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De-disciplining the Eye

Mieke Bal

Introduction

At the risk of reducing cultural history, in this paper I assume that in Western culture, at least since the Middle Ages, the two cultural activities of looking at images and reading texts have been disciplined through the promotion of realism as the basic mode of reading. Realism is, then, reading for a content that is modeled on reality at the expense of awareness of the signifying system of which the work is constructed. The problem with realism as the proper way of reading and looking is that it encourages ideological manipulation as it passes content off as natural. Yet realism has succeeded in becoming so "natural" a mode of reading that denying or ignoring its pervasiveness will not help us move beyond it. In this paper, I will discuss one way of countering realism's disciplining effects by opposing realistic to textual reading and by maintaining, rather than resolving, the tension between the two. I will do so through the analysis of a painting by Rembrandt and its literary pretext.

Realism's power is enhanced by its complicity with other oppositions that pervade modern cultural behavior. First, there is the opposition between holistic and detailed reading. Although realism favors the construction of a holistic content, it finds support in textual details. The conjunction of these two tensions comes to light when we rephrase the opposition between the two modes of reading as reading for the textual whole versus reading for the realist detail. In addition, realism's predominance has been supported by the maintenance of two

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other oppositions: that between unity and fracturedness of the work, and that between visual and verbal modes of expression. As I hope to demonstrate, these oppositions are all related in their common support for an ideology of reading and looking based on realism. However, they do not overlap as neatly as the presentation of their complicity might suggest.

Reading with the preestablished assumption that the work is a whole, that it is coherent and well-structured, has now come under attack as a critical strategy that stimulates strongly ideological interpretations, erases disturbing or incoherent details, and imposes on the text a romantic conception of organic growth not relevant to works outside the romantic tradition.[1] The "convention of unity" is a powerful ideological weapon because of the pressure it exerts on the reader to choose one interpretation over another rather than to read through the conflict of interpretations, because it presupposes single-handed authorship and the authority that entails (hence recent problems regarding Rembrandt's practice as a studio artist), and because it encourages the projection of "masterplots" that colonize or erase the marginal.[2] However, using the challenge to unity as a cover, or pre-text, for a resistance to interpretation may well be based on the same unifying fallacy it tries to avoid. The suggestion, for example, that a detail in *Madame Bovary* is merely a sign of verisimilitude may be motivated by a sense that the detail does not fit otherwise.[3] And such a judgment relies in turn on a sense that the rest of the signs do fit, that the narrative is a

1. For illuminating discussions of the convention of unity, see Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981) and *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982); and Ernst van Alphen, *Bang voor schennis? In leiding in de ideologiekritiek* (Utrecht, 1987) and "The Complicity of the Reader," *V/S Versus* (forthcoming).

2. For critiques of the masterplot, see Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London, 1972), and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981). Freud's predominant masterplot, the Oedipus complex, has been sufficiently criticized and the alternative pre-Oedipal plot in which the mother is central has been advanced convincingly. See, for example, Elisabeth Bronfen, "The Lady Vanishes: Sophie Freud and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (Fall 1989): 961–91.

3. See Roland Barthes's influential "L'Effet de Réel," *Communications* 11 (1968): 84–89, and Gérard Genette's seminal "Vraisemblance et motivation," *Communications* 11 (1968): 5–20.

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whole that has no use for this particular detail, but does accommodate most of the others smoothly. Such a judgment also attributes to the signs a status inalterably textual rather than readerly: it has the effect of the real on the readers precisely because it is out there, in the work, and works on us.

Naomi Schor has demonstrated that the aesthetics of the detail is not gender-neutral.[4] Incoherent details become even more challenging for the reader to interpret if they happen to constitute the arena in which a battle over the marginality of women is fought. If we reverse the usual perspective we take toward a text and begin at the reader's end, it is still possible to see, with Roland Barthes, a contrast between "functional" details—details that we can integrate into the reading of a fabula or theme—and details with an *effect,* precisely, of the real. That contrast, however, still partakes of a reading strategy, and is not inevitable, stable, or intersubjective. The difference is not just a matter of words; acknowledgment of such difference affects the power of the reader and, paradoxically, enriches the interaction between work and reader so as to increase our sense of the work's effectivity.

In this essay I will explore a mode of reading I call "reading for the text." A text is what we make of a work when reading it: roughly, a meaningful, well-structured whole with a beginning and an end. But as a mode of reading, textuality allows for constant activity, a continual shaping and reshaping of sign-events. I will argue that reading for a sense of textuality, and for the wholeness this simple textuality entails, does not necessarily preclude awareness of a fundamental lack of unity, while reading for the effect of the real, in spite of the promotion of the "realistic detail," tends to do so. The two modes of reading are fundamentally different; yet the conflict between them is not necessarily obvious, nor should such conflict be avoided, ignored, or smoothed out.

The goal of this confrontation is not to promote textual reading at the expense of realistic reading. It is the conflict between them I wish to promote. The two modes of reading can be brought to bear on the same work, although they are incompatible. As a result, activating both modes is in itself a critical endeavor: their very combination helps one to avoid the unifying fallacy. Textual and realist readings are a problematic and thereby productive combination.

Realism and Gender

The hypothesis I will explore concerns the ideological underpinnings of the idea of wholeness and the way in which textuality and

4. See Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York and London, 1987).

realism construct wholeness. The issue of wholeness is important because it necessarily entails blindness: the desire for wholeness informs the compulsion to project unity onto the image or text and thus to ignore incoherent details that threaten to break the unity. The reassuring quality of unity has deep roots in the unconscious. When Freud constructs femininity as a response to castration anxiety, "femininity" is a mode of reading. Femininity is the boy's response to the image of the female body inscribed with lack. Thus, femininity does not concern women but only men, and it does not concern the "text" but the reader.[5] In relation to those unconscious roots, it is arguably the desire for wholeness, as well as the anxious awareness of its impossibility, that underlies much of Western culture's preference for visual representations of the female nude. In view of this concatenation of reading and gender, I will focus my discussion on Rembrandt's painting *Bathshebah's Bath* (1654) in the Louvre and its verbal pre-text: a story of rape and murder generated by an act of looking at the female body.

I will question if, and how, textualism and realism as reading attitudes promote the sense of wholeness. I will contend that both do, but in different ways and with different consequences. Textualism promotes the self-conscious construction of wholeness, and hence the awareness of that constructedness. Realism as it is traditionally understood promotes a self-evident wholeness that is not even noticed but merely assumed. A mode of reading that looks for details that do not fit is therefore potentially a useful tool for an antirealist, critical reading. We need to reflect on the status of details and their relation to the whole in order to prevent the recuperation of "problematic" details as signs for the real. The success of Barthes's concept of the effect of the real is suspect precisely because of this danger of recuperation.

Signs for Textuality

W. J. T. Mitchell has argued convincingly that the often-alleged opposition between verbal and visual art obtaining between discrete and dense sign-systems (proposed by Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art*), although appealing as the most sensible and the least hierarchical of current formulations, is not unproblematic.[6] The problem lies in the

5. This is obvious in Freud's essay "Femininity," *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 22:112–35. The entanglement of projection and reading is even more striking in Freud, "The Taboo of Virginity (Contributions to the Psychology of Love III)," *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood, Standard Edition,* 11:191–208.

6. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986), pp. 70–74. Mitchell argues that Nelson Goodman's blind spot is rooted in his fundamentally apoliti-

conflation of the theoretical status of signs and their actual functioning, of signs as things and sign-events, of text and reading. Verbal art, although composed of discrete words that normally can be described individually as signs, does not *function* by discerning words individually. The text may consist of individual words, but reading does not. The work needs many words that do not function as discrete literary signs at all, words that contribute to the emergence of sign-events but can do so only in dramatically intense merging with other elements. The readability of that work requires many words to support the signs that form the work as a signifying text, while those words depend, in turn, on such signs for their own acceptability. In order to "tell" a narrative syntagm of the form subject–action–object, a text needs more words than just the three that fill the slots in the syntagm. As a sequence of mere words, language may be discrete; as a readable form of representation, it is not.

