2. Experience and the Visual

The "Period Eye" – Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience*[1]

The notion of the "period eye" was put forward by Michael Baxandall, an approach exemplified by his book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style,* which has been through several editions since it first appeared in 1972. Baxandall's first sentence – "A fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship" – reveals his specific approach: for Baxandall, the artwork does not depict such a deposit, it is a deposit. In other words, the point of departure, centre and task here is not an artwork but a social relationship. In this view, the artwork is the visual materialization of this relationship. Baxandall develops his model using the painting of the Quattrocento in Florence – more precisely: using his description of the social relationships that determined the production of this painting. The painters' "clients" dictated the framework within which artists produced their commissions; individual talent or even genius played a marginal role. As Baxandall writes with typical dryness: "In the fifteenth century, painting was still too important to be left to the painters. The picture trade was a quite different thing from that in our own romantic tradition, in which painters paint what they think best and then look around for a buyer. … The fifteenth century was a period of bespoke painting, however, and this book is about the customer's participation in it." (3) Reviewing the book's second edition in 1988, a sociologist made a telling link to her own discipline: for her, the "period eye" is "a deep account of the ideological congruence between the *habitus* of a class of men, as Bourdieu would say, and meaningful cultural

1 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (1972), 2nd edition (Oxford 1988).

forms".[2] Rather than being static, however, this habitus is a cognitive style, rooted in the visual practice of the client that became the raw material for the painter. So much for the sociological recasting of Baxandall's project.

This brings us to the subjects of the "period eye" – the clients. It is their seeing that Baxandall attempts to reconstruct. He develops a method to make the eye of the historical client accessible to today's viewers and readers. This takes place not via a process of seeing today, but by reconstructing the context of seeing at the time in question – from an outside, so to speak. This seeing is a skill, a learned ability that arises not primarily from dealing with art but as an everyday visual practice that in turn impacts on what clients expect from painting.

For the Florentine art of the 15th century, Baxandall locates his historical point of departure in the practices of art trading (and other kinds of trade), because the social group commissioning the works consisted essentially of the patrician merchant class. He thus begins by giving a vivid picture of the customs of this clientele when dealing with art, in particular the modalities of contracts between customer and artist – an unusual choice of subject matter to get readers in the mood for the painting of the Quattrocento. These modalities are of interest above all insofar as they show how the value of art was perceived: gradually, for example, the use of precious materials became less important than the personal involvement of the master of a given artist's workshop; rather than buying a specific amount of gold and lapis lazuli in the picture, then, the customer now paid for the master's particular skill, a shift in values for which Baxandall supplies documentary evidence. Apart from stating what should be done by the master and not by his assistants, however, these contracts provide no further description of the skills in question, and other sources on the painting of the time use qualitative linguistic metaphors that can no longer be translated into a visual-painterly equivalent, prompting Baxandall to inquire into "how Quattrocento people, painters and public, attended to visual experience in distinctively Quattrocento ways, and how the quality of this attention became a part of their pictorial style" (27). This introduces the key concept of experience. We are not talking about a hypothetical, abstract viewer like the one assumed in the mathematical construction of one-point perspective (where this viewer is even reduced to a *single* eye), nor about the similarly hypothetical viewer of experimental psychology as presupposed

2 Magali Sarfatti Larson, review of *Painting and Experience* in *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no. 4 (1996), 454.

by Gombrich. Baxandall's viewer is a historical and social variable; his/her eye, or rather his/her seeing as a cognitive activity, is shaped by experience and by the physical, mental and emotional skills, habits and activities required by everyday life in the art-consuming social groups in Florence at the time. This shares certain implications with the metaphor of the "embodied eye"[3] as used since the late 1980s within art and cultural studies in discussions of the body as a focus of social, media, technological and cultural processes.

The "period eye" begins at the point of transition between the physiological process of seeing and the interpretation of the optical data in the brain (29). This interpretation is based on "innate skills" (29) and skills developed through experience. Baxandall groups these acquired interpretative skills, "the categories, the model patterns and the habits of inference and analogy" (30), under the concept of "cognitive style" (30).[4] In this way, he turns "style" from a category for describing art into a category for describing the way art is seen. This cognitive style, on which the period eye is based, consists of "a stock of patterns, categories and methods of inference; training in a range of representational conventions; and experience, drawn from the environment". The process within which these factors take effect is "indescribably complex and still obscure in its physiological detail" (32). To illustrate what is described here in brief, abstract terms, Baxandall offers practical examples relating to technical issues of artistic practice in contemporary Florence (the arrangement of figures, the construction of three-dimensionality on a flat surface, colour, the figures' body language).

Baxandall's seeing is practical and physical, for example translating experience with dance as a social practice among the educated classes into an ability to interpret patterns of figures. Baxandall sees this as a visual skill and a set of expectations shared by the painters and their clients, forming the context and background for the arrangements and gestures of figures in Botticelli, a claim he backs up with treatises on dance and other written sources that link Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, the group of persons involved, and a dance composition (78-81). Another specifically Florentine context cited by Baxandall for the visual expectations of customers and the visual habits of artists

3 Christopher S. Wood, "When Attitudes Became Form. Christopher S. Wood on Michael Baxandall (1933-2008)" in *Artforum* 47, no. 5 (2009), 43-44.

