

Scarafoni's version to Conant's, especially for the form of the all-important transept.¹¹ A new set of drawings, based on careful reexamination of all the evidence, including derivative buildings in south Italy, is a prime *desideratum*.

Two: Does the plan really require explanation? A significant strain of Italian scholarship, generated by the influential scholar Géza de Francovich, stresses local rather than Roman Early Christian precedents for the main church, especially the prior building on the site. The latter apparently had three apses (*Chron. Cas.* II. 32). Carbonara asserts that it also had a transept, but his evidence is cursorily presented and needs review.¹² If the plan simply repeated what had been there before, there is no a priori cause for more elaborate explanation.

Three: Why bring in the Early Christian basilica? The plan recorded in the 16th century has Ottonian and south Italian parallels.¹³ It does not look like a Constantinian basilica, as Krautheimer was well aware; this is why he initially posited the intermediary of Cluny. The relation to old Roman churches was deemed likely because of Desiderius's presumed position as a spokesman for the papal Reform. The visual discrepancy was explained by a theory of symbolic resemblance conveyed by signs, in this case the transept.

Four: Is the transept a sign? The greater the frequency of the transept in the building sphere of pre-Desiderian Monte Cassino, the less certainly one can claim it as a distinctive sign of the old Roman basilica. One might also argue that the more functional a space or feature, the less likely its iconographic motivation. No one, to my knowledge, has studied the transept in relation to the liturgy of Monte Cassino. In the Chronicle the word for the transept is *titulus*, perhaps by association with the main altar, which stood within it.¹⁴

The main altar was over the tomb of Saint Benedict, who figures surprisingly little in the art-historical account of Desiderius's ambitions and achievement. *Renovatio Romae* does not leave place for him, and in art history, as Bloch recognized, *renovatio* is a compelling concept. It may also be true that in the long view Rome was more important than Saint Benedict, unless of course one happens to be Benedictine. But Desiderius did not have our hindsight. The extraordinary dedicatory portrait in the lectionary Vat. lat. 1202, which he had made for use in the basilica sometime after 1072, shows him offering a book to a severe and commanding, almost mesmerizing Saint Benedict, seated like an emperor on a cushioned stool. Though the saint is swathed in a monastic habit, Desiderius is vested not like an abbot but in a red pluvial, which identifies him as papal vicar.¹⁵ As an image of power relations, the miniature clearly portrays Rome in the service of Saint Benedict, not vice versa. The implications of such a reversal for the art-historical understanding of Monte Cassino might profitably be explored. Perhaps Monte Cassino was not meant to revive Rome but to supplant it; perhaps Desiderius's vision was not retrospective but peripheral and futuristic; perhaps his perception of "West" and "East" was cultural rather than political, pragmatic and contextual rather than abstract and nostalgic.

¹¹ G. Carbonara, *Iussu Desiderii. Montecassino e l'architettura campano-abruzzese nell'undicesimo secolo*, Rome, 1979, 85-86, n. 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, chap. 1, 33-97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 68-76.

¹⁴ *Mediae latinitatis lexicon minus*, ed. J.F. Niermeyer, Leiden, 1976, s.v. "titulus," 18, apropos *Chron. cas.* II. 3.

¹⁵ *The Codex Benedictus. An Eleventh-Century Lectionary from Monte Cassino*, ed. P. Meyvaert, New York and Zurich, 1982, 13 and fol. 2r.

Monte Cassino still needs an art-historical monograph. To say this does not belittle the contribution of Herbert Bloch, whose work will always be fundamental to any historical study of a great, and still living, institution.

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SVETLANA ALPERS, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988. Pp. 160; 12 color pls.; 182 black-and-white pls. \$29.95.

Svetlana Alpers's *Rembrandt's Enterprise* has already been so widely reviewed that, rather than adding another presentation and either praise or criticism of its content, it may be useful to do something slightly different.¹ I would like to place this important and thought-provoking book in the context of the growing interest in the relations between discourse and image that exists in several sectors of the humanities today.

In 1983 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 preventing proper appreciation of Dutch art, which she claimed to be primarily descriptive. Although her opposition was mainly against the narrative approach to Dutch art, she also argued against an exclusive attention (promoted by iconography) to the "hidden" meaning, in favor of a more directly visual way of dealing with these pictures.² She had already demonstrated the heuristic productivity of her hypothesis as a reading strategy in a piece on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, where she showed that the sense of paradox this painting seems to produce (cf. Michel Foucault, John Searle, Joel Snyder, and Ted Cohen) stems from its integration of narrativity and descriptivity. 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

¹ I wish to add that I know of no other book that has been so oddly reviewed as this one. Not only are reviews widely divergent in opinion, but the negative reviews invariably complain about the tone of the book. I have read it once more to find out what was wrong with the tone, and honestly do not understand the criticism. I do find, however, that the tone in which reviewers complain about Alpers's tone is itself strange. With hardly concealed irritation, the book is called irritating; with unwavering positivity, reviewers call the book too positive; with a Romantic longing for a more sympathetic Rembrandt, reviewers claim Alpers espouses 19th-century Romanticism. I decline to speculate about the reasons for the self-reflexivity in these reviews, but it surely does not encourage debate.