The same can be said of visual works. While many elements are not in themselves significant, they cannot be spared. Many of those elements are what Norman Bryson would call connotative: elements that fill up the surface of the work in such a way that the representation passes for realistic.[7] While Goodman would see there aspects of the density of visual images,[8] Meyer Shapiro's attempts to assign meaning to elements like the frame, background, and color amount to an attempt to turn them into discrete signs, hence, to relativize a distinction like Goodman's by reducing the realm of the meaningless. Shapiro claims that it is the reader who decides which elements are discrete signs and which are not, and this holds true for verbal as well as for visual art.[9]

In the painting *Bathshebah's Bath* (fig. 1) we can see many of these elements—whether we call them connotative, meaningless, effects of the real, or parts of the image's density: the curtain, the cloth in the background, the cloth the woman is sitting on, but also the woman's bracelet and necklace, which might be seen as part of her adornment, but can also be there simply because they are there, for no reason other than visual filling. There are many elements, in both verbal and visual texts, that are neither iconographic nor denotative, because they do not contribute to the recognition of the theme, nor do they add to the narrative because they do not "tell"; although they seem to have no

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cal attitude, which makes him unaware of the conventions and value systems underlying representational practices.

7. See Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1981).

8. See Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis, 1976).

9. See Meyer Shapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Semiotica* 1, no. 3 (1969): 223–42.

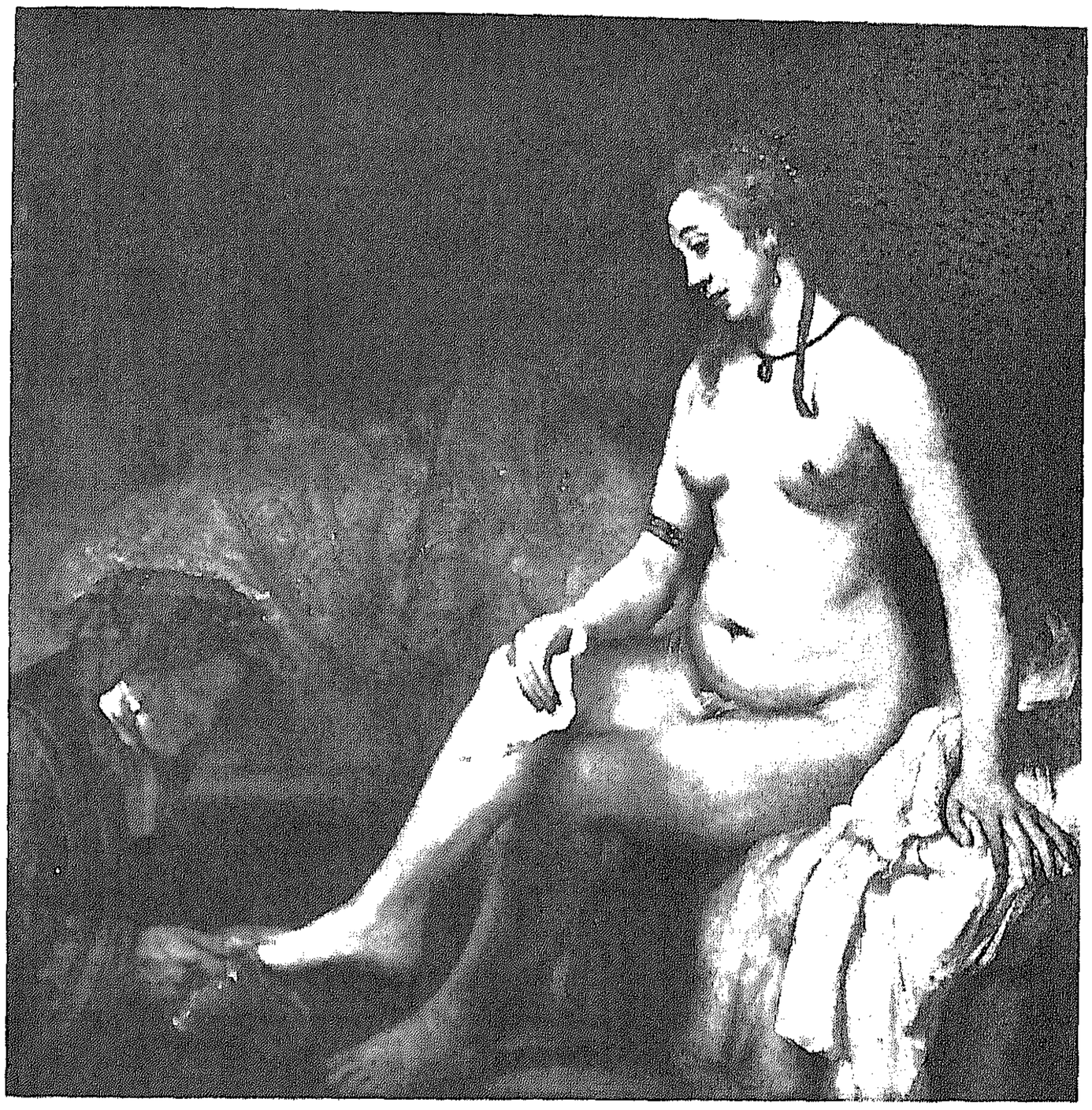

FIG. 1.—Rembrandt, *Bathshebah's Bath,* 1654. Louvre, Paris. Cliché des Musées Nationaux.

particular meaning at all, they are clearly and insistently significant. I will characterize such elements as signs, or sign-events, that contribute to our awareness that the work is processed as something we may call a *text,* even if no specific meaning can be assigned to them.[10]

10. I use the word "text" quite casually as a combination of elements leading to semiotic events, a combination structured enough to be perceived as a whole and materially presented as complete. Thus defined, novels, poems, drawings, and paintings are texts. In verbal art, the clear delimitation of the work by beginning and ending, problematic as such a delimitation may be, serves the purpose of producing the idea—illusionary but functional—of a text. In visual art, the frame, or the arbitrary delimitation of a piece of paper, does the same. On framing in literature, see Victor Brombert, "Opening Signals in Narrative," *New Literary History* 11 (Spring 1980): 489–502, and D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, N.J., 1981), for more traditional approaches. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago, 1968) seems to me the best of its kind. Jacques Derrida's remarks throughout *Dissemination,* trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981) and *The Truth in Painting,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, 1987) challenge the very notion of framing as conceived so far.

Forms of Textuality

Most representational works in the Western tradition present the difficulty of self-evident textuality. No one will deny the textual status of *Bathshebah's Bath,* for example, at least according to my broad definition of text. The work has a frame that delimits it, a subject that gives it semantic coherence, and a composition that gives it formal structure. It is meaningful, even if interpretations vary, and it is full of signs.

In this case, the sense of unity passes unnoticed because it is not contradicted clearly by other signs that help us process the work as a whole. The sense of wholeness is strengthened by the sense of recognition: the subject fits the tradition of representations of the biblical Bathshebah, a favorite subject of painting at the time. Also, it happens to be a subject based on a story of problematic and gendered viewing. Even if we do not immediately recognize the iconographic subject of Bathshebah, we get a sense that something is happening, a sense of narrative.

