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Alpers: The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century

David Carrier
Carnegie-Mellon University

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logical hold as absolute and inescapable; conversely, he underestimates the polysemous subversiveness of the signifier, the presence in the text of not just one monolithic discourse, but many, whose contradictions and redundancies open the space of our limited but nonetheless viable "freedom."

It is a pity about the obstructive style, because the book offers, beyond these complaints, many intelligent and forceful indications for inquiry into the operations not only of cinema but of all textual institutions. Heath concludes, much as Metz does, with the call for a new historiography grounded in the analysis of social productions and relations; despite local suggestions, this is not realized, and I again suspect that a theoretically informed practical instance of such a historiography would be more convincing and stimulating than the theoretical formulations. But, after all, the book is entitled Questions of Cinema, and those that Heath raises deserve close attention.

Within their common area of address, these books suggest different discursive contexts: Metz’s speaks comfortably from the mandarin throne of French criticism confident of its cultural centrality, while Heath is more heterogeneous and uneasy, aware of its marginalized and contradictory status in a Britain where all voices are those of class strife. This may yet turn out to be its strength, given greater rhetorical control. At the moment, in response to these latter contradictions, I am left with a discouraging sense of the remoteness of these highly specialized and skillfully wrought productions even from the average university-educated filmgoer in Britain or America. Time will tell whether they are a genuine vanguard staking out inaccessible territory for future intellectual colonization, or a lost patrol in the wilderness of its own discourse.

Note

1 Eisenstein is perhaps insufficiently acknowledged as the pioneer of this kind of inquiry; his investigation of the psychological-affective base of cinematic signification through the montage principle is very close to the Metz/Heath enterprise.

References

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Reviewed by David Carrier
Carnegie-Mellon University

Suppose that in some unimaginable disaster the Italian and Dutch paintings of the National Gallery are mixed together. Your task is to separate them again into two groups. The obvious procedure would be to call Annunciations, Crucifixions, and Judgments of Solomon Italian, and genre scenes, still life works, and landscapes Dutch. Asked to justify this procedure, one could contrast the interests of an aristocratic Catholic and a bourgeois Protestant society. Depictions of flower groupings or young ladies receiving love letters are not suitable for altarpieces. For art historians, as Alpers explains in her introduction, this seemingly simple classification involves some value judgments. Histories of Italian art trace its developing naturalism and locate the texts it narrates. But Dutch seventeenth-century art doesn’t progress toward naturalism, and it is an act of description (‘most Dutch pictures are composed of subjects gros, vulgar, and filthy,’ William Collins wrote in 1817; and this view, Alpers points out, is also that of its champions, as when Fromentin praises it as ‘the portrait of Holland . . . faithful, exact, complete, life-like, without any adornment’) (quoted in Hackoll 1976: 206; Fromentin 1981:97). When the authors of the Pelican history refute this claim that Dutch art ‘is nothing but a mirror of reality’ by reference to the Dutch naiveté and awe before reality, and to the formal and expressive qualities of their representations, we are unconvincingly (Rosenberg et al. 1972:240, Fry 1927). If it seems unfair to thus judge Dutch art inferior merely because art historians have a hard time talking about it, suppose literary critics concluded that the greatest novels are those most readily analyzed—perhaps even the ways we speak of pictures bring out our anti-Dutch prejudices. A deep picture, we say, tells us more than we see just by scanning its surface; a merely attractive image is, literally, superficial.