² In an appendix to *Describing*, Alpers engaged in a polite and clear debate with E. de Jongh, who initiated the application of Panofsky's ideas to Dutch art of the 17th century. I find her argument convincing, especially in light of its liberalism; there is, to my mind, more than enough room for two views in the arena of Dutch art.

in that art.³ What is at stake in *Describing*, 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 *épistémè* à la Foucault — a cognitive style typical of a particular social group at a particular time — which pervaded the culture as a *doxa* à la Barthes — an ideologically informed set of assumptions taken as certainties. Visual as it may be, the assumptions and issues are part of the discourse current in the milieu in which the art was produced and in which it functioned. It is this aspect of Alpers's study — with its roots in 17th-century verbiage, in diffuse rather than specific sources — that makes a good case for art history's inherent relation to the interaction between discourse and image. I would like to examine some theoretical problems of this pervasive "discursivity" as inseparable from visuality through a discussion of *Rembrandt's Enterprise*.

Alpers's *Describing* concludes with two case studies, of Vermeer and of Rembrandt, where the former is shown to be descriptive and the other not, in such a way as to set up a binary opposition.⁴ Alpers's new book begins by qualifying this conclusion. Here, the author regards Rembrandt not as an exception in his time, but as both its product and an instrument of change. Hers is a creative response to the current debate on (dis)attribution, authenticity, and the sense of loss entailed by the non-autographic status of many of Rembrandt's masterpieces. And the study is an indication that the discipline of art history is well able to take care of its own problems and the dead-ends that we hear so much about these days.⁵ Rather than deploring the loss of great Rembrandts or settling for the resolution of the authenticity question, Alpers proposes to explain why the misattributed paintings have fooled us for so long. 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 place in it.⁶ 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 relevant as all four issues are for an assessment of Rembrandt's enterprise, I will only consider the first two here; though Alpers's last chapter is probably the one that irritated many of her critics, the first two are the most productive for a semiotic point of view.

There appears to be an unconscious level of word and image interaction at stake in the study of a "visual culture" such as Alpers proposes. This can best be demonstrated by examining the difference between her two books. In *Describing*, Alpers leans heavily on written sources of a philosophical and epistemological tradition to substantiate her claim that Dutch art in the 17th century is descriptive rather than narrative. As W.T.J. Mitchell, F. Meltzer, and others have argued, for art historians, and doubtless for Western culture as a whole, the relationship between discourse and images is problematic.⁷ Iconoclasm, initiated by the Israelite taboo on graven images as well as by the Platonic myth of the cave, has alternated with iconophilia and idolatry; and traces of that ambivalence can be discerned in attempts to differentiate the two media, which are invariably inscribed in a hierarchical relationship, a tradition whose more recent struggles began with Lessing's *Laocoon*.⁸ Iconoclasm and its religious roots are responsible for a bad conscience, which is concerned to emancipate the image, and this, in turn, sometimes leads to repression of the verbal side of the argument, something that is inevitable in a culture in which the two media are constantly mixed. This repression is bound to continue as long as the two media are treated as distinct in principle. The repressed verbiage of Alpers's argument in *Describing* is visible in the absence of definitions of, and even of explicit reflection on, the very concepts of description and narration in which her work is grounded. Seemingly obvious, these notions suffer from a lack of convincing definition within their "home" field of literary theory as well.⁹ It is much easier to assume a "natural" meaning for these terms than to deconstruct the dichotomy that tends to place narration on top and to consider description as its ornamental or realistic handmaid.¹⁰ Reversing the

³ Martin Jay adopts Alpers's distinction, and thus juxtaposes the descriptive mode as an alternative to, albeit in continuity with, perspective, hitherto considered the sole dominant regime until the late 19th century. See M. Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in H. Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality*, New York, 1988, 3-28.

⁴ It is with this view of Vermeer that I have implicitly taken issue in the introduction to my forthcoming book, *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Cambridge University Press. I can see why Alpers considers Vermeer sympathetic to a descriptive visual culture. Within the opposition she sets up, Vermeer is the best case she could have chosen. But neither Vermeer nor, for that matter, the visual culture in question are as pure of narrative and other forms of discursivity as Alpers's very opposition suggests.

