down by the laudatory discourse of connoisseurship. The "Rembrandt" corpus is worth some kind

of attention in which respect is not an issue, and in which, ultimately, craziness, incoherence, and contradiction are possibilities, if only because the critic and viewer are never exempted.

Finally, the number of works in which blindness is thematized makes "Rembrandt" doubly appropriate for a study like this one. First, there is the question of the insistent presence of a theme that postmodernism relates to self-reflexivity, feminism to voyeurism, and psychoanalysis to castration. Second, there is the metaquestion of the critical blindness brought forth by sheer thematic psychoanalysis which obscures the work of representation. Both these questions deserve exploration.

"Rembrandt," then, is here treated as a cultural text that transgresses the imaginary boundaries between "high" and popular culture, a boundary I locate between the work as thing and its reception as event. It is the center of a body of reflection on art, visuality, and discourse. "Rembrandt" inserted itself into the cultural discourses and visual practices in the seventeenth century in Holland, and has been in constant movement and transformation since. Whenever historical "facts" – speculations about the biography of the painter named Rembrandt – partake of the event of reception, these facts and speculations themselves become part of the text. Conceiving the historical dimension of analysis in this way, I do not ignore it, but I do keep in mind that no historical position is innocent of the contemporary perspective of the subject doing the historiography. In fact, it is that historical position in which I am primarily interested.

In his famous attack on the concept and authority of the author, Foucault (1979) banishes four different concepts of authorship. Not only does he dispose of the psychological idea of the author, of the authorial intention, and of the historical author as origin of the work, he also jettisons the last stronghold of the concept of the author – the author function as the centering of meaning – by demonstrating it to be a projection of a reader who needs semantic centrality to deal with the work. Foucault's alternative is a radical proliferation of meaning, where the author/work becomes a fluctuating function, always interacting with other functions in the larger discursive field.

So far so good; but is there a limit to these fluctuations? Or are we constrained by an anything-goes attitude that makes any future shift in power relations within the culture invisible from now on? My position here is that there *are* limits, but not limits that can be authenticated by appeal to the author, even when interpreting "author" in the widest sense of the historical context. Instead, those limits are strategic, but fundamental. They are fundamental, for any position that does not assess the political basis of the status quo cannot challenge the established cultural powers, because, simply, these powers were established on political grounds. But once shifting, strategic limits are accepted as replacement for both "natural" limits and Foucault's "antilimits," then these new bounds offer a

starting point from which to develop a politics of reading that draws its legitimacy from political positions, not from any fictitious "real" knowledge. And once we acknowledge both the necessity and the strategic nature of limits to interpretation, we move from the question of the author back to the question of interpretation.

WHY INTERPRETATION?

The need for interpretation requires some additional comments at this point as well. A study that focuses on reading cannot but question the location of meaning and the related concern regarding the subject of interpretation. Such a task inevitably leads to the further question: Why bother to interpret if interpretation is subjective anyway?¹²

Here, again, strategy prevails. Whenever a literary scholar, moved by the commendable intention of putting an end to the current proliferation of interpretation, stands up to claim that some details in realistic texts have no narrative function, that they merely serve to produce an "effect of the real" (Barthes, 1968) or an effect of verisimilitude (*véraisemblance*; Genette, 1969b), someone else responds that the examples given do have a narrative function after all, if only one looks hard enough. There seems to be a resistance to meaninglessness that invariably looks convincing. As a consequence, we continue to assume that everything in a work of art contributes to, and modifies, the meaning of the work.

But if everything in a work of art participates equally in the production of meaning, then how do we know what texts and images are "about" and why? In other words, which signs convey, or trigger, which meanings? One answer is that there is no answer because texts and images do nothing; the interpreter invents the meaning. Putting the question differently, we may ask, On what basis do we process verbal and visual signs? The debate is particularly troublesome in literary theory because the question interferes with the apparent obviousness of the answer. We assume we know what signs are and which signs we process because we know what a letter, a word, and a sentence are, and we assume that words are the units we call signs in verbal works.

Here, visual poetics reminds us of this assumption's untenability, by forcing us to ask what the visual counterpart of a word is: Is it an image, as the phrase "word and image" too easily suggests? Mulling over this difficult equation, we become less sure that words are, in fact, the "stuff" of verbal signification.

The problem of delimiting signs and delineating interpretation – of distinguishing interpretation from description – is related. Since readers and viewers bring to the texts and images their own cultural and personal baggage, there can be no such thing as a fixed, pre-determined meaning, and the very attempt to summarize meanings, as we do in encyclopedias and textbooks, is by definition reductive. Yet as soon as we are forced to draw from these views the inevitable

conclusion that "anything goes" and that interpretation is a futile scholarly activity since it all depends on the individual interpreter, we draw back. We then turn around, trying to locate, in the text or image, not a meaning, but the "occasion" of meaning, the thing that triggers meaning; not fixity, but a justification for our flexibility.

As Jonathan Culler has argued, when confronting the dilemma of interpretation we face two mutually exclusive positions which nevertheless are complementary, continuous – that is, mutually inclusive.¹³ Ernst van Alphen has argued convincingly in response to Culler that the dilemma can be resolved only by our letting go of a unified concept of meaning and being ready to distinguish at least two different "moments of meaning production" occurring at the two loci of the debate, text and reader. Van Alphen's solution is not a harmonizing of the conflict demonstrated by Culler; it is not a dialectic resolution but rather a radicalization of the poles of the opposition. Moreover, van Alphen leaves room for more than two kinds of meaning, and stimulates thinking about other possibilities.¹⁴

As I hope to show in the third chapter of this study, I subscribe to the general skepticism concerning the possibility of circumscribing meaning, but as my second chapter will demonstrate, I do not find interpretation futile. On the contrary, the continuity and interdependence between producing and processing works of art makes interpretation as important, as valuable, as writing and painting. But my continued adherence to interpretation is more polemical than that. While I find much that is intellectually attractive in the currently widespread resistance to interpretation presented in response to the recognition of the free play of signs and meanings, I also see in it a renewed threat to the freedom of cultural participation, a new form of censorship.

