[DRAFT: THIS VERSION MAY DIFFER IN MINOR WAYS FROM THE PUBLISHED VERSION (FORTHCOMING IN A VOLUME ON *PHENOMENOLOGY AND AESTHETICS,* ed J. Parry), IN WHICH CASE THE LATTER SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS AUTHORITATIVE]

Describing Reality or Disclosing Worldhood? Vermeer and Heidegger.

17th century Dutch painting is generally approached through two complementary angles: firstly, through the culture and mores of its time. According to Simon Schama[1], Dutch painting was the mirror in which the dominant customs and values of a then fully expanding society of artisans, navigators and merchants were reflected. The recurrence of certain themes (such as depictions of water and polders, scenes of banqueting or in inns) had the function of expressing and exorcising great terrors (flooding, hunger); correlatively, the representation of domestic scenes is explained in reference to the gradual establishment of an ethics centred on the family, simplicity, honesty and labour-- the famous Protestant ethics analysed by Weber. In the same vein, Clifford Geertz's[2] culturalist interpretation insists on the impossibility of interpreting Dutch painting independently from the context which it is held to translate into symbolic terms. The most representative sample of this line of work is probably the symbolist reading of E de Jongh[3], for whom the objects, actions and scenes of private life shown almost invariably have a verbal equivalent in Jacob Cats' then highly fashionable books of Emblems[4].

The second line of interpretation criticises this approach as being too contextualising and seeks to focus on the nature of the representations themselves. The main problem is then to understand how Dutch art distinguishes itself from its illustrious Italian counterpart.[5] According to

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[1] *The Embarrassment of Riches : An Interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age,* London : Collins, 1987

[2] 'Art as a Cultural System', *Modern Language Notes,* 1976, n°91, p. 1475 sq.

[3] See for example *Rembrandt et son temps,* Bruxelles, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1971, pp. 143-194. See also 'Grape Symbolism in Paintings of the 16th and 17th Centuries', *Simiolus,* 7, 1974, pp. 166-191, and 'Pearls of Virtue and Pearls of Vice', *Simiolus*, 8, 1974-1976, pp. 69-97.

[4] For example *Silenus Alcibiades*, Middelbourg, Royal Library of The Hague, 1618.

[5] Generally speaking, Italian art rests on the primacy of two elements. The first is well known (see Erwin Panovsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, translated by Christopher S. Wood, New York: Zone Books, 1991) and concerns the geometric construction of space according to the principles of Albertian perspective. Space is considered as infinitely divisible and calculable extension, in which figures and objects are distributed according to the mathematical relationships defined by a framework established by the vanishing point and horizon line. The second distinctive feature of Italian painting lies in its emphasis on narratives and storytelling. Based on the representation of great human actions, biblical or historical, it is a painting of time in that its principal function is to immortalise an event or series of events (cf. ubiquitous depictions of the various scenes of the life of Christ). Consequently, Italian painting is centred on the representation of the human body, its actions and expressions. It draws on a repertoire of postures and gestures that dates back to Antiquity and which feeds most traditional representations (such as, for example, those of the Massacre of the Innocents) and allowed artists to display their virtuosity in the rendition of human emotions (such as Herod's cruelty, the harshness of the soldiers, the mothers' despair, the pathos of the death of the children, etc.). The — easily recognizable — protagonists generally command the organisation of paintings that are meant to highlight their worth, and in which the geographic or historical context only appears as architectural background, or is glimpsed in a *veduta*.

Svetlana Alpers[6], in contrast with the transalpine focus on history and the presentation of myths or religious episodes, Dutch painting in general (and Vermeer's work in particular, which is deemed 'exemplary'[7] by Alpers) are based upon a descriptive, realist approach to the world.[8] She points out that the Dutch abandoned Alberti's perspectival method of pictorial construction in favour of a different tradition (cartography, for which they were well-known[9]) and technology (the *camera obscura,* a then recent discovery[10]). For her, Dutch painting is thus characterised by an objectivity close to that of the natural sciences, a 'detached or perhaps even a culturally unbiased view of what is to be known in the world' (Alpers: 163)[11]: it is deemed an art of description — an art of space and not of time.[12] By challenging the supremacy of the Italian model, this reading allows many of the pictorial features particular to Dutch representations to be given their own value. However, it rests on two unquestioned hypotheses: firstly, the idea that the understanding of spatiality at work in the paintings

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[6] *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the 17th Century,* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983.