⁵ This remark is a response to the notion that art history is in crisis, as suggested by publications such as A.L. Rees and F. Borzello, eds., *The New Art History*, London, 1986, and D. Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven, 1989 (reviewed elsewhere in this issue of the *Art Bulletin*). For a brilliant analysis of the paradoxes involved in the enterprise of art history, see M.A. Holly, "Past Looking," *Critical Inquiry*, December 1989, forthcoming.

⁶ Alpers's view should not be caricatured so as to suggest that Rembrandt single-handedly invented capitalism. For Alpers, Rembrandt profited from a trend that he intensified in the context of the art world. I am not in a position to assess the exact historical merit of this view, and I am not interested in such an assessment. Rather, I find the attempt to look at the works from the perspective of their making and dealing is a productive departure, a fruitful reading strategy.

⁷ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, 1984,

for a wonderful analysis of the ideological biases that accompany any attempt to articulate the difference between discourse and image, and F. Meltzer, *Salome and the Dance of Writing*, Chicago, 1987, for a brilliant analysis of iconoclasm and iconophilia in various images and texts in Western cultural history.

⁸ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon: Oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766), in *Werke*, ed. H.G. Gopfer et al., Munich, 1974 (English ed., *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, trans., with intro. and notes by E.A. McCormick, Baltimore, 1984). Mitchell (as in n. 7) shows that even Nelson Goodman's philosophical account of images as dense and discourse as discrete is ideologically problematic and, in fact, not tenable. For iconophobia and iconophilia in 20th-century philosophy, see M. Jay, "In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought," in D.C. Hoy, ed., *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, Oxford, 1986.

⁹ See my account of this problematic, and a typology of descriptions in the context of rhetoric, in "On Meanings and Descriptions," in *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, vi, 1-2, 1981-82, 100-148. P. Hamon's book (*Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, Paris, 1982) remains the only major work on description from a literary-theoretical perspective. On narration, Alpers's most relevant source is A. Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*, London, 1982.

¹⁰ For the notion that apparently semantically empty codes like dichotomies constitute ideologies, see E. Van Alphen's introduction to the critique of ideology, *Bang voor schennis?*, Utrecht, 1987. In chapter 10 of *Reading "Rembrandt"* I have argued that Rembrandt's work provides a good case for, and demonstration of, such a deconstruction.

hierarchy, as Alpers does in this book by showing the value of descriptive art,¹¹ is a first, powerful, but insufficient, step. Its insufficiency shows in the solution offered to the dilemma of the misfit, the "exception." As she points out in her later book, categorizing Rembrandt as culturally exceptional — as a more narrative artist than the rest of the Dutch, as she did in *Describing* — undermines the reversal. For classifying one of the greatest artists of the time outside the emancipated class comes close to reinstating the dominance of what is to be undermined, while the potentially subversive power of exceptionality remains unexploited as long as the dichotomy stands, reversed or not. Any serious attempt to define the terms of such a suspect pair should lead to a questioning, not of the order of the hierarchy, but of the very opposition underlying it.

In her new book, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, Alpers takes issue with her previous position regarding this artist. The relationship she posits between paintings and historical context, and between words and images, becomes more diverse, and to me more interesting. Demonstrating the precedence of words is problematic in a context in which artists did not follow a body of theoretical writing, but Alpers demonstrates the existence of a more complex relationship between painting and writing in which paintings generate texts, and texts generate paintings. Given the impossibility of neatly distinguishing discourse and image in the production of paintings, it becomes tempting to look for a framework in which the two media are treated as equal. Semiotics provides such a framework, by positing the ability to signify of any cultural object brought into circulation. Alpers discusses Rembrandt's works in terms of that other distinction, between Rembrandt's manners of paint handling, "fine" and "rough" (*fyn* and *grof*), a distinction I would like to put into the semiotic framework. Understood semiotically, the terms indicate not just manners of painting but meaningful signs; handling paint in one manner rather than another becomes a statement. Alpers interprets Rembrandt's manner of painting by emphasizing the materiality of paint and its relation to sculpture, to touching as a specific way of seeing, and to a problematization of representation. In short, Rembrandt's manner of paint handling becomes a sign of self-reflection: a statement about painting. Alpers argues that the pure materiality of the work of paint, what Bryson calls the painterly trace, produces a sort of self-implosion that counters the representational dimension of the work.¹² This self-implosion does not make the work less meaningful; it changes the meaning, from the unproblematic, realistic representation of an outside world to a statement about how problematic such a representation is, and how central to representation is paint in its materiality.