Censorship of art, be it overtly political or subliminally social, is confirmed, strengthened, and perpetuated by censoring forms of interpretation. In a world where access to writing and painting is made difficult – by the institutional censors of art – for all individuals deviating from a self-asserting mainstream, making interpretation a privileged form of art processing subjugates it to the same mechanisms of exclusion.

But there is more to it. True, the academic practice of interpretation, linked with journalism and other more popular forms of interpretation through a common ideology and often even through shared personnel, can be a form of censorship in itself. Even where the margins built within art and the reigning concepts of beauty leave some space for the production of works that cannot be exhausted by mainstream response, the exclusions operating within the very activity of interpretation as a practice taught and learned can easily take care of all interpretations that might enhance the unsettling aspects of these not-so-mainstream works; of interpretations that make the works threatening. This is precisely the mo-

tivation for the resistance coming from progressive scholars. But for the same reason, censorship *of* interpretation can be used to conceal the censorship *by* interpretation. And that is why the resistance to interpretation can receive such wide acclaim, from progressive as well as from conservative ideologues.

A more open academic and educational policy can make room to include the views of those who respond to art from a less predominant social position. Such a broadening is an indispensable next step toward a better, more diverse and complex, understanding of culture. In spite of its challenging and persuasive logic, we must place the resistance to interpretation within this dynamic. I am afraid that it cannot be an accident that the increasing participation of women and minorities in the academy coincides with a growing resistance to the very practices from which they had formerly been excluded. To put it overly simply, as soon as women began to speak, the subject of speech was no longer relevant; as soon as women began to interpret, there was no more need for interpretation. In other words, the same threat is acutely present as the one that the "death of the author" poses: As women gained access to signs, the sign was put to death.¹⁶ This demonstrates precisely how the problematic of interpretation and the challenge to the sign are related.

In the following chapters, I shall not make a regressive claim for the reinstatement of the Saussurian sign with its system-ontological status and its safely sutured signified. My endeavor will be much more down to earth; I shall explore modes and possibilities, analyzing what does or can happen in the encounter between text and reader – an encounter that is never a true encounter and that always leaves rests, gaps, and "meaninglessness" anyway. I shall try to show that the determination of signs and the attribution of meaning to signs – acknowledged as readerly activities – follow various paths whose diversification is precisely the point. We do many different things under the unifying heading of interpretation that we call the response to signs. This is how the problem of interpretation joins the problem of the sign.¹⁶

The view of signs to which I shall adhere in this study posits the basic density of both verbal and visual texts. I use the term "density" in Goodman's (1976) sense: as conveying the fundamental inseparability of individual signs, as the opposite of discreteness. This view eliminates at least one difference between discourse and image. Resisting the early Wittgenstein's anguish about, and sympathizing with his later happy endorsement of, the cloudiness of language, I shall contend that the same density that characterizes visual texts obstructs the propositional clarity of verbal texts.¹⁷ Thus, separate words cannot be taken to rule interpretation, and the ideal of "pure" propositional content longed for in the *Tractatus* is untenable: The elements of a proposition cannot have independent meaning. This

recognition means that the difference between verbal and visual texts is no longer one of the status and delimitation of the signs that constitute them. And the visual model, apparently predominant, overwhelms the concrete particularity of the signifier, giving rise to "cloudiness" in each medium. Hence, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* mourns the fact that there is no nondense language, whereas later, in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein denounces the positivistic illusion that makes visuality the basis of interpretation, sacrificing both the signifier and the activity of semiosis. In this later work he endorses the view he earlier regretted, that language is as dense as pictures. This may not make language visual, but it does displace the difference between the two media.

Yet the density of both visual and linguistic signs is not really the issue. Rather, it is the dynamism of signs that the recognition of their density makes possible that is at issue. The perception of signs as static can be traced to the atomistic view of verbal signs, itself a relic of early structuralism which, in its turn, had inherited it from more explicitly positivistic schools of cultural scholarship.¹⁸ The problem and source of this atomistic view are the semiotic positivism that claims ontological status for the sign. If the sign is a "real thing," then signs must be numerable, hence discrete and intrinsically static. A radically dynamic view, however, would conceive the sign not as a thing but as an event, the issue being not to delimit and isolate the one sign from other signs, but to trace the possible emergence of the sign in a concrete situation of work-reader interaction. Wittgenstein's concept of language games posits a dynamic view of the sign, which makes signs as *active*, and requires them to be both deployed *according to rules* and *public*. A sign, then, is *not a thing but an event*. Hence the meaning of a sign is neither preestablished and fixed, nor purely subjective and idiosyncratic.

Although this view seems to open the discussion to a paralyzing infinitude of phenomena, this apparent problem disappears as soon as we acknowledge that sign events occur in specific circumstances and according to a finite number of culturally valid, conventional, yet not unalterable rules, which semioticians call "codes." The selection of those rules and their combination leads to specific interpretive behavior.

THE CONTENT OF THIS STUDY

In light of the preceding considerations, this book progresses from more general to more specific explorations of problems pertaining to the interpretation of verbal and visual art. The opening chapter, "Beyond the Word-Image Opposition," provides an overview of issues included in the general theme of the book, and relates these issues to some major works of art analysis that are currently influential in both art history and literary studies.

Chapter 2 begins to explore the hermeneutic exchange between

literary and visual studies by demonstrating the possible gain of this exchange in terms of social issues. The chapter addresses the question of the relationship between representation and reality head-on through the elaboration of a "rhetoric of violence." It explores the interpretive possibilities for painting offered by literary concepts like metaphor and metonymy, and then proposes to reverse the perspective and read literary texts with a bias for visibility as it is thematized in many a text. The works discussed in that chapter all thematize rape, and Lucretia is the central character.