Bathshebah's Bath is a complex work in terms of the various modes of reading to which it gives rise. Viewers knowledgeable about Rembrandt's work and life, and interested in the connections between them—in other words, readers of the text "Rembrandt"—may tend to view it primarily as a portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels, Rembrandt's common-law wife. In this case, recognition functions noniconographically, requiring knowledge of biographical data rather than of the pictorial tradition. Such knowledge may not be acquired separately from acquaintance with "Rembrandt": we know Hendrickje's face only through the representations of it in "Rembrandt."[11] Reading the painting as a portrait of Hendrickje is a realistic reading, even if the reality of the knowledge it is based on makes it quite dubious as a "truth." Such a realist reading may be no less legitimate than any other reading, but we should not concern ourselves with it here, except insofar as it might have some effect on the sign I will discuss.

We must also consider that the work is a traditional nude, and as such it can be discussed as a potentially voyeuristic work—although I would immediately want to qualify such a judgment, as I do below. There is surely a connection between the verbal story, the pre-text, in which vision in the mode of voyeurism determines the events and the popularity of the subject in painting. In the history of Western art the

11. How deceptive such a circular knowledge can be is demonstrated by Svetlana Alpers's comparison of Rembrandt's own self-portraits and Jan Lievens's portrait of Rembrandt in *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago, 1988), pp. 61–63. We think that we know Rembrandt's face and use that knowledge to identify self-portraits in details of his history paintings. Since we like Rembrandt's art better, we believe him more than Lievens, who presents us with a quite different face. This is a good case of the way realism functions as a mode of reading and as an aesthetics.

theme of Bathshebah's bath is as often depicted as Susanna's bath, and, I am afraid, for the same reason: although (and in some sense because) viewing is represented in these stories as disturbing, they both lend themselves to voyeuristic purposes, or to a critique of voyeurism.

It is easy to see right away why *Bathshebah's Bath* could be perceived as moderately but problematically voyeuristic. First, it exhibits the woman's body without qualifying the way we may look at it; without, for example, representing, for either identification or ridicule, the voyeuristic gaze itself. Second, it does not thematize any contact between the naked woman and the viewer, proposing neither appeal for help nor acquiescence. Third, the pre-textual story itself mentions the woman's nakedness, the enticing effect it has on the voyeur, and the subsequent appropriation of the body. The knowledge the viewer may have of the biblical text is not innocent of later readings superposed on it. As I have more than once been able to check, many people who recall the story without having it acutely in mind have a vague "memory" that Bathshebah was responsible for her own rape. This frequent response demonstrates the risks of the notion that recognition is denotative. For it is an interpretation that 2 Sam. 11 does not at all call for, but that has in effect been imposed on the story through an unacknowledged word–image interaction.

The iconographic reading that travels from the text via the preceding images that interpret and reinterpret it to the image at hand will allow for relatively easy identification of the subject if the reader possesses enough familiarity with the tradition. The naked woman, the vague suggestion of a roof in the background, the servant occupied at the woman's toilet (not mentioned in the story of 2 Sam. 11 but present in the iconographical tradition), the letter in the woman's hand, are all firmly established in the pictorial tradition. That letter can be considered the hinge of the work, as I will argue shortly, and it promotes the sense of textuality, but *not* because it is textual itself. The letter functions according to the reader's foreknowledge and adopted mode of reading: it is what links the iconographic with the biographical reading on the one hand and with the narrative reading on the other.[12]

12. Let me first eliminate the biographical reading as irrelevant to the present discussion. As Gary Schwartz points out, the work was painted in the year Hendrickje was summoned before the council of the Dutch Reformed Church to answer the charge that she "'practiced whoredom with Rembrandt the painter'" (Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* [Harmondsworth, 1985], p. 292). In a biographical interpretation, the letter in the woman's hand might be taken to refer to the letter of summons Hendrickje received, and this biographical reference might account for the figure's melancholic look: she was upset by the letter she just received. For those who adopt this interpretation, the iconographic interpretation of the subject as Bathshebah does not seem plausible. Schwartz suggests, in contrast, that the biographical event happened the other way around: the church councilors saw the work and interpreted the painting as a provocation, and that indignation made them take action (Schwartz, *Rembrandt,* p. 293). But then

Narrative Looking

At first sight it is not easy to interpret the work as a visual narrative. The scene is rather static: no action takes place other than the routine manipulation of the woman's foot by her servant. Yet there is a strong sense of narrativity, which, I contend, can be accounted for neither by iconographical or thematic recognition nor by narrativity alone. To begin with the former: reference to the biblical story is scarce; we do not see any sign of the spying King David. In the biblical story, the king sends a servant, a messenger, to bring the woman whose view had kindled his desire. Instead of these figures, one might argue, we have the letter delivered by the messenger. This seems a rather arbitrary connection to a story where no such letter is mentioned. The letter is a supplement, a detail that is not called for, yet it seems so "natural" and thereby calls attention to the unnaturalness of the sense of wholeness it disturbs.

In fact, the iconographic-thematic reading rests more probably on a somewhat uncomfortable logic, which reverses the relation between the visual text and its pre-text. Titles are assigned to old paintings not because they illustrate a story, but a story is nonetheless invoked as a reading of the painting. The fact that the woman is naked, and that her toilet is being attended to, seems to be enough: the viewer may then assume it must be for a man that she is being prepared, "made beautiful," and that connection in turn suggests that this particular story be imported in order to interpret the image. The voyeur may be absent, but his presence is felt nevertheless; the story gives him an identity and a body. Out of reach for a critical response, his power hovers over the woman's existence.

No narrative structure counters this effect, which is one of the reasons this work could qualify as quite voyeuristic. It is not easy to construct a fabula: elderly woman cleans naked woman's toenails? woman holds letter she just received? There is a sense of focalization in the woman's pose; her body, not her gaze, is turned slightly toward the viewer. While this serves the voyeuristic purpose, it does not connect to a fabula that would thus be focalized. Only if the viewer identifies with King David as a voyeur—if, in other words, the body is offered to both the king and the customer—would a fabula be constructed, but that would place the viewer in an uncomfortable position.

On the other hand, the woman's look is remarkable. She is looking in an undeniably melancholic, reflective way. Her reflectiveness is

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the letter makes no sense. The "real" order in which the events occurred is unknown, while this kind of reading depends on such knowledge. The impulse to read biographically is a form of realism, but one that reads the text at hand through other texts whose historical reliability is unproblematically assumed while their textual status is ignored.

enhanced by the fact that her head turns away from the viewer while her body does not. These features remain nonnarrative, however, because they are not related to each other and to a fabula. They do counter the voyeuristic effect in that the woman's unwillingness to communicate with the viewer problematizes the latter's position.

None of the attempts to construct a fabula results in a naturalization of the image.[13] Although the image clearly makes sense as a whole, what sense it makes cannot be decided. We are left with a sense of narrativity that is not fulfilled, with a sense of wholeness that does not satisfy, with a frustrated need to position ourselves in relation to a viewing situation the narrative should bring forth but doesn't. These dead ends leave us with a strong awareness of textuality as not quite fitting, as alien: somehow, the image's textuality remains out of place.

The Letter's Speculation

The represented letter remains. Iconographically, the letter is a type-sign referring to clandestine love. Women writing, reading, or receiving letters are often represented in a kind of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting similar to still life,[14] notably in interiors by Pieter de Hooch, Gerard Ter Borch, and especially Jan Vermeer. The woman is then embedded in the genderedness of this genre, where the household is the affair of women and the men—often visitors, teachers of music, soldiers, or seducers—are intruders.[15]

The occurrence of a letter as the central sign in a painting whose iconographic and narrative status is ambiguous is almost enough to make the work shift genres, from history painting to genre painting. The letter would then function in a different, but equally radical, textual way: as an indicator of genre, even as a theoretical pun. Indeed,

13. Naturalization is the impulse to integrate a representation within our own sense of "normality," of what is possible and "natural" in our life experience. Thus there is a close connection between naturalization and appeal to doxa, or "common sense." See Culler, "Convention and Naturalization," *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), pp. 131–60.