[7] Cf. Alpers: 222: 'The place that Vermeer's works have had in this book leaves no doubt about what I take to be their exemplary role in the definition of the art of describing'.

[8] See for example Alpers, Introduction, p. XX: 'a major theme of this book is that central aspects of 17th century Dutch art — and indeed of the northern tradition of which it is part — can best be understood as being an art of describing as distinguished from the narrative art of Italy'.

[9] The cartographic tradition excludes the adoption of a single point of view and offers a non perspectival representation of the world. For example, the division of the picture surface into squared zones, which is central to the Albertian tradition as it allows the visualisation of perspectival lines, fulfils a very different function in northern painting: it enables the division of space into small zones in which people and buildings are represented from different perspectives (see for example *Le polder Het Grootslag près d'Enkhuizen* (anonyme, Enkhuizen, Zuiderzeemuseum). On the use of cartographic techniques in Dutch painting of the golden age, then by Philippe Koninck and even Piet Mondrian see Alpers: 119-169). Correlatively, the position given to the spectator is often from a bird's eye., i.e. aerial and most importantly in movement, which doubly derogates from Albertian principles. The views of ports give another example of this resistance to these rules: in most cases the outline of the town hugs the coast from a horizontal perspective and yet is seen from above, in a doubling of perspective which is contrary to Alberti's principles.)

[10] As indicated by Huerta (Huerta: 25), early versions of the *camera obscura* consisted of darkened rooms with a small hole to admit light. This produced an inverted image of the exterior scene on the wall opposite the aperture. In the 17th century it was discovered that placing a convex lens over the aperture and using a movable screen would produce a brighter image and improve the focus. The resulting image shows optical effects not visible to the naked eye (such as white, pearl-like reflections on objects) and is saturated with colour. Contrary to perspectivism, centred on the vanishing point and ordered from a single point of view, the *camera obscura* gives a spherical vision of the world that displays itself before the gaze of a spectator that has lost his privileged position. The consequence is the impossibility of fitting most Flemish paintings into the Albertian framework: landscapes and interiors overflow the sides of the canvas, exceeding the circumscribed cubic space. The world is no longer a theatre for human action and its narratives, it is rather a panorama where things and men find their own places.

[11] See also Alpers: 162: 'Huygens (...) also pushed aside the historians of the world in the interest instead of binding knowledge to the vivid appearance of things seen. To the Dutch way of thinking, pictures, maps, history and natural history had common means and ends'.

[12] Thus there are very few history paintings in Dutch art of this period (Rembrandt being a notable exception). The focus is not on characters, let alone on the human body, but on places — fields, villages, landscapes, towns, and interiors. Far from being a privileged figure, the microcosm in which Italian Renaissance thinkers deemed the macrocosm reflected, man appears as only one element in a wider context. He is not really the focus of the representation (with the obvious exception of portraiture). This reversal of the hierarchy of men and things is also shown by the privileged status given by the Dutch to *lumen* (the light which emanates from or is reflected by objects), rather than to *lux* (the light allegedly emitted by the human eye in its exploration of the world and from which Italian painters modelled the contours of objects). Correlatively, the artists' attention was drawn to the things themselves, towards the minute representation of details, textures and materials (hence the frequent use of microscopes to refine the rendering of objects, and the fashion of 'fine' painters like Gerard Dou).

is purely mathematical. In this regard, whether the construction of space should follow the principles of Alberti or those of Kepler makes little difference: in both cases the represented space is modelled on Cartesian extension. The second hypothesis is that the main significance of the paintings is epistemological: thus 'the aim of Dutch painters was to capture on a surface a great range of knowledge and information about the world' (Alpers: 124).[13] This is by no means an isolated view: in particular, many interpreters have emphasised Vermeer's alleged 'uncanny naturalism' and some have even interpreted his work as a 'way of deriving certain knowledge from uncertain circumstances (…) and finding truth in a world of doubt' (Huerta: 17). [14]