¹¹ Alpers affords us a powerful argument for the impossibility of distinguishing the two modes in her article on *Las Meninas*, one of the best analyses of that over-analyzed work. She demonstrates that the work's irreducible complexity, which so many critics have tried to subsume under a single heading (such as "classicism" for Foucault, "paradox" for Searle), stems from the intertwining of descriptive and narrative aspects, which defy any attempt to separate them. The special status Alpers assigns to Velázquez's painting, which also holds for Rembrandt, would appear less special if it were not built on a pre-established dichotomy. Alpers's article, incidentally, also provides evidence of the collaboration between words and images: it is through the activation of the concepts of descriptive versus narrative, a distinction and its deconstruction, that Alpers is able to see the painting differently from those who remain unaware of the steering agency of words in their account. This is an instance of the as yet termless symmetrical counterpart of what I call elsewhere "visual poetics" (a way of reading texts that is informed by visual concepts): a ver-

Alpers's analyses of particular paintings are mostly convincing, and her general point is well taken. She defends "rough" painting or the famous late Rembrandtesque impasto, with the emphatic substantiality of its paint, by making it so much more interesting and meaningful in the semiotic sense, and she carefully stays away from binary evaluation; she does not advocate "rough" as more adequate than "fine." But in the (verbal) interpretation of the (visual) particularities of the works, the repressed hierarchy between discourse and image resurfaces. The focus on material seeing — touching — gets rephrased in the idealizing terms of love, understanding, human relation (e.g., pp. 23, 29): the *doxa* of humanistic values informs the visual experience of seeing these works. However, this idealism seems a problematic stance to take apropos Rembrandt, an artist with a clear predilection for subjects wherein the contiguity between seeing and touching is thematized in terms of power and sexuality — as in Bathsheba, Susanna, Lucretia, stories in which seeing women is equated with taking possession of them. Alpers's positive interpretation of the relation between seeing and touching here seems to be informed by a certain humanistic discourse that promotes reference to these age-old myths for their morally uplifting content, in spite of their obvious sexism. Thus, this discourse facilitates the use of these subjects for voyeurism and the condoning of rape.

What does this problem have to do with "word and image"? I would contend that the failure to recognize the importance of discourse in an interpretation that presents itself as based on visual observations, obscures the extent to which words take precedence in the construction of the image. Of course, the words taking precedence here are obscured by those of the more directly related contemporary texts. But the words constructing the images Alpers sees here are those of the *doxa* of our culture: the diffuse presence of stories as arguments. That *doxa*, among other things, condones rape by means of the alleged "natural" continuity between seeing and touching, which in turn allows the members of that culture to construct touching as concern and affection.¹³ With this in mind, then, a second, unintended meaning can be read in Alpers's chapter title, "The Master's Touch": masterly touching becomes mastering by touch. I would like to revert to the relation between these two issues: on the one hand, the more technical one of Rembrandt's impasto and its relation to self-reflection through emphasis on the tactile; and, on the other, the ideological representation of sexual power. I will do so with a particularly troubling painting, the Berlin *Susanna*, where the subject is, on one level, the abuse of power through the extension of seeing to touching.

The subject of the *Susanna* is related to the verbal "pre-text"

bally informed, yet basically visual, way of seeing. See *Visual Poetics*, a special issue of *Style*, xxi, 2, 1988. The pieces of the *Las Meninas* debate are S. Alpers, "Interpretation without Representation," *Representations*, 1, 1, 1983, 31-42; M. Foucault, "Las Meninas," *The Order of Things*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York, 1973, 3-16; J. Searle, "Las Meninas and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation," *Critical Inquiry*, vi, 1980, 477-88; J. Snyder and T. Cohen, "Reflections on *Las Meninas*: Paradox Lost," *Critical Inquiry*, vii, 1980, 429-447; L. Steinberg, "Velasquez' *Las Meninas*," *October*, xix, 1981, 45-54. I have analyzed this debate in detail in chap. 6 of *Reading "Rembrandt."*

¹² See N. Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, London, 1984.