4 "Cognitive style" is a concept from anthropology and psychology. See Allan Langdale, "Aspects of the Critical Reception and Intellectual History of Baxandall's Concept of the Period Eye" in *Art History* 21, no. 4 (1998), 479-497: 486. In Baxandall's work, the background of this concept (and of some others) remains unexplained.

is religious drama which, as he shows, features constellations of figures and narrative strategies similar to those found in painting (71-76). A highly practical skill possessed by merchants that influenced the way they perceived art is the calculation of the capacity of barrels using geometry and mathematics (86/7); such three-dimensional seeing aided comprehension of the volumes portrayed in the painting of artists like Piero della Francesca or Pisanello. Here, too, Baxandall cites sources that convincingly link context and painting, including a mathematical handbook for merchants by Piero della Francesca (87).

The metaphor of the "period eye" does what figures of speech are supposed to do: it blurs categorical boundaries of the kind that hinder comprehension of historically "unfamiliar" phenomena (as Pächt would say, see chapter three) but that accompany most debates on method in art history: the line between art and context, between historical and present-day reception; between artist and consumer; between the optical-physiological basis of seeing and what one would now call its cultural construction; between physicality and sociality; but also, and this is a difficult point in methodological terms, between historically specific but not reconstructable individuals (in this case artist and client) and what can be said in general terms about these individuals in the sense of a typical viewer of a specific place or time. This last point drew criticism from Gombrich, for example, concerning the use of totalizing concepts like zeitgeist, national style or *Kunstwollen*.[5] Sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu and anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, who were interested in insights into social groups, and thus in the generalizability of individual observations within specific limits, were significantly more sympathetic to the "period eye" than their art historian colleagues. For Bourdieu, who in 1981 published the chapter of *Painting and Experience* dedicated to the period eye in French with a foreword of his own,[6] it offered the methodology for a sociology of perception; in his 1976 article *Art as a Cultural System*, Geertz took it as his point of departure

5 On Gombrich's critique of Baxandall's "period eye", see Langdale, "Aspects", 480. Unfortunately, Langdale gives no more specific details, except for a reference to an interview with Baxandall conducted for his unpublished dissertation (see ibid., footnote 21).

6 Michael Baxandall, "L'Œil du quattrocento" in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 4 (1981), 10-49; Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Desault, "Pour une sociologie de la perception", ibid., 3-9.

for an analysis of the visual culture of a society, providing one of the most important stimuli for the subsequent emergence of visual culture studies.[7]

What progress did Baxandall's method offer in cognitive terms? He takes art as his starting point; he treats style as an important concept. However for Baxandall art is the starting point but not the end of his endeavours. He has a concept of painting, at least in the specific case of the Quattrocento, which leads away from painting itself towards an epistemic interest that lies beyond it – to the "social relationship" of which painting is the "deposit". This sounds like a social history of art of the kind we have known since Arnold Hauser – an approach that offers no answer to the question of the inner connection between the manifestations of art and sociality, working instead with mostly suggestive, non-verifiable analogies between stylistic periods and forms of society. With his period eye, on the other hand, Baxandall inquires, with a precision based on historical evidence, into the verifiable relationship between the manifestations of art and the visual conditions dictated by the society where its production and reception take place. In this way, he finishes by bringing the way we see today into play: based on the assumption that forms and styles of painting respond to social conditions, a knowledge of social practices and conventions may "sharpen our perception of the pictures" just as, conversely, the forms and styles of painting can sharpen our perception of society (151).

According to Baxandall, the possibilities within social history for reconstructing past societies are limited to written sources, imposing a crucial limitation on attempts to reconstruct *experience*. And this is where painterly style becomes important: "a pictorial style gives access to the visual skills and habits and, through these, to the distinctive social experience" (152). This implies that a painting can be read like a written source, and the period eye is Baxandall's proposal for such a method of reading. This makes it possible to avoid both the mistakes of an "illustrated social history" and "facile equations" between social milieus and painterly styles – his negative examples being the equations of bourgeois milieu with realistic style and aristocratic milieu with idealizing style (152). At the end of his book, Baxandall clearly states the essence of what he wants to achieve with the "period eye": For the "students of charters and parish rolls", the visual facts may appear "hopelessly lightweight"; "They are certainly a distinct kind of fact: what they offer is an insight into what it was like, intellectually and sensibly, to be a Quattrocento person. Such insights are

7 Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System" in *Modern Language Notes* 91, no. 6 (1976), 1473-1499. Cf., Langdale, "Aspects".

necessary if the historical imagination is to be fed, and the visual is here the proper complementary to the verbal." (152-153) The path of an empathy that overcomes historical time thus leads not back to art but through art to the historical individual; however, and this is important, this historical individual is typified and generalized at the level of relatively homogeneous social groups – like the "church-going business man, with a taste for dancing" (109).

Experience is joined here by two more concepts that are just as impossible to reduce to language: insight and imagination. Here, then, Baxandall takes his metaphors for the process of scholarly learning from the field of the visual, deploying them against the supposed facticity and objectivity of a form of historiography reduced to written sources; herein lies their significance and their methodological weight. Baxandall tries to introduce visuality into the academic discipline of history as a fact. In subsequent decades, however, as mentioned above, his proposal was taken up mainly by other disciplines with more of a focus on the present, in particular sociology and anthropology – disciplines that later came to occupy places at the core of visual culture studies. Such uptake of the period eye has increased especially since the 1980s, always with the same motivation: an analysis and critique of culture based on the relations of the social – and not, for example, on the isolated specifics of an object or a genre of cultural production.

These readings are exemplified by Clifford Geertz's article "Art as a Cultural System". Geertz is often named as being partly to blame for two of the "turns" of recent decades: the cultural and the linguistic turn. It is true that his text combines culture and semiotics, but it specifically opposes a brand of semiotics that views signs merely as a means of communication, a code to be deciphered. He calls on the analytical forces of semiotic theory, "whether Peirce's, Saussure's, Lévi-Strauss's, or Goodman's", to turn their attention away from an "investigation of signs *in abstraction* toward an investigation of them in their natural habitat – the common world in which men look, name, listen, and make".[8] This embedding of experience into semiotics is his adaptation of the period eye: as his chief witness for experience as the site where art, seeing, everyday practices and society meet, he cites Baxandall's example of the Florentine merchant. In his book, Baxandall himself never argues in the sense of semiotics; he sticks with experience as the concept that brings the various fields together. The reason for this, presumably, is that he is not in-

8 Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System", 1498, (my italics).

terested in interpreting the pictures he cites as examples.[9] This in turn means that the horizon of experience shared by painter and viewer, which he defines as the medium of art (40), is not something he wishes to apply to the pictures as an interpretative tool. Baxandall does not establish a *system*, not even a system of signs; in contrast to the comprehensive, emphatic definition of culture put forth by Geertz,[10] he uses the concept of culture very pragmatically and very sparingly.

Today, "experience" is making a comeback in cultural studies; evidence for this includes Christopher Wood's reading of the period eye, published in his obituary for Baxandall.[11] He describes Baxandall's approach in *Painting and Experience* in a way that is characteristic of the altered perspectives of recent years: Baxandall, Wood writes, called on the reader "to occupy the body of the fifteenth-century Florentine patron of altarpieces and frescoes, typically a 'church-going business man, with a taste for dancing'". This is where the metaphor of the "embodied eye" comes into play; the embodied eye belongs to the body of this businessman. The reader, Wood argues, is invited to participate in the historically remote everyday life by a "process of bodily triangulation: We would feel with our bodies, and see with our embodied eyes, what the beholders of Masaccio and Filippo Lippi saw." This body metaphor is one of his adaptations of the category of "experience"; another is to be found in the time-oriented concept of "process". In Wood's view, Baxandall demystified the art of the Renaissance, releasing it from the grip of iconological expertise and references to antiquity, recasting it as "process art, whose very content is materials, labour, the mass of the body, the force of gestures". Wood then makes an astonishing link to *When Attitudes Become Form*, an exhibition of contemporary art shown in Bern and London in 1969 featuring conceptual, performance and installation art – currents within the neo-avant-garde that sought to revolutionize the concept, genres, spaces and institutions of contemporary art. For Wood, the parallel between the painters of the Quattrocento as described by Baxandall and the artists of the neo-avant-garde lies in the interaction of work and materials, in the emotional commitment of

9 He addressed the problem of interpretation in a later book, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, London 1985), a series of "fiercely antimethodical lectures", as Wood remarks in his obituary: Wood, "When Attitudes Became Form".

10 For Geertz, culture is "the general system of symbolic forms" (Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System", 1488), a position that echoes Cassirer's philosophy of culture.

11 Wood, "When Attitudes Became Form". All quotes in this paragraph, ibid., 44.

the artists, and in their direct link with the audience. Baxandall's readers in the 1970s, Wood writes, would have appreciated the description of an art context where painters and audience escaped the control of the church and which had not yet withdrawn into the cabinets of the collectors, taking place instead "in the piazza, in public, where they listened side by side to the mendicant preacher who coordinated the biblical tales with the affections of the heart, and where all practical men, susceptible to the beauty of things, could openly share their intimacy with materials, tools, and craft. In this way, inside the scholarly treatise, art and life find their way back to each other." Baxandall's Quattrocento was attractive to the 1970s, then, because it spoke to the utopia of a unity of art and life in a harmonious society – for as Wood critically adds, Baxandall's "social history" is not dynamic, knowing no diachrony, conflicts or breaks. This contrasts strongly with early cultural studies and John Berger's approach based on a Marxist critique of ideology in *Ways of Seeing*.[12]

Wood's description of Baxandall's "scholarly treatise" is so lively that one forgets that Baxandall meticulously backed up every one of his links between lived reality and pictorial form with references to written sources – sources that had previously gone largely unnoticed by art history because they did not belong to the canon of iconology. Since the 1970s, this in turn marked Baxandall out not only as a contemporary of recent ethnology, but also of recent academic history with its interest in everyday life and mentalities.

Although his approach did meet with interest in the context of Anglo-American adaptations of structuralism, it is not easy, however, to describe Baxandall's linking of everyday life and cognitive style as structural. The category of experience, with its refusal of a structurally fixed outline, strikes me as a more fitting one to describe his approach with its pragmatic restriction of its methods' scope and a refusal to construct closed theoretical frameworks. His method implies an appeal to today's viewers: in order to be able to comprehend the life and art of a given historical period, they must learn something that is historically unfamiliar and that goes beyond what has been reproduced in language. Baxandall calls for an understanding of unfamiliar cognitive skills in order to recognize historical habits of seeing.

12 With Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, Richard Hollis, 1972 BBC TV series, book published the same year.

