



Heidi de Mare, ***Huiselijke taferelen. De veranderende rol van het beeld in de Gouden Eeuw*** (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2012, 607 pp., ISBN 978 94 6004 066 5).

In *Huiselijke taferelen. De veranderende rol van het beeld in de Gouden Eeuw* [Domestic Scenes: The Changing Role of the Image in the Dutch Golden Age] Heidi de Mare argues that in the early modern period the image served as an instrument by which knowledge of the natural world could be produced. Following Michel Foucault for whom history unfolds not gradually but through a series of epistemological ruptures, De Mare observes how Holland of the seventeenth-century gave rise to a new episteme, or a constellation of knowledge, in which the dominant, religious image-concept had been replaced by what she calls the ‘early modern image-concept’. Influenced by Svetlana Alpers, Pamela Smith and Claudia Swan, among others, De Mare wishes to demonstrate that seeing is a form of knowing, and she does this by offering an exploration into Pieter de Hooch’s *kamergezichten* or interior scenes.

In many ways, this book is one continuing celebration of the immense potential of the image as a product as much as a producer of knowledge. True to the interdisciplinarity that De Mare advocates, De Hooch’s work is placed in the context of Simon Stevin’s architectural designs of houses, Jacob Cats’ literary instructions for running a perfect household, and Samuel van Hoogstraten’s treatise that encourages young artists to first study the world before starting to paint it. The three chapters on Cats, Stevin and the interior scene that form the core of this lengthy study are preceded by an elaborate discussion of the position of Aristotelian thought in early modern Europe through which, De Mare insists, the changing concept of the image should be understood.

For De Mare, De Hooch’s domestic scenes are neither realistic snapshots of the past, nor moralistic puzzles to be deciphered, but rather exercises in translating visual properties of the contents of a room into paint. His oil paintings are brought up as examples of sites where the minutiae of domestic visuality were studied: the patchwork of doors, windows and walls within one composition, the reflection and refraction of light and shadow falling onto them, the appearance of objects against it such as chairs and benches, pots and pans, books and candles, and, ultimately, the bodies placed within them. De Mare asserts that De Hooch, and artists like him, studied closely the ways hands hold pens, needles, or apple skins, bodies bend, sit, or turn, or how light plays of on a fold in a silk dress: it is as if we see De Hooch’s hungry gaze zooming in on these things all the

while recording them in paint. By comparing Van Hoogstraten's art theory with De Hooch's paintings, De Mare points out that these artists, by closely following instructions, in fact put the theory of seeing as knowing into practice.

However, despite its compelling argument on De Hooch, the book bites off more than it can chew. Instead of further developing the main argument about De Hooch and the changing image-concept, this study offers long reviews of the current literature on various topics that read as state-of-the-field reports. These literary overviews are filled with sharp criticisms, finger-wagging and sweeping statements, resulting from a deep suspicion of art historical and theoretical discourse. De Mare is quick with her critique yet slow in offering alternatives. As a result, the book is at once too much and not enough. Too much are lengthy expositions on nineteenth century myths and clichés around Dutch domesticity and artistic genius, on Plato's hostility towards images, on Jan Steen's topsy-turvy households et cetera. What the book leaves out are key concepts, essential ideas and crucial scholarly works that would have enabled De Mare to make her criticism productive. For instance, it is inconceivable that she as a self-declared image-scientist (*beeldwetenschapper*) refrains from mentioning the German field of *Bildwissenschaft* that brings together early modern art, science, and natural philosophy in a very exciting and very fruitful way. Another mystery is why interpretation is termed a 'by-product of human history' (573), while the alternatives De Mare presents in the form of 'slow looking' and 'close-reading' are both very much interpretive practices coming out of semiotics. Methodological inconsistencies such as these are numerous, and accumulate at the end of the book, when historical formalism is proposed as a way out of the impasse created by art historical over-interpretation and the dominant, nineteenth century-based art historical paradigm. However, if there is one approach that might propel us straight back into nineteenth century ideology, it is formalism.

But what concerns me most is the status of the unusual format of the lavish reproductions that have been inserted as separate folders at the end of each chapter. Most pages display twenty-odd thumbnail figures, sometimes only of details, headed by a general theme, and lacking proper captions. Surprisingly, various covers of books mentioned in the text are illustrated as well, while their presence remains unjustified (the covers have not been discussed in the text). Evidently, this lay-out is inspired by Google image search and my guess is that De Mare wants to let her selection of examples speak for itself as a visual argument as such. But it does not work. In a scholarly work that is about changing image conceptions, and that fulminates against contemporary scholarship that presumably refuses to look at art properly, it is remarkable, to say the least, that the size of the reproductions preclude any form of slow looking or close reading that the reader is encouraged to carry out. (The reader's engagement with materials is generally frustrated, as there are, for instance, no proper footnotes either, even when quotations have been given.) Moreover, one would have hoped that De Mare had acknowledged that the repetition of motives and patterns that we spot in De Hooch's work are brought about by the very conditions of their reproduction as series of

thumbnails in her book. However, like most of us image-lovers, De Mare probably has been carried away by the overwhelming riches of visuals available online, feeding upon them from behind the computer screen, only to forget that the patterns we discover in thumbnail reproductions today are likely to stand at the foundations of the art historical myths of tomorrow.

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