¹³ Of course, I am not suggesting Alpers shares misogynistic views that condone rape, only that at times she borrows their ideologies unawares, as we all inevitably do to one extent or another.

of an apocryphal appendix to the book of Daniel.¹⁴ The subject of Susanna is attractive to painters because it thematizes vision: power and the abuse of power as it is related to seeing. The story focuses on the arousal by seeing of the lust to touch, and the power to touch warranted by social power. Here, visuality or rather its epistemological potency, visibility, are the decisive factors generating the narrative. The fact that the one Elder, in the Berlin *Susanna*, touches his victim, is less important than the specific part of her he touches: her clothes; thus by undressing her he makes her vulnerability *visible* — he exposes her vulnerability to touch, her “touchiness.” I will apply Alpers’s argument to this case. The man’s hand is thematically related to the painter’s touch as well as to his hold on the woman, but the theme of touching is clearly related to a theme more negative than love. Of course, as her interpretation of *The Goldsmith* as a misogynistic appropriation of female procreativity suggests, Alpers would agree with this. But then we may wonder how the hand can be related to image-making, and what the ideological implications of that relation might be? But the case becomes slightly more interesting as soon as we notice, thanks to Alpers’s semiotization of it, the handling of paint in this work. It is not the impasto, the thickness of the paint, that is meaningful here, but the contrast between “rough” and “fine” paint handling itself. Large parts of the *Susanna* are painted in the manner Alpers describes; that is, they are painted a bit “roughly” or, in Alpers’s view, in a tactile mode. But amazingly, not all of it is “rough.” There is one detail done in the “fine” manner — Susanna’s hair. The transparency of realism is here doubled by and commented upon by the reference to the painterly manner. This reference is deictic, referring to the *hic and nunc* of the utterance. In semiotic Charles Sanders Peirce’s terminology, we can call it indexical, since it points to something — the act of painting — with which it entertains an existential contiguity. From a semiotic perspective, that is, taking these striking details as signs, one is led to ask: what do they mean?¹⁵

As we are speaking of a painting, and a painting on vision at that, the answer to this question must be anchored in the visual image presented. The position of Susanna’s hair within the structure of the image is crucial: it is the object of the Elder’s gaze. Surprisingly, the Elder is not looking at the body he is busy unveiling. But, looking above it, he is doubly overlooking it: he is staring at the one location in the work where “fine” takes precedence over “rough.” This is an unsettling confirmation of Alpers’s claim that the handling of paint works as a sign of self-

reflection and self-representation in the work of painting.

This case leads me to raise the question of how discourse and image intersect here. The subject of the painting is verbal by virtue of its medium (the text) or of its structure (narrative). Choosing it for a painting is neither an incidental choice, exclusively motivated by commission or market, as Schwartz would probably argue,¹⁶ nor an underscoring of the artist’s personal obsessions, as one might misconstrue my present argument as claiming. Rather, it is evidence of the inseparability of images and words, and of the impact of words on images. The detail in the *Susanna* can be read as a reference to a verbal — philosophical as well as practical, ideological, and political — discussion on the uses and misuses of vision as another one of the riches that, according to Schama, embarrassed the society that generated the work: the token of an *épistémè*.¹⁷

After her chapter on the touch, Alpers devotes attention to the theatrical model. Rigorously historical without following older, rather superficial historical views in which theatricality was merely associated with gestures, light, and dress (p.35), the author shows convincingly how Rembrandt drew upon the popularity of the theater of his time, upon the discussions about acting, and upon what Diderot would later call the “paradox of the actor” — the fundamental artificiality of acting as an imitation of nature. Yet Rembrandt also managed to confine his practice of painting to the domain where he alone reigned: the studio. Here, he had models act out scenes to be painted. Thus, discussions about the theater focused precisely on the relationship between word and gesture — hence, image — and between oral and visual presence (p. 48). Discussing the represented viewer, so frequently present in Rembrandt’s works, Alpers proposes that we see this idiosyncratic feature as “spectatorial,” rather than voyeuristic, and this remark joins Bryson’s criticism of the use of the term “voyeurism” for cases where the privacy characteristic of voyeuristic looking is not only absent but by definition excluded because spectatorship is part of the meaning of the display.¹⁸ Rembrandt’s preference for scenes involving spectatorship points indeed in this direction. In addition to this thematic argument, Alpers interprets other aspects of Rembrandt’s work as theatrical as well, such as the unconventional movement of his figures, which have no sources in the pictorial tradition and which bear comparison with Delacroix.¹⁹ The movement of Rembrandt’s figures, in turn, does not merely point to their own mobility. In a detailed discussion of one of the rare phrases in which Rembrandt expressed his views

¹⁴ The word “pre-text” for the story from which a painting draws its subject seems particularly suitable to express the double function of such a text, to provide the subject and the excuse to revel in its more dubious aspects.