In what follows, I shall focus on a small set of examples taken from Vermeer's work (*Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* [1663], *The Milkmaid* [1658] and *The Geographer* [1668-9]) to challenge the relevance of these assumptions and more generally to suggest an alternative to both contextualist and realist readings. Before I proceed, however, let me make two disclaimers: firstly, I do not mean to deny the interest of these interpretative lines, nor their ability to highlight important aspects of the works. Yet somehow neither gives us a sense of how we relate to the paintings as *artworks*: in each case they are taken as artefacts and decrypted according to external principles. Little attention is given to the reasons why we react to *these* particular artefacts in a different manner than, say, to the Plantin press in Antwerp (which lends itself beautifully to contextualist interpretations) or to Jacques de Gheyn's extraordinarily detailed botanical and animal drawings[15] of the same period (which are driven by the ideal of objective representation). Equally, there is no attempt to analyse the specific mode of existence of the depicted objects, nor the ways in which we respond to them: yet understanding these may be key to grasping why these particular paintings are considered artworks rather than items documenting a specific historical period. However (and this is my second disclaimer), I certainly do not want to claim that my own account holds the ultimate truth about the paintings examined, let alone about Vermeer's work in general. I only intend to bring to the fore

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[13] Cf. also: 'the pursuit of natural knowledge in the 17th century provides a model for the consideration of both craft and high art' (Alpers: 24).

[14] For an extreme version of this sort of epistemological reading, see Robert D. Huerta, *Vermeer and Plato: Painting the Ideal*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005. Huerta claims that Vermeer's approach was resolutely 'naturalistic', focused on the acquisition of knowledge and thus governed by the desire to depict reality faithfully: 'Vermeer's approach to knowledge acquisition bears a marked similarity to the methods of Kepler and Huygens. (...) Vermeer's solution was to adopt a 'concentric method', returning again and again to the same subject matter, refining and subdividing his maps of reality so as to more precisely describe it' (Huerta: 17). The claim that Vermeer's paintings are naturalistic in intention and effect is very common amongst commentators. See also Arthur Wheelock, *Johannes Vermeer*, which expands on Vermeer's 'uncanny naturalism' (102 sq), and D. Lokin, 'Views in and of Delft' in *Delft Masters, Vermeer's Contemporaries: Illusionism through the Conquest of Light and Space*, ed. M. Kersten and D. Lokin, Swolle: Waanders, 1996.

[15] See for example *Four Mice*, Rijksmuseum-Stichting, Amsterdam, or the depiction of insects in his *Drawing book* Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Institut Néerlandais, Paris.

what happens when we look at three of Vermeer's paintings, and suggest possible reasons why they strike us as artworks.

My reading is Heideggerian in spirit. However — perhaps somewhat unexpectedly — it is not directly inspired by Heidegger's reflections on art and will only be related to these fairly late in the paper: it emerged from my direct interaction with the paintings. As I was looking at the works, I was struck by the fact that which my perception of them simply did not fit the contextualist or the realist frameworks: the space and the objects shown seemed internally organised by the practices of the characters depicted. Both the order in which I apprehended the various items on the canvas and the relations established between them followed patterns that seemed inexplicable by mere spatial contiguity. At the same time, I became aware of how my understanding of the scenes was affected by the strong emotional climate generated by each painting. It dawned on me that perhaps these works that tell no story and depict no illustrious characters were performing a role similar to that of fundamental ontology itself, albeit in a radically different manner: they were *presenting* (rather than articulating, as in *Being and Time*) what it means to be in a world. Yet while it helped me to understand my encounter with the paintings, this intuition immediately raised many tricky questions: firstly, *how* was such a presentation possible? Was it the result of a psychological identification with the characters? And if not, how did it come to be? Secondly (and correlatively), *what* was presented by the works? All I could *see* were depicted objects and characters. What was *their* mode of being? Was there something about it which allowed them to point towards the irrepresentable? Thirdly, *what* was this transcendent element exactly? Heidegger tells us that artworks disclose a world. But what I was seeing in the paintings wasn't just any kitchen or bedroom: all the representations bore the marks of their temporal and geographical inscription. So was I glimpsing the world of the Dutch Golden age? But how could that be anything but a lost world to me? Was Heidegger right then to say that artworks from the past are 'gone by' and inoperative outside of their own context? And yet my experience of the Vermeer paintings did seem to rest on my grasping something that went beyond their representational content. So what was that?