The issue of reading as a socially framed effect of meaning will be recurrently discussed in the following chapters. In Chapter 2, it is related to the problem of meaning and experience. In Chapter 3, it focuses on the elusiveness of meaning. "Visual Storytelling" centers upon the story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, examining devices for storytelling in a still medium, and then questioning the notion that storytelling in literature proceeds sequentially. This questioning focuses on the concept of myth as a token of permanency, as the petrified, transhistorical "hard core" of a story. In Chapter 4, inversely, an issue traditionally limited to the visual domain is explored. Through the story of Susanna and the Elders the meaning of looking and *its* status as reading is examined.

After exploring the interface between visual and verbal art in these first four chapters, in Chapters 5 through 9 I shall discuss the specific gestures by the reader that in the search for meaning bring about sign events. First, in the search for theme (iconography) and narrative, I shall juxtapose iconography with narratology. Next, I shall bring two other conflicting modes of reading to bear upon each other: the search for the "text" (the effect of the representation as a whole) and for the real (away from the work of representation). Both of these modes of reading, or codes, focus on signs that help us understand the work in terms of representation.

"Recognition: Reading Icons, Seeing Stories" (Chapter 5) will continue to pursue the relationship between visual and narrative in images and texts in terms of the tension between modes of reading. In this chapter, I shall examine the art historical dogma of the iconographic mode of reading and shall argue for its possible critical use. Then, I shall explore a narrative mode of reading, and analyze the tension between iconography and narrative. My analysis will ultimately call for a juxtaposition, a nonresolved dialectic, of the two. Finally, I shall conclude the chapter with a discussion of the relations between visual and textual representations of a number of Biblical narratives, ending in an iconographic reading of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and of the painting *Samson's Wedding*.

In "Textuality and Realism" (Chapter 6), a similar tension is at stake, this time between reading for textuality – for a complex and structured representation – and reading for realistic understanding, in which the representation is taken for granted and the represented

object foregrounded. Again, although these modes of reading yield different results, both are equally valid. The thematic center of this chapter is the story of David and Bathsheba, and the "Rembrandt" painting *The Toilet of Bathsheba*.

The codes discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 open up the work to reflection on various aspects of meaning "external" to the work itself: in a meaning that is culturally validated; in a story that we know and may want to know better; in an idea of coherence; in the reality in which we stand and to which we want to suture the meaning of the work. In addition, many works of art also trigger reflection on the work itself. I shall therefore complement the outward-oriented modes of reading with a discussion of the search for the work and for the sign themselves. Signs "for the work" take various shapes, and it is rewarding to disentangle these, as the tendency today of interpreting every work ultimately as self-referential does not seem to foster understanding of specific works. The examination of what happens when one adopts a certain reading strategy inevitably leads to a critical analysis of the texts of art criticism itself. "Self-Reflection" (Chapter 7) is an in-depth analysis of modern art-critical discourse, which I shall argue partakes of the self-reflection which it claims the work emphasizes.

In this chapter, I shall first argue that self-portraits are only deceptively self-reflexive. Then I shall conduct a polylogue between two self-reflexive paintings – Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and a modest panel by "Rembrandt" – and a set of interdisciplinary responses to the former work. The chapter concludes with the view that self-reflection has a quadruple status, and that the resistance to any of its "four fundamental concepts" leads to entanglement in narcissistic speculation and specularly. Ultimately, the very appeal of the self-portrait as the false locus of self-reflection supports this view.

Throughout these chapters I shall thus propose that we accept that the modes of interpretation we use when reading verbal or visual art are basically similar, even when academics have assigned different names to those practices. I shall, however, admit that the modes in question come from general semiotic practices firmly anchored in modern Western culture and have no universal status. Keeping their historical specificity in mind, a few words on the terms of such an analysis are due, which will follow shortly.

The last three chapters lean strongly on the discourse of psychoanalysis. "Blindness or Insight?" (Chapter 8) uses narcissism to examine critically psychoanalysis as a discourse that interacts with images. This examination is pursued further in Chapter 9, "Blindness as Insight," where the plea for a psychoanalytic criticism of visual art focuses paradoxically on works in which blindness is an insistent thematic center.

"Dead Flesh" (Chapter 10) concludes by relating the awareness of problems of representation to the question of the attitudes toward

THE TERMS OF ANALYSIS

The status of my own interpretations is strongly bound up with the terms I use to elaborate them. Most of the terms of analysis used here are necessarily derived from theories pertaining to a single discipline; the disciplines from which these terms are derived include feminist theory, rhetoric, narratology, and psychoanalysis. I shall discuss their relevance and the conditions for bringing them to the other disciplines in due course. Neither restrictive disciplinary nor free eclectic borrowing will be taken for granted, and I shall try to justify explicitly any modifications of concepts. Although most concepts are derived from visual analysis and literary theory, the use of psychoanalytic and feminist concepts is so current in contemporary critical cultural studies that it seems that they need not be problematic. Yet I find that the self-evidence of those concepts sometimes precludes their efficacy, as imprecise, casual use alternates with precise, technical deployment.

I shall try to argue deliberately for my uses and possibly misuses of theoretical terms, but the general question of the relation between visual response and psychoanalysis must be mentioned right away. As I have argued before, the object of a reader-oriented analysis of art is *our relation to the image*. The "our" in this statement needs further analysis. Although this phrase is meant to suggest how deeply entrenched we are in any act of interpretation of images stemming from other times and places, "we" is emphatically not a monolithic subject. Within a psychoanalytic framework, this collective subject can be further differentiated. By "us" I mean a subject traversed and fraught by the unconscious, including the superego and its social implications; narcissism and its defensiveness against affect, desire, and the fantasy character of response. The way we perceive and interpret images is based on fantasy, and fantasy is socially based. Thus there is dissymmetry between men and women before male and female figures. But this dissymmetry is also unstable, varying according to which aspects of the unconscious are more or less strongly implicated in the act of looking. As I will argue, the response to the *Danae* is more likely to differ according to gender, whereas the response of women and men to *The Blinding of Samson* might differ less strongly, because this painting appeals to a pre-Oedipal fantasy. The differentiation, here, occurs not so much directly according to gender lines but primarily according to other divisions, like narcissistic fulfillment and the relative solidity of the ego.

