

Rembrandt's Eyes

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Mona Lisa ('the eyes follow you round the room'), for example, has certainly been damaged by its over exposure and The Hay Wain barely survives its endless biscuit tin projection as the essence of Englishness. In contrast The Staalmeester's or the great self portraits exhibited in London last year slough off all traces of sentimentalism and banalization and confront us with extraordinary living power.

This creates a problem for Simon Schama and for anyone aspiring to write about Rembrandt (including the author of this review), namely the likelihood that the writing will be grossly inadequate in the face of the painting. Of course this is a problem for all writing about art but it is intensified where Rembrandt is concerned because of his peculiar 'eloquence': his work speaks to us - emotionally, psychologically - with a directness unmatched even by masters such as Holbein, Durer and Titian.

The difficulty is compounded by the paucity of documentary information about Rembrandt's life combined with the abundance of pictorial material. On the one hand, no diaries, memoirs, interviews, manifestos and almost no letters. On the other, nearly eighty self-portraits - an utterly unprecedented and unmatched visual autobiography - and a large, if indeterminate, number of family portraits (his father, his mother, his brother, Saskia, Hendrickje, Titus, even baby Rumbartus).

So what is writing about Rembrandt doing? What function, exactly, is it performing and is that function necessary or justifiable? If its function is conceived in terms of 'explanation' or 'interpretation' of the meaning of the work it seems to me it is likely to fail, not because the work is mysterious or inexplicable but because it explains itself so much better than the writing can. Thus if we take Rembrandt's Bathsheba or Woman Bathing in a Stream both paintings for which the model was almost certainly his lover, Hendrickje Stoffels, and we start writing about the feelings of the artist towards Hendrickje which the paintings express we need to know that any words we choose - tenderness, love, affection, sympathy, sensuality, desire etc. -

are less expressive, less precise and less powerful than the paintings themselves. If the function of the writing is conceived in terms of persuading the reader of the merits of the work, then however necessary this task may be in relation to much contemporary work or even some neglected figure from the past, it is largely pushing at an open door where Rembrandt is concerned. Again the work has already done the job better than any writing can.

Having wrestled with this problem somewhat, I am persuaded or have persuaded myself, that two kinds of art writing remain necessary and - just about - defensible. The first acts as a signpost. It is akin to the humble but vital guidebook or museum plan and is also the main function of criticism as performed by someone like Clement Greenberg (or F R Leavis in literature). It says, "Here lies an important visual experience", and "I, who know something about these matters, recommend you go and have a look". It is useful and needed because we are all bombarded with so many images, so many sights, that we pay little or not attention to most of them or the attention we pay is very one sided - as when walking through the streets we frequently attend only to getting where we have to go and not to most of the buildings or people - and therefore it helps if someone says in a loud voice "Look, really look, at this!"

The second performs a function similar to the gallery itself or perhaps to a viewing platform from which to survey a natural or urban panorama, that is it provides a context or vantage point favourable to seeing the artwork clearly. Writing does this primarily by providing technical, biographical and socio-historical information relevant to the work's production and reception. For example, Géricault's Raft of the Medusa is a mighty painting in and of itself but it is easier to 'see' it properly, to grasp its power, if one is provided with the information that it was painted in response to an actual shipwreck which was controversial in the way that the recent Paddington rail crash and the sinking of the Herald of Free Enterprise at Zeebrugge were controversial. (Contextual information which would have been available to everyone at the time and which Géricault would have taken for granted.)

Of these two kinds of art writing the first is particularly relevant to contemporary work and the second to work from the past but in both cases the writing must remain strictly and humbly subordinate to the actual visual experience of the art.⁽¹⁾

The fundamental problem with Schama's book is that it is completely lacking in this necessary humility. Despite beginning by quoting Paul Valéry's injunction that "We should apologize for daring to speak about painting", Schama proceeds to ignore the warning and speaks about painting and everything else without apology and without restraint for seven hundred pages. How does he fill these seven hundred pages? Not by providing a systematic account of the history of the times or the structure of the society, nor a rigorous biography, nor a location of Rembrandt's work in its artistic and cultural context. Rather Schama offers a strange hybrid of history, biography and art history yoked together into an apparently seamless though jerky and incomplete narrative. The whole unwieldy structure is sustained by three main procedures each of which seems to me highly dubious.

The first is the piling up of adjective upon adjective, phrase upon phrase, (in)significant detail upon (in)significant detail so as to generate the illusion of seeing, in the words of the dust jacket "through Rembrandt's own eyes". Thus we are offered this description of Amsterdam:

From a seagull's gliding attitude, the great city resembled a half moon; a rat-gnawed cheese; a cradle lying with its base to the southern meadows, the top open to the dark waters of the IJ; the tubby hull of a noorvaarder awaiting masts and sail, sheets and shrouds, so that it might be off about its business; a straw-filled bolster indented with the weight of heavy heads. [p.311]

Followed by:

First, the Zuider Zee itself, sucked through the inlet of the IJ, washing against the slimy double row of palings separating the inner from the outer harbour, carrying with it a load of tangled wrack and weed, worthlessly small fish, and minute crustaceans generating a briny aroma of salt, rotting wood, bilge-water

and the tide-rinsed remains of countless gristly little creatures housed within the shells of periwinkles and barnacles. [p.311]

Which, in turn, is followed by two pages on Amsterdam's supposed smells, three pages on its sounds, two pages on its tastes, another two on its 'straight edges' and 'flowing curves' and three more on its sights. The merits of such prose are doubtless a matter of opinion. Peter Conrad in *The Observer* (31.10.99) called it "ravenously gustatory" and said it left him "pining for a dose of Alka Seltzer". Jonathan Israel, in an otherwise highly critical review in the *TLS* (5.10.99), referred to "his facility with words" and "renowned rhetorical skills" as "Schama's great strength". Personally I find it extremely unappealing. More importantly, the whole exercise is a misguided venture, based on dreadful hubris, for it is not Schama but Rembr andt who has enabled us to see "through Rembrandt's eyes".

Schama's second procedure is to leave no digression unpursued. His two hundred page digression on Rubens, leads to a sub-digression on Rubens' parents, Jan and Maria, and Jan's bedding of Anna of Saxony, and even a sub-sub-digression on Jan's father ' Bartholomeus, the apothecary' who 'had died when Jan was still a child' [p.42]. His description of Leiden leads to a discussion of the town's textile industry and thence to the state of 'the raw wool, dense, greasy and matted [which] came to the city in hanks of sheared fleece', and that in turn to 'the plank floors of workshops (often the front parlour of the smaller houses) where the raw wool was washed, carded, combed and spun' and to how 'the doors of these little houses were left open to the street so that on breezy days the fluff hung over the streets like dandelion seeds' until at last the cloth emerges 'as lengths of serge, baize (not the green stuff of our billiard tables but a fine twill cloth), or worsted, depending on how the fibres were laid and twisted and what merchants said the clothiers in Paris, Frankfurt and Cologne were currently seeking' [p.200]. Schama continues in this vein down every nook and cranny throughout his immense book and in the process displays a truly staggering quantity of knowledge, but to what point? The job of the historian, as E H Carr argued in *What is History?* is to distinguish between 'facts' that are historically relevant and those that are not and this Schama repeatedly fails to do.

Thirdly, wherever there is a gap in the narrative or there is insufficient evidence for the dramatic effect Schama desires, he simply makes things up. He imagines what 'perhaps' was the case, what 'must have' or 'might have' taken place and inserts the fantasy scenario into the story in such a way that the distinction between fact and fiction is repeatedly blurred. The book's first paragraph reads:

After thirty salvos the cannon were obliged to cool off. So perhaps it was then that Constantijn Huygens thought he heard nightingales fluting over the artillery! The windows in the headquarters of Frederik Hendrik, the Prince of Orange, commanded a remote but panoramic prospect of the steege. Had he been asked, Huygens would have been in a perfect position to draft one of those grandiose bird's-eye views of the operations of war, engraved to document the commander's genius, his worthiness to be remembered as the equal of Alexander or Scipio. Some like to describe such scenes as theatres of valour. And to an eye as literary as Huygens's, the distant view from his tower chamber might well have seemed like a great masque, b laz ing with pyrotechnics and noisy with the work of contraptions; a flamboyance of banners. But he also knew that for all its appearance of a rout, such festive parades were actually conducted according to a strict program: first the pipers and drummers; then horses, fantastically comparisoned; then mountebanks and men in lion skins; the pasteboard dolphins and dragons; and finally triumphal cars à l'antique, pulled by garlanded oxen or the occasional camel. [p.3].