In what follows, I shall begin by looking at two of the paintings mentioned above through a contextualist and realist lens[16]; in doing so, I shall highlight both the usefulness and the limitations of these analyses before turning to the phenomenological interpretation and questions evoked above. I shall suggest that what the paintings make palpable to us is an existential structure which transcends the particularities of the various historical worlds and which we can therefore relate to, namely what Heidegger calls their *worldhood*. I shall develop the implications of this and conclude by asking how

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[16] I have restricted this analysis to two paintings only for lack of space.

this particular case study relates to Heidegger's own reflections about art in general (in particular in view of the fact that Vermeer's works do not conform to what Julian Young calls the 'Greek paradigm'[17] established in OWA).

Woman in Blue reading a letter takes up a traditional theme of Dutch iconography, that of someone intruding in on a lady who is reading or writing a letter.[18] According to Walsh[19], it is an illustration of the "illness without remedy" from which pregnant ladies languished (i.e the pregnancy itself!) and the presence of pearls, symbols of purity, probably indicates the legitimacy of the pregnancy. From the same contextualist perspective, the presence of the map on the wall, detailed enough to be identified[20], is explained by the importance of the Dutch cartographic tradition and is meant to connote their contemporary maritime power. Correlatively, the spatial organisation of the painting is panoramic (the table and chair extend beyond the edges of the canvas, an effect which is often the result of the use of the *camera obscura*) and rigorously structured around the female figure by the vertical and horizontal lines of the table and chairs (the angularity of which accentuates *a contrario* the roundness of the figure, the hands of the reader being visually held by the horizontal bar of the map). The general impression of balance is further reinforced by the fact that the space between the left side of the map and the wall is almost identical to that which separates the back of the lady and the right side of the canvas, which places her in the geometric centre of the picture.[21] *The Milkmaid* can be interpreted along similar lines: the representation of servants at work is another constant in Dutch art.[22] The presence of the foot warmer (bottom right corner) and that of the small cupids on the tiles on the wall could be seen to symbolise the warmth of domestic love, itself connoted by the maternal character of the woman who offers bread and milk. The placing of the vanishing point behind the right elbow of the maid surreptitiously emphasises the importance of the gesture. The space of the painting is structured by the two containers suspended in the left corner: the metal one, inclined towards the spectator, guides the eye towards the jug and the bread, while the wicker basket, angled towards the right, draws the attention back towards the stove, the conjunction of the two dimensions creating an effective illusion of depth, itself emphasised by the shadow of the

[17] 'Great art, we have seen, is art which first, brings world out of background inconspicuousness and into the explicitness of foreground clarity (call this the 'truth' condition); second, endows it with an aura of 'holiness' (the 'earth' condition); and third, gathers together an entire culture to witness this charismatic presencing of world (the 'communal' condition'. In view of the focal significance of Greek tragedy and the Greek temple in its construction, I shall call this conception of art the 'Greek paradigm' (Young: 65).

[18] See for example Metsu, *Woman Surprised While Writing A Letter,* or Vermeer's *Reader*.

[19] J. Walsh Jr, 'Vermeer', *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 1973, n° 31, section 3.

[20] It is a map of Holland and Western Frieze, drawn by Balthasar Florisz van Berckenrode in 1620 and published by Willem Jansz Blaeu. Cf. *Johannes Vermeer*: 136.

[21] (X-ray plates show that Vermeer purposedly enlarged the map on the left hand side).

[22] (cf. for ex Nicolas Maes)

nail on the wall.[23] Finally, the dotted paintwork with its white specks, on the handle of the bread basket, suggests that Vermeer used a *camera obscura* as the latter is known to create the appearance by refraction of a white halo on the surface of objects.

Thus these paintings can be approached through their integration in a specific iconographic tradition, an emphasis on realism and the construction of space according to geometric principles and the scientific innovations of the time. Yet the importance of cultural elements should not be overestimated: while the theme of the letter is certainly traditional, the treatment that Vermeer gives it in *Woman in Blue* is extraordinarily decontextualised. There is no identifiable light source. