



## *Rembrandt's Roughness*, by Nicola Suthor

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2. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966); N. Munn, *The Fame of Gawa: The Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge, 1978).

NICOLA SUTHOR

*Rembrandt's Roughness*

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Scholarship about the art of the Dutch golden age has long been characterized by seemingly insurmountable rifts. From the 1960s on, the iconological approach, which discerned hidden meaning even in simple still lifes and landscapes on the basis of emblem books, was pitted against skeptics who felt that the “reading” of Dutch paintings as texts did not do justice to their visual qualities. Whereas this debate has subsided in recent years, another, deeper fault line has opened: between historical scholarship—preferring to look at art through the eyes of its original public, using archival documents, painting treatises, and epigrams to reconstruct artist’s categories—and those who prefer a more holistic view that also involves recent literature, including philosophy, aesthetics, and literary theory. Although most art historians remain averse to anachronism, notable names in the other camp include Mieke Bal (*Reading Rembrandt*, 1991), Hanneke Grootenboer (*The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 2005), and Benjamin Binstock (*Vermeer’s Family Secrets*, 2009).<sup>1</sup> All three would probably subscribe to the approach of “cultural analysis” and defend its anachronistic elements, since these make it possible to acknowledge how one’s own position as a researcher is shaped by the social and cultural present. The present, judging from these three authors, follows French-oriented Continental philosophy (Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) rather than analytic philosophy or the Frankfurt school.

The latest branch on this cultural-analytic tree is Nicola Suthor’s *Rembrandt’s Roughness*, a very ambitious book that analyzes Rembrandt’s main works with the help of the aforementioned Frenchmen and also Maurice Blanchot, Jean Genet, Louis Marin, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Paul Valéry. To their lot, the author—who was trained in Germany—adds early twentieth-century Protestant art historians such as Werner Weisbach and Carl Neumann, the Neo-Kantian sociologist Georg Simmel (author of *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, 1916), and, most important, the founding

father of philosophical phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. From the latter, the book under review takes the concepts of the “phenomenal” and “intentionality” as its main addition to the state of research in Dutch art.

Husserl’s *Phantasy and Image-Consciousness* (1904–5) highlighted the division between the concrete artwork and what it refers to: he identified this as the “physical image” versus the “image subject” (or signifier versus signified). In between these two is a third category: the “image object,” namely, the image as it is perceived by the viewer—as it appears, filtered through the senses, in the mind’s eye.<sup>2</sup> According to Husserl, the material properties of the physical image determine the conditions for the “image object” as it “makes its appearance to us on the basis of color sensations, form sensations, and so forth” (p. 196). This theory basically corresponds to the ancient practice of ekphrasis, which is not the description of an artwork but rather of the person or situation that the artwork refers to. In short: an ekphrasis of a bust of Homer does not describe a carved piece of stone but rather dwells in synesthetic fashion on the appearance and character of the ancient poet. The image of Homer that is evoked before the mind’s eye is thus by no means identical to the sculpture but, in terms of the available range of associations, it is surely connected to the work’s formal qualities, such as the warm tone of the marble or the bust’s facial expression.

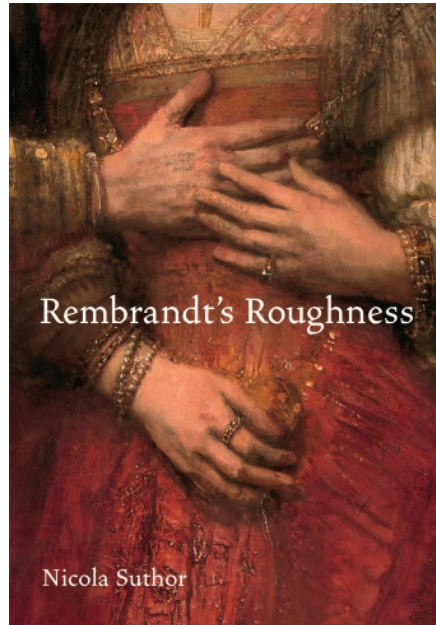
*Rembrandt’s Roughness* contends that Husserl’s differentiation provides a key to interpret the motivation and meaning for Rembrandt’s idiosyncratic brushwork, memorably characterized by Simon Schama as “daubing, dragging, twisting, dabbing, drizzling, coating, sloshing wet-into-wet, kneading, scraping, building into monumental constructions of pigment that had the mass and worked density of sculpture.”<sup>3</sup> Earlier scholars have explored Rembrandt’s “rough manner” as understood by his contemporaries, via historical concepts such as grace and irony, *sprezzatura*, *non finito*, *facilitas*, *obscuritas*, and *brevitas*.<sup>4</sup> This book, by contrast, focuses on phenomenology, and makes three basic assumptions: (1) Rembrandt’s rough manner of painting calls attention to the fundamental difference between the materiality of the artwork and the mental image it evokes; (2) the unfinished quality of some

