

Review: Visual Practices and Invisible Boundaries

Els Stronks, ‘Negotiating Differences. Word, Image and Religion in the Dutch Republic’, in *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions*, ed. by Andrew Colin Gow (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

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The Dangers of Ocular Desire

In his account of the ascent of the Mont Ventoux on 26 April 1336, recounted in a famous letter to his confessor Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, purportedly on the eve of the same day, Petrarch describes how, upon reaching the summit of the windy mountain, he is overwhelmed by the view of the surroundings. But as the poet freely gazes upon the landscape that unfolds before his eyes, his mind is almost instantly directed inward and he feels compelled to open the book he has taken with him on his hike, not coincidentally Augustine's *Confessions*. Ever since he received the book from his confessor, it has accompanied him everywhere, Petrarch writes. Not unlike Augustine's own scriptural and transformative experience, the book falls open, as they are known to do, on a well-read passage from book ten which describes the dangers of ocular desire; men forget themselves, Augustine warns, when they gaze upon the beauty of the world.

[T]he mountains of the province of Lyons could be very clearly seen on the right, and to the left the sea by Marseilles and the sea that beats upon Aigues-Mortes, some days' journey away; the Rhône itself was right under our eyes. While I was admiring these places one by one, thinking now of earthly matters, and now raising my mind, after the example of my body, to higher things, it occurred to me to look into that book of St. Augustine's, his *Confessions*. It was your kind gift, and I always keep it with me in memory of the author and of the giver; it is such a handy little book, small but infinitely pleasing. I [92] opened it, intending to read whatever I chanced to light upon, for what could I find there that was not holy and devout? I happened to open it at the tenth book. [...] And I call God and my brother to witness, these are the words that struck my eyes first: “And men go to look in amazement at mountain-heights and the huge waves of the sea and the broad flow of rivers and the tracts of ocean and the stars in their courses, but for themselves they take no thought.” I was astonished, I must confess.¹

In his monumental study (and defense) of the rise of secular modernity, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg sees this moment of free observation

of nature that is instantly turned into contemplation of the self, as an instance in which the *Epochenschwelle* between the Middle Ages and early modernity – expressed as an oscillation between inwardness (*memoria*) on the one hand and worldliness (*curiositas*) on the other hand – becomes visible.²

With early modernity begins an era that is characterized by what has been described by Martin Jay as ‘ocular-centrism’; new discoveries in science (for instance the invention of microscopes and telescopes as well as new insights into the nature of sight) and new developments in the arts (for instance those of perspectival painting in Italy or the rise of landscape painting in the Northern Renaissance) hinged on the primacy of sight for human cognition.³ However, vision was and always remained ambiguous; as early modern reliance on the sense of sight grew for understanding the world scientifically, residual distrust of vision – already present, as becomes obvious from the citation above, in Augustine’s theology – increased with the rise of Reformatory tendencies. For Luther, as for Augustine, believing is a function of hearing, not of seeing.

A growing distrust of the theatricalities of Catholicism, especially of the ritual of Mass, seen ‘as a visual lie’ by Protestants, spawned debates over idolatry and iconoclasm between them.⁴ Seen from the most extreme stance in the debates, Catholicism becomes a religion of the ritual and the theatrical and is therefore supremely reliant on sight, while Protestantism becomes the religion of the Word and the text, reliant on hearing. As is to be expected, however, religious differences between Catholics and Protestants could never be reduced to such a simple dichotomy. For instance, in spite of their suspicion of the visual and the ocular, assurance of visual accuracy is of much greater importance to a Protestant than to a Catholic. Precisely because of their rejection of the theatrical and idolatrous spectacle of Mass and their insistence on seeing bread as bread and wine as wine – and not as merely the accidental forms of Christ’s flesh and blood – it is important for Protestant believers that what they see is exactly what it is, in other words that bread is bread and wine is wine.⁵

The widely used metaphor of nature as the second book of God, as God’s second revelation next to or complementing (or even expounding on) the Bible also betrays, in particular for the Dutch Provinces in the seventeenth century, a greater [93] reliance on vision for understanding God than would be readily apparent from the Reformers’ insistence on *sola fide* or *sola scriptura*.⁶ Again the influences of Augustine can be traced throughout the development of this metaphor.⁷ The complexities of these issues surrounding the visual, ocular, aural and verbal aspects of worship, be they expected or unexpected, are precisely what is at stake in the book under review in this text.

The Peculiar Dutch Republic

The main objective of Els Stronks’s *Negotiating Differences. Word, Image and Religion in the Dutch Republic* is to gain insight into the nature of the peaceful coexistence of the different denominations in the Dutch Republic. In order to achieve this, Stronks starts from the assumption that an analysis of the illustrated religious literature in the Dutch Republic between 1600 and 1725 will reveal the invisible boundaries between the visual practices of the Catholics and the textual traditions of the Protestants. In other words, Stronks starts from the idea that literature is particularly suited to reveal the complexities of the debate that I have already hinted at. The period’s religious literature, and in particular the ways in which it includes or excludes or makes specific use of illustrations, can provide new insights into the nature of the

supposed religious freedom and tolerance (Stronks herself uses the term ‘toleration’ as denoting not so much acceptance as some sort of religious ‘laissez-faire’) of the Republic.

In Stronks’s analysis religious literary texts are regarded as ‘responses to opinions and cultural sensibilities’ on the one hand, and as ‘representations of identities’ on the other.⁸ Protestants and Catholics alike shaped their religious identity through the appropriation of textual or visual practices of other denominations. Stronks regards literature thus both as an instrument of change and as a response to contemporary issues.⁹ The period’s illustrated religious literature is therefore treated as a ‘social framework in which the ideologies of its participants were shaped and reshaped’.¹⁰ This is an approach that is both compelling and challenging, since it is not an easy task to trace the agency of a particular literary text. Stronks defines the ‘scope’ of her study as a combination of a literary perspective, book history, cultural history and visual studies. And indeed she successfully combines a historical with a hermeneutical approach, to which I will come back later. It is already clear from the opening chapter that Stronks’ carefully balanced structure which neatly divides the period she is discussing, will be accompanied by an equally balanced methodology.

As an illustration to her starting point, Stronks describes in the first chapter the case of the Dutch Reformed minister Willem Teellinck (1579–1629). With his devotional treatise *Ecce Homo, ofte ooghen-salve voor die noch sitten in blintheydt des ghemoedts* [Ecce Homo, or salve for the eyes of those who are still sitting in blindness of mind] published in 1622 and dedicated to the VOC (Verenigde Oostindische [94] Compagnie, United East India Company), Teellinck was the first to include an explicitly missionary character in his theological writings. Teellinck is commonly regarded as the first exponent of Dutch Pietism. Interestingly, the Reformed theologian and preacher Gisbertus Voetius called Teellinck a Reformed Thomas à Kempis, thereby placing Pietism on a par with Catholic practices. Teellinck, whose stance in the iconoclastic debate of the age was that images were dangerous and therefore redundant to worship, preached *sola scriptura* and in fact represents the most extreme Reformed position in the debate.¹¹ However, since Teellinck was clearly influenced by the theology of Thomas à Kempis and the practices of the *Devotio Moderna*, he provides an excellent case study of what Stronks calls the ‘porosity of early modern confessional boundaries’ in the process of differentiation between the various denominations of the Dutch Republic.¹²

Religious Literature or Religious Writing?

Before I discuss the rest of the book’s chapters, I would like to take a closer look at Stronks’s corpus and the way she defines it. As I have already indicated, the author studies literature both as an instrument of change and as a social framework. Given the specificity of her research aims, her corpus thus consists of a particular kind of literature, namely religious literature. Stronks defines religious literature, following Ian Green, as ‘literature specifically related to the Bible, as well as works concerned with the relationship between God and the faithful’, although the latter type could also be called devotional literature.¹³ Further on in her comprehensive opening chapter, Stronks sums up her research corpus as ‘a representative and extensive selection of poetry collections, emblem books, picture Bibles and illustrated Bibles, collections of hymns, sermons and prayer books’ that she subsequently divides into two neat categories, namely biblical illustrations and emblematic imagery. This definition, however clear and useful for Stronks’s particular aims and purposes, begs a number of questions, such as ‘Why are illustrated Bibles, sermons, hymns and prayer books regarded as literature in an early modern

context?’, ‘Can Teellinck’s treatises be regarded as literature with such a definition?’ and ‘If so, can Teellinck be regarded as an early modern literary author?’. Even though the answer to the last questions intuitively and automatically appears to me to be a resounding ‘No’, Stronks’s definition in itself leaves room for doubt.

This does not pose a problem for Stronks’s analysis since her definition of literature is not meant to be an ontological category but rather a heuristic one. Besides, this should not be seen as a flaw in Stronks’s argumentation, but rather as one of the book’s assets, since these questions – important questions that certainly deserve the attention of a literary historian, I might add – about the boundaries and specificities of early modern literature as opposed to other social and [95] cultural domains (in this case religion) are raised by Stronks’s book despite their not being within its scope.