14. For a brilliant analysis of still life, see Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life* (Cambridge, forthcoming). Bryson establishes a relation between still life as a genre and the social construction of female space. This connection supports the association between women-and-letters genre painting and still life.

15. On de Hooch, see Peter C. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), and Horst Gerson, "Pieter de Hooch," *Kindlers Malerei-Lexicon* 3 (1966): 308–12. On Vermeer, see Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*, 2d ed. (London, 1970), and Arthur K. Wheelock, *Jan Vermeer* (New York, 1981). A very acute interpretation of one of Vermeer's woman-with-letter paintings was proposed by Annie Leclerc, "La Lettre d'amour," in Hélène Cixous, Madeleine Gagnon, and Leclerc, *La Venue à l'écriture* (Paris, 1977). A critique of this essay appears in Jane Gallop, *Thinking through the Body* (New York, 1988), pp. 165–77.

the letter's status as a sign for textuality can hardly be overrated. But this does not make reading the text any easier, however. It is possible to relate the letter to the melancholic look on the woman's face. It is then appealing, within the practice of word–image interaction that informs our cultural attitudes, to go to the biblical story to establish such a link, as the iconographic tradition is likely to have found it there. And indeed, exceptionally in the Hebrew Bible, there is a letter in 2 Sam. 11, but Bathshebah never sees it. It is the letter that David writes to the leader of his army in which he orders the latter to expose the bearer, Bathshebah's husband Uriah, to mortal danger.[16]

That letter is, literally, the harbinger of death. After Bathshebah's appropriation by the king it ushers us into the second, grimmer part of the story. Assigning that sinister function to it, then, is a specific way of dealing with the Bible. What happens in such an interpretation is that the story will be rearranged to account for motifs that are striking when their dramatic function is considered in relation to their stark effect on visual imagination. It is a way of reading the biblical story visually, taking up its motifs in juxtaposition and rearranging them in the space of the paint surface, hence ignoring the place of each motif in the narrative sequence. In other words, reading in Bathshebah's letter an allusion to Uriah's letter is endorsing the view that the iconographic tradition is based on such a reading. The reading is then doxic rather than literal, and it endorses a number of assumptions regarding gender relations in the story.

Relating that pre-textual reference to the letter in the painting can help the reader to account for Bathshebah's melancholic look, but at the cost of semantic blurring and narrative complexity in the interaction between verbal and visual texts. The look would be a narrative prolepsis. This interpretation of the letter and the look changes their status radically. Since narratively speaking the female figure cannot have knowledge of the function of the letter nor, indeed, of its very existence, the letter becomes the *sign* for textuality, affecting the other signs related to it. It is a false sign of narrativity, and through its influence the melancholic look itself becomes a sign-for-text. It counters the reading of realistic verisimilitude and displays the figure's function as a semiotic object, as a machine for generating meaning.

Starting at the other end of the interpretive process—that is, at the end of reading the image itself—one notices that the letter is a conspicuous, indeed, central sign in the work. It is placed in the center of the

16. As I will argue shortly, the letter is a hinge in the biblical story, too. The story, moreover, is curiously confused where it deals with the relations among signs, women, and death. See my *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love-Stories* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987).

painted surface, its color sets it off from the softer colors that surround it, and because of the many possible yet equally deceptive associations it evokes, it seems saturated with meaning without having any specific meaning. This is what makes the letter a sign for textuality. But with a nauseating specularity, there is a tiny detail *within* the letter that mirrors precisely these characteristics of the letter: the little red spot, hardly visible, on the left corner of the letter.

It is a strange spot: sealing wax or blood? The most obvious way to process it is to take it as a seal and consider it a detail that enhances the reality of the letter: a sign for the real. The letter as a represented object is made to "look like" a real letter, and, in agreement with Barthes's concept of the effect of the real, this connotation of reality accounts for its occurrence as a detail. But this, again, does not quite work if we look at it more closely. For as a seal it is strangely placed, not in the middle but in the corner of the letter. And just as the white of the letter contrasts with the surrounding colors, the red contrasts with the white of the letter. And this is how the specular turmoil set in motion by the letter continues its movement: like the letter itself, the spot can be interpreted as a proleptic sign of impending violence, conferring this sense of violence onto the letter that contains it. It would refer then to the violent appropriation of the woman by David, the murder of her husband, and later, the death of the child born of the rape.

And again, that proleptic meaning in turn refers to the textuality of these sign-events: the woman holding the letter, the letter containing the spot, have in realist terms no bearing on the events the signs predict. The semiotic status of the spot is thereby self-reflective: it is dependent for its functioning on the signs that contain it and which it, in turn, textualizes; the spot is nothing in itself, has no positive meaning, and thereby foregrounds its semiotic nature. The spot mirrors the letter but it can do so only because the letter already announced the violence. The red spot also activates the letter as a sign-for-text in that it mirrors exactly the letter's position in the painting: central yet decentered, a focal point around which all other details converge, yet a detail that can remain buried under the discipline of realistic reading. The spot is to the rest of the letter what the letter is to the rest of the painting, to Bathshebah's melancholic look, among other things: a symptom of "text."

By their insistent suggestion of meaning, the signs discussed here demand a coherence that is not, after all, substantiated by the work as a whole. In fact, the strangest thing about them is that by their very function of pointing at textuality, they denounce the lack of coherence, the lack of specific meaning within the painting. Thus they point at the irreducible gap between signifier and signified that Ferdinand de Saus-

sure insisted on, and that triggered Jacques Lacan's sharpest reworking of Saussure's semiotics.[17] Signs like these, signifying their suggestion of meaning and meaning's deceptiveness at the same time, cannot be recuperated under any of the more usual categories of the sign. They resemble most closely, while at the same time being most radically opposed to, the connotative signs in Bryson's terms, the signs for the real.

Signs for the Real

As Barthes originally conceived "the effect of the real," this effect is produced by elements that resist (narrative) meaning. Thus, it is tempting to consider as such all textual or visual "stuff" that is not indispensible for the production of the thematic or narrative meaning and likewise does not attract attention to the work of representation or the textual status of the painting. In literary theory, examples alleged to produce "the effect of the real" are invariably descriptive details, considered superfluous for the narrative. But the conflation of signs for the real and description seems to me unwarranted and confusing, symptomatic of a problem in narrative theory that stems from an unwarranted taxonomic tendency.[18]

This view is based on a privileging of events over other fabula elements and of fabula elements over representation. It holds only as long as we maintain this implicit hierarchy between events and other narrative elements.[19] That hierarchy is extremely tenacious as it is supported by the influence of early structuralism. But from another point of view, the conflation itself may be evidence of the effect of the

17. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (1959; New York, 1966), and Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore, 1968).

18. See Alexander Gelley's attempt to bring the analysis of description beyond the taxonomic dichotomy (Gelley, "Premises for a Theory of Description," *Narrative Crossings: Theory and Pragmatics of Prose Fiction* [Baltimore, 1987], pp. 3–34). Gelley tries to overcome the dichotomy by moving from description to space to fictional worlds without clearly delimiting the scope of these concepts. Arguably, he would have succeeded better had he assigned visuality a proper place.