¹⁵ In a personal communication, Alpers argued that hair does not have for Rembrandt the relevance I attribute to it in this interpretation. For my argument, the objection is irrelevant. For Alpers, images in this art are more maker-oriented than viewer-oriented, while I maintain this is not the way to put it. For me, the difference lies not in the artist’s intention but in the approach. Although, on the one hand, I can appreciate this difference in focus, I am, on the other hand, troubled by the potential projection in the intentionalist view. How can we know whether hair counts for Rembrandt or in “Rembrandt,” rather than for this particular critic? The over-historicization of the art obscures the under-historicization of the critic’s own position.

¹⁶ G. Schwartz, *Rembrandt, His Life, His Paintings*, Harmondsworth, 1985. Schwartz takes great pains to trace commissions for the paintings, and predictably succeeds in some cases, failing in others. Although commissions certainly shed new light on some of the works (I found his interpretation of *Jacob Blessing Joseph’s Sons* quite challenging), I do not see why he needs to suggest that *all* the meaning of the works can be derived

from commissions. Also, in cases where the evidence is more than shaky, he persists in drawing positive conclusions, often informed by his own ideological commitments, e.g., in his discussion of the famous gift to Huygens, or by his own taste, as when he tries to “save” the *David Playing the Harp for Saul* in the Mauritshuis, The Hague.

¹⁷ See S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, New York, 1987. In “Rembrandt and Women,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, xxxviii, 1985, 1-21, Schama provides a historical analysis of Rembrandt’s ambivalent attitude toward women, which I find very convincing. From a nonhistorical, analytical perspective, I would suggest Rembrandt’s works show more than merely ambivalence: there is a sometimes fierce partiality in either direction, a consistent inconsistency.

¹⁸ This is argued by N. Bryson, *Word and Image. French Painting of the Ancien Régime*, New York, 1981, 37.

¹⁹ In *Tradition and Desire. From David to Delacroix*, New York, 1984, Bryson presents Delacroix with reference to Corneille and the ambition to rival the great tragedies. Particularly convincing is Bryson’s reference to the Corneillian concept of *gloire*, whose polysemic complexity he argues informs some of Delacroix’s history paintings.

on art (pp. 49-51), Alpers shows that the artist linked the movement of his figures to another kind of movement, to a triple sense of the word "moving"; for Rembrandt, then, the idea of movement included mobility of figure, gesture, and affect, making movement a part of the rhetorical model of theatricality.

As in the case of Alpers's discussion of "The Master's Touch," I accept the overall argument Alpers makes about Rembrandt's theatricality. However, whereas most of her discussions of actual works are illuminating, I would like to question one of her interpretations. Though it is possible that I am doing Alpers an injustice by highlighting a case that is secondary for her, it has bearing on the issue I am focusing on, namely the attempt to overcome the word-image dichotomy. Among the first examples Alpers discusses is an early work, *Judas Returning the Pieces of Silver* of 1629, in which the theatrical gestures of the figure emphasize the untrustworthiness of his intentions. "Once a traitor, always a traitor," is what the painting's theatrical movement seems to say. By the same token, it addresses the paradox of acting and, we might say, opposes words (of repentance) to images (of hypocrisy). The link between representational and moral opposition suggested by this example is, of course, not inherent to Alpers's concept of theatricality. Yet it presents, I fear, a rhetorical trap nevertheless, as becomes clear when she uses it for a second example (a work of a decade or so later), *Samson Posing the Riddle to the Wedding Guests* of 1638. Here Alpers gets caught in her own discourse, because she uses the term "theatricality" for the *Judas* in collusion with moral values (role-playing becomes hypocrisy). Alpers gives a visual description of the work, immediately followed by an account of its verbal background:

To the one side we see Samson posing his riddle to the Philistines, while just off center, behind the festive board, is the self-conscious, stiffly posed figure of his new wife, identified in the Bible only as the woman from Timnah. It is she who will betray Samson to her people after tricking him to tell her the answer to his riddle. Posed in the posture of a bride . . . she is a woman who will contradict her appearance as a newly wedded wife by doing her husband in. Once again, at the center of his picture, Rembrandt has focused on a betrayer — on one whose appearance or actions must be understood as being a performance. And this fact is underlined here by the compositional echo of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, in which Rembrandt placed Samson's wife, his betrayer, in the place of Christ (p. 37).