Between presence and representation – Svetlana Alpers' *The Art of Describing*[13]

In her 1977 article "Is Art History?", Svetlana Alpers reviewed the main tendencies of the New Art History in terms of method.[14] This new current first announced itself in a series of studies of individual artworks under the title *Art in Context*, published from 1972 by John Fleming and Hugh Honour as a counter-model to the traditional art-history-by-period of the "Pelican History of Art" series. For Alpers, the main concerns of this "new" art history lay in a shift of attention to the context and reception of art; as its most interesting proponents she named T.J. Clark with *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*[15] and Baxandall with *Painting and Experience*. For Alpers, as her title suggests, the key here was that the individual artwork was treated as a piece of history. One might say that the question of art's context (who commissioned it, who was the audience, where was it shown, etc.) made such a focus on individual works necessary. Alpers describes the New Art History as a movement to democratize the discipline: Clark uses context to demystify the concept of solitary artistic creativity by embedding it in its social setting; and Baxandall does the same to seeing by situating it as a social practice.[16]

Alpers' thoughts on whether art is history then take an unexpected turn: inquiring after the epistemic interests of the "new" art historians, she accuses them of having neither a subjective standpoint nor a shared position. Instead, she argues, their project of reconstructing context pursues a "notion of objective historical research".[17] What Alpers demands is, firstly, clarification of individual art historians' own subjective positions as a precondition for research, and secondly, going beyond this, a moral humanist commitment to research of the kind advocated by Panofsky and Warburg, and by Gombrich with his harsh critique of totalizing zeitgeist concepts. Alpers criticizes Baxandall as "a most sophisticated spokesman" of this supposed objectivity and quotes a phrase from *Painting and Experience* (151): "quattrocento intentions happened in quattrocento terms, not in ours". For Alpers, "Baxandall's

13 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago 1983).
14 Svetlana Alpers, "Is Art History?" in *Daedalus* 106 (1977), 1-13.
15 T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1973).
16 Alpers, "Is Art History", 2.
17 Ibid., 9.

disembodied desire – one shared by many art historians today – to see quattrocento art in quattrocento terms is as much an intellectual structuring *of our times* as the others. This too is knowledge we *make*."[18]

Why mention this debate? One reason is the metaphor of the disembodied desire for objectivity, which matches that of the disembodied eye in the later debate surrounding the critique of perspective as logocentric and abstract. Interestingly, Baxandall's "objective historicization" of visual practices was meant to combat precisely this abstraction of seeing – contrasting it with the seeing body of a quattrocento businessman "with a taste for dancing". For Alpers, however, the assumption of having reconstructed this body as an objective historical reality implies the elimination of another seeing body, i.e., that of the viewer who erroneously believes it is possible to disregard his/her own condition of seeing as a situated practice. Pächt did not pursue this strategy: like Baxandall, although he spoke of the unfamiliarity of historical modes of seeing, he tried to integrate the stylistic preferences from the viewer's present into his analysis as factors influencing his/her perception and choice of historical image structures. We might also note that Pächt's view did not take the artwork purely as its starting point, but also returned to it. In other words, he looked back and forth between artworks as a way of accessing historical formal structures, both synchronously and diachronically – an operation that might be theoretically linked with today's concept of interpictoriality.[19] Baxandall takes a different approach, viewing artworks as "lenses bearing on their own circumstances", as something through which to view history. "The suggestion is not that one must know about Renaissance Germany to enjoy the sculpture, but that the sculpture can offer a fresh focus on the cultural history of Renaissance Germany."[20]

This view is what gave rise to the concept of visual culture, sometime between 1977 and 1983. It came into the centre of art historical debate with the publication of Alpers' *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*

18 Ibid., 10, my italics.

19 Several "inter"-concepts are in circulation in the field of visual culture studies and media studies, inspired by the poststructuralist concept of intertextuality (see, for example, Ralf Adelmann, Andreas Fahr, Ines Katenhusen, Nic Leonhardt, Dimitri Liebsch (eds.), *Visual Culture Revisited. German and American Perspectives on Visual Culture*, Cologne 2007) which rebutted the notion of authorship, arguing that texts arise from interaction with other texts.

20 Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, London 1981), vii.

(1983): "What I propose to study then is not the *history* of Dutch art, but the Dutch *visual culture* – to use a term that I owe to Michael Baxandall."[21] Alpers does not provide a reference for this; surprisingly, the term is not used in *Painting and Experience*, first appearing in Baxandall's book on German Renaissance sculpture. This work has a similar structure to *Painting and Experience:* here, too, there is a chapter entitled "The Period Eye", but since Germany, unlike Italy, lacks treatises on art that give a primary insight into the visual habits and aesthetic judgements of the time, it is necessary to look elsewhere, "in the wider visual culture".[22] This is intended to provide insights into categories that might be authentic for the "general visual experience" of the period in order to get closer to its sculptures, and it is also meant to offer a view "through and beyond the sculpture" to the culture that influenced the "artistic manipulation of visual experience". I quote these passages at such length because they illustrate the links installed by Baxandall via the concepts of visual culture and visual experience.

With his concept of "visual culture", then, Baxandall almost incidentally brings into play a bridging concept that links conditions of seeing and culture. The concept's "right of primogeniture" lies with art history, inspired by input from other disciplines, primarily the cultural ethnology of Clifford Geertz and new approaches in the humanities dealing with the history of mentalities and everyday life. In the years that followed, rather than systematically pursuing this approach, Baxandall turned to other methodological problems,[23] which explains the pragmatically limited reach of his concept.