19. For a critique of this hierarchy, see Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago, 1978), and Culler, "Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative," *The Pursuit of Signs*, pp. 169–87. Culler's position is based on Cynthia Chase, "The Decomposition of the Elephants: Double-Reading *Daniel Deronda*," *PMLA* 93 (Mar. 1978): 215–27, reprinted in her *Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition* (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 157–74, and Peter Brooks, "Fictions of the Wolf Man: Freud and Narrative Understanding," *Diacritics* 9 (Spring 1979): 72–81, reprinted in his *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York, 1984), pp. 264–85.

real: assuming, as alert readers of fiction, that the narrated events are fictitious, the need for a sense of a reality to place the events in makes us welcome description as explicitly reality-based, even if it is, as support for the imagination, precisely not. If that is the case, then we do have reasons after all to privilege description under the rubric of *signs* for the real, without, however, making that privilege exclusive.[20]

If I have delayed the discussion of the better-known effect of the real until after the introduction of the effect of text, I have done so to prevent the effect of the real from falling back into the status of "the rest," or of the lower half of a hierarchical dichotomy. Signs for the real should not be defined negatively, as what they are not, but positively, as what they are, or rather, as what they do. I would like to approach them not as a category like "description," which is too much contaminated by its opposition to narration to stand outside the hierarchy, but within narration.

In his seminal essay "Vraisemblance et motivation," Gérard Genette was discussing narrative motivation, not description, when he argued that the act of the heroine of Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves,* who told her husband about her love for another man, was in urgent need of "plausibilisation," of motivation needed to make it understandable. This need was grounded in the cultural attitudes and ideology of love and marriage. The need occurred because the act was culturally incongruous.[21] But this insistence on verisimilitude is tricky; too much of it undermines its effect and makes the work ostensively textual. Signs for the real must not be explicit *as* signs for the real, even though they may be explicit about something else. A convincing descriptive detail must not be explicit *as* description; an argument for verisimilitude may be explicit as an argument for the righteousness of a decision, but not for its verisimilitude. In Genette's examples, the signs for the real were not descriptive as opposed to narrative, but discursive and narrative at the same time; that combination, by diverting attention from the one in favor of the other, made them work. As a symptom that something strange is at stake with the element they synecdochically signify, signs for the real burden the reality-effect with a self-undermining rhetoric that points to the paradox of realism: realism as a device leads away from reality.

20. In my article "On Meanings and Descriptions," trans. Robert Corum, *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature* 6 (Fall 1981–Spring 1982): 100–148, I discuss the input of metaphor, metonymy, and other figural structures into description, a fact which in itself suffices to show the fictionality of even the most realistic description. I also argue there for the integration of description within the narrative, an argument I don't want to repeat here. A brief summary of this article may be found in Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative,* trans. Christine van Boheemen (Toronto, 1985), pp. 132–34.

21. See Genette, "Vraisemblance et motivation." See also Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif* (Paris, 1981), who discusses the motivation of description in realist narrative.

Textuality and—and Versus—Reality

The kind of signs at stake in the effect of the real signify the idea of reality, plausibility, naturalness, truthfulness, and Truth. One aspect of the truth-status of a work is the sense of wholeness. This is where signs for the real and signs for text seem to overlap. But in fact they are opposed. When brought about by signs for text, wholeness is seen as constructed; when brought about by signs for the real, wholeness is not even noticed but taken for granted. Everything that triggers awareness of the arbitrariness of the frame breaks the illusion of reality and truth. Read as signs for the real, textual details convey the idea of the real by effacing their own status as signs, while the signs for text emphasize that status.

But it is the reader who decides which effect the signs will produce. While the realist reading is often the more tempting, because it is a smooth, facile, reassuring one, the textual reading is more empowering. This is so because the sense of wholeness that remains implicit within the realist reading is more vulnerable to any sense of fracturation within the text, while the sense of textuality can accommodate such a sense even in realist terms, provided the reader is open to the fracturedness of reality.

This paradoxical state of affairs becomes understandable if we realize that Lacan's lesson is more widely relevant than in a limited psychoanalytic context: the basis and source of experience, thought, and feeling is the symbolic, not the real. For Lacan, what is real is not accessible and can be described only as being, but being without representation, description, or interpretation—without symbolization, that is.[22] Realism, as Elisabeth Bronfen defines it, describes the moments in a representational text that do not cover up the translation of the real into representation but show the real as fractured and emphasize that fractured state.[23] In this sense, realism becomes identical to textuality.

22. See Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris, 1966).

23. Bronfen analyzes a novella by Theodor Storm in an essay on realism, "Leichenhafte Bilder, Bilderhafte Leichen," in *Die Trauben des Zeuxis*, ed. Hans Körner (forthcoming). Her words are:

> Wenn das Reale—in Anlehnung an Lacans Typologie—nur bezeichnet werden kann als Sein minus Repräsentanz, Beschreibung oder Interpretation, wird der Begriff "Realismus" adäquat für jenen Moment in einem darstellenden Text, der nicht nur die notwendige Übersetzung des Realen ins Repräsentatorische aufdeckt, sondern das Reale nur in Bruchstücken zeigt, in jenen "Details", die das Scheitern und Stolpern jeglicher symbolisierender und imaginärer Versuche zu manifestieren suchen.
>
> When the real—to support Lacan's typology—can only be signified as being minus representation, description, or interpretation, then the concept of "Realism" becomes adequate [to describe] that moment in a representational text that not only discloses the necessary translation of the real into the representational, but shows the real in its very fragmented state in those "details" that attempt to manifest the

But this redefinition does not leave room for the *illusionary* realistic effect as it has been traditionally defined, hence, it precludes a serious critique of realism as an ideological, smoothing device the reader can but need not endorse. In other words, it tends to conflate the position of the author as the critical agent with that of the reader as the passive follower. Instead, but still following Bronfen, I suggest that we incorporate the old sense of realism as effect into the new one as the unmasking of that effect. Where the two are combined, we have a new, critical occurrence of realism. The combination occurs in the first place with the reader. It is she or he who decides not to take for granted the wholeness enhanced by the detail, but instead to open the detail to the subversion that makes it the dominant element rather than the whole. The realistic detail is then not conflated with the textual detail, which does not allow for the effect of the real. The two effects can either collaborate or work against each other, according to the activity of the viewer.

When we return to *Bathshebah's Bath,* for example, we notice the conflict that makes the letter stand out. Let us start, now, not with the letter but with the look. The readability of the woman's melancholic look, directed nowhere, requires psychological motivation. The need for motivation is produced by the lack of connection between her look and the old servant polishing her nails. Thus it is produced by textual wholeness infused with humanistic realism. When two figures are facing each other, we expect them to look at each other, to be involved somehow with each other.

The composition of the painting emphasizes this expectation by drawing a straight diagonal line from the heroine's head to the servant's head, underlined by a lower diagonal formed by Bathshebah's arm and leg, with the letter in the middle. But instead of communicating with each other, the two women here are each preoccupied with something else. The intensity of their preoccupation is mutually emphasized. The veiled old woman, humbly sitting at the heroine's feet, looks intensely on the object of her care. Her hand displays the tension we have come to know as a sign of "work." The tension is an example of a double sign for realism and textuality. The pressure of the hand refers at first sight to the "real" work of caring, but it slightly overdoes the effect, thereby referring back to itself as a sign for the real. Realistically speaking, the intense pressure the servant applies could not but hurt the toes, and Bathshebah would be distracted from her self-absorption.

Bathshebah, similarly, breaks the expectations of the narrative mode of reading by denying the sequence of events. She is staring so

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breaking down and the failure of any attempts at symbolizing and imagining. [My translation]

intensely that she is emphatically not about to act. Visually, her position as much as forces her to direct her gaze toward the elderly woman, but she is instead intensely engaged in staring vacantly. Her vacant stare breaks the line of sight, and the letter is the locus of its breach. If the letter were not there, the painting's line of sight would make almost no sense at all. The staring is the sign that produces the sense of need for the letter.

