

## ART IN TRACY CHEVALIER'S NOVELS

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### Abstract:

*According to Lyotard's opinion, the perceptual has become the condition of existence for the conceptual and the linguistic. As a painting or any other visual material cannot be interpreted if it is not firstly seen, the visual perception has become the sine qua non of any further relation with that iconic representation or, in Klee's words, 'une nature naturante' (Klee in Docherty, 174) – a visual material that is capable of generating new works of art based on it. The relations between these new representations and the original they have emerged from are included in the so-called 'figural historicity' (Docherty, 174), which refers to the temporal condition of the textual interpretation of each new representation. For this reason, a work of fiction based on a painting (e.g. Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier) cannot make 'any serious theoretical or systematic truth-claims whatsoever.' (Docherty, 174) It only presents a new version of the facts, which might correspond or not to the textual implications of the original iconic image it has started from. Instead of truth, in the case of the novels based on works of art, we can speak of 'the enactment of desire' (Idem, 174), as the writer's wish to turn the visual material into a literary one is more powerful than his/her intention to convey a truth value to the information presented in the novel.*

### A

As the visual character is one of the most significant aspects of Tracy Chevalier's prose, it is interesting to analyse the connection between art and its representation in her five novels, starting from Panofsky's considerations on iconography and iconology, which lead to various opinions on how art should be reflected in fiction.

According to Panofsky, the complex relationship between art and culture can be understood by interpreting three different levels of signification: the first one refers to the message that the art receptors can understand only by means of their own experience, without any further knowledge; the second one implies the cultural knowledge that the art receptor has already got, whereas the third one aims at revealing the discrepancy between the myth, intention or symbolic power of the work of art and the lucid consciousness of its creator. Taking all these into account, any interpretation should be raised to the third level of signification, in order to reveal the 'intrinsic meaning' (Panofsky in Dittman 186) of the work of art and to turn iconography into iconology. In an image, the 'subject' is important for the significance of the documentary content, for the very reason that the artist has chosen that particular subject. Therefore, the significance of the documentary content can be identified with 'the intrinsic meaning of content, constituting the world of 'symbolical' values' (Panofsky in Dittman 188). The discovery and interpretation of these symbolical values (which often remain unknown to the artist himself and can be completely different from what he intentionally expressed) represent what Panofsky defines as iconology, in opposition with iconography, which refers mainly to the explicit contents of a work of art. Among its purposes, iconology aims at bringing to the foreground those symbolical values that belong to the past and have never been brought to the level of consciousness. It means that modern iconologists should go beyond the explicit contents of a work of art and the artist's declarations, in order to investigate the deep meanings and the original intentions of the artistic creation. This is what Tracy Chevalier actually does, even if she is not an iconologist, but a writer interested in finding strikingly new ideas for her novels. Every time, she goes into the deep meaning of the work of art she is studying at the time as a source of

inspiration and fills in the blanks of history with her own conjectures, which finally make the substance of her prose. In the end, the explanations she gives about the creation or interpretation of a work of art – be it a painting, tapestry or sculpture – become more credible than the experts' opinions. Therefore, the way in which art is reflected in a work of fiction turns out to be more important than the way it is presented by the theoreticians in the field of art itself.

Even if Tracy Chevalier does not use the instruments of art historians or art critics, as she would rather invent a story starting from a work of art than comment on the work of art itself; thus, she interprets in her own particular way the painting, tapestry or sculpture she chooses as a source of inspiration. According to Hans Sedlmayr, the very act of interpreting a work of art implies re-creating it, re-actualizing it and, finally, re-living it with the same passion as the artist who initially created it. Therefore, the interpretation of a work of art should start from the exterior to the interior, from its form to its significance. First of all, a painting should be looked at as a whole, then considered as a structure formed of various parts, then read as a text, in which colours or light function as words, and, finally, re-structured as 'an ordering context' (Sedlmayr, 84). Actually, this is what Tracy Chevalier confesses to have done when writing her novels: firstly, she liked the painting or the tapestry and wondered who its protagonist really was, then she studied its various parts, in order to understand the artistic procedures and the symbols hidden beneath the surface, then read it as a non-conventional biography and, in the end, turned it into a work of fiction. Her approach seems to be the right one, as any work of art gathers very different elements – various materials, shapes, colours, significances – and has a unifying structure, namely the general impression that it makes on the audience. In Tracy Chevalier's case, the general impression that Vermeer's paintings make on her is due to the special blue and yellow he used. These became the dominant colours in all her novels, as she shows by choosing as the motto of her debut novel, *The Virgin Blue*, a quotation from Goethe:

'As yellow is always accompanied with light, so it may be said that blue still brings a principle of darkness with it. This colour has a peculiar and almost indescribable effect on the eye. As a hue it is powerful, but it is on the negative side and in its highest purity is, as it were, a stimulating negation. Its appearance, then, is a kind of contradiction between excitement and repose.' (Goethe in Chevalier 1)

Even if Chevalier starts from an original work of art and imagines a story about its protagonist, her novels should not be evaluated in comparison with those works of art, because her purpose is not to provide a textual replica of a visual material, but to turn some techniques from the visual arts into narrative techniques. As she confesses in her interviews, the criteria she has in mind when choosing one work of art or another are its unity, originality, organized structure and density. Therefore, the criterion of the original source does not apply to the entire work of fiction, but only to its narrative core, which is, actually, only the pretext for the novel. Paraphrasing Th. Haecker, one may say about Tracy Chevalier's novels that it is the work of fiction that makes us understand how the things really happened, and not vice versa, as Vermeer's biographers try to prove.

As any work of art belongs both to its historical time and to a supra-historical or ahistorical time, it is possible for it to transcend the mentality of the epoch in which it was created and to enter the universal heritage of atemporality, easily becoming a source of inspiration for other artistic manifestations, destined to other types of artistic sensibility. For example, nowadays, instead of visual arts, we speak of a visual culture, in which we may include more forms of artistic expressions and, what is more, we can refer to another type of sensibility that is related to them. The definition of a viewer or observer has changed drastically through history, and both the concept of vision and visuality have undergone a complex transformation, passing from the

simple perception to the mechanism in which sight is not the very substrate, but only an instrument among others.

In a visually dominated society, or a society of spectacles, the relation between simply seeing something and integrating it into a complex institutional and discursive power system has to be redefined according to the new needs and desires of the observing subject. That is why a new type of observer has been 'created' nowadays, by turning the old type of vision, based on the contrast between the viewer (the external instance) and the viewed object (the internal instance), into a new one, a normative one, which imposes the way to look at something, not from the outside, in a detached manner, but from within, in a personal, participative manner.

From the subject's perspective, the fact that it is 'looked at' or 'read' has a great significance, as it gains a different ontological dimension during the interaction with its beholder. According to Lacan, seeing is the intersection of the gaze (i.e. the beholder's way of perceiving the subject) and the subject itself:

'In the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture.'  
(Lacan in Mirzoeff 112)

Lacan's theory is refined by Lisa Cartwright, who gives one of the basic definitions of visual culture:

'Visual culture is not the image itself, but the networked intersection between the technology, the user and the object being viewed.' (Cartwright in Mirzoeff 301)

What at first sight seems to be a society of spectacle, of visual elements only, finally proves to be a society that combines visual and textual information, images being accompanied or explained by texts. Therefore, in order to properly understand an image, we need a language pattern that verbalizes the experience of the visual.

In *Exploring the Modern*, John Jervis distinguishes between two cultures or worlds, as he calls them: the world of the narrative, or a 'depth culture' and the world of the image, or a 'surface culture'. Obviously, in the world of the narrative, the emphasis is laid on the discourse and text analysis, based on a certain structure, which usually implies the idea of 'time' and the idea of 'truth', whereas, in the world of images, picture prevails upon the text, which, if there is any, is meant only to serve the image, not to direct or explain it. As it is a world of 'appearances', it usually has no time or truth value, images being recycled in an eternal present and given one meaning or another, depending on various contextual elements, such as the period in which they are viewed, the ideologies of the epoch, the place where they are etc. Generally speaking, images are meant to circulate, so crossing boundaries between various fields or disciplines is encouraged. On the other hand, when trying to verbalize a visual experience, we lose something of its original message or impact, because we attempt to turn the atemporal into temporal and the fragmented into linear.

This idea, of the impossibility to perfectly translate a visual image into a literary discourse, has been commented by Tracy Chevalier in one of her interviews, in which she referred to the particular difference between a painting and a book:

'I would say the fundamental difference is temporal. A painting is about a moment, a book is about a sweep of time – be it 100 years or a day or an hour, it is still about what changes between the beginning and the end of the story. A painting is about what we see and how we respond to a moment. The power and beauty of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is

that in such a seemingly simple painting he has extended a moment so that we think about her long after we've stopped looking at her. She contains much more in her face than one single moment of time.' (<http://www.tchevalier.com/gwape/index.html>)

Two of the five novels published by Tracy Chevalier so far focus on the art in the Netherlands in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. The source of inspiration for the best-selling novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is the homonymous painting by Johannes Vermeer, which has fascinated the author even since she was a teenager, whereas the starting point for *The Lady and the Unicorn* is the series of Dutch tapestries known as The Senses and hung on display at The Cluny Museum in Paris. Therefore, the influence of the Dutch art on Tracy Chevalier's fiction is huge and should be taken into consideration when analysing the sources of inspiration, motifs, visual aspects and character complexity of the novels.

Generally speaking, Dutch art records 'the here and now of *la vie vivante* anchored in a specific time and place.' (Schama, 9) It skillfully combines portraits and actions, feelings and gestures, social involvement and religious belief, in such a way that, in spite of its variety, it seems a huge fresco of a nation.

In Schama's opinion, the most representative artist for the Dutch painting is Johannes Vermeer, who combines all the specific artistic elements and all the major beliefs of his epoch, as it could be easily seen in his *Allegory of Painting*, where he takes some elements from every important Dutch painter before him and mixes them in his unique way, adding to them, as a hint, the image of the Republic of the Seven Provinces (i.e. the Netherlands of his time), thus suggesting that he is the representative artist of the whole nation.

According to Svetlana Alpers, the descriptive Dutch painting should not be subjected to analytic and critical methods, such as the Panofskian iconography, which had been developed for use in the interpretation of the narrative imagery of Italian painting. The immediacy and simplicity of the Dutch art should be let to speak for itself, as in the case of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, where the visual characteristics – lots of description, elements of trompe l'oeil and mise-en-abime – prevail upon the dynamism of the plot.

Tracy Chevalier's fiction seems to support Alpers's main assertion that the Dutch art is descriptive rather than narrative and displays a fascinating array of ideas from many different fields, including optics, perspective theory, and cartography. Therefore, we should view it circumstantially, which has become a familiar strategy in the study of art and literature:

'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.' (Alpers, 25)

The new experimental science and technology in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for example the invention of the *camera obscura*, brought a new type of knowledge of the world, which was reflected in painting, as optical devices can be seen as sites of both knowledge and power that operate directly on the body of the individual. The pleasure for the detail, great contrasts in scale, the absence of the frame (the world depicted in Dutch pictures often seems cut off by the edges of the work or, conversely, seems to extend beyond its boundaries), a formidable sense of the picture as a surface (usually, a mirror is included in the painting to reflect the objects around, to put them into perspective) are the great effects that the scientific discoveries of the period brought to art or, rather, to the Dutch visual culture.

The science of vision in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century was based on the mechanics of light and optical transmission and derived all knowledge from observation and measurement, as both in science and in entertainment and mass culture there was an increasing focus on visual aspects and experiences.

In the novel entitled *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, Tracy Chevalier speculates on the events behind Vermeer's painting, imagining how the master used the modern devices of the time in order to improve his creations. Here, the year is 1664 and Vermeer is showing his *camera obscura* to his supposed maid-muse:

'It is surprising, isn't it? I was amazed as you the first time my friend showed it to me.' 'But why do you look at it, sir, when you can look at your own painting?' 'You do not understand.' He tapped the box. 'This is a tool. I use it to help me see, so that I am able to make this painting.' 'But – you use your eyes to see.' 'True, but my eyes do not always see everything.'... 'Tell me Griet,' he continued, 'do you think I simply paint what is there in that corner?' I glanced at the painting, unable to answer. I felt as if I were being tricked. Whatever I answered would be wrong. 'The camera obscura helps me to see in a different way,' he explained. 'To see more of what is there.' (Chevalier, 59)

This story, which Chevalier chooses to present at the beginning of the relationship between the painter and his muse, is meant to stress the fascination with visual representation that makes the copy of the original (in this case, the image seen through the lenses of the *camera obscura*) seem almost more real than what is seen through the eye alone. The writer's thesis, which she tries to prove in all her novels is based on Umberto Eco's assumption that people seem to prefer to look at an exact representation of something rather than observing the thing itself, because we give more credit to what is registered as 'truth' than to what we see for ourselves, without 'translating' it, without mediating it by representation.

Generally speaking, what Tracy Chevalier actually does in her prose is to transpose the images from tapestries or paintings into language, into a coherent *fabula*, which can tell the same stories in words, instead of images. Thus, her novels somehow 'emanate the same visual qualities' (Bal 162) as the works of art that inspired them and have a very strong impact on their readers.

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