Thinking about the uneasy fit between psychoanalysis – a basically verbal discourse – and visual art, and the equally uneasy fit between psychoanalysis – an overwhelmingly masculine discourse – and feminism, the strategies and concepts of deconstruction have

often been quite helpful. The continual suspicion of binary oppositions, which informs this study as a whole, is, of course, a major tenet of deconstructive criticism. And for a study that puts interpretation in the center and questions the status of meaning, no concept seems more attractive than that of dissemination.¹⁹ For dissemination also takes place in the space between verbal and visual reading, and calls into question the tenability of those categories through an alternative concept of textuality.

Earlier in this Introduction I discussed Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance*, a painting that might be considered the "purest" of images. As we have seen, it was textualized by the workings of narrativity, imported into the work by an act of reading. That discussion exemplifies the way in which I shall generally handle standard concepts; such a method is called for by this book's interdisciplinary status, but it accommodates neither purism nor eclecticism without problems. For, in an important sense, an image is not a text; but while irreducibly different, the visual and the verbal domains interpenetrate, influence, and inform each other. Why, then, speak about "reading" images as "texts"? Without trying to assimilate images to verbal texts, I want to make a case for an idea of visual textuality without that visual text losing its visual specificity.

Later on in this study, I shall more fully interpret "Rembrandt"'s *Danae*, but here I would like briefly to analyze that work as a text, offering this analysis as a model in miniature of just how this method will let visual texts be read without sacrificing their visuality. First, I shall present the *Danae* in the more traditional sense: as a narrative. But this concept of textuality will prove to be slightly problematic. If the concept of text illuminates the painting, so the painting shows the defects of the concept of text, with its fixed relation between sign and meaning, its hierarchical structure, its suppression of details, of the marginal, of the "noise." It is to such an oppressive notion of text that Derrida opposed the concept of dissemination, which enhances the slippery, destabilizing mobility of signs in interaction with sign users: here, viewers. Derrida replaces the metaphor of the phallus as the ultimate meaning with that of the hymen as the sheet – or canvas – on which meaning circulates without fixity.

The *Danae* (Figure 0.2) is more than a narrative in the traditional sense of a re-production, an illustration of a preexisting, narrative text. Let me briefly compare the verbal and the visual approach. The pre-text has it that this woman, forever barred from love by her frightened father, is, at the very moment the picture presents, visited by Zeus who managed, thanks to his disguise as a shower of gold, to break the taboo the woman's father had imposed on his daughter. In this pre-text's context, Zeus, the ever-loving master-god, is also the first Oedipus slaying his jealous father. But this is a verbal story, and we want to pursue a *visual* text.

Looking at the picture, we see a female body, nude, displayed

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for the lust of the viewer who is allowed to peep into the intimacy of the doubly closed bedroom. But this is a visual story, the story of vision in Western culture. It is the story of the male voyeur and the female object, of the eroticization of vision; it is the story of the central syntagm – subject–function–object – in which the positions are fixed along gender lines – through which, indeed, gender itself is constructed. It is the scheme that is invariably nearly dominating, nearly exclusive, but never absolutely so, because the dynamic of narrative precludes its foreclosure. If only in order to break the monopoly of this visual construction of gender, undermining this verbal/visual opposition is worthwhile.

Between the text (the story of the welcomed arrival of Zeus) and the image (the exhibition of a female body for voyeuristic consumption), the painting produces its own narrative, reducible to neither—the work's visual/narrative textuality. The pre-text is literally a pretext: Its anteriority allows the painting's appeal to the general understanding of the story as a frame for its reversal. The story's centrality, as the theme of the work, allows everything decentered to slip in; it allows, that is, for the dissemination of meaning.

There is another way to phrase this. The work's genesis in a preexistent narrative helps to sever the tie between the two and to produce another narrative, irreducibly alien to it, void of the deceptive meaning the pre-text brought along. With its genesis, the severing of the tie, a central void, and the dissemination of what



0.2 *Danaë* 1636, Bredius 474,
canvas, 185 × 203 cm
(Leningrad, Hermitage)

matters, an alternative to the hymen as the central bodily metaphor is creeping in here – and that alternative is the navel.

Starting from the pre-text, the divine lover who is supposedly welcome is visible only as a sheen. But the sheen, the border of light, so crucially “Rembrandtish,” dissolves into futility. For in spite of deceptive appearances, Zeus’s gold does not illuminate the woman. Rather, the sheen delimits the space in which the woman is enclosed; it demarcates her private space, emphasizing the form of the opening in which the woman’s feet disappear – her opening. The sheen emphasizes the opening, but it does not produce it: so in this way the sheen does not *count*, and the pre-textual story is undermined.

Looking at the image from a different angle, we must take our own position into account. The viewer is *also* supposed to come in and be welcomed – as voyeur, allowed to see the female body on display. But, at the same time, this viewer is deprived of his identity, as his eyes come in contact with his mirror image in the two represented onlookers. These two, the putto and the servant, form, according to a formal analysis, an insistent triangle with the female body as its base, paralleling and reversing the triangle of the exit-curtain. The putto refers iconographically to the pre-text, his tied hands a “symbol” of forbidden sexuality. While also offering a way of viewing the woman, it is an immature, childish way. For though he wrings his hands in despair, he is not looking at the woman’s body. Perhaps he despairs over this lack, a lack imposed by the bonds on his hands, which, in fact, prohibit both touching *and* looking. Exasperated by the interdiction, the putto is visually self-enclosed. The servant, of whom more needs to be said later on, does not look at the woman at all.