But this is a reversal of the function of the letter as I have discussed it previously. If it is the deviant inward look of the woman that gives the letter its function, we are far removed from the letter's power to turn the look into "text." And that is exactly what the sign for the real does. Its own status as sign, as rival of the letter, disappears behind its meaning, the psychological motivation for an act—staring—which is culturally considered odd, or meaningful. This is the ideal sign for the real: powerful and overwhelming, it asserts itself, against all odds, without being necessarily noticed as such. The fact that the reference to, and the subsequent recognition of, 2 Sam. 11 contradicts this motivation, that the letter stands out as a sign more clearly than does the look precisely because the letter is less easy to explain, and that the sign-status of the letter is emphasized by the red spot that mirrors it is all swept aside, suppressed, by the interpretation of the inward look as melancholic.

Visual Signs and Verbal Images: The Instance of the Letter

The problems raised by the tensions between the two modes of reading at stake in this paper are intimately related to the ideological consequences of the disciplining of the eye: to the cultural attitudes toward the verbal and visual media, to the fact that these are seen as media rather than as modes of reading. I will now consider these tensions between signs for textuality and signs for the real in direct relation to the interaction between the verbal and visual arts. What I have so far not made a central concern is the fact that the troublesome sign in *Bathshebah's Bath* is a letter, not just any sort of sign but a text, and that it is thereby a self-reflexive sign for textual coherence; but it is also a verbal text, visually representing "verbality." This is a tension between the letter as sign-for-text recuperating the look for its cause, and the look as sign for the real recuperating the letter for its effacement. This tension becomes more fascinating when, and only when, the viewer knows 2 Sam. 11 *as a text,* not as a doxa; in other words, and if I am allowed a pun on a Lacanian punning title, the instance of the letter triggers the contradictory effect.[24] That is, the opposing signs lead us to

24. We may want to elaborate on Lacan's title: "L'Instance de la lettre." Let me just evoke three of the many associations generated by the word *instance:* "example," in straight English; "agent," in reversed "Franglais," for example, as a translation of the

pre-textual reading. This is a special kind of iconography, since the icon is thoroughly verbal, but in its verbality, thoroughly visual.

Whether or not it passes through an iconographic tradition that makes the letter a more iconographic sign in the standard sense, an attempt to bring the actual pre-text in while eliminating the imposition of its diffuse readings—its connotations in Barthes's sense, its doxic version—is rewarding for a *visual* assessment of the work. The instance of the letter is the shifter, the little detail that hooks us and imposes the text alluded to, lets that text spread out and take over.[25]

In the first place, the text is as troublesome as the painting; it, too, has a detail that doesn't fit. The tension there is elaborated between a text—the letter from David containing Uriah's death sentence, which the victim himself carries to the executioner—and a verbal but quite visual image. This image is the metaphor of the millstone found in verse 21 of 2 Sam. 11: "Who killed Abimelech, son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman cast down a millstone from the wall of Thebez and kill him?" This metaphor compares Uriah's death with the death of Abimelech. The metaphor does not make sense in any "logical" way—in terms of the fabula as a sequence of events, that is—and it thereby symptomatically insists on the text as *other* than a story. The image deserves special attention precisely because it is so starkly and, indeed, so disquietingly visual. Finally, it is an ideologically troublesome image. Displacing the issues raised in the text in which a rapist needs to cover up first his rape, then the subsequent murder, this metaphor attempts to pass as self-evidently true a negative judgment on the woman in the story that no detail in the text supports. This metaphor suggests that Bathshebah has provoked her own rape, that she is the real culprit, that the murder is due to her sheer existence. The image is a symptom of the narrator's hidden agenda, and subsequent doxic versions of the story provide evidence of the detail's success. In an attempt to expose the workings of the doxa and its basis in an ideology of verbal and visual media, I will elaborate the detail in the text as much as the detail in the painting, expecting that the strangeness of the textual detail will help illuminate the detail in the painting, and vice versa. The relation between the painting and its out-of-place letter and the text and its out-of-place image is emphasized by the coincidence of *the place of the letter* in the two works. Indeed, that place is as conspicuous and thereby as invisible as that of the letter purloined in Edgar Allan Poe's famous story.[26]

French "les instances du récit"; "insistence," as a filling and enhancement of a graphic gap.

25. The term *dissemination* comes to mind. But that term has problems of gender and semiotics as well. See my *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word–Image Opposition* (New York, forthcoming).

26. When speaking about the place of a letter and the displacements it can produce, I cannot help thinking of the debate, comparable in passion and intellectual

As a metaphor, or allegory, of literality, the letter must be given full weight. Visually speaking—in terms of distribution of space to be seen—the letter is both the visual center of the painting and the textual center of the story. In the story, the letter holding Uriah's death sentence literally occupies the middle verse of the chapter, both numerically in terms of the number of verses and globally in terms of space occupied by the verses. Mitchell distinguishes four levels of spatial form in literature relevant for this example: the material form of the text, the represented space, the form in the structural sense, and the meaning that we "see" before our mind's eye when we understand a text.[27] These levels are exchangeable between verbal and visual art without any metaphorical distortion.

The letter also occupies a middle position in the represented space, since the text is divided between events taking place in the palace in Jerusalem and events taking place at the battlefront. As the letter is being transferred between these two spaces, it stands between them, and rather than connecting, it separates them. The letter is also structurally central and mediating because in terms of the aspects of narrative, it represents an intermediate position.

The letter occupies an ambiguous intermediate position between narrative voice and directly quoted, spoken discourse as it is spoken but not directly quoted. David, the "speaker" of the letter, needs the messenger-victim in order to reach his addressee. The event of which the letter is the center, its transmission from one place to another, is the only moment in the story where focalization is excluded. Uriah holds the letter, but does not read it; failing to connect visuality with textuality by reading, he will die. The letter comes to stand as an emblem of the painted letter: it can be seen but not read; it functions in the visual mode but not in the verbal mode. The letter, then, is an *image:* a visual sign autonomous enough to work as a sign, yet embedded in a framework in which it both supports and is supported. In terms of action, the letter stands between private violence (rape) and its concealment, and public violence (murder) and its concealment, as a brief moment of suspension. As a central event, the letter is also an emblem of a specific view of storytelling: a story that tells itself, that happens as it unfolds. From this succinct account it appears clearly that the central position of the letter in the painting can be seen as an acute visual reference to the spatial position of the letter in the text.

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quality, on "The Purloined Letter," the one leading from Lacan, via Derrida, to Barbara Johnson and beyond, around this short story. The pieces of the debate have recently been published as a collection, *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading,* ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore, 1988).

27. Mitchell, "Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory," in *The Language of Images,* ed. Mitchell (Chicago, 1980), pp. 282–86.

In 2 Sam. 11 the letter kills. This murderous quality is both obvious and invisible, as the text surrounding it employs all possible means to conceal it. The major devices of concealment are twofold: the breaches of narrative logic and the use of metaphor as symptom that becomes allegory. The content of the letter does not correspond to the events that fulfill its orders; instead of killing Uriah alone, the letter kills many soldiers. Thus the story line is problematized. The metaphor, on the other hand, poeticizes the story further. By its form it underscores a textual mode other than narrative. This metaphor thus becomes the alien element, the *allos*, that operates the reversal of the story's meaning. Its effect is comparable to that of Bathshebah's melancholic look in the painting: both can be taken either to smoothly explain away or to troublesomely enhance the strangeness of the letter.