I quote this passage at length because of the interaction of word and image it displays and because this interaction entails a view of the painting in which the visual is overruled by the verbal. The first sentence describes the painting ("we see"), while the final clause of that sentence introduces the verbal source. The conflation of the two is marked by the words describing the bride, in which Alpers's discourse shifts from description to evaluation of the figure, a shift that is, I claim, based on the verbal account of the story, not the visual one in the painting. The words "self-

conscious, stiffly posed" are quite concretely "shiffters," terms that partake of two different discourses or between discourse and the situation of utterance, thus marking the transition between the two: self-consciousness and stiffness are each semantically double (although they are so in different ways). The self-consciousness is strongly related to the figure's relationship to the addressed viewer — the woman literally addresses the viewer. Hence, the bride's "self" calls for identification between figure and viewer through the implied viewer that is called forth by the very contrast between the woman and the other figures. The stiffness of the woman's pose, in contrast, inserts the figure into the mode of theatricality that it alone challenges. The figure is isolated from the other actors, who all ostentatiously interact with each other and exclude the viewer who can enter the scene by identification alone. The problem can be summarized as follows: why is the "stiffly posed" bride chosen to represent theatricality, since the other figures, engaged in busy action with each other, seem to qualify for the part much better?²⁰ If it is the connection with Judas that motivates this focus, the verbal — the notion that both characters are traitors — has overruled the visual. This is why I suggested above that the Judas example turned out to be a rhetorical trap.

But where does this damning verbal input come from? It does not come directly from the text of Judges 14. For Judges 14 mentions neither tricks nor betrayal — only blackmail, only life-threatening intimidation of the woman by her kinsmen.²¹ Hence, it is not this text that is brought in here, but a more diffuse and by no means universal *doxa*, a cultural commonplace that considers this bride a prelude to Delilah. One might argue that Rembrandt has represented this particular *doxa* reflecting contemporary views on the story, but that would miss my point. Rather, I contend that Alpers's interpretation of this work is based neither on the visual evidence of the painting, nor on the verbliness imported to supplement vision drawn from the specific and prestigious religious document (the text of Judges); instead, her interpretation is based on vague, common, but nonliteral "knowledge" of the story as we are used to see it — on a *doxa*. And her own allusion points this out.

The visual allusion to Christ through the iconographic reference to Leonardo's *Last Supper* that Alpers uses to suggest that a (theatrical) betrayer is intended, seems to undermine her case. The woman is compositionally taking the place of Christ. If she were to be a traitor, then this position in the painting would have to be ironic. However, such an ironic reversal of values implied by Alpers's interpretation is unwarranted.²² Rather, the woman is depicted in this honorable position because she is about to be sacrificed, just as Christ was at the Last Supper. The wedding feast is, so to speak, *her* last supper. And this reference is likely in the 17th century, which was fond of typological interpretation, where characters of the Old Testament are taken to prefigure Christ. What makes the case special, and shows Rembrandt's ambivalent relationship to women in an interesting light, is that it is not Samson but the woman, the woman who is — we must not forget — his victim, who is here presented typologically. I would suggest

of Diderot, Berkeley, 1980.

²¹ I have extensively analyzed this story in my book on women in Judges, *Death and Dissymmetry*, Chicago, 1988.

²² In general, irony is a tricky concept that always comes in handy if we do not see what we should be seeing. But for irony to be meaningful, it requires a set of consistent indications. Genre is one such indication. I have argued elsewhere (*Reading "Rembrandt"*) that the painting does play on genre reversal. But even so, the reversal is not located in this figure.

²⁰ The other figures are engaged in interaction and constitute a unity from which the bride is emphatically excluded. Fried's book is not mentioned in this chapter on theatricality. Alpers uses the concept in a way opposed to Fried's: while Fried understands theatricality as an explicit relationship to the viewer, for Alpers theatricality in Rembrandt "is not engaged with addressing the viewer but with constituting a self by performance and by commanding performance" (personal communication). The opposition between the two uses of the term does not affect my view that the men, not the bride, are being theatrical, in both Fried's and Alpers's sense. See M. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age*

that the painting does appeal to a notion of theatricality as defined by Alpers, but only through a questioning of that status. The figures busily performing, as in a genre painting, all engaged in role-playing, contrast with the one figure who is *not* acting, and who is, ostentatiously, excluded from the scene. Alpers senses this exclusion when she places her "behind the festive board." In visual terms, this placement is not entirely convincing, but it nevertheless rings true: although she is not spatially placed farther back than the other figures, she is not part of their scene.

What, now, is the point of this discussion? I am not presenting this view as a simple difference of interpretation nor do I intend to quibble with an otherwise fine study. Instead, I want to argue for the systematic study of the interaction between discourse and image. The concept of theatricality, which might have served as an exemplary meeting-place of verballity and visuality, would appear inadequate in this case, and this prompts me to attempt another approach, one that might transcend the word-image opposition. As I will argue below, the limits of visual poetics are bound up with three problems: the implicit relation of visual poetics to word and image, its historical exclusivity, and its methodological isolation.