Alpers, on the other hand, is less pragmatic than programmatic in her use of the concept when she proposes to study not the history of Dutch art but Dutch visual culture (xxv). How can this programmatic aspect be described more specifically? In *The Art of Describing*, concrete application, theoretical considerations and engagement with art history as a discipline are so tightly interwoven that it is hard to focus on a single aspect. Instead, a look back to an article published in 1976, *Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Represen-*

21 Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, xxv, my italics.
22 Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, 145.
23 See in particular Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*.

tation,[24] will help to shed light on the context in which she first encountered this problem to which she would go on to devote her book.

Alpers' article is an appeal for a new focus on painting that is not narrative but descriptive. The major theme of her book is already fully formulated here: she "rebels" against the dominance of iconographic readings of art, a dominance whose historical roots lie in the fact that European art history as a whole is assessed using criteria derived from the position of high esteem occupied by the art of the Italian Renaissance. Narrative, idea and history (the inherent textual quality of Italian painting since the Renaissance which, with Alberti's "istoria" and "costruzione legittima", links storytelling with the pictorial space of one-point perspective as a narrative space) have, according to Alpers, been the benchmark of success in the history of European art since Giotto, just as interpreting this content has been the benchmark in art history. This emphasis, which also implies a methodological restriction, is countered by Alpers with something she refers to in *The Art of Describing* (1983) as "descriptive painting". In "Describe or Narrate?" she speaks of the "dazzling descriptive surface of Dutch painting" and confronts "the Renaissance commitment to narrative art … which continued to challenge ambitious artists well into the nineteenth century" (16) with those descriptive tendencies in art, especially the art of the 17th and 19th centuries, that were discussed in the 1970s under the heading of realism. With a wealth of source material from art theory and art description since the early Renaissance, she shows that in the traditional hierarchy placing the intellect over the senses, the argument in favour of a legible, narrative art goes hand in hand with an attack on art that "delights the eyes of the ignorant".[25]

This is the basic agenda that also motivates *The Art of Describing*: Alpers wants to revise this hierarchy by focussing her work on painting that (also) describes rather than (only) narrating. But is it "merely" a question here of

24 Svetlana Alpers, "Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation", in *New Literary History* (8:1, 1976), 15-41. Interestingly, this issue of *New Literary History* was subtitled *Readers and Spectators: Some Views and Review*, and the contributors included Gérard Genette, the poststructuralist literary theorist and proponent of narratology, and the film semiologist Christian Metz. The focus was on the reception of art, on legibility and visibility, an approach pursued by literary theory since the late 1960s that was only gradually becoming established in art history.

25 Alpers, "Describe or Narrate?", 17, translation of a quotation from Boccaccio about Giotto, who he praises because his art "addresses the intelligent with recognizable figures".

stepping into the academic breach to defend undervalued works? Several metaphors in "Describe or Narrate?" offer clues to additional, implicit motives. Discussing Caravaggio's *Conversion of St. Paul*, she claims that the light interpreted by scholars as heavenly "illuminates and thus involves us in the material things of this world rather than in the miracle of another". However much the light is meant to point to the miracle of conversion, in worldly terms it also makes the viewer "physically part of the event that took place on the road to Damascus". For Alpers, it is thus entirely clear that for Caravaggio, "the road to salvation is through immersing oneself in *this* world" (19, my italics). What is appealing about Caravaggio's art, she argues, is the direct, immediate quality of his description. The life imitated in intense painterly description breaks through the art into "our" space (19/20). "We are party to the undoing of art as the tables are turned by life." (20) Caravaggio's painting plays with the possibility of tearing down the barrier between "artifice and life, between the fictive world and the actual world of the beholder" (19). This is surprisingly similar to the metaphors of a blending of art and life in the avant-garde discourse of the 20th century: immediacy, immersion, presence without (narrative) representation. And indeed, Alpers cites Michael Fried here (18), a writer associated with New Art History who has argued along these lines concerning the art of the 1960s and in his studies of the art of the 18th and 19th centuries. In his now-famous polemic against the large objects of Minimal Art published in 1967,[26] Fried called for a "pure" presence of art that does not distract the beholder from his/her equally pure contemplative state by asking him/her to read – that does not destroy the asemantically pure presence of art in favour of inherently narrative structures of representation.

Alpers' agenda can thus be summed up by terms like authenticity, presence, directness and anti-narrativity. It is an approach that finds itself confronted (like the artists of the neo-avant-garde)[27] with the problem that the status of pictures is caught in an irresolvable (and unavoidable) tension between presence and representation. In her introduction to *The Art of Describing*, Alpers speaks of the "pleasurable effect of the suspension of narrative action

26 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", *Artforum* 5 (1967), reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed.): *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, introduction by Anne M. Wagner (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1995), 116-147.

27 This is why I would say that in historical terms, her discourse belongs more in the context of the art-life discussion of the neo-avant-garde of the late 1960s than in that of a structural or structuralist renewal of art history.

in the name of delight in *representational presence*" (my italics) in order to criticize the polarization between narrative and descriptive pictures in the work of writers like Louis Marin, Roland Barthes and Leo Bersani.[28] This polarization and what Alpers says about it are interesting in the context of this book insofar as the equation of action with narrative and of passivity with description, which she criticizes, addresses types of seeing. For Dutch painting, at least, Alpers rejects this dichotomy: "far from being the ideal suspension of a restless narrative mode, descriptive images, in the seventeenth century at least, were central to the society's active comprehension of the world".[29] For Alpers, both descriptive seeing (by the painter) and the viewer's seeing what is depicted *as such* (and not as something else, e.g. as part of a narrative), are *active* attitudes towards the world. In order to make her claim suitably incisive, however, she dramatizes the narrative mode as "restless", implying hyperactivity.