The comparison in 2 Sam. 11:21 ("Who killed Abimelech, son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman cast down a millstone from the wall of Thebez and kill him?") juxtaposes, in an exasperatingly complex structure of embedding that in turn foregrounds its own fictionality, the victim Uriah, who has been killed by David's letter, and the tyrant Abimelech, who was deservedly killed by a heroic woman. The comparison is displaced, since Bathshebah, the woman in the story, is the victim: she is raped, she loses her husband in the aftermath of the struggle between the two men for her possession, and she will lose the child born of the rape. Uriah is a victim, too, since he loses both his wife and his life. Abimelech, in contrast, is a king, but a false one, a tyrant who usurped power to which he was not entitled. That the metaphor is both strongly motivated and at the same time absurdly unmotivated produces a sense of displacement. It is overdetermined thematically, since between the two murders there are at least six common motifs: death, woman, wall, battle, shame, folly. All six motifs connect the metaphor to the letter as well: it conveys a sentence of death because of a woman; a death is arranged to take place at a wall and in battle; the letter's carrier brings shame on himself by being foolish enough to be honest. On the other hand, the metaphor is unmotivated narratively, since these motifs do not relate the metaphor's vehicle, the woman with the millstone of Judg. 9:53–54, the killer, to its tenor, Bathshebah, the victim; instead it relates the ashamed and foolish victim of Judg. 9:53–54 to David. The displacement is so emphatic that it is both difficult and urgent to make sense of it. We can do so if we allow ourselves to read the patriarchal text as possessing, hidden in its symptomatically confused detail, a critical, maybe self-critical, potential.

The visuality of the image invoked in 2 Sam. 11:21 can help sort out these confusing aspects. The comparison is highly visual even in its own pre-textual reference: the impressive pre-textual image of Judg. 9:51, evoked "iconographically," of a woman standing high on top of the threatened tower of defense, dropping her weapon—a millstone,

instrument of her peaceful work, displaced in the situation of war—on the head of the usurper. The image is also highly gendered. In the Judges passage, the fallen tyrant is so ashamed of being killed by a woman that he orders his armor-bearer to kill him quickly so that no one will be able to say that he was killed by a woman. In retrospect, then, it is tempting to read into the visuality of the image the geography of the female body, and its intimidating impression on the scared male: the towering woman, threateningly impressive in the eyes of the bluffing tyrant who is approaching her entrance too closely. This visualization of the female body can be argued to inform the comparison in 2 Sam. 11, which in turn informs Rembrandt's painting. More generally, this visualization of the female body as threatening to men may be connected to Freud's construction of femininity as castration anxiety based on a failed act of looking.[28] In fact, bluff is exactly what General Joab, the frightened man who comes up with this image, anticipates David will reproach him for.

The function of the metaphor, with all its distortions and irrelevancies, is to displace the guilt for the violent event from the king onto his victim. The metaphor, rather than Uriah, carries the letter over, shifting the story from literal into figurative, allegorical reading. And true enough, the issue that motivated the entire story is, indeed, the power of the female—a power that brought about the moral fall of Israel's king of kings, a power that only the most absolute, tyrannical power of the male can supersede. And what is that power? Nothing else but the visual power of her body, its to-be-seenness.

David's misbehavior, although acknowledged on one level of the text, is excused and explained on another as being beyond his individual free will. Seeing Bathshebah naked, David the voyeur *must* have her, regardless of the price he has to pay: his moral integrity, his best soldiers, and later, the life of his son. The metaphor drives home the "truth": that readers have the reassuring option to salvage the reputation of the king and to blame both vision and the woman, an option readers in the modern West eagerly adopt.[29] The *image* of Bathshebah brought the king down.

28. Among the many acute feminist critiques of the Freudian construction of women, Jacqueline Rose's essay, "Sexuality in the Field of Vision," *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London, 1986), pp. 225–33, argues precisely this: that such a view of femininity is not medium-neutral; that it promotes a continuous attempt to "master" visually the problematic femininity generated by a visual mishap.

29. This is precisely how doxic knowledge works. To be sure, scholarly readers do their utmost to side with the righteous, and no one in his or her right mind will argue that David is innocent, Bathshebah guilty. But what they do argue is that David's guilt is (1) individual weakness; (2) part of God's plan to humiliate the mighty; (3) modified by Bathshebah's self-exposure. Bathshebah, in turn, is excused (1) by reference to the cleaning ritual after menstruation; (2) by reference to the architecture in the ancient Middle East. To the latter excuses one may wish to object that no excuse is needed for a rape victim,

This text is not just a defense of voyeurism and the ensuing rape, although on one level of reading it comes close to that, exactly as the painting does. When read at face value, as is mostly done by critics who fall into the trap of its metaphoric motivation, the image stands for the woman's responsibility in the event.[30]

The difficulty of disentangling the figure's structure makes it attractive to pass on and ignore its status as sign. Thus conceived, the comparison functions as a sign for the real, but the "real" in question has a specific gender ideology. In order to step outside of this ideology, we must reverse the perspective and look at the image *as sign;* we must take it *at the letter.*

The image signifies displacement and in that respect resembles the spot on the letter in the painting. Displaced from the center while representing a central concern, and displacing the guilt of the violence from perpetrator to victim, the displaced image not only displaces, but also draws attention to the act of displacement. The complexity of the image's own structure, which counters any attempt to disentangle it by narrative logic, refers back to the letter, which made it possible for the event to happen and for this response to the event to be imagined. The comparison in 2 Sam. 11:21 was produced by the letter carried over, in the middle of the text, from one side of the represented space to the other. In other words, the letter also stood for displacement, for transition, for reversal. As the figural crux of the text, the letter engendered all subsequent textual figurations. The comparison of verse 21 owes its possibility for existence to the letter. And the letter, itself such a central figuration of the narrative text, is a sign for "text," rather than for the "real" that text might also evoke. This is not so because the letter itself happens to be a representation of a text but because, as an image, it structures the set of signs around it into "text." The sophistication of the letter's central position draws attention to the sophistication of the comparison it produces, and whose apparent confusion may be very significant. Less than real, its meaning is ideological, and its means, textual.

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and to the former that the very impulse to qualify the act partakes of a distancing effort typical of a culture that positions men as already problematically entangled in their view of femininity.

30. In *Lethal Love,* pp. 16–28, I have analyzed in detail two critical responses to this metaphor, one (Menakhem Perry and Meir Sternberg, "The King through Ironic Eyes: The Narrator's Devices in the Biblical Story of David and Bathshebah and Two Excurses on the Theory of Narrative Text" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* [1968]: 263–92) entirely falling into the trap and eagerly buying into a superficial sexist interpretation, another (J. P. Fokkelman, *King David,* vol. 1 of *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses* [Assen, 1981]) more subtle and technically "correct," yet, after carefully mapping out the complex structure, unwilling to interpret its very complexity along with its overt meanings. As a result, even this careful

Reading Distortion

If we now return to the letter Bathshebah is holding in the painting, and the little red spot on its corner, we discover that it, too, points to another detail: the painting has its own "verse 21"—a detail that doesn't fit, a distortion of structure, a voyeuristic tendency, and a geography of the female body. For those who have eyes to see, and are willing to read with the text rather than the doxa, and with the detail rather than the "official story," the painting holds a surprise.

Bathshebah's body must be the final location of our look. The painting is, after all, on one level just a female nude, as beautiful and attractive as Rembrandt's *Danae* (1636) and as intriguingly strange.[31] If we look at the body, without taking for granted that it is just that, a female body presented for our delectation, we notice that the body is twisted. It is only a slight twist, hardly perceptible: textuality is almost, but not quite, overruled by realism. The twist has the same function as the metaphor in 2 Sam. 11: it allows us to endorse the ideology of voyeurism and, siding with David, to blame the exposed woman. The legs are crossed, and their crossing, pointed at by the letter that partly covers them, is the locus of the distortion. It is there that narrative and ideology, and textuality and realism, collide and collude.

