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Lindenwood University

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Andrea Roberts

Ceci N'est Pas un David

Dr. James Hutson

Art 400: Senior Seminar

10 May 2012

It is a peculiar fact that almost every piece of artwork ever created has attached to it a piece of text.¹ Originally, at least, most works are given a title for the purpose of referring to what it is. Later, this body of text begins to grow as critical work is written and attached to it by the use of the title. A consequence of this is that text connected to a piece of artwork becomes significant to the piece itself and can even be reinterpreted and critiqued as though it were part of the original work. For example, there is a chunk of marble that, at the time of this writing, is positioned inside of the Florence's Accademia Art Gallery; it is very beautiful, for it was carved into the shape of a man, though immensely tall, by an expert artist.² However, it is not until specific words are attached to this marble that it becomes recognizable, specifically, when the artist is named as Michelangelo Buonarroti and the work is named *David* (Figure 1). These words become "signifiers" that are attached to and interact with the piece itself.³ This fact functions as the most immediate channel into the art world for aspects of Reception Theory and later, deconstructionist literary theory, such as the kind put forth by French theorist Jacques Derrida.⁴ For deconstructive purposes, it becomes useful to focus on a specific signifier for an in depth analysis; a good place to start is with the most important piece of text attached to this statue, and that is its name, *David*. By taking this word and the narrative that it implies, at least two distinct binaries can be analyzed. These are the relationship between David and Goliath, with the emphasis being on Goliath and the relationship between perfection and imperfection, which interrogates the culture in which the piece was created. Through the method of

¹ Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History*, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2004), 216-217.

² Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, (Upper Saddle River, Prentice Hall, 2011), 443.

³ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History: A Discussion of Context and Senders," in *The Art of Art History*, 243-255, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2009), 243.

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1996), 70-71. (Also see Jacques Derrida's *Restitutions of the Truth in Painting*, 1978.)

deconstruction, the traditional interpretations of Michelangelo's *David* can be argued as incomplete and often meaningless, largely due to the effects of ethnocentrism.

Norman Bryson, a semiologist, has contributed to the discourse of intertextuality in his writings on the theory of the signs and their relation to (con)text.⁵ Bryson broaches the idea of 'framing', formerly proposed by Jonathon Culler, as a context for a work of art "is not given but produced".⁶ As signs contain socially constituted meanings, 'framing' the signs within a work would open interpretation by the understanding that signs are "institutional arrangements, systems of value and semiotic mechanisms."⁷ This ideology advances the search of social historical relevancy in a work, as the context in which the piece was rendered may have caused a deviation from its intentional or "implied reading".

The most immediate form of interpretation applied to the statue of *David* occurs even before a visitor approaches it. Renowned culturally, the familiar title supplies to the viewer the name of the man who is being represented. As a symbol, the word "David" is tied to the narrative of the Israelite King David; the work's connection to this narrative is underscored by two single details within the work that are direct representations of the narrative, and these are the sling and the stone that are held within the man's hands.⁸ In fact, the sling and the stone indicate that the work is intending to represent a localized section of this narrative, an episode found early in the tale which portrays the young man, not yet a king, gaining his fame by challenging a foe to his nation that none other in the Israelite army was willing to challenge.⁹

⁵ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History: A Discussion of Context and Senders," in *The Art of Art History*, 243-255, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2009), 244.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 2 Sam. 5, 6 ESV.

⁹ 1 Sam. 17 ESV.

This foe is named Goliath, and this portion of the story is almost always referred to as the Story of David and Goliath.

Here is an interesting effect; the statue is titled *David*, and it is shaped into the form of the young king. However, because of the specific moment being portrayed, it is impossible to not complete the phrase and mention the name Goliath. There may be only one word on the placard displaying the title *David*, but every person who walks up to it will mutter the words *David facing Goliath*. Thus, although not portrayed or named in any way, Goliath is also included in this artwork because he is supposedly the intended recipient of the young king's gaze.

This creates difficulties in the reception of the work; particularly because the work is received as heroic and magnificent. This effect is often attributed to the statues exaggerated size, the alluded anatomical perfection, and contemplative stance in which the figure is positioned. This interpretation, even when restricted to the portion of the David narrative to which the work refers, limits itself solely towards the Jewish and also biblical interpretation of these events. In fact, as the common saying goes, the victors write the history books, and the view of David as a hero is peculiarly a Judeo-Christian viewpoint. If one were to analyze subdominant portions of story, using the biblical text as a starting point and moving to the numerous retellings of it throughout Christian history, the symbol that the young man David becomes within the story is only heroic to the Jews. Yet, to their enemies, the Philistines, he would become a terrifying symbol, one of pain and loss. To them, the image of David would represent the death of their greatest warrior, the retreat and humiliation of their armies, and, one might assume, a possible

act of disapproval from their deity, the god Dagon.¹⁰ If this subdominant interpretation of the story is allowed primacy, the statue no longer can function as simply an illustration of a hero, as the city of Florence wanted to cast David, but it must also incorporate these opposing views. Thus, the image that the statue presents is conflicted. Is the viewer supposed to view this man in admiration, as though he were about to save the nation from its greatest threat? Instead, the presence of this alternate reading means that the image bears with it a sense of anxiety. The viewer may then become unconsciously aware that the figure shown may in fact be an image of an enemy about to calmly topple feelings of security and victory. *David* may in fact not be a victor but a villainous destroyer.

In fact, it is unnecessary to reach back to the original story to find the potential for differing views of this event. In contemporary times, after the refounding of Israel in 1948, the word “David” has inflated in its connotation to include the Star of David representing Judaism used as an insignia on Israel’s flag. Thus, the word “David” carries with it subconsciously a representation of the current nation of Israel. Should a visitor to this statue be from a nation that is either anti-semitic or at extreme odds with the political goals of Israel, their interpretation of this image may not connect with the heroics of a young king saving his people but rather of a Jewish culture that is despised. For instance, should a Palestinian, whose people are currently within a bitter and longstanding war with Israel, view this statue and give an interpretation, it may be much more similar to the ancient interpretation voiced by the Philistines within the original text. For the Palestinians, this may very well be an image of what they perceive to be “Goliath”. In Donald Preziosi’s Introduction Deconstruction and the Limits of Interpretation, he

¹⁰ 1 Sam. 5:1-7 ESV.

discusses the issue that a work of art “could ‘justifiably’ be considered a code comparable to other practices of social meaning production”.¹¹

Once the unvoiced presence of Goliath is recognized, attention can be turned to the image itself, that which is named “David”. A seventeen foot tall representation of a young male, this image is entirely nude; it holds in its left hand a sling, and in its right a stone, signifying the character the statue is intended to illustrate¹². This figure is held up as an image of bodily perfection, and this introduces another binary into the work, that of the concepts of perfection and imperfection.

Again, there is a discrepancy between the statue itself and the symbolic narrative of which the statue’s name is a signifier. To begin with, while the character David was a shepherd and therefore could be conceived as being rather muscular, there is almost no room for interpreting the image of his fight with Goliath as being in the nude.¹³ As detailed in the Mosaic laws located within what the Jews call the Torah, nakedness was considered offensive and always represented shame within Jewish culture.¹⁴ The fact that *David* bears no clothing does not find its source in the original narrative and must therefore come from somewhere else, further dividing this art piece from the text that has been attached to it. However, in accordance with cinquecento art and Michelangelo’s views on the divinity of the human body it is appropriate for David to be rendered nude in accordance to what was considered beautiful in Florence, Italy in the sixteenth century.¹⁵ The nudity of the statue also functions to reveal another important detail

¹¹ Donald Preziosi, “Deconstruction and the Limits of Interpretation,” in *The Art of Art History*, 271-273, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2009), 271

¹² Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, (Upper Saddle River, Prentice Hall, 2011), 443.

¹³ *Ibid*, 477.

¹⁴ Gen. 1:7-11 ESV.

¹⁵ Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, (Upper Saddle River, Prentice Hall, 2011), 477.

which must be critiqued; the statue *David* is not circumcised. According to the book of Genesis, because of the religious covenant which the Jewish God made with Abraham, all of Abraham's descendants were required to be circumcised to signify their involvement in the covenant.¹⁶ Later, this requirement was codified into law in the book of Leviticus, which states that Jewish males were to be circumcised eight days after they were born.¹⁷ As a descendant of Abraham, David would most certainly have been circumcised. The absence of this detail becomes very revealing about the culture in which artist Michelangelo lived. First, this detail represents the pronounced separation between Michelangelo's Italian European culture and that of the ancient, Jewish, Middle Eastern culture in which King David is situated. Because of the demographics of the time, as well as the spread of Anti-Semitism through Europe which caused an exodus of the Jews, Michelangelo would probably have been unfamiliar with Jewish culture to the point that he was unaware of this important detail.¹⁸ Furthermore, it is also conceivable that he would not have had an opportunity to find a model of what this procedure should look like because Florentine men of this time were commonly uncircumcised. However, it is not just this portion of the statue that is incongruent with Jewish body; the statue lacks any defining features, such as hair or facial structure, that would mark it as anything other than a sixteenth-century European male. This is most likely because of another commonly stated interpretation of the statue, which is that it is a portrayal of male perfection.

The implication of this is that if the statue is Michelangelo's representation of *David* is supposed to portray male perfection, and the statue is not Jewish but rather European, then *David*

¹⁶ Gen. 17: 9-14 ESV.

¹⁷ Lev. 12:3 ESV.

¹⁸ James Hutson. E-mail to author, May 3, 2012. Also see Elizabeth D. Malissa, Italy and the Jews Timeline, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/italytime.html> (The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise: 2012).

functions to reflect the anti-Semitic rhetoric of Michelangelo's era. European culture of the 1500's held the difficult paradox of being both anti-Semitic and strongly Catholic, a religion which incorporates massive amounts of ancient Jewish stories. For Florence to commission a statue of David cast as a European demonstrates their interpreting of the Jewish people into an "other", a concept well familiar to post-modern theory through the works of Edward Said.¹⁹ As an "other", Michelangelo fabricates what was originally a Jewish story and symbol into something more recognizably European by portraying what could be called the epoch of Jewish culture as instead a "symbol of Florence's valiant Republic".²⁰ A Eurocentric mindset would see the European body as superior, and should David need to be presented as a heroic and imposing figure, his "Jewishness" would get in the way. Thus the impetus towards perfection within the statue *David* represents much less the perfect male form and much more a prejudice against the Jewish race. This prejudice infiltrates back into the interpretation of the statue to further confuse any perceived meaning, for the image is both the glorification and the oppression of Jewish culture throughout Europe.

More and more the image presented by the statue in Florence's Accademia Gallery of Art ceases to align with the text with which it associates with. It can no longer be interpreted as the image of the young, strident David, muscles taut, poised in concentration and faith in the moment before the event that would end a military conflict in Israelite victory and effectively launch David into the career that would destine him to be king. It must instead make room for the slain Goliath, who represents the strength and vitality of an opposing culture relegated to the role of the villain simply because of the perspective of the text, and for the anxieties of war

¹⁹ Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History*, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2004), 207-208.

²⁰ Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, (Upper Saddle River, Prentice Hall, 2011), 477.

within the Middle East as a symbol of modern Israel to its neighbors. The statue may no longer be interpreted as an illustration of the young king, for the young king was Jewish and therefore circumcised. It must instead be prepared to acknowledge the lack of cultural understanding caused by centuries of prejudice and discrimination against the very people group which the statue is claiming to represent. It can no longer be labeled as a character from the Bible pulled out of the ancient stories. It is instead the image of a very much contemporary and very much European ideal of male perfection. One can even look beyond the viewer's reaction that this is a human male to criticize the statue's gigantic proportions. At seventeen feet tall, this is in no way a literal representation of a human male, further removing the statue from any interpretation that it is an image of male perfection; its height serves not to associate the statue with the humble shepherd David but rather the shepherd's opponent, Goliath.²¹ The reaction of the viewer to the statue is much better associated with the reaction of the Israelites to the giant Goliath; as opposed to the boy who would eventually become king. But if the David of the story, which is symbolized by the name "David", is not the same as the *David* of this statue, then the use of that symbol as a means to interpreting this work no longer functions, and what is left is colossal, naked young man carrying a sling and looking into the distance.

²¹ Ibid, 443.

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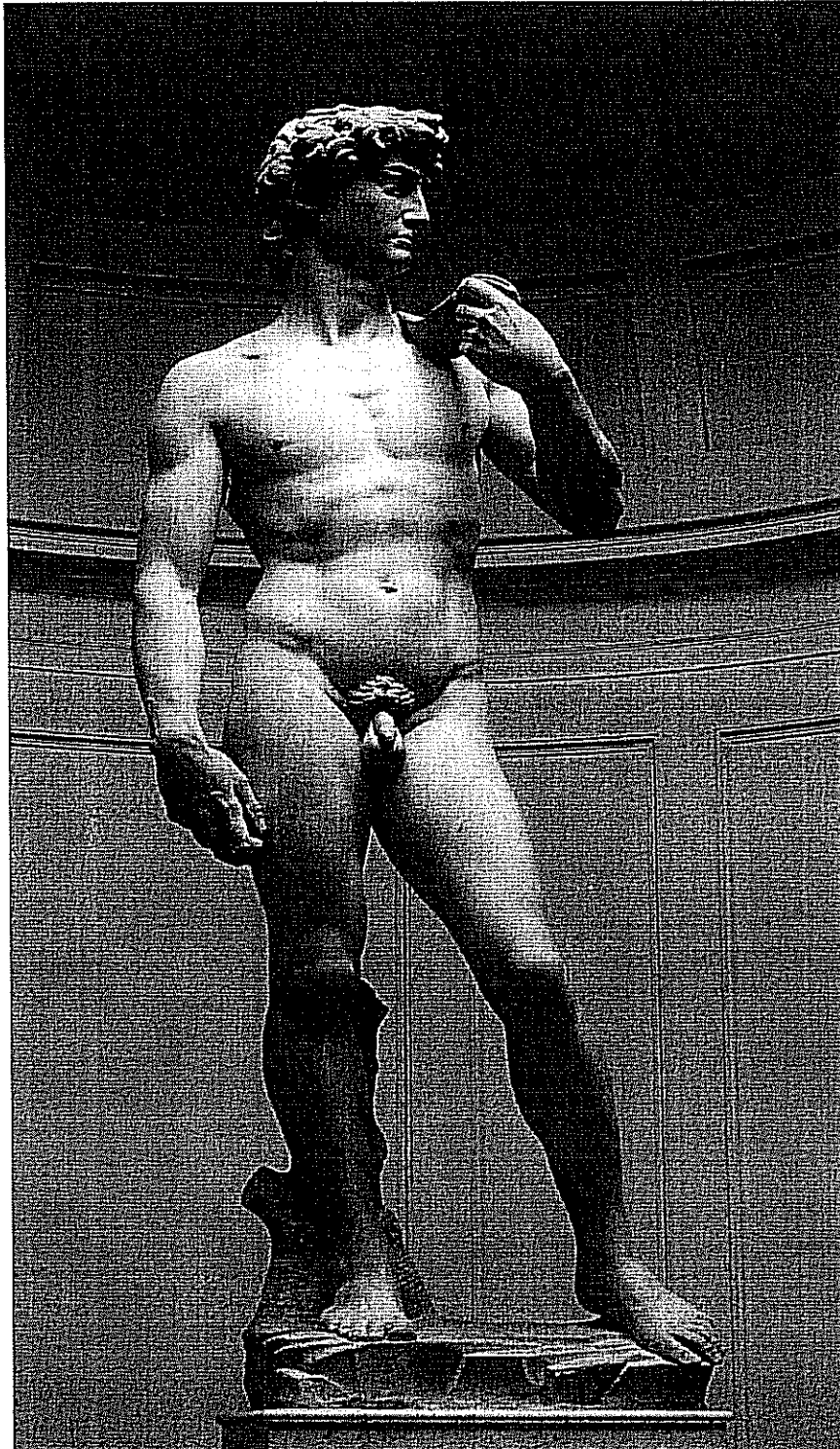


Figure 1: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *David*, 1501-1504. Marble. Academia, Florence.