The polarization between narration and description in literature and fine art raises complex theoretical and methodological problems. Alpers picks up on the connotations of the two poles and harnesses them to her position. Narration is associated with action, activity, active reading/seeing, with a meaning "behind" the surface of pictures, with the iconography that interprets this meaning. There follows the denial or dismissal of the painterly surface and of the forms and materiality of painting. To Wollheim this denial constitutes a "transparent view of art" because it looks "through" the surface at the meaning that lies behind.[30] Narration also implies a hierarchy of pictures and how they are dealt with - history painting then being the highest in the hierarchy of genres - and a narrative space based on perspective. All this for Alpers is incorporated in the Italian model of fine art. On the other hand she links description with passivity since no action is narrated. In her account description is linked with the surface and materiality of the pictures, with showing only what *is*, [31] and with a perceptually pragmatic approach to a pictorial space that deviates from the mathematical model. Her approach concerns itself with seeing pictures rather than reading them. Alpers' aim is to revaluate the descriptive mode, one that is not exclusive to Dutch painting, and

28 Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 235f. The associated theoretical problems and debates concerning the status of the picture cannot be gone into in more detail here.

29 Ibid., 236.

30 See ibid., xxiv, where she quotes Wollheim.

31 Often known as realism, although Alpers does not wholly agree with this, Alpers discusses this in detail in "Describe or Narrate?".

to render it productive. And she feels justified in this by reference to an art-historical tradition that is interested in art beyond the norms of Italian art. She names Riegl for Dutch group portraits, Pächt for the art of Northern Europe, Baxandall for German limewood sculpture and Fried for "absorptive or anti-theatrical (for which we may read anti-Albertian)" French painting (xx). Alpers asserts: "The Dutch present their pictures as describing the world seen rather than as imitations of significant human actions." (xxv) However simple this characterization of Dutch painting may appear, it should be clear by now that the consequences are less straightforward. We can see this in *The Art of Describing*, which opposes the "recent rash of emblematic interpretations of Dutch Art" (xxiv).[32] In his *Early Netherlandish Painting,* Panofsky had already examined this painting in terms of its "disguised symbolism" by which (to use Alpers' terminology) he meant that painting concealed meaning under its realistic surfaces (xxiv).

If there is no hidden meaning in Dutch painting, Alpers asks, how should we view it? (xxiv) This is a revealing question as it implies that for Alpers, too, there is a fundamental link between the act of viewing and the search for meaning. Any form of seeing without this search is alien to her, or at least hard to justify, as well as being hard to structure in methodological terms – a gaze into the void, so to speak. And what does Alpers do? Instead of turning firmly towards the surface, towards the painterly appearance of things – as Pächt does, for example, in his description of the miniatures in the *Admont Giant Bible* – she refocuses her attention from the picture to its circumstances: "My answer has been to view [Dutch art] *circumstantially"* (xxiv, my italics). What she refers to here as "circumstances" is what we already know as context: "I mean not only to see art as a social manifestation but also to gain access to images through a consideration of their place, role, and presence in the broader culture." (xxiv) What I assume she is doing here is avoiding the potential accusations of formalism that make focussing one's attention on the formal appearance of things in painting so risky.

In various guises, the dichotomy of form and content has always been a part of German art history, and it also touches on the status of art-historical seeing. The problem may be suppressed in Anglo-American art history of the

32 The drastic choice of the word "rash" and an epilogue that tries once again to specifically refute this approach may explain why Alpers' book received such a polemic review from E. de Jongh, the main practitioner of this kind of interpretation (see *Simiolus, Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 14, no. 1, 1984, 51-59).

Gombrich-Baxandall-Alpers line in a way that can be felt in the "emptiness" of the image beyond meaning (as suggested in the above-quoted question by Alpers) and in the way she redirects attention away from pictures towards context. Whereas Baxandall's pragmatic reserve (diagnosed by Alpers as objectivization) leaves little scope for attack on this count, Alpers' struggle for a position and method is far more openly symptomatic. To put it concisely, one could say that the attention she devotes to the context of painting is intended to cover up the self-reflexivity (or "emptiness") of its surface, but also to open it up to the outside. Where iconography scans painting for symbolic-textual prefigurations, a context-based approach looks at the sociocultural conditions of its production.

To return to Alpers' characterizations of Dutch painting, whose descriptive character she sees as being based on active seeing aimed at a knowledge of the world: "Already established pictorial and craft traditions, broadly reinforced by the new experimental science and technology, confirmed pictures as the way to new and certain knowledge of the world." (xxv) She names and interprets qualities that she attributes to this orientation: departures from a viewer position determined by one-point perspective ("positioned viewer") in Dutch painting give the impression that the world is more important than the viewer; the use of major contrasts in proportion shows that man is not the measure of all things; the absence of a frame within the frame implied by the composition (framing groups of trees in landscapes, for example, or the order of figures in a space determined by perspective) makes the picture appear a random segment of the world that continues beyond the arbitrary limits of the frame. Also notable is a marked sense of the picture as surface, resembling a mirror or a map but not the Albertian window, and an emphasis on craft skills in the painterly rendering of objects (xxv).