Realistically/narratively speaking, the legs are crossed so that the servant/procuress can fulfill her duty and prepare the woman for royal rape. At the same time, the body is turned toward the viewer who stands in for the king as the voyeur whose act of vision prepares *him* for the rape. But the distortion comes to preclude this smooth appropria-

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critic misses the point of the sign for the real, the image's self-effacement. Compared to the *Las Meninas* discussion, the first of these interpretations would be comparable to Michel Foucault's and John R. Searle's "naive" (read nontechnical) assumption about perspective, and the second to Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen's more sophisticated mapping of the "real" perspective. See Foucault, "Las Meninas," *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences,* trans. pub. (New York, 1973), pp. 3–16; Searle, "*Las Meninas* and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 6 (Spring 1980): 477–88; and Snyder and Cohen, "Reflexions on *Las Meninas:* Paradox Lost," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1980): 429–47. Both, however, miss the point that Leo Steinberg highlights, which incorporates the passion for technical righteousness (Steinberg, "Velázquez' *Las Meninas,*" *October* 19 [Winter 1981]: 45–54). See my *Reading "Rembrandt"* for an analysis of this debate.

31. Here is one sample comment typical of the dominant cultural attitude. Kenneth Clark writes in *Feminine Beauty,* a book that as an endeavor exemplifies the kind of complicity between realism and gendered aesthetics I am criticizing in this paper: "And yet when Rembrandt depicts the emotion shining through Bathsheba's face . . . as she ponders over King David's letter he achieves a kind of beauty which is dependent on inner life and not on physical form" (Clark, *Feminine Beauty* [New York, 1980], p. 23). Note that (1) the letter is unproblematically identified as David's summon; (2) the nature of the emotion is not specified; (3) beauty as the primary aim of the work is taken for granted, which then makes it easy to subordinate all other aspects.

tion. If coherent and unproblematic voyeurism was the point, it would have been much more convenient for the figure's legs to have been crossed the other way. Although the right leg is crossed over the left leg, the right foot remains at the right side of the knees. Had the figure crossed her legs the other way, no twisting would have been necessary. But then the body would have been turned much less toward the viewer. What such a realistic representation would have enhanced is precisely the body as whole. So the twisting seems to be the point, and we can read that twist as the shift from realism to textual self-consciousness.

Indeed, this reading becomes quite plausible in the face of the letter. First, in the middle of the diagonal line leading from Bathshebah's melancholic look to her foot in the servant's hand, there is a text: a letter. Second, the line from Bathshebah to the servant only emphasizes the fact that she does not *look* where her eyes are directed. Her inward look goes nowhere, rigidified as it is in melancholy. Is she already mourning her murdered husband? Or her appropriated body? Or her not-yet-conceived son? That in itself is a highly self-conscious textual construction, for she is only being prepared for the act whose success will *then* lead to the murder of Uriah and the death of the offspring. Both her melancholy and the letter are radically out of place as well as absolutely central.

Even today, readers continue to eagerly adopt the notion that since the biblical text lets the murderer blame the victim by metaphorization, she *must* have provoked the event. Thus, for example, they retrospectively accuse Bathshebah of exhibitionism rather than David of voyeurism.[32] But the painting's textuality disturbs such an illusion. This is why the body has to be twisted and the legs crossed in a less-than-handy way: to expose the geography of the female body as well as the act of exposure itself. At the center of the painting is the letter; at the center of the body is the navel. The navel, the center of the body, had to be displayed so that the viewer could collude with David's voyeurism, but the display itself, its artificiality, had to be emphasized.

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32. I have on several occasions asked an audience how they remembered this story. Invariably, at least one member of the audience will say, "Isn't that the story of the woman who exposed herself to David?" As I have argued in *Lethal Love,* pp. 26–28, the scholars who do their best to read carefully tend to have an apologetic impulse in mind, which betrays the same doxic background, even if they then set out to be fair and read "correctly." Thus Perry and Sternberg start their entire analysis in "The King through Ironic Eyes" from the question: does Uriah know his wife has been unfaithful? The relevance of the question goes without saying only if (1) Bathshebah is assumed to be willingly complicit; and (2) "unfaithfulness" is an issue in the text. I hold that it isn't. In addition, the "excuses" for Bathshebah they give in note 29 are only understandable within the context of Jewish rituals and archeological knowledge, which are, of course, the first elements to disappear in a cross-cultural appropriation of the text. Neither Rembrandt nor the viewers of his works at large can be expected to hold onto these backgrounds.

The twist foregrounds textuality, constructedness, contradiction. The woman's navel is not the navel of the text. The letter—a text evoking a text in order to distort it—and in the corner of the letter, the little red spot, is the trace of a genesis void of meaning and diffusing meanings throughout the text. Could the red spot be explained as the letter's seal? Sure, if you like. But then, it is displaced in its turn, from the middle, where seals tend to be applied, to the corner; it is marginalized. And then, too, it is void in its turn, for what the secret seals are meant to warrant is unveiled—the letter is open, the hymen broken. If we assume that the spot denotes blood, announcing the bloody events the sealed letter is meant to bring forth, then the fact that the wrong figure is holding it calls into question the effectiveness of the seal, of the letter, of the text. In other words, the little spot points at a confusion similar to, and thereby denouncing, the one in the text and those persistent readings it has triggered. The confusion pervades the image, infecting the delectable body and its navel, for the sake of whose exhibition the entire body had to be twisted—so that we realize the difference between a realistic navel as a center for erotic viewing and a textual navel as a diffusing and confusing void center—a trace or *grammè* of the image's genesis in pre-textuality.

Conclusion

In conjunction with this very literary reading of the literary pre-text, what can we conclude about the painting's signs and the modes of reading they encourage? The two readings of the letter as sign for text and the look as sign for the real are mutually exclusive, incompatible yet competing because they each recuperate the other sign within their reach. The simultaneous occurrence of both sign-events is impossible, yet both interpretations are possible. In other words, another commonplace about the distinction between visual and verbal art has to be sacrificed in this game: the notion that verbal works are processed sequentially in time, while visual art can be viewed in a single moment. The viewer who wishes to reflect on both possibilities of interpretation needs to shift from one mode to the other alternatively. So does the reader who wishes to account for both the realistic-ideological appeal of the metaphor in 2 Sam. 11 and for the textual effect of the letter, which undermines that appeal. Both readings are nonsequential and non-simultaneous.

The incompatibility and the irreducible gap between the readings turns the entire painting almost into a visual pun, a case of the rabbit-or-duck drawing. Is this a text or a scene, a narrative or a display, a painting or a woman? It cannot be both at the same time. The power of signs for the real is located in this exclusivity. Thus we must conclude

that signs, indeed, are events, and that we, the viewers, are the subjects who bring about these events. We choose between the rabbit and the duck, the text and the woman. And we have the possibility of choosing both, although not within the same event of reading. That choice undoes the disciplining of the eye; it liberates our cultural practices from the constraints of the binary oppositions with which I began this paper.

There is no reason to argue that signs for the real are more descriptive, more visual, less narrative, than other kinds of signs. They participate in the narrative, descriptively or otherwise, and they are visual or verbal according to the work and the issue in which they function. If they tend to overwhelm other signs, it is because of the cultural habits with which we approach the works, not because of an inherently powerful realism. It depends on us, the viewers, whether we want to interpret the doubling of the end of Bathshebah's left braid as a shadow of the braid or as a painterly trace, as a thing that effaces the work of representation or as a symptom that displays it.

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