These two stories – the purely textual, verbal pre-text and the story of the purely visual present – collude and collide in the work’s textuality. They are in tension, but not in contradiction. They produce a new story, the text of the *Danae* as an interaction between the canvas and the viewer who processes it. In this text, Zeus, invisible as he/it is, thus becomes the pre-text the woman uses to get rid of the indiscreet viewer. The woman who at first sight seemed to be on display – as spectacle, in a static, visual reading – takes over and dominates both viewer and lover. Her genitals, prefigured by the slippers and magnified by the opening of the curtain at the other end of the sight line, are central in the framed text. They are turned toward the viewer, but they can be seen by neither viewer nor lover, because the viewer is sent away while the lover comes to her from the other side/sight. In this way her sexuality, in spite of its centrality, is a trace of the pre-text, for the conflicting lines of sight cut it off: it is also the locus of the metaphor that kept creeping into the vocabulary of my analysis: It is the navel of the text. But between sex and navel lies a difference – the difference between voyeurism and its deconstruction.

The metaphor of the navel is more satisfying than that of the

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hymen for the deconstructed image; diluted into a multiple textuality, it is a false center attracting attention to its void of semes – to its dis-semination. The metaphor of the navel pushes Derrida's dissemination to its limits, and beyond. Although he undermined the phallic view of the sign and of meaning inscribed in Saussure's semiotics, Derrida still could not quite let go. For his dissemination, meant to dissolve the penetrating power of the dualistic sign, comes dangerously close to an overwhelming dispersion of semen; coming all over the text, it spreads out so pervasively, so Biblically, that it becomes like the stars in heaven or the sand at the seashore: a promise to fatherhood. Derrida clings to the concept of the hymen, the veil that protects from penetration as an alternative for the phallic privileging of the invisible signified; but by invoking Hymen, he also embraces the moment when the virgin bride is torn open and pervaded by semen. Invoking Hymen invokes marriage. And marriage imperialistically prevails, threatening to become the metaphor for semiosis.

Deconstructing this metaphor with the help of visual images read as texts, I propose to replace it with the navel – both a trace of the mother, and the token of autonomy of the subject, male and female alike; a center without meaning, it is yet a meaningful pointer that allows plurality and mobility, that allows the viewer to propose new readings to meet his or her needs, but without letting those readings fall into the arbitrariness that leads to isolation.

This concept of textuality leaves room for the specificity of the visual; indeed, it builds the reading it suggests upon the image's visibility. Yet it enhances the irreducible textuality – its play between story and static image, its visual mobility, and the indispensable collaboration between the work and its socially and historically positioned viewers. The navel, then, is a metaphor for an element, often a tiny detail, that hits the viewer, is processed by her or him, and textualizes the image on its own terms. In the *Danae*, it is not the woman's "real" navel but her genital area (Figure 0.3); in *The Toilet of Bathshebah*, another nude with an ostentatiously represented navel, the navel of the text is the left-hand corner of the letter the naked woman is holding (Figure 0.4); in the Vermeer, it is the nail-and-hole (Figure 0.5). Later on, I shall argue that the navel of the Berlin *Susanna* is the fist of one of the Elders (Figure 0.6). In many works that I shall analyze in this study, the textual-

0.3–0.6 (left to right) *Danae*, detail; *The Toilet of Bathshebah*, detail; Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, detail; *Susanna Surprised by the Elders*, detail.



izing navel is an emptiness, a little surface which the work leaves unfilled.

INTRODUCTION

This play with metaphors should not be taken for a meaningless linguistic game. By choosing a bodily metaphor, I also wish to demonstrate both my allegiance and my polemic opposition to much of psychoanalytic theory. Here the navel is the symbolization of a body part, just as the phallus is, and it too is loaded with the connotations of gender. Yet these are radically different in status. The phallus refers to gender in terms of haves and have-nots, or "to have it" versus "to be it." The navel, in contrast, is fundamentally gender specific – the navel is the scar of dependence on the mother – but it is also democratic in that both men and women have it. And unlike the phallus and its iconic representations disseminated throughout post-Freudian culture, the navel is starkly indexical.

Thus, the metaphor of the navel, as the detail that triggers textual diffusion, variation, and mobility of reading, is therefore a tribute not only to an antiphallic semiotic but also to an antiphallic genderedness that does not assign to women a second-rate position. My position toward gender, then, is comparable to my attitude toward "high art." In both cases, the hierarchy is not denied, which it cannot be because it is a cultural reality, but it is shifted and thereby undermined.

In her seminal article on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), Elisabeth Bronfen (1989) suggests that we focus on the navel as an image of primary castration. In support of that suggestion, she argues for the psychoanalytic importance of the experience of primary narcissism. She makes her case through a close analysis of Freud's repression, in that essay, of the place of the woman – his daughter and the mother of the child out of whose game the theory emerges. Freud's identification with the child as between father and son is based on the conflation of mother and daughter, and demonstrates the genderedness of the very formation of this theory and, by analogy, of theory in general. But when Freud, the day after the death of his favorite daughter, shifts attention from her death to his woundedness, calling her death an incurable assault on his narcissism, another identification – that between father and daughter/mother – is at stake. When the father/son is wounded, only then are gender boundaries crossed.

What emerges from this study, finally, is a "Rembrandt" full of ambivalence. Both highly disturbing and highly gratifying, this body of work gains in depth by readings in the mode of the navel: the readings in each chapter acknowledge visibility and do not shy away from discursive elements; they recognize where cultural commonplaces are mobilized, yet leave room for the marginal other; they endorse the "density" of visual signs and let that density spill over into literature, while not fearing to point out specific, discrete

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signs in visual works and the loci of density in literature. Each chapter pursues simultaneously a theoretical question, the interpretation of at least one "Rembrandt" work and at least one verbal text with which the visual work entertains a relation. Together these chapters offer an overview of issues and concepts relevant for the study of the interaction between image and discourse.

The interpretations set forth in this study are not meant to be full, comprehensive descriptions of what we see in the paintings; nor are they narratives reconstructing the pre-texts that give the works meaning. Instead, my interpretations start at the navel, the little detail that doesn't fit the "official" interpretation: the view of the work put forward by the terms of agreement among readers before me. For invariably those official readings leave a rest, a lack. They have one thing that isn't there and should be, or that is there but shouldn't, and thus trigger the alternative reading. What the classical narrative readings cannot unproblematically accommodate sets in motion another narrative, via the suspenseful encounter between the narrative and the visual. In this way, the concept of the "navel of the text" is programmatic: It proclaims an interaction, not an opposition, between discourse and image.



BEYOND THE WORD- IMAGE OPPOSITION

[T]his heat has the power to decompose and dissolve the very coherence of form on which visibility may be thought to depend. (Rosalind Krauss, "The Impulse to See," 1988:51)

INTRODUCTION

It is fashionable today to speak of art history as a discipline in crisis. At first sight, the symptoms of such a crisis are overwhelming. Books with titles like *The End of the History of Art?* (Belting, 1987), *Rethinking Art History* (Preziosi, 1989), or *The New Art History* (Rees and Borzello, 1986) find eager publishers and buyers; scholars from adjacent fields enter the field of art history to propose alternatives to current approaches they consider dead ends (e.g., Bryson, 1981, 1983, 1984) or to deconstruct the art historical enterprise itself (e.g., Melville, 1990); some of the most interesting art historians disclaim their allegiance to the discipline (e.g., Fried 1987:10); and, most significantly, alternative fields emerge out of ongoing but hitherto rather marginal preoccupations, under various headings, which propose the study of art in relation to other disciplines. Programs in cultural studies, visual poetics, word and image studies, and comparative arts are testimony to attempts to revitalize art history by expansion into another field. Without such an emergency measure the field is in danger of being rigidified, impoverished, dying.

But these supposed symptoms are deceptive; when examined more closely, they indicate something quite different from a crisis: an astonishing vitality, perhaps the all but overwhelming predominance of art history within the humanities today; indeed, they perhaps indicate a shift from linguistics in the 1960s and early 1970s, via anthropology in the 1980s, to art history in the 1990s as the central discipline on which other fields draw heavily for their *own* revitalization. One can argue that the willingness of art historians to challenge their discipline provides evidence of the discipline's strength; it can afford the risk.¹ If scholars from other fields are attracted to the study of art, something more attractive must be going on there than in their home fields.² And if strong art historians take some distance from what they consider less interesting or

tenable in their home field, they are by the same token themselves contributing the new perspective that was lacking. For in spite of their disclaimer, they, too, are art historians, and unless they wish to give away the field to those whose practice they don't like, their own practice must remain art history. Art history is expanding its boundaries with the creation of new fields, not giving up the ghost. Art history itself is not in crisis; it is challenging, addressing, and overcoming the threat of its own foreclosure. The works of Svetlana Alpers, T. J. Clark, Michael Fried, Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, and Leo Steinberg, to name just a few contemporary historians of older art, attest to art history as a lively, exciting discipline.

This is not to say that all is fine in art history, and that those who think the discipline is in crisis are out of their minds. Those who claim that art history cannot survive the challenge of feminism, for example, may have a point. Of course, to the question whether art history is sick or in the pink, the answer will have to be neither, or both. I am situating my own enterprise within the cracks produced by these opposing views. I am speaking, that is, as one of those "aliens," who come to visual art from a literary background, with what some may want to call the arrogance of ignorance, and others a fresh, or at least different, perspective. I am speaking as one who enthusiastically participates in establishing an integrative discipline where the study of words and images is no longer separate.

Scholars from various disciplines have been able to enter the adjacent field thanks to semiotics, a multidisciplinary methodology, which is in no way the property of literary studies.³ The usefulness of semiotics as a method, a paradigm, a perspective, or just an eye-opener, for art history in its current exciting crisis, is worth assessing.

In *Tradition and Desire* (1984), Norman Bryson takes up the issues raised by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) to show how the dialectical relationship between the wish to follow and the desire to outdo great models establishes the unique interaction between sameness and difference that characterizes each work of art. These interactions can properly be called a dialogue, in the Bakhtinian sense of the many-voicedness of any work, but including the tensions that Bakhtin's slightly embellishing concept tends to obscure.⁴ The tensions between tradition and desire, as Bryson phrases it, generate *new* work, renewal of work, and reworking of newness, with the very newness being relativized in the very process of analysis.⁵

Of course, there is a context for the dialogue between the desire to follow and to outdo glorious predecessors that I wish to actualize here. First, it is well known that scholars, just like everybody else, need to establish their own difference from others by lumping together all the work they wish their own to differ from. Thus they practice what Hayden White (1978) calls "ostentatious self-definition by negation." Labeling their own work as "new," their

predecessors' "old," if not "ancient," they try to separate and valorize their own work at the expense of their models. But difference between "old" and "new" is never unproblematic. With *les anciens* et *les modernes* in seventeenth-century France, for example, *les modernes* found it less easy to define their newness than the oldness of *les anciens*. Today the New Historicism in literary studies is, from the perspective of nonhistorians, just a little too close to the old historicism to gain a distinct profile. And in certain quarters the New Art History is too busy disqualifying its great predecessors to emerge itself as detached from them.

Don't misunderstand me here. I find this tension largely productive, as it motivates the "new" people to radicalize their positions, while it challenges *les anciens* to renewal as well. But in the case of art history it is partly responsible for the defensive conservatism of large contingents of art historians who rightly refuse to recognize their work in the caricatures set up by *les modernes*.

A second context for the tension between tradition and desire is the dialogue between word and image. Mirroring the preceding struggle, word-and-image works tend to suggest that "straight" art historians neglect the verbal aspects of visual art. But this can hardly be the case in a field whose strongest tradition is today iconographic, the method that consists of *reading* images as what, visually, they are *not*, and which has, moreover, always been strongly anchored in verbal sources. Traditional, iconographic art history may suffer from underestimating the readerly quality of its own work. But, at the same time, overemphasis on the novelty of word-and-image studies encourages the repression of the verbal aspects of traditional art history, hence making difficult the insertion of traditional work within the new paradigm. And word-and-image studies may undermine their own project in the way they accuse their predecessors of failing: The very phrase "word and image" suggests that two different, perhaps incompatible things are to be shackled together; the phrase emphasizes the difference, not the common aspects of the two. This dichotomistic fallacy continues to weaken the renewal word-and-image studies promise.