Alpers’s learned and highly ambitious book aims to change the rules of this game. Instead of applying the standards of an art of narration to Dutch art, let us seek novel criteria demonstrating how it is, on its own terms, fully the equal of Italian painting. Just as Saenredam, Metsu, and Vermeer are not painters doing poorly what the Italians do well, so her defense of them should not be measured by the standards of Panofsky’s or Wolfflin’s accounts of Italian art. Of course, no account, however novel, can change the
rules entirely, and so when Alpers speaks of locating "a certain cultural space that was occupied by Dutch images" (p. 8), we can place her account. She wants to show how Huygens's interest in camera obscura images (Chapter 1), Kepler's model of the eye (Chapter 2), Bacon's concern with practical knowledge (Chapter 3), and specifically Dutch interests in mapping and texts ( Chapters 4 and 5) relate to the visual qualities of Dutch art. There are no real Dutch equivalents to the Italian artist-theorists Alberti, Vasari, and Leonardo, and so inevitably the connection between these theories and Dutch art must be somewhat indirect. Huygens's description of camera obscura images makes the same point as Reynolds's later account of Dutch painting (p. 12). Though the Dutch artists showed no active interest in Kepler's optics, "we might . . . consider Vermeer's View of Delft as an exemplification of that theory" (p. 35). Though Bacon's theory produced no painting in England, "a country without any notable tradition of images," studying his writings "can help deepen our understanding of Dutch art. Like "the Dutch art with which we have linked it," he replaces a concern for narrative with an interest in description (p. 109). As my italics indicate, what is problematic here is understanding the connection proposed between these texts and Dutch painting. Here is an imaginary parallel case. Suppose I analyzed post-Impressionism by reference to the philosophies of Peirce and H. H. Bradley without claiming that the painters knew anything about these English-speaking authors. Such a theory, of course, might provide a suggestive way of looking at Seurat or Gauguin; it would not place their work in its original context. As an art historian, Alpers wants to do more: she aims to ground Dutch art in a "specific cultural ambiance" (p. 32).

Perhaps she can make up for the lack of Dutch writing about painting by direct appeal to visual evidence. Dutch interest in a Keplerian rather than Albertian perspective may show us how to see the pictures themofoevo. Rejecting the familiar contention that Vermeer's images show evidence of his use of the camera obscura, Alpers proposes that in a more general way his work displays that "notion of artificial" (p. 35) found in Kepler's account of the retinal image. Alberti treats pictures as windows through which observers actively look, for Kepler, they are like retinal images which we passively observe. The Dutch image, like a mirror, reflects what is already there. We can compare Alberti's vanishing-point perspective, which requires a viewer, with the distinctively Northern distant point construction where "there is no framed window pane to look through . . . [the picture] is itself identified with pieces of the world seen" (p. 56). Analogously, a map is an image without viewer (p. 138). To see a map is not to look down upon a city or landscape from some imagined window in the clouds; hence the characteristically Dutch concern with mapping.

This argument is very interesting and complex. For the epistemologist, certainly, there is a distinction between the observer viewing the world through a window and the retinal image whose relation to any observer is unclear. But how does this window/retinal image contrast relate to the distinction between art that narrates and art that describes? The contrast, it might seem, is in how the painter presents his space, not about what he depicts within that space. Furthermore, since the two kinds of perspective produce optically equivalent results, even that claim could be excessive. What we have are not two different, incompatible theories about perspective, but two ways of constructing possibly identical images. So, when Alpers redoes the familiar contrast between a Northern art of textures and surfaces and Italian painting of objects and space, we need to add that such a contrast is not equivalent to the difference between the optics of framed window and retinal images. To suggest that Van Eyck leaves "the frame and our location . . . undefined" (p. 45) is puzzling; like his Italian contemporaries, he composes with bilateral symmetry. Alpers's contrast between Northern deconstructions of the figure, the showing of multiple images of the same figure, and the Italian depiction of many figures (p. 59), and the suggestion that Saenredam's church interiors are "an aggregate of views" (p. 51), rather than "a fictive, framed window through which we look into the church interior" (p. 52), are perhaps similarly problematic. As she recognizes by treating Giorgione as a Northern artist, and Leonardo as combining Italian and Dutch concerns, the notion that Italian painting is an art based on single vanishing-point perspective is at best a useful idealization; few actual Italian pictures are more than approximations to that ideal. To Saenredam's church interiors we might juxtapose Panini's, which differ, perhaps, roughly as Dutch churchs differ from Italian ones. The statement that Dutch use of color in drawings involves treating paintings as like retinal images could also be applied to many Venetians; noting that Caravaggio too did not draw (p. 38) is puzzling, since he surely is a paradigm of an artist of narration. There seems some danger of opposing Dutch painting to an Italian art exemplified in too few Italian works. Finally, Alpers's analysis is not always visually convincing. Like Michael Fried, she can be too ingenious. Is representing an organ in a church interior characteristic of a culture in which it is being "soon, not performed, bearing witness rather than dramatizing an event" significant? Surely in depictions of church interiors such a visually prominent object would appear.
All of these questions occur in Alpers's analysis of Velázquez's Las Meninas, for her a synthesis of the normally incompatible approaches of Northern and Italian art. It is "at once a replication of the world and a substitute world that we view through a window frame" (p. 70). Foucault and John Searle have recently claimed that the painting is inconsistent, the king and queen reflected in the mirror on the back wall occupying the same position as the viewer standing before the picture; as their critics and Alpers note, they calculate incorrectly (Alpers 1983). The mirror is not a picture center; hence the royal couple are not standing where the viewer must be. Alpers's proposed identification of the inconsistency with the presence of two identifiable and incompatible modes of pictorial representation" is puzzling. These systems are not two ways of describing the optics, only one of which is consistent with the geometry, for the picture can consistently be described in the terms of an Albertian window. From where Velázquez stands, he can see the king and queen whom we, but not he, see reflected in the mirror behind him. Consider an optically similar example from everyday life. I look through a window and see you on the other side; you can see what is invisible to me. Behind me, as I can see the mirror behind you, and so not visible to you, and that mirror may allow me to see the things behind me I cannot see directly. Here I am not claiming to "solve" this very mysterious painting, but only asking why the contrast between two kinds of picturing can help us understand it.

Some problems come from that endlessly difficult subject, perspective. The "objective" test is whether at the right viewing point a picture duplicates the light pattern from the scene it depicts (Carrier 1980). But of course few pictures satisfy this rigorous standard, and we do not view even them from a fixed vantage point. Thus, to ask whether a perspectival representation shows the world as it really looks is, as Gombrich has urged, to pose an unanswerable question. A moving viewer or one looking with two eyes through an Albertian window violates these conditions, which can be met only by viewing through a peephole. (Such a device is discussed by Alpers, but it is a Northern artwork [pp. 63-64].) Adopting different, successive viewpoints on a window gives an aggregate of views, while a motionless camera obscura produces an image consistent with the optics of single vanishing-point perspective.

Why does the window but not the camera obscura presuppose a viewer? Certainly the scene to be seen through the window exists whether or not there is a viewer, as the camera obscura image is there, whether or not viewed, admittedly, the Albertian window requires that the viewer's position be marked, but the same is true of the camera obscura since viewing from an extreme, glancing angle would produce distortions. In a very suggestive footnote, Alpers relates this account toargments about the status of photography, whose ultimate origins, she urges, lie in Dutch art (pp. 243-244, footnote 37). Photographs are often found inartistic because they are not composed but produced mechanically. As Gowing (197/0.27) points out, Vermeer's images, which were dismissed before photography as seeming unnatural, today are sometimes criticized for being merely photographic. But the suggestion that either Dutch paintings or photographspassively show the world as it is needs qualification. Genres like the erotic photograph or the family portrait always compose in light of some cultural tradition. The recent issue of Studies in Visual Communication on gay art, with its contrast between Wilhelm von Glieder's Sicilian boys mimicking classical nudes and a genre of photography, Lesbian couples, for which we lack such a preexisting model, is suggestive here. Similarly, when Gombrich reminds us that when flowers in winter were luxuries, still life images of them were much valued, we see how such genres please in virtue of their visual content (Gombrich 1963:104).