Already in these opening lines we have a 'perhaps', a 'had he been', a 'would have been' and a 'might well have'. The overall effect of the passage is to make it almost impossible to tell what is real history here and what is the product of Schama's all too vivid imagination. Nor is this just some opening rhetorical flourish. Schama continues in the same vein right to the closing paragraphs where he 'imagines' Rembrandt's daughter Cornelia in Batavia 'on that December day' looking at her sleeping child 'as if he were silently, seriously conversing with himself as to how he had come to be baptized with so peculiar a name as Rembrandt' [p.702]. In between the technique is put to work creating the impression that Schama has a hot line to the

mind of Rembrandt nearly four centuries ago. Thus:

Rembrandt was giving his full attention to the matter of painting, and in particular to a small patch of plaster in a corner of the walk-up studio. At the point where the wall met the upright beam of the doorjamb, projecting into the room, plaster had begun to flake and lift, exposing a triangle of rosy brick... Rembrandt liked this. From the beginning he was powerfully drawn to ruin. He enjoyed tracing the marks left by the bite of worldly experience. He liked to toy with the poignant discrepancies between outsides and insides. In the corner of his room, Rembrandt's eye ran over the fishtail triangle of decomposing wall. [p.12-13].

Peter Ackroyd in *The Times* (28.10.99) finds this stuff convincing, "[Schama] is able to enter his subject with his own imagination so that we seem to be standing beside the artist as he places his brush upon the canvas". I find it false, bordering on the dishonest. For me it tends to destroy my confidence in the book as a whole and to undermine its genuine merits.

Such merits do exist. On the one hand, as I have already said, there is the prodigious amount of information that has been absorbed and processed. Even if the facts are not one hundred per cent reliable - Jonathan Israel, who has infinitely more expertise in the matter than I do, says there are "numerous astounding inaccuracies" and identified seven or eight of them (TLS 5.10.99) - this remains a considerable achievement. On the other hand there are a number of cogent, closely argued and interesting readings of individual works - the exceptionally detailed analysis of *The Night Watch* [pp.480-500], especially the exposition of its compositional structure [p.496] is outstanding, but I also have in mind his discussions of the Danaë and the nude etchings [pp.383-401] and of the wondrous *Jewish Bride* [pp.663-68]. By the time I reached these passages I was so out of sorts with Rembrandt's *Eyes* that it took a while to realize that a qualitative improvement had occurred. But it was as if having a definite image in front of him to work on temporarily relieves him of the necessity to invent and fantasize and word spin. This does not mean I regard Schama's interpretations as definitive or even necessarily correct, for example I see a critical element in *The Night Watch* he would deny, but they are serious and challenging contributions.

But enough of the merits and demerits of Rembrandt's *Eyes* structure, prose and research, what of its general case about Rembrandt, its overall intellectual argument? In fact, for a book of this size, there is remarkable little of such argument. There is, of course, the contention that the example of Rubens was of overwhelming importance for Rembrandt's development. To say that this point is stressed is an understatement since it is asserted and built into the structure, woven into the narrative, for hundreds of pages, but it is not really argued for. That is to say it is not argued for in the way that a historian or art historian should argue, considering counter arguments and alternative possibilities and the views of other authorities. In the end one is left with the feeling that while Rubens must have been a significant influence (like Cézanne on Picasso or Picasso on Pollock) Schama is overstating and rather forcing his case. What is not offered, however, is any general consideration of the relationship between Rembrandt's work and the rest of Dutch art in the 17th century (Hals, van Ruysdael, de Hooch, Vermeer etc. are conspicuous by their virtual absence). Nor is there a general argument about the relation between Rembrandt and Dutch society. This might seem strange in view of the obsession with the infinitesimal details of the physical environment but it is as if the unending focus on the trees substitutes for an overview of the wood. Then again, there is a sense in which the assertion of the non-existence, in the final analysis, of a relation between Dutch society and Rembrandt's art (except as 'background' or 'context') is the book's central theoretical proposition.

This is the point Schama emphasizes in his interview in *The Times*([2](#)) and in the key theoretical section of the book entitled 'New York 1998'. He is at war with 'fashionable' determinism([3](#)) and his battle-cry is 'Rembrandt as genius'.

Now the concept of 'genius' has long played a major role in cultural history and criticism and has been much debated in the last thirty years or so. My own view is that the word itself is not a problem. If it is taken to mean simply 'someone who is exceptionally, outstandingly good at something' then Shakespeare was a genius at writing plays, Einstein was a genius at theoretical physics, Marx was a genius at social theory, Kasparov is a genius at chess and Cézanne and Rembrandt were geniuses at painting. Fine! But genius is

frequently taken to mean much more than this. It carries with it connotations of belonging to a higher order of humanity than ordinary mortals, of divine inspiration, of innate superiority, of asocial, supra-historical transcendence. And with this concept of genius there most certainly is a problem. To put the matter bluntly it is both mystical and not far removed from the idea that some people are born to rule. Yet it is precisely this latter meaning that Schama chooses to adopt and apply to Rembrandt.