Having learned so much from art history, I am now caught in the very tension Bryson demonstrated in *Tradition and Desire* (1984), both in relation to the works I shall discuss here and in relation to the discussion itself. I wish to make my endeavor clear from the outset: This is not a work of art history, "new" or not, although it is deeply indebted to some outstanding work in art history. Therefore, I shall begin with a brief presentation of work by three authors: Svetlana Alpers, an art historian; Michael Fried, who is trained as an art historian and a literary critic; and Norman Bryson, who came to art history as a literary scholar.⁶ I also want to acknowledge that disciplinary input is indispensable if one is to avoid importing old problems into new attempts. And an increase in such acceptance might make it easier for me to show to both outsiders and insiders of art history that *verbality* or "wordness" is indispen-

sable in visual art, just as *visuality* or "imageness" is intrinsic to verbal art.⁷ As I shall use the terms, *verbality* (or "wordness") refers to a kind of discursivity that is not logocentric, *visuality* (or "imageness") that is not imagocentric; neither is tied to a particular medium.

Following my discussion of the works of Alpers, Fried, and Bryson, I shall replace that awkward conjunction "and" with some more specific links. As Shoshana Felman (1977) has demonstrated for the equally unsatisfying phrase "literature and psychoanalysis" (of which more in Chapter 8), such an apparently neutral conjunction or linking word often hides an unwarranted hierarchy that undermines the connection's enriching potential. I shall therefore propose different possibilities to rebaptize, hence to reorient, the enterprise. For my goal is not to claim more "newness" than is there, but to systematize currents, or even perhaps undercurrents – "tropisms" in Nathalie Sarraute's (1957) sense – in extant work, and thus contribute to the acknowledgment and further development of more thorough and explicit relations between fields, and more self-confidence for each, which is a precondition of acceptance of otherness.

STATE OF THE ART

In 1985, Svetlana Alpers published *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, a book that received much attention both inside and outside art history. In this book she undertook to revise the concepts with which we approach the art of the past. She argued against the art historical bias that privileged narrative art in the Italian mode, thus obliterating the specificity of Dutch art. Earlier she had demonstrated the heuristic productivity of this hypothesis as a reading strategy in a piece on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, where she had shown that the sense of paradox this painting seems to produce (e.g., Foucault, 1973; Searle, 1980; Snyder and Cohen, 1980) stems from an integration of narrative and description.⁸

In *The Art of Describing*, Alpers draws upon contemporary documents, both verbal and visual, concerning the "visual culture" in the Netherlands: ideas about vision, about scientific reliability, about the invention and the impulse to invent instruments for the perfection of vision, about the impulse to document structures visually as in maps. On the basis of this reading of the visual culture of the time, she analyzes a large number of works of art of various genres in order to demonstrate the descriptive impulse in that art.⁹ What is at stake in *Describing*, in my interpretation of Alpers's thesis, then, is the influence of a verbal context, a diffuse cultural text about vision, on the visual art of the time. This visual culture is an *episteme* à la Foucault, which pervaded the culture as a *doxa*" à la Barthes. It is this aspect of Alpers's study – with its roots in widely circulating discourses of the time, in diffuse rather than pointed

sources – that makes a good case for art history's inherent "word-and-image-ness."¹²

The book concludes with two case studies, of Vermeer and of Rembrandt, where the former is shown to be descriptive to the point of representing its extreme while the latter escapes it, or takes it to its limits.¹³ Alpers's later book, *Rembrandt's Enterprise* (1988), begins by challenging this conclusion. Here, the author takes Rembrandt not to have been an exception to his time, but to have been both its product and an instrument of change. It is a creative response to the current debate on (dis)attribution, authenticity, and the sense of loss entailed by the nonautographic status of many of Rembrandt's masterpieces. And it is an excellent piece of evidence that the discipline is well able to take care of its own problems and dead ends.

Rather than deploring the loss of great "Rembrandts" or settling for the resolution of the authenticity question, Alpers proposes an explanation for why the misattributed paintings have fooled us for so long.¹⁴ This study is "materialist," in an unorthodox sense of that word, in that it analyzes both the materiality of painting and the economic activities of the artist; the economic organization of the art business and Rembrandt's eccentric and, at the same time, founding place in it.¹⁵ The book's four chapters each deal with a different aspect of Rembrandt's active intervention in the status of art: his relation to the materiality of paint, his use of theatricality, the direction of his studio, and his way of creating value on the market. As interesting as all four issues are, I shall return only to the first two, and shall discuss them only insofar as they touch upon the relation between discourse and image.

Michael Fried's book, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), declares its object to be painting plus commentary. In this book Diderot's writing on painting in the *Salons* is not taken as a secondary metatext, but as an inherent part of the art production of the time; the interaction between critic and artist is dialectic rather than hierarchical. As Fried's title indicates, the central theme of the study is the relation between painting and beholder which, in the period Fried discusses, becomes more and more problematic and paradoxical. Fried begins at the moment in French art when interest focused on characters so absorbed in their own mental occupations that the visual representation of their states of mind was the ultimate challenge painters had to face. The twenty or so years of production he studies show a shift away from this challenge to one seemingly opposed, but in fact a response to it: the representation of dramatic movement. Fried shows that this preference for the theatrical is the diegetic¹⁶ consequence of a representational preoccupation with unity. This concern for unity can be seen as a response to the absorption tradition, where unity remained thematic (i.e., all figures were absorbed) but could not be diegetic (i.e., figures did not interact). Fried argues, however, that

READING

"REMBRANDT"

the concern for unity is in turn grounded in a specific view of the painting's relationship to the beholder, which is paradoxical from the start and, as we will see, bound to disrupt the unity itself.