Perhaps this contrast between Italian and Dutch art can be clearer if stated another way. In narrative pictures the goal of composition is clear; the image must present clearly a story, allowing us to identify quickly the major actors and to determine what they are doing. But in descriptive art the whole notion of composition becomes somewhat problematic. We praise a still life painter for his care in arranging flowers, but he, unlike an artist painting a Marriage at Cana, does not by his arrangement of objects itself give information. So, one way to look for the composition of descriptive paintings—here Meyer Schapiro's famous account of Cézanne is an obvious model—is to seek in such works an implicit narrative (Schapiro 1970). To treat the contrast between Alberti windows and the camera obscura as merely explaining how the Dutch and Italians present their space perhaps presupposes a form-content separation itself derived from Italian art. Bringing in now Alpers's account of the Dutch Baconian interest in crafts, we might connect Dutch paintings with an interest in describing the infinite variety of everyday things which are interesting just because they can be depicted. For the Dutch, she tentatively suggests, pictures are not just illustrations of texts because visual images themselves were a kind of language (p. 93). One side to her revisionist art history is the discussion of images which ordinarily art historians would think too minor to be worth study. Not only Saenredam's paintings but his engraving of allegedly miraculous images found in an apple tree tell us something about Dutch visual interests (pp. 80-82). A left-wing critic of T. J. Clark complains that even for him "popular prints . . . are made to serve the analysis of the always more comprehensive
meaning of a painting from the Louvre" (Rifkin 1983:36). One possibility, suggested by Alpers's account but not explored by her, would be to argue that our belief in art history as the story of great masterpieces is merely another side of that Italian ideal she criticizes.

Her "Epilogue: Vermeer and Rembrandt" raises this question about quality judgments. By definition, great artists are exceptional, and so saying that Rembrandt provides "a critique of the art of describing from within" (p. 222) while Vermeer exemplifies its assumptions is a tidy way of comparing them. But if these are the two great artists of the period, we are left with a tradition containing only one great exemplar; however fascinating Saenredam, Metsu, or Cuy, nobody would juxtapose them with many painters of description with Leonardo or Caravaggio or Poussin or Piero or... The claim that Dutch painting is separate but equal to Italian art seems not established. (Might we suggest that just as Dutch perspective deconstructs the centered observer before the Alberti window, so it calls upon us to give up the belief that an artistically tradition must be centered upon a few geniuses?)

A number of Alpers's examples relate to this point. She contrasts Everdingeri's "Dutch insistence on accommodating the past to what is present to the eyes" (p. 228) with Rombrandt's narrative. In comparing versions of Susanna and the Elders by Lastman and Rubens, we find that Rubens expresses everything with bodily gestures, while Lastman expects the viewer "to imagine a caption or a visible text" (p. 211). (Her comparison of the Lastman with a Dutch cartoon with inscribed words is, for us non-Dutch readers, unconvincing; we can only judge the cartoon by the expressive bodily gestures. It would be interesting to know if one has "read" it correctly.) An obvious response is that Everdinger and Lastman just are inferior artists. That may just be the claim of an Italian chauvinist, though what the history of Italian art shows is progress in story-telling without resort to words. While early Annunciations spill out the angel's words in a line running across to Mary, Leonardo makes the whole scene visually clear. There is something unesthetic about an image not visually self-explanatory. Alpers seemingly confirms this traditional value judgment when she speaks of "the frequent awkwardness displayed by figures in northern works," to add that this awkwardness is due "to a different notion of a picture and of its relation to a text" (p. 212). Awkward Dutch narratives, like weak Italian paintings, fail to narrate clearly. It would seem more convincing to say that the Dutch, recognizing their lack of talent at story-telling, turned to genres more congruent with their culture's view of images. Alpers's suggestion that a Jan Steen Bathsheba, unlike Rembrandt's version, would be taken for a genre scene without the latter she holds is relevant here. If Dutch sitters for historical portraits appear "dressed-up rather than transformed" (p. 14), as if they were playing parts they could not entirely believe in, perhaps we have a measure of the relatively large distance of the Dutch from a classical tradition in which the Renaissance Italians thought they could see themselves reflected.

Perhaps Alpers's discussion of how art history was traditionally centered on the study of Italian narrative painting doesn't provide the easiest way of placing her own work. Italian art history revolves around pictures not only to their textual sources but to a tradition of theorizing about art; so we can grasp the meaning of Piero in part by his relation to Alberti, and compare Vasari's account to Michelangelo's works. When such theorizing is missing, the historian is forced to become more speculative. Therefore, when Alpers says, for example, that Dutch mapmakers were called "world describers" and that painters might also be, though "the term was never... applied to them" (p. 122), she is rather in the position of Ogil Grah, who tries to explain Muslim attitudes toward representations while noting the lack of any entirely helpful texts within Muslim culture (Grabar 1973:99). Like Grabar, Alpers is not so much exploring the artists' intentions as providing a visually relevant perspective which the artist did not and perhaps could not articulate. If our model of art history is debate about the textual source of Botticelli's Primavera, such an account will by comparison seem highly arbitrary. "The task of criticism," Richard Wolheim writes, "is nothing other than to retrieve the artist's intention"; but whether a social history of art like Alpers's can achieve that task is problematic (Wolheim 1979:13). Just as psychoanalysis and studies of advertising and some recent art criticism would turn our attention from the conscious intentions of individuals to the larger system of beliefs which perhaps no one person has articulated, so here that traditional model of interpretation may be all too Italian. Still, given the general Dutch interest in writing, why does no even approximate equivalent to Alpers's account appear within that culture? Is she reconstructing ideas which then were too obvious to need articulation or providing a perspective which only now is available?

Given her interest in Foucault and cultural history, there are two issues tantalizingly close to Alpers's concerns which she mentions only in passing. Italian belief in the superiority of Southern art was linked with patriarchy, as Michelangelo's famous observation that Dutch art was, as she paraphrases him, "an art for women" (p. 223) indicates. (A wit once suggested that Alpers identified the Renaissance as a "male chauvinist plot," and that is actually not an altogether silly idea.) She interestingly elides this claim that Dutch art is art for women, who for Michelangelo
lacked aesthetic judgment, and the claim that it depicts actual—ordinary, not beautiful—women. What might feminist art critics learn from these claims? Second, when she notes the parallel between Dutch paintings and mirrors (p. 42), one recalls Lacan’s now famous account of “the mirror stage,” the moment in individual and perhaps also cultural development when the individual can perceive the physical unity of his or her body. That stage marks a point in self-awareness already related, I think, to her account of the Italian and Dutch uses of perspective (see Damisch 1979).

We might understand the originality and difficulty of The Art of Describing better by comparing it with a recent major, more orthodox book. Howard Hibbard’s Caravaggio limits its furies into theory by refuting the fartouched suggestion that Caravaggio is “an artistic parallel to Galileo,” to noting that an artist named Michelangelo “may have felt...anxious ambivalence,” and to suggesting that his bloody beheadings show that he “unconsciously feared punishment for sexual thoughts or deeds” (Hibbard 1983:84–85, 154, 262). Hibbard’s goal is to correctly attribute the artist’s works and to study its visual sources, and so a gifted journalist like John Berger, who responds subjectively and empathetically to Caravaggio, reminds us how academic Hibbard’s account really is. Those who live precariously develop a phobia about opon opo oposco......

Almost every act of touching which Caravaggio has painted has a sexual charge......in Caravaggio’s art—there is no property’ (Alpers 1977). Do we again need a Leo Steinberg to remind us that current concerns with gay liberation and violence in film might be relevant to our interest in Caravaggio? Conventional art history achieves objectivity by treating great artworks as relatively isolated objects, related to other great art and influenced by the culture outside. By contrast, The Art of Describing offers a novel way of thinking about Dutch art and its culture, suggesting points to relations between that and modernist painting. If the book is relatively diffuse, that is in part because a narrative not centered around the story of one artist is hard to present. But unless art historians can, as Alpers but not Hibbard succeeds in doing, relate their work to such broader concerns, it is hard to see how the discipline can remain relevant to anyone except a small group of professionals (see Gowing 1970). Alpers’s book offers much to argue with, and much worth arguing with; it deserves and will, I expect, receive much attention.

Notes
1 See the articles by Bruce Russell and Joan E. Biron in Volume 9, Number 2 (Spring 1983).
2 Mark Roskill and I discuss this issue at length in our forthcoming Artwriting.

References
- Ritkin, Adrian 1983 No Particular Thing to Mean. Block 8:36.