The Debates in the Dutch Republic

In the second chapter, ‘Aspects of visual culture: word, image and religion’, Stronks provides the reader with a comprehensive synthesis of the historical religious and cultural debates that shaped the literary environment of the seventeenth century. In other words, she draws up the ideological framework in which the religious literature that will be under scrutiny functioned. She does this by means of a number of key texts of that period, for instance the unavoidable *De Initiatione Christi* by Thomas à Kempis or Calvin’s *Institutiones* but also perhaps more surprisingly Karel van Mander’s *Schilder-boeck*. By using these texts to reveal the intricacies of the age’s ideologies, Stronks aptly shows how the ideological framework of the age is indeed itself made up of texts and thus further illustrates her definition of literature as a social framework. These debates revolve around three issues that Stronks manages to outline clearly without affecting their complexity: the hierarchy of senses, the role of emotions and the representation of the invisible.

Analyses of Word and Image

After these two introductory chapters – one introducing aims and method, the other providing the reader with background and context – Stronks expounds her analysis in five chapters, each dealing with a particular period in time that in turn corresponds to a number of trends in the religious literature of the various denominations. I would like to call these content-based chapters and these are all extremely well-documented and thoroughly substantiated. Furthermore Stronks never loses sight of the social framework which, in her eyes, is a building block of literature and continuously shifts back to the historical context of the emergence of these texts. Among the many strengths of this book is the fact that Stronks actually manages to combine a broad scope (the natural result of the project’s ambitious aims) with minute attention to detail. That is to say the author provides the reader with careful, nuanced and detailed analyses of the selected emblems and the texts that accompany them while never losing sight of the bigger picture.

Although it may seem obvious that a study that aims to integrate a literary (hermeneutical) with a cultural-historical approach manages to do just that, this is no small feat. Especially as the reading of emblematic images, in a hermeneutical approach, can often become lost in the wake of textual excavation. This brings me to the following commendable feature of Stronks’s study: its richness in illustrations. I must confess that I am usually not one for carefully

examining [96] illustrations provided in literary studies. Here, it is imperative to do so to fully grasp what Stronks is trying to convey.

The genre of the book review does not allow for praise alone. I therefore have to point out that the richness of the text and its dense argumentation sometimes result in a sort of casualness about important points that are being made. This happens, for instance, in chapter seven where Stronks remarks almost nonchalantly that the literary developments she describes support the hypothesis that towards the end of the seventeenth century there was a shift away from institutional religion towards the individual believer.¹⁴ This is corroborated by the fact that Stronks's overall conclusion is included in the epilogue instead of the main body of the text. But this is just a minor critique, as is the following observation that left me frowning: Stronks's study ends with a question, namely 'Why was the intermingling of textual and visual practices unexpectedly complicated in the Republic, where Catholics and Protestants coexisted and interrelated in relative freedom compared to neighboring countries, whose restrictive mechanisms such as censorship and legislation were more impedimental?'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, *Negotiating Differences* is an impressive piece of work that almost answers as many questions as it raises.

Notes

1. Petrarch, *My Secret Book*, trans. by J.G. Nichols (London: Hesperus Press Ltd, 2002), p. 109.
2. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966; repr. 1996), p. 398.
3. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. (Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1993), see chapter 1.
4. Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye. Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4.
5. Clark, *Vanities of the Eye* (2007), p. 190.
6. For the importance of the metaphor in the early modern Netherlands see: Eric Jorink, *Het Boeck der Natuere. Nederlandse geleerden en de wonderen van Gods Schepping 1575-1715* (Leiden: Primavera Press, 2006).
7. As has been done by Hans Blumenberg for instance in *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986).
8. Els Stronks, 'Negotiating Differences. Word, Image and Religion in the Dutch Republic', in *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions*, ed. by Andrew Colin Gow (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p 3.
9. Stronks, 'Negotiating Differences' (2011), p. 9.
10. Stronks, 'Negotiating Differences' (2011), p. 9.
11. Stronks, 'Negotiating Differences' (2011), pp. 4-7.
12. Stronks, 'Negotiating Differences' (2011), p. 10.
13. Stronks, 'Negotiating Differences' (2011), p. 9. Or see Ian M. Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. ix. [97]
14. Stronks, 'Negotiating Differences' (2011), p. 269.

15. Stronks, 'Negotiating Differences' (2011), p. 303.