Theatricality addresses a beholder willing to identify with positions offered, and most of these paintings include a figure representing that identification diegetically. Yet the theatrical mode also implies an awareness and acceptance of, even a demand for, the viewer's absence from the scene of (the) painting.

In his book *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* (1987), Fried focuses only indirectly on these issues, his main theme being a kind of deconstructionist self-representational quality in a major painting by Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic* (Figure 1.1), and in the writings of Stephen Crane. The self-representations in both cases are paradoxically intertwined; simplifying Fried's complex thesis, one could say that Eakins's preoccupation is with writing, Crane's with drawing. A similar "word-and-image-ness" is at stake in my remarks



1.1 Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic* (1875, canvas 96 × 78½ in. [243.8 × 199.4 cm] (Jefferson Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia)

on the Tobias drawings in Chapter 8. Yet the analysis of Eakins's work, which is the part of the book I shall limit myself to here, works its way to that thesis through an analysis of the relationship to the beholder as suggested by two major figures in the painting, the master surgeon Gross and a seemingly secondary figure, who, according to Fried and his predecessors, is the patient's mother.¹⁰ The paradox of theatricality in Eakins's painting takes on a twentieth-century affective quality that is related to familial roles and becomes the acute dilemma of both intense seeing and intense not-looking. I shall revert to this affective aspect in the concluding chapter of this study, where I shall take mis-seeing, un-seeing, and not-looking as the founding themes of visual representation. Although in this book Fried presents himself thematically as a word-and-image scholar since he focuses on the representation of writing in painting and on visual representation in writing, it is within the former that I wish to take up his work.

Norman Bryson has published three books within a few years' time: *Word and Image* (1981), *Vision and Painting* (1983), and *Tradition and Desire* (1984), already mentioned.¹¹ The first and third books deal with a historical body of painting, from Lebrun to Delacroix. The second is a shorter essay, largely a polemic against the resemblance theory of representation predominant in art history, of which Gombrich's schemata are taken to be the last remnant. In the first of this series of books, Bryson addresses word-and-image issues in more than one way. These discussions are representative of the various steps which will be outlined in this chapter and will be indicated with the somewhat provisional catch phrases "word and image," "visual poetics," and "comparative arts." In this book the author analyzes both paintings and texts: two chapters are on Diderot. Thus the book belongs to "straight" word-and-image approaches. He confronts texts with their pre-textual background (Lebrun) or with their posttextual responses (Watteau), and shows the interaction between them.

To the extent that he is able to demonstrate how the texts interfere both with the painting and with its perception by the viewers, and how textuality determines the rhetorical effect of paintings, Bryson comes close to what I shall call "visual poetics." Most characteristically, throughout the book he works with a distinction within the paintings between two modes of representation, both visual and both present in each of the works discussed: "discursivity" and "figurality." The distinction between the two draws upon French semiotics and is related, not always in entirely clear ways, to pairs like paradigm and syntagm, denotation and connotation, signified and signifier, realism and narrativity.

It might be worthwhile to compare Bryson's distinction between discursivity and figurativity to Peirce's symbolicality and iconicity, to which his formulations sometimes come close. But such a conflation would be misleading. Iconicity – in the vulgar sense of pictorial resemblance – is precisely what all the books discussed

here are determined to challenge. In the specifically Peircean sense, iconicity represents a subset only of figurality. Iconicity is a ground of meaning production, a code, if you like, that establishes a relation between sign and meaning on the basis of analogy – of a common property. Thus, a map is iconic, not because it resembles the land, but because it shares with it a particular property: the shape of its boundary. Symbolicity is also a code, but one that establishes a relation between sign and meaning on the basis of conventional agreement. A good example is perspective, long considered the device of realism par excellence. It may be iconic in the specific sense, but it is more significantly symbolic.¹⁴ We accept perspective as "natural," as realistic, because we are accustomed to it, even though we know that there are many art forms, within and outside our own culture, that are not perspectival.

Peircean iconicity is emphatically not the same thing as visuality. It is worthwhile to straighten out this possible misunderstanding from the start, because I shall use Peirce's vocabulary incidentally. Here is an example of an iconic meaning production that is not visual, yet that has repercussions for art historical writing. Jonathan Culler (1988:100) demonstrates that Bachelard's philosophical discourse is iconically contaminated by the earlier philosophers he writes on. The text's style is in some specific ways analogous to the style of its object. Although the relationship between sign – Bachelard's text – and meaning – the discourse he is commenting on – is iconic, there is nothing specifically visual about this production of (additional) meaning. In the following example, the visuality is there, but not in the iconic relation itself. In the wake of Hayden White's emphasis on the rhetoric of history, Michael Holly (1988, 1989) shows how the great early cultural historians such as Burckhardt and Adams are iconically prefigured by the paintings and stained windows they respectively discuss. They write their historical accounts in a style whose poetics is iconically referring to, if not shaped by, the works of art they set out to describe. Here the sign is discursive, the meaning is visual, and the iconic relation is shaped by the visual object. A symmetrical counterpart of this iconicity is implied in Michael Baxandall's *Giotto and the Orators* (1971), according to which the paintings are shaped in the form of the Latin sentences written by contemporary humanists. Here the sign, an aspect – composition – of the paintings, is visual whereas the meaning is not. Again, the relationship between sign and meaning is iconic, because analogous. Figurality, in Bryson's visual sense, then, must by all means be kept distinct from iconicity.

Bryson uses "figurality" in the etymological sense of formness, materiality, defining discursivity as propositional content. The most extreme figurality is what Bryson calls the painterly trace, the "deixis" of a work of art. The trace is the clearest example of another Peircean type of ground of meaning production – indexicality. The index is the sign that signifies on the basis of an existential relationship of contiguity with its meaning. Alpers's claim