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Between Substance and Text: Painted Bodies by Rembrandt and Lukacs

The estrangement of the body as an object for scientific discourse is a process that has been active in Western civilization since antiquity, but became more pronounced in the seventeenth century. With it developed the idea of the self as an opposition of body and mind: the body as the flesh, the materiality, the here and now of presence: the mind as the giver of meaning after the fact, overlaying materiality, but never "present" itself.

Drawing on texts by Mieke Bal, Svetlana Alpers and Francis Barker, in this essay I look at Rembrandt's paintings as an oeuvre on the threshold of modernity. The body of Aris Kindt in *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* (Fig. 1) can be seen, in Francis Barker's words, as "flesh made word" (Barker 1984:103). As such, it holds a promise of a future deliverance from bodily suffering through modern science. Yet in other paintings Rembrandt's use of impasto and his portrayal of hands and blindness carry the aura of a corporeal body and a pre-scientific way of knowing. The materiality of the body that suffers and dies from mysterious causes cannot yet be denied in the plague-ridden Amsterdam of the 17th century.

At the end of modernity, in our own postmodern time, I find in the painting *Where the Finest Young Men ...* (1987) (Fig. 2) painted by the young Canadian painter Attila Lukacs, a resurfacing of the ambiguity between the textualized and material body. At this time however, the disillusionment with science is so acute that it becomes an impetus for a search for pre-scientific values.

Both painters use the *materiality* of paint as a means to *transmit* rather than transcribe meaning. Painting is a medium that is particularly suited to address the problem of mind and matter.

The painting can be seen as a play between materiality and immateriality, and the painter gains esteem as the transformer of matter into meaning, linking the two absolutes much like the itinerant smith

traveling between two absolute spaces, the smooth and striated, in Deleuze and Guattari's *Treatise on Nomadology*. (Deleuze and Guattari:413). Drawing a connecting line from Rembrandt to Lukacs via Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer, the question can be asked: do these painters play a role in the forging of a new self for a new age?

The increased involvement with materiality in post-modern art can be seen as an attempt to register *presence* in time and space. This materiality is however *not* foregrounded in the same way as it is in high modernism, where a painting is presented as a flat surface, a canvas covered with paint, without the illusion of space. For this kind of modernist "scientific" self-reflexivity, of critical analysis of the medium strictly through the means of the medium itself, brings with it a loss of referential meaning. Unlike Clement Greenberg, post-modernist painters do not regard the two-dimensional limitations of painting "as positive factors to be acknowledged openly" (Greenberg 1965).

Instead, the materiality in post-modern painting emphasizes the *analogous* qualities of paint with other natural elements such as blood, water and iron in its molten state: its fluidity, its viscosity and its congealment. Contemporary painters such as Attila Lukacs and Anselm Kiefer rely on the substance of paint to evoke meaning, and indeed use *as* paint other substances that can function similarly; tar, straw, lead, and sand. While the use of these materials may be innovative¹ the use of the materiality of *paint* to transmit meaning can be found as far back in history as in Rembrandt's work.

Svetlana Alpers, in her book: *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, devotes a chapter to Rembrandt's "rough" handling, his "non-representational and non-rational marks of paint" (Alpers 1988:81sq.). Rembrandt's unique handling of paint can not be related to the "rough/smooth" debate that was current in his time, according to Alpers. Although at times Rembrandt may have used his "rough" handling to appeal to a

more sophisticated viewer, who could then "finish" the painting in his or her mind, this was not really his intent. When the more sophisticated artists and audience during Rembrandt's life-time, began to turn away from the "rough" handling of paint, because of its devalued connotation with craft and the guild, and began to favor a more "literate," "smooth" surface, Rembrandt stayed with the substance of paint, the impasto, which in his hands, as Alpers says, emphasizes the craft in a new sense, outside the "rough/smooth" debate.