All of these attributes, then, have to do with the status of painting as a site of knowledge about the world. Visual culture, discussed here prominently for the first time, is thus a culture of knowledge. Alpers even claims that it played a key role in society: "One might say that the eye was a central means of self-representation and visual experience a central mode of self-consciousness." (xxv) This goes far beyond the role of everyday skill attributed to seeing by Baxandall; its elevation of visual culture to the status of a paradigm of sociality comes closer to the later basic assumptions of visual culture studies – with one crucial difference, specifically with reference to Dutch painting and culture. "In Holland," Alpers states, "if we look beyond what is normally considered to be art, we find that images proliferate everywhere." (xxv) This

resembles the self-legitimization of today's visual culture studies when it diagnoses a new age of relentless, omnipresent images.[33] Images are not only everywhere – in books, on fabrics and carpets, on tiles and in frames on the wall – they also show everything, from insects and flowers to Brazilian tribespeople to the interiors of houses and churches. Central examples of the importance of visuality in the Dutch culture of the 17th century are maps and atlases that describe "the world and Europe to *itself*" (my italics). Knowledge about the world, articulated and communicated in seeing and visual description, is thus also a factor of self-consciousness.

In *The Art of Describing*, Alpers builds up context (which she suggests should be studied in dealing with non-narrative painting) in layers: she begins with Constantijn Huygens who as a leading figure in the country's cultural life testifies for Dutch visual culture as a contemporary witness to the intellectual, cultural and scientific currents of the period, as well as its taste in art. Huygens enthuses about new optical instruments like the camera obscura, the microscope and the telescope, and his writings provide detailed support for Alpers' theory of a visual culture of knowledge via observation of the world. The next layer deals with a specific quality of the pictures in this culture: their "lifelike appearance" (26). This lifelikeness is not to be taken for granted, it goes beyond the usual standard of mimesis in painting since the Renaissance and needs to be explained. To this end, Alpers introduces Kepler's model of the eye and seeing as a factor of the cultural milieu, providing her with a workable model for dealing with Dutch painting. This is followed by a contextualization of painting as a highly skilled craft of the kind required for lifelike portrayals. As well as a steady hand, this also depends, even more crucially, on an attentive eye. Here, then, a culture of knowledge based on observation (layer 1) is linked with a school of painting whose "model" Alpers bases on Kepler (layer 2).

This layered structure culminates in the theory of a "mapping impulse in Dutch art" (119ff). Here, the map as a pictorial genre brings visually represented knowledge about the world together with the mode of the picture itself. With this strategy, Alpers means to escape from the argumentative structure of analogy (e.g., the analogy between Kepler's model of seeing and descriptive painting) into the concretion of an object. Her main example is Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (1666), a picture whose theme is painting itself

33 One example among many: Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London 1999).

and which features a map in a prominent position as a picture within the picture. At this point, then, the path leads away from context into the picture – and back out again towards the Dutch love of cartography.

From this broad but detailed spectrum of historical contextualizations, I take a closer look at the analogy between Kepler's model of the eye and painting. "Where is the art?" Alpers asks when pictures show something that looks like a copy of reality without telling a story: "When images are situated at the threshold between the world and our perception of it how can they be considered as art?" Vermeer's *View of Delft,* for example, "is just there for the looking" (27). In this painting, Alpers argues, the world (not the painter!) stains the surface of pictures with colour and light, "impressing itself on it" (27) – a use of metaphor that recalls William Talbot's description of photography in *The Pencil of Nature.*[34] And Alpers really does view Dutch painting as a historical precursor to photography; the Nordic descriptive mode of painting shares many qualities with photography (43) – its fragmentariness, the arbitrariness of its framing, the immediacy of its contact with reality. This immediacy refers both to seeing and to the transfer of seeing into painting; it is also guaranteed by the camera obscura, the microscope, the telescope and other lenses that acted as optical aids at the time, ensuring maximum analogue transfer of what was seen into the image. In Alpers' model, this mode forms the historical equivalent of photography, understood as the indexical transfer of the world into the image. What Alpers' argument does not take into account is that right from the start, photography was never a "purely" descriptive medium. In other words: the photographic image, too, is not merely a media transcription of the world; instead it involves a selecting and composing authorial eye that orients itself towards the aesthetic norms of its time.

As a metaphor, immediacy must be read here against a mediatedness like that introduced by the narrative function of Italian painting between the world "as it is" and the picture/viewer. This gives rise to a chain of signifiers of world, description, immediacy, northern painting and photography that seems to lack what its counterpart (narrative, mediatedness, southern painting) brings with it in and of itself: meaning and with it the possibility of integrating the picture into the broader context of interpreting the world. The series of polarizations could thus be continued: meaning versus "the world is as it is"; painting as a function of narrative versus painting as tautology:

34 William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London 1844-1846).

"What you see is what you see", as Frank Stella remarked in 1964 on the self-referentiality of his pictures.[35]

To counter this danger of the tautology of world and lifelike image, I would argue, Alpers introduces Kepler's model of seeing as a historical context, but also as a model that structures both seeing and image production in 17th-century Dutch culture. Kepler's definition of the human eye as a "mechanical maker of pictures" and his formulation that seeing creates a painting (pictura) of what is seen on the surface of the retina (34) form the basis for Alpers' argument. Kepler views the eye in isolation as a seeing mechanism and he also accepts its distortions as optical facts (35). This lends seeing a new, emancipated status; the sense of sight is relieved of the usual charge of deception; seeing including its naturally inherent distortions is accepted and isolated as scientific fact – and it is in this sense that Alpers uses it as the context for Dutch painting. This signals another contrast to Baxandall's "period eye": the period eye is not a natural mechanism, but a "skill", a socially and culturally conditioned and trained eye that brings forth corresponding *forms* such as the creation of volumes in the quattrocento or the floral forms of German late Gothic – forms that have to do with learned habits of the eye that lead to the objects of the world being seen and painted *in a particular way*.

Kepler equates seeing with "picturing" (33). "Visual perception is itself an act of representation in Kepler's analysis." (36) This is the bridge established by Alpers between seeing and the painting of pictures: the "artifice" then lies not in the invention of a picture, but in the coincidence of nature and art. Vermeer's *View of Delft*, which Kenneth Clark called "the nearest which painting has ever come to a coloured photograph" (27), could thus be seen as a display of this artifice. "A claim is made on us that this picture is at the meeting-place of the world seen and the world pictured." (35) In the Netherlands, Kepler's mathematically defined line between nature and "artifice" is a matter for painting, and not just since Kepler, but beginning with van Eyck. With her analogy between the models of mechanical seeing and descriptive painting, Alpers secures a further bridge: that between the world and its representation. Just as a trompe-l'oeil is an optical fact, the deception in painting (of which it is accused) is not a moral problem but an epistemological one: "there is no escape from representation" (35). If the eye sees not "what is" but what the eye's optical mechanism makes out of what is, then this divergence contains the

35 Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd" (1964) in Battcock (ed.): *Minimal Art*, 148-164: 158.

unavoidable fact of representation – because seeing *is already* representation. In this way, representation in descriptive painting is marshalled on the side of nature.

Now the difference between the narrative, Italian norm and the descriptive Dutch mode of painting becomes clearer: on the one hand, the framed picture as an object in the world, the Albertian window through which we look, from a position defined by perspective, at a narrated world; and on the other, the picture that *takes the place of the eye itself*, leaving the frame and the viewer-position undefined (45). The latter also applies to the position of the painter: according to Alpers, it is dissolved within the picture; the painter, absorbed in attentive observation of the details of the world, "merges" with the picture, anonymizing him-/herself in this kind of "selflessness" (83). In Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* this manifests itself in the back view of the painter: "Like a surveyor, the painter is within the very world he represents. He disappears into his task, … Observation is not distinguished from the notation of what is observed." (168)

The image of the painter disappearing into the painted world would be a good place to link Alpers' model with the critical theories of the subject and authorship proposed by Foucault and Barthes. Apart from a cursory reference to Foucault's *The Order of Things*, however, Alpers herself does not situate her approach within a structuralist or poststructuralist context. Interesting here is Louis Marin's review of her book, under the ambiguous title "In Praise of Appearance". Marin sees parallels and differences between Alpers' model and structuralism. As one key difference he cites the fact that Alpers does not abstractly deduce her fundamental oppositions (e.g., narrative versus descriptive) from a "basic structure of signification; rather, they are discovered in history".[36] Conversely, he credits Alpers with "magnificent appreciation of appearance and surface", culminating in her critique of the "Albertian" subject, which she counters with a multiple, fragmented subject, even a "nonsubject, at once everywhere and nowhere" – a verdict in which Marin gathers together all of the motifs of poststructuralist critiques of the subject that have since become common currency. And Marin's reading gains something else from Alpers' version of the disappearance of the author, arguing that it paradoxically brings forth an animation of the objects themselves *in their representation*, a kind of "visual autorepresentation, a kind of 'object-consciousness'"[37] –

36 Louis Marin, "In Praise of Appearance" in *October* 37 (1986), 98-112: 100.

37 Ibid., 112.

which brings us back to the void around which Alpers' book revolves: the tautology of an "unmediated" representation of things. It is this tautology that makes her less a structuralist and more a contemporary of the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s with its call for a "pure" presence of objects beyond meaning and interpretation. I am thinking, for example, of Carl Andre with his brick works, about which the critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote, on first encountering them: "The bricks *were.* … Here, at last, was the purely and clearly existing heart of the matter."[38]

In the avant-garde discourse of presence, a central role is played by Michael Fried's engagement with Minimalism. For Fried, Minimalist objects have no presence because they are theatrical. This suggests an analogy in which the stage is a context that determines meaning, deflecting attention from the non-functional absorbed state of seeing and rendering presence as an effect of perception impossible – comparable with Alpers' critique of emblematic readings of Dutch art. Fried's "tautology of presence" certainly bears similarities with Alpers' argument: "It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness:* … it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre."[39] The "perpetual creation of itself" and the "instantaneousness" both recall Alpers' take on Vermeer's *View of Delft*: it is "just here for the looking". In this reading, the non-interpretative seeing of the Dutch painters is a historical equivalent to the avant-garde discourse of presence. Both focus on an "object-consciousness" that creates an "immediate" link between viewer/artist and art/world. But Alpers leaves a certain tension between object and seeing: she situates seeing in a historically determined field – the field of *visual culture* as a culture of knowledge.

The question of what art might be, beyond meaningfulness, is also addressed by both Fried and Alpers. For both of them, the key to the answer lies in the type of perception dictated by the artwork, and for both of them what characterizes art is the "absorption" of the gaze of an isolated eye, the eye of both producer and recipient: in its aesthetic make-up, art shows that the eye of both artist and viewer is absorbed in its seeing, isolated in the sense of an independence from the surroundings in the moment of seeing – a gaze

38 Peter Schjeldahl, "Minimalism" in Malin Wilson (ed.), *The Hydrogen Jukebox, Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl 1978-1990* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1991), 204-205.

39 Fried, "Art and Objecthood", 146.

that is not “pure” in the sense of a biologically fixed predisposition, but that is extremely focused on what it perceives.