of Rembrandt's works demonstrates that this was no accident but the painter's intention; (3) the rough elements of Rembrandt's facture can be interpreted as meaningful components of the work's iconography. These claims merit a closer look.

As to the first assumption, "the most dazzling feature of Rembrandt's art" is that the peculiarities of his rough manner expose the "inner conflict" between the "image object" and the "physical image" (p. 196). In other words, his roughness is intended not only to contribute to the illusion of spatiality and lifelikeness but also to call attention to the physicality of oil painting: this is the "phenomenal efficiency" of his art. In art history this is, in fact, not an entirely new idea. In 1604, Karel van Mander admired Titian's brushwork precisely because it could be appreciated from two complementary perspectives: "Lastly [Titian] made his things with bold brushstrokes and patches, so that they were imperfect from nearby, but were highly effective seen from afar." This playful oscillation between materiality and illusionism expressed the master's consummate virtuosity.<sup>5</sup> One of Rembrandt's early critics, Arnold Houbraken, saw Rembrandt working along similar lines in order to emulate the great Italians.<sup>6</sup> Although Suthor ignores Titian and his reputation as a legitimization for Rembrandt's roughness, elsewhere she takes care to balance her references to twentieth-century philosophy with statements from seventeenth-century art theory.

According to phenomenology, perception, like other mental and emotional states, is characterized by intentionality: it is always directed toward the objects of perception. In other words, whereas in the Cartesian view the thinking subject remains separated from the world of objects, phenomenology posits that consciousness is always the consciousness *of* something. It is Suthor's second assumption that Rembrandt recognized this fundamental aspect of perception. He expected the viewer to complete the image mentally and thus to become co-responsible for the artistic experience. Rather than giving his works a mirrorlike smoothness, Rembrandt therefore left them partly unfinished: "Less precision is . . . more precise because it engages the imagination of the beholder: our experience of how things appear in life and in art will fill in the gap"

(p. 197). Seventeenth-century art theory, which was strongly influenced by the ancient practice of ekphrasis, confirms this idea. Suthor could have alluded to Franciscus Junius's preference for leaving an outline incomplete: when viewers can "understand it with the mind, rather than distinguish it with the eyes," they become more closely involved with the artistic illusion.<sup>7</sup> What is more, human vision does not see everything with the same sharpness: it focuses on points that attract the attention. Thus,



in Rembrandt's early work, Suthor states, "the painterly texture is an interweave of focused and unfocused passages producing a heightened sensory impact on the beholder" (p. 197), and she quotes Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten: just "as one recognizes his friend from far away, or meets him by dim light, later [*sic*] seeing and comprehending his form with understanding, so a rough sketch often gives a similarly strong impression to the connoisseur that there is more to be seen than is actually developed in the sketch" (p. 65).<sup>8</sup>

Suthor concludes that not finishing his works was Rembrandt's intention, quoting the well-known statement (attributed to Rembrandt by Arnold Houbraken) that "a work is ready once the artist's intention is realized" (p. 185). It would go too far to conclude from this quote that Rembrandt had any insight into philosophical intentionality or into the phenomenology of perception. Rather, he may have grasped, through his

experimenting with the illusionistic rendition of the visible world, basic notions from the *psychology* of perception—the painterly tricks that deceive the eye (such as our tendency to fill in blanks in an image). Yet Suthor adduces pertinent statements by Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza to illustrate that the philosophical concept of intentionality was not alien to Rembrandt's scholarly contemporaries. Even his fellow painter Joachim von Sandrart called on the viewer not to judge a painting at first glance but to take time to understand the artist's intentions and consider the image conjured up in the mind's eye: "Often the best and most splendid paintings initially displease our eyes, until we reach the *intento* [*sic*] and purpose of the artist. For this reason, we should allow paintings to trickle in our mind and comprehension slowly" (p. 30).