I agree with Alpers that this newness lies in "the production of a substantial, as distinguished from a suggestive, pictorial presence" (Alpers 1988:18). But I do not think that this "metal-working", this transformation of substances to acquire meaning, can be fully explained by the interpretation that it is presenting the painting itself as an object. In comparing Rembrandt to Mondrian, I think Alpers weakens her argument. The "thingness" of Mondrian's canvas is a metaphor for the solid reality which the painting reveals. Mondrian wanted to disclose an objective, true reality underlying the forms of nature in a Platonic sense, while Rembrandt gave meaning to the substance itself by transforming and molding it, so that it appeals to the sense of touch as well as sight. The materiality of Rembrandt's paint does not reveal a deeper reality, but rather, demonstrates meaning in the matter itself and is a testimony of the painter's act of transformation.

In spite of my disagreement with Alper's comparison to Mondrian, her observations and interpretations of Rembrandt's "material sense of pigments" (Alpers 1988:26-27) are convincing arguments for his inventive ways to present meaning in materiality. The importance of materiality and of touch in finding meaning is underscored thematically; Alpers points out Rembrandt's frequent depiction of hands and blindness. She also remarks on the apparent solidity of his figures in contrast to the representation of space as simply the absence of substance.

While Alper's interpretations do not diminish the evocative power of Rembrandt's paintings, they call attention to an aspect of his oeuvre that has remained unanalyzed, though not unnoticed. The painter Paula Modersohn Becker for instance, as is related by Alpers, wrote from Paris in 1903: "... I can still learn so much from them (Rembrandt's paintings), the

wrinkled intricacy of things, life itself" (Alpers 1988:146).

Mieke Bal, in a chapter entitled: "Dead Flesh, or the Smell of Painting," agrees with Alpers on the *constructive* rather than the evocative nature of many of Rembrandt's impasto paintings, although she interprets it differently. One painting that lends itself in particular to a discussion of the presence of paint is the *Slaughtered Ox*, 1655, of the Louvre. Of this painting, Bal says:

The substance of paint is also the substance of death. And the substance of death is dead, stinking flesh. ...

... The substance of paint as flesh affects every aspect of the dead body. The roughness not only conveys the making of the work: it also loosens the boundaries of the body — its outside — conveying the fusion that is inherent in rotting. The flesh represented, therefore, stinks, and its stench contaminates the representation itself. (Bal 1991:386)

The woman in the painting, behind the ox, looks at the viewer and the ox with empty eyes. The empty eyes, Bal says, are the iconic signifiers of the empty body of the animal. Bal sees the woman also as contiguous with the open body: her own body is obscured by the lower part of the door, but is complemented by the abdomen of the ox. An identification with the representation of the woman then, can lead the viewer to identify at the same time with the ox: the substance of death, death itself. And so, says Bal, the miracle of the words "I am dead" has been accomplished (Bal 1991:388).

In analyzing this painting and others dealing with death, Bal stresses their theatricality. But the similarity lies again in the presence, rather than the representation of death, and has therefore more in common with the precursor to conventional theatre, with pre-modern ritual, where fascination with horror leads to a cathartic experience, a purging of fear and guilt. Bal's observations on the theatricality of Rembrandt's death paintings concur with those of Francis Barker in an essay on Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp* (1984:73). In this painting, the handling of the paint itself is

indifferent, neither rough, nor particularly smooth. The interest of the painting lies for Barker in its portrayal of a historical moment in which the body is being turned into "flesh made word", while the aura of the "old body" is still present (1984:103).

It is however, only an aura, the "old body" is absent, as is the impasto, rough handling of paint. The flesh of Adrian Kindt, the criminal who was executed, and whose dead body was punished once more by serving as the model for the anatomical lesson, has already turned into a text, into an object for scientific discourse. Yet the painting depicts an event, namely the yearly public anatomical lesson in Amsterdam, that harks back to the concept of the "old body". While public executions were becoming rare, the public anatomical lesson in a theatre, het Waagebouw, was taking over the cathartic function of the putative ceremony of executions. In this way, Barker argues, the *Anatomy* is close to the "overt celebratory bodiliness of the dramatic and penal scaffold" (1984:73).