Far from inadequate, the concept of theatricality is suited to a visual poetics precisely because it unites word and image into one composite sign. A theatrical unit, be it diction, gesture, or movement, can only be confined to either verballity or visuality artificially. Students of the theater accept this unity implicitly, and, thus, find the very opposition of word and image meaningless. To some extent, this implicit unity allows the colonization of the image by the word to pass unnoticed. Alpers's description of the *Samson* reveals this domination of the visual image by the diffuse discursivity that informs her interpretation. The colonization of the image by the word turns the image into a myth, into the locus where the illusory stability of meaning can anchor itself. The specific form of the verballity in this case is double. On the one hand, it is the *doxa* surrounding the biblical story; on the other, the pre-established status of betrayal as the moral meaning of role-playing. The concept of theatricality is applicable only after these two verbal "pre-texts" have been given relevance. And this turns out to be too late: theatricality cannot be used to correct the verbal dominance and to assert its own specificity. Generally speaking, the historical approach is considered to be in conflict with the systematic approach. However, this dichotomy — together with those between theory and practice, literal and figurative, form and content, text and context — is to my mind among the most powerful and paralyzing ideologies in the humanities today. Of course, studying a historical object in context is necessary, and I find the research underlying Alpers's study both solid and relevant. But the lack of a systematic concept of theatricality makes for a line of argument that leads, in spite of the author's overt disavowal of the truth-falsehood dichotomy, to a syntagm in which role-playing is connected with the stiff pose, rather than with the movement of the other figures. If, as the author claims, "taking the part of another . . . is the measure of success" (p. 37), such a method requires a unification of historical and systematic perspectives if we are to answer the question, whose part is this woman playing — that of Christ, compositionally present through the prestigious predecessor and historically present through contemporary exegesis, or that of Judas, discursively present through the modern *doxa*? In other words, what is the significance of the woman's stiff pose and anxious eyes? Working the systematic perspective (the figure's direct address to the viewer) into the historical one (Alpers's point about performance in the studio and that of contemporary theology and exegetic tradition), would have led to a different, and in my view more challenging, interpretation.

Methodological isolation, finally, is the result of opting for either a systematic or a historical approach. Remaining within the art-historical paradigm with its near-exclusive focus on intentionality, Alpers cannot add to the concept of theatricality the verbal and the visual perspectives in such a way as to exploit fully their respective potential and to overcome their respective limits. Semiotics could have helped by making recognizable which phenomena were taken as signs and given meaning. It would have been helpful to know the sign status of the stiff pose and how it overlaps with or deviates from the compositional sign that is Christ's place. But it takes more than just a semiotic toolbox to go beyond the word-image dichotomy; the tools must be used for work, and that work includes interaction between different signs, different levels of meaning production. The basic semiotic concepts interacting here can be briefly described as follows. Indexicality connects a sign to its meaning by means of (existential) contiguity. This relation is at stake in the figure of metonymy, where one element stands in for another with which it is contiguous, as well as in the figure of synecdoche, where an element stands for the whole of which it is a part. Iconicity connects a sign to its meaning by means of similarity (not necessarily *visual* similarity; the semiotic icon is not a priori visual). In the case of *Samson's Wedding*, the contribution of indexicality (which points out the metonymical relation of the *Wedding* to the earlier painting and its synecdochical relation to the *doxa*) to the overruling of iconicity (which would identify the woman with Christ [com]positionally) raises the question of the relative power of sign systems and codes. Is it because index overrules icon or because words overrule images that the concept of the theatrical did not push the interpretation beyond the implicit domination of verballity? Precisely because semiotics offers only a general theory of signs, it cannot answer this question. The semiotic perspective, then, raises questions that can only be answered more specifically within an interdisciplinary framework, a framework in which semiotics would serve by letting the traditions and methods of the various disciplines be consciously confronted with one another. Visual poetics and its counterpart, both based on a recognition and activation of the share of the "other art" within literature and visual art, can be placed within such a framework, and, within it, theatricality can still be a privileged term. But in order for this to happen, the various disciplines must learn to take themselves and each other equally seriously. Declaring one's own or the interlocutor's discipline in crisis may be more helpful than unwarranted self-congratulation or over-admiration of the other, but it is less helpful than a recognition of limits that have yet to be overcome.

Alpers's book is not semiotic; it is not a study in visual poetics or comparative arts. Yet it has the potential to be fruitfully developed in that direction. The book may have met with resistance because it seemed unorthodox for art historians, challenging established views and bringing in considerations so far kept at bay. But I, for one, would like to pull it away from orthodox art history, and suggest that it could become a radically novel way of reading art, visual or literary. It surely offers that possibility, and that is more than can be said of much art-historical writing today.

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