Suthor's third assumption, and most radical idea (as it does not correspond to notions from seventeenth-century art theory) is that the "rough" elements that are not directly representational—the "zones of mimetic uncertainty," which she also calls the "phenomenal" aspects of Rembrandt's art—can be just as meaningful as the representational elements. Holes in the paint crust, exposed underlayers, dark patches of cast shadow, scribbles, and thick impasto can contribute to the work's iconography. (Although Suthor does not mention iconography directly, her terms "meaning" and "significance" can hardly be understood otherwise; as she might put it, in Rembrandt's work, sometimes the material qualities of the "physical image" correspond to the "image subject").

*Rembrandt's Roughness* is at its best when it lovingly describes these instances of "mimetic uncertainty" in Rembrandt's work and carefully weaves them into existing discussions of the art's iconography. Thus, the volume singles out cast shadows (in *The Night Watch*, *The Portrait of Jan Cornelis Sylvius*, and *The Hundred Guilder Print*, chapter 2); the visible ground layer (in *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deyman*, chapter 3); direct and reflected light (in *Moses with the Tablets of the Law*, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, and *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, chapter 4); and the color red (in *The Jewish Bride*, chapter 5). This book

certainly made me look with new eyes at some of the best-known paintings and prints of the Dutch golden age. As I find myself clearly among that group of art historians who remain averse to anachronism, however, I also feel obliged to identify pitfalls of the approach.

The first is that introducing modern philosophy in the effort to better define the researcher's own position may be commendable, but it involves the obvious risk of writing Whig history: seeing the past as oriented toward the present. *Rembrandt's Roughness* does not escape this fallacy and firmly places the master on a teleological line toward modernity as someone who made fundamentally "abstract" images, in the words of Genet. Thus, the artist is presented as idiosyncratic even when he was not: when Rembrandt "render[ed] the skin in several layers of paint [and took] into account a penetration of the viewer's sight to the underlying stratum in order to interweave warm and cold flesh tones" (p. 191), he followed the common procedure for painters in the Netherlands working in oil since Jan van Eyck. The analysis becomes even more equivocal when supposedly "abstract" qualities of Rembrandt's paintings are identified on the basis of their current appearance, without taking account of stages in the working process and the subsequent changes in condition. In this regard, the book would have profited from acknowledging some findings of the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP). The sketchy appearance of the cap, palette, and brushes in Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* at Kenwood House, London—which hampers the illusion of spatiality since the master's brushes seem to recede rather than protrude—were identified by the RRP as unfinished; yet for Suthor, the "subtle obfuscation of the hand's naturalistic representation" confirms that it is a "figment" without "any element of reality," signaling ultimately that, in this painting, Rembrandt was pondering "the question of whether suicide is possible" (p. 193).

Typically, Suthor's analysis consists of a complex train of thought sparked by a minute detail of an artwork. The results are likely to be too tenuous for some readers who, to begin with, may not share the author's visual observation of this detail. For example, in her analysis of Rembrandt's painting (now

in Boston) of a man standing in front of an easel, Suthor zooms in on the white stroke that outlines the edge of the depicted canvas. She suggests that this line, which "curves just slightly inward and has thus been executed freehand, in contrast to the canvas's other less profiled edges," is a reference to the famous contest between Apelles and Protogenes as to who could draw the subtlest line (p. 188). The statement is unclear (which direction is "inward"?) and does not take cognizance of the basic procedure of painting: Rembrandt worked from back to front, and from darker to lighter passages, so he would always have painted first the shaded darker ends of this rectangle, and added last the edge that is illuminated and closest to the viewer. This explains why the line is firmly on top of the paint surface. It is hard to imagine Rembrandt using a ruler for the three darker edges of the rectangle, then suddenly dropping it and dashing out the last line in a bout of creative frenzy. It seems clear to me he would have executed this entire work—which is easy to handle at 9 $\frac{7}{8}$  by 12 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches (25 by 32 centimeters)—without the use of a ruler or compass. Not taking such practical matters into account can lead to the idea that the illuminated edge of the panel becomes a "freestanding, self-sufficient form that has a function beyond its representation" (p. 188). But for Suthor, this is just the beginning of the more lofty contemplation of how Rembrandt's bright line materializes a "moment of fascination," as featured in Maurice Blanchot's essay "The Essential Solitude" (1955). Blanchot describes how "the gaze coagulates into light, where light is the absolute gleam of an eye one doesn't see but which one doesn't cease to see since it is the mirror image of one's own look."<sup>9</sup> Suthor concludes:

In Rembrandt's work, we find this moment of fascination materialized, drawing the viewer into its nonreality that is external to the fiction of the depicted scene. The white line runs through the fictitious interior space and discretely crosses, or cancels, it out. . . . We can read the white edge as a delineation of the deeply impersonal, behind which the painter retreats in order to then enter the wide-open space of creative potential. (pp. 188–89)

This is difficult to grasp other than as a poetic rumination similar to Marcel Proust's existential meditation on a small yellow patch in Vermeer's *View of Delft* (in *In Search of Lost Time*). And whereas such ruminations inspired by painterly details have been defended as a legitimate approach by Mieke Bal and Hanneke Grootenboer, what sets Suthor's approach apart from theirs is her assertive claim that she understands Rembrandt in terms of his own *intentions* and that she is reconstructing the "language of the painter" (p. 195), rather than coming to the conclusion that this "reading" of artworks as philosophical "texts" produces an analysis that is *separate* from what the artist intended. The above-quoted passage brings us, finally, to the language in *Rembrandt's Roughness*.

In a work of such grand theoretical and analytic ambition, which incorporates a modern vocabulary that was alien to Rembrandt in the understanding of his work, the terminology should be all the more clear and consistent. Yet the opposite is the case in this book. Common art historical terms are used vaguely (on the very first page: how are "medium" and "material" different?) and artworks are ascribed "subliminal" or "magic" effects without an explanation (p. 110: is the reference to seventeenth-century magic or the twenty-first-century kind?). Even the terms "meaning" and "significance" lose clarity throughout the argument. Often it seems that interpretative meaning is conflated with sensuous experience; stating that formal qualities have "agency" or induce "inner evidence in the viewer" muddles this situation even further (pp. 27, 24). Light and shadow thus have a "semantic effect" (pp. 35, 54): "paint and the way it is applied flow in to the semantic structure of the artwork, thereby autonomously generating meaning on the level of sensuous experience" (p. 27); these meanings "cannot be abstracted, because they cannot be separated from the painting's physical layers of imprimatura and ground" (pp. 31–32). Here the term "meaning" no longer accords with the iconographical method; perhaps "association" would have been a more appropriate word. This lack of conceptual clarity may be a function of the author's suggestion that there is a fundamental slippage between



form and meaning in the interpretation of art, but it contributes to an overall imprecision regarding to *whom* this meaning applies—to Rembrandt's contemporaries or to twenty-first-century scholars? What further increases the text's opaqueness is its use of many highly unusual words in English (*motificality, chromospatially, chirally, objectionableness, deixis-identifying*) and several errors in the translation of the original painter's terminology in Dutch.<sup>10</sup>

As a heuristic, approaching Rembrandt's art from a "phenomenological dynamic" (p. 160) certainly works in this volume, as it results in the refining of various existing iconographic interpretations by calling attention to details that have not been noted before. Suthor's main contribution to the field, in terms of primary sources, is this careful new look at well-known masterpieces. Yet, as an attempt to introduce a phenomenological approach into Dutch art history, *Rembrandt's Roughness* is hampered by the obscurity (if not the roughness) of its language, which might impede it from making a similar impact to Mieke Bal's structuralist approach.

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#### NOTES

1. Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-life Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Benjamin Binstock, *Vermeer's Family Secrets: Genius, Discovery, and the Unknown Apprentice* (London: Routledge, 2009).

2. Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*, trans. John B. Brough (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 20–23.

3. Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 620.

4. Jan Emmens, *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst* (Amsterdam: van Oorschot, 1979), 94–114; Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1997), 155–90; Thijs Weststeijn, *The Visible World: Samuel van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 229–40; and Yannis Hadjinicolaou, *Denkende Körper—Formende Hände: Handeling in Kunst und Kunsttheorie der "Rembrandtisten"* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016).

5. Karel Van Mander, "Het leven der moderne, oft dees-tijtsche doorluchtighe Italiaensche schilders," in *Het schilder-boeck* (Haarlem, the Netherlands, 1604), fol. 177r: "Ten lesten wrocht [Titiaan] zijn dinghen met cloecke pinceel-streken henen, en ghevleckt, soo dat het van by geen perfectie, maer van verre te sien, goeden welstand hadde"; cf. Van Mander, "Grondt der edel-vry schilder-const," in *ibid.*, fol. 48rv. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

6. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburg der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21), 1:273.

7. Franciscus Junius, *De schilderconst der oude* (Middelburg, the Netherlands, 1641), 325: "In't goude laeckene kleeed van Venus vinden [de liefhebbers] sich allermeest opghenomen met den naed des selvighen kleeeds . . . Aenghesien men dien naed vele eer met sijne ghedachten begrijpen, als met d'ooghen kan onderscheyden."

8. The original Dutch has "immediately" rather than "later."

9. Maurice Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude," in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 21–34, esp. 32–33.

10. The book fails to engage with the fundamental Dutch concept of *handeling*: similar to the Italian *maniera*, the term designates the painter's brushwork as the most personal element of his work, sometimes visible as a trademark. As *handeling* literally means "doing," it clarifies the early modern conception of art as a performative act in which paint is transformed into a virtual reality. (It is therefore incorrect to translate "van de handeling of maniere van schilderen" as "On the Treatment of Manners of Painting," p. 32.) The phrase "zwierich van sprong" that Van Hoogstraten uses for *The Night Watch* does not mean "animation of the contrast" (pp. 36, 135) but rather the pleasing effect of figures placed in a three-dimensional choreography; see Paul Taylor, "'Zwierich van sprong': Samuel van Hoogstraten's Night Watch," in *The Universal Art of Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–1678): Painter, Writer, Courtier*, ed. Thijs Weststeijn (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 97–114. "Vastigheden der konst" are the fixed rules of art, not "artistic renderings" (p. 9); to translate *schilderachtig* (picturesque) as "charming" misses its idiosyncratic meaning in a painterly context (p. 135). *Hurerei* is German, not Dutch; "als door een berg gescheiden" means "as if separated by a mountain"; *zinnebelden* should be *zinnebeelden*; *heft* and *heest* should be *heeft*, and so on (pp. 115, 12, 23, 27, 47).

ELIZABETH ALICE HONIG

*Jan Brueghel and the Senses of Scale*

University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016. 288 pp.; 75 color ills., 83 b/w. \$84.95

Elizabeth Alice Honig's *Jan Brueghel and the Senses of Scale* opens by simulating for the reader the experience of viewing a very small work on copper by Jan Brueghel. A full-page illustration shows a painting in its actual size (7.2 × 10.2 centimeters, or 2<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 4 inches) surrounded by a deep frame. In the image a mouse crouches next to a cut rose set in a blank indeterminate space registered only by barely indicated shadows. A striped, tufted caterpillar undulates along the spiny stem of the rose toward a bud on which a spotted butterfly perches. While the painting's elegant and spare composition is immediately apprehended at a distance, the precisely observed rendering of each "figure" invites our close, extended engagement with its illusions. As the picture is devoid of any stable setting for the projection of an embodied self, its solicitation of sustained, intimate viewing seems addressed exclusively to the viewer's avid eye. At the same time, as reproduced on the page, the painting appears as an object one could easily grasp in a physical, as well as visual, act of possession. Our encounter with the image in its real dimensions functions here as more than a dramatic device for inciting our visual interest: it virtually mobilizes the intertwined appeal to vision and touch—mimetic illusion and material presence—that Honig argues is fundamental to Brueghel's artistic mode. Her animating premise for the book is that the small scale of his work, its effects of intimacy and materiality, and its techniques of multiplicity and detail constitute an "alternative form of visuality in Europe culture around 1600" (p. 7), outside the historically enshrined notion of Baroque painting as a monumental art directed to a distanced viewer positioned to take in its compositional and rhetorical unities.

Honig's insight provides her with a coherent framework for this innovative study of an artist whose "uniquely, impossibly messy" oeuvre (p. 23) has hindered such comprehensive interpretative analysis. The unwieldy messiness confronting any scholar of Jan Brueghel's art comprehends