But, as Barker points out, in the Amsterdam of 1632, Descartes might have been amongst the viewers of this popular event. It is certainly the spirit of Descartes and of the new scientific age he personifies, that is present in the painting. The body of Aris Kindt is transformed from a ritual siphon of guilt to the object for scientific analysis and discourse; the "flesh made word" (Barker 1984:103). Already, the dissected left hand looks abstracted, more like a diagram out of the anatomy book that is displayed in the right lower corner, Barker notices. All eyes of the surgeons are directed not towards the "real" body, but towards the open anatomy book.

In spite of the textualization of the body, both Bal and Alpers discuss the importance of the hands in this painting as signifiers of the sense of *touch* and of the importance of craft in *knowing*. Dr. Tulp is about to pull the muscles to demonstrate the prehensibility of the hand, which Aristotle had recognized as the instrument of human reason. His own left hand is demonstrating this same function. Alpers feels that the emphasis on this ability of the hand in the painting not only emphasizes the craft of the surgeon, but also elevates that of the painter (Alpers 1988:26, 27).

Rather than a kinship with Mondrian and Picasso, as Alpers proposes, there is a connection between

Rembrandt's use of material, his emphasis on touch and craft, and the work of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), and his many followers, including Attila Lukacs via Anselm Kiefer. Influenced by Schiller and the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, Beuys was motivated by a search for unity of spirit and matter. Through the use of felt, fat and copper in shamanistic rituals and objects, he stressed the idea of transformation and of substance, presenting substance in a way that was different from the objective, scientific representation of objects. The artwork for him was a fusion of material presence and immaterial meaning. As such it provides a model, a source of energy, with the power to strengthen the will towards a freer disposition in the individual first and eventually in society. While Beuys held on to this idealistic Schillerian view of art as the salvation of the world, his post-modern disciples, such as Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), are more sceptical. Kiefer uses tar, sand, lead and straw in his paintings, which revive myths and heroes of the German past, including its Nazi past, with the intent of undermining their power. The negative criticism of Kiefer's work concerns the danger of summoning these monsters of the past without falling under their spell again, especially since the methods are those of presence, rather than representation, of intuitive identification with irrational forces, primitive ritual and intensity of feeling, in short, a pre-scientific interaction with substances and its implicit lack of distance. "I do not identify with Nero or Hitler, but I have to reenact what they did just a little bit in order to understand the madness. That is why I make these attempts to become a fascist", said Kiefer (Rosenthal 1987:17). There is never a primal landscape in his works: nature is always inscribed with culture. The enormous scale of the work leaves the viewer no distance; he or she is left with the terror in the confusion of nature and culture, of real and representational, photograph and straw, myth and history, and the consequent confusion of good and evil.

The influence of German art was strongly felt throughout the Seventies and Eighties. Lukacs' work shows similarities with Kiefer in scale, use of material and the interest in history. Even his theme of neo-fascism echoes the German painter's obsession with the ghosts of the Nazis. The sense of parody, however, is much stronger in Lukacs' work than in any of the German paintings. He is perhaps a truer itinerant: born in Canada from Hungarian immigrant

parents, he lived in Europe for a while, in Germany, to paint what he sees, as the outsider.

Unlike in Kiefer's paintings, there is hardly a trace of subjective expression of emotion in Lukacs' work. His figures are clearly "posing", presenting a spectacle, a "tableau" (Dompierre 1989) for the viewer, who is in a separate space, out in front, with the painter. The figures and their configurations are clearly pastiches from paintings of the past.