There was a time, not so very long ago, before the anachronism police had been sent out on monograph patrol, when "genius" and "Rembrandt" seemed to belong in the same sentence. For the unnumbered millions who respond intuitively to his painting applying the G word to Rembrandt seems no more incongruous than awarding it to Shakespeare, Raphael, Cervantes, Milton or Bernini, all of whom predate the Romantic recoinage of the word. It was the way in which Michelangelo was referred to both inside Italy and beyond. Not long after his death, biographies of artists made a habit of identifying those who were inexplicably exceptional as prodigies whose gifts seemed so incommensurably greater than those of their contemporaries that they must have been marked by a touch of divinity. [p.24my emphasis - JM]

In making his case that Rembrandt is a genius in this sense Schama commits, I believe, two intellectual errors. The first is to equate the evident uniqueness of Rembrandt's art with its social inexplicability. [pp25-26]. This misses the fact that we are all of us, in certain respects, unique and that what makes the work of a particular artist uniquely 'great' is not that it is asocial but that it gives especially intense and powerful expression to profoundly social themes. This is what happens in Aeschylus' Agamemnon, in Michelangelo's David, in Picasso's Guernica, in Eliot's Waste Land and in Rembrandt's Staalmeesters. (4) The second is to identify conformity with being a product of society and rebellion with being outside or above society. The theoretical error here was exposed by Marx when he wrote, "The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class". (5) Conformists and rebels, Manchester Liberals and Chartists, Versailles and Communards, fascists and communists, Edmund Burke and Tom Paine, Ingres and Manet are equally products of their given society.

Underlying these confusions is Schama's failure to grasp, failure even to attempt to grasp, the contradictions in Dutch society. That would involve dealing with the structure and nature of that society as a totality, something Schama never does either in Rembrandt's Eyes or in his earlier, much superior, work The Embarrassment of Riches. In my opinion the starting point for understanding both the nature of Dutch society in the Golden Age (its amazing dynamic novelty and its cold cruelty) and the nature of Rembrandt's art (its no less amazing humanity and originality and its profound sadness) is that the Dutch Republic was the world's first properly capitalist society and state, the result of the first successful bourgeois revolution. Subjectively, the birth of capitalism, emerging from the interstices of feudal society, was experienced by society's most sensitive antennae, and perhaps also by the mass of its population, as both an immense liberation and a profound loss, a profound increase in alienation. This is what lies at the root of Shakespeare's tragedies and Michelangelo's sculptures, both David and the slaves. It is what permits us to understand how Rembrandt could be both enthusiast for Dutch society and rebel against it, painter of The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp and etcher of himself as beggar.

Schama would reject this starting point out of hand as old fashioned Marxist dogma (or would it be fashionable determinism). Indeed he has already cut himself off from the most minimal use of insights derived from a Marxist perspective when he denies at the start of The Embarrassment of Riches that the Dutch burgher was a bourgeois on the spurious grounds that 'the burgher was a citizen first and homo oeconomicus second'. (6)

It is this rejection which prevents Schama, for all his labours, from producing a coherent or convincing account of Rembrandt's art as a whole and which, combined with his overwhelming ambition to be a historian superstar, results in him filling his pages with lists of every fowl to be found in Amsterdam game pie and every smell he can imagine rising from the Amsterdam canals. Fortunately Rembrandt's art rises effortlessly above the cacophony.

Notes

1. There is another kind of writing about art which is quite widespread and, I think, legitimate, where art is mentioned as part of a wider historical, sociological or philosophical analysis of a period, theme or issue. But this is different in that the aim is not to illuminate the art but to use the art to illustrate the wider argument. Thus Marx's observation that, 'Rembrandt painted the Mother of God as a Dutch peasant woman', (L Baxandall and S Morawski eds, Marx, Engels: On Literature and Art ; New York 1977 p.60) was designed to make a point about ideology and material conditions in a debate about freedom of the press.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. "I've moved back to a more old-fashioned view of Rembrandt that, while requiring substantial amounts of history, wants to say that there are limits to what history can explain. It's a view that looks at how paint lands on the canvas and leaves more space for the pure powers of original invention. History doesn't really have any explanatory forms for that, I believe". The Times (28.10.99) [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Personally, determinism strikes me as profoundly unfashionable at the moment but conservative ideologists always like to present themselves as rebels against dominant left wing orthodoxies.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Seeing all art, great and mediocre alike, as social, does not involve embracing as mechanical or absolute determinism. For a discussion of determinism in general and its application to art in particular, see John Molyneux, 'Is Marxism Deterministic ?' International Socialism 68, Autumn 1995. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. K Marx and F Engels, The German Ideology, London 1985 p.65.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. S Schama, The Embarrassment of Riches, London 1987, p. 15.[Back to \(6\)](#)

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