Seen this way, the background of the painting *Where the Finest Young Men...*, (Fig.2) could be a pastiche of Kiefer's architectural paintings, such as *Athanor*, based on an outside courtyard designed by Speer for Hitler's chancellery (Rosenthal 1987:115 and plate 62). Similarly, the drips, the tarry substance, the whole black mystery of the lower half of this painting could be a parody of Kiefer's way of working. Lukacs complains sometimes that people don't see the humor in his paintings, but his is the kind of joke that evokes a laugh that sticks in your throat.

I am not laughing any longer when I see the *Finest Young Men* as resurrections of Rembrandt's Aris Kindt. What seemed a promise in 1632, of a future of bodies that would be known, a nature that could be subjected and regulated to serve rather than to oppress, has in 1987 turned into the nightmare of the present. This is what has become of Aris Kindt. The young men's selves, their individuality is effaced, what is left are empty bodies with identical faces. What they are is written on their skin, but these tattoos seem to belong as much to the surface of the painting as Aris Kindt's open hand belongs to the anatomical book. Identities are inscribed, the body is text.

But these zombies are involved in a ritual, just as much as Dr. Tulp and his surgeons were staging a ritual. While they created the body as text, the zombies here could be involved in a magical recuperation of the body as flesh. It is ambiguous, because of the overlay of parody, and the intentional non-involvement of the artist: "I purposely haven't engaged them in any violent or typical acts that people might expect of them, so I don't have to get into making too much of a social statement about them", Lukacs says evasively (Watson 1988:86). But intentional or not, the viewer looks in fascination at

the deep black mystery of the open barrel. What are these figures in aprons — the aprons of the smith, the artist, the surgeon, the butcher — retrieving from those black depths? Is it perhaps the old body, the body of the flesh, of the runny, bloody, stinking substance that the whole bottom half of the painting consists of? Could it be that, since the paint drips down, pours down, off the painting onto the floor, into the space of the viewer, the paint becomes a reminder of the bodies that we once were? Or perhaps we are all waiting for a new body, still undefined, waiting in the corner to be formed.

The role of the smith is an ambiguous, even treacherous one. Moving from one absolute space to the other, from the nomads to the sedentaries, smiths are mistrusted by both. Barker muses on Rembrandt's status in the Tulp painting; does he really identify with the serene surgeons, who are declaring a new order of the "rational spirit of capitalism" (Barker 1984:77), turning a blind eye to the horrors that are inflicted on the body of Aris Kindt? Barker would like to believe that Rembrandt's placement in this picture is an ironic one; that Rembrandt — not really fitting into the social order he depicts, regularly breaking its rules in his own life — is disclosing here the hypocrisy of the new order. But that, Barker admits, would perhaps be too much of a humanistic interpretation. More likely is Alpers' interpretation of an identification of Rembrandt with the surgeon. Both the painter and the surgeon need the hand and the brain, to cut into the body. But as such, Alpers shows throughout her book, Rembrandt is just as much a proponent and a product of the new age of "enterprise".

Lukacs' position is perhaps even more ambiguous. He needs to disassociate himself from the skinheads: the *Finest Young Men* would never have set foot in the National Gallery of Canada if he had not. Yet he must have, just like Kiefer, "reenact(ed) just a little bit in order to understand". His own statements in this regard are ambiguous, even contradictory: "I definitely do not consider myself an official member of that society. I'm more like a voyeur." Not an *official* member? a member and/or a voyeur?

This uncertain position of Rembrandt and Lukacs leaves me with a troubled feeling about the ethical agency of the artist. The question remains: if that isn't

Lukacs delving into the cauldron, *whom* did the painter leave in charge?

NOTE

¹ This is innovative because it is quite different from the use of everyday material in Dada and Pop-art. In these movements established meaning in the found material was subverted, while Kiefer evokes *new* meaning with "non-art" material such as sand.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Ill. 1, pg. 74. Rembrandt: *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp*, 1632, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Ill. 2, pg. 75. Attila Lukacs, *Where the Finest Young Men...* 1987, National Art Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of Ira and Lori Young, West Vancouver, 1990. Copyright by Richard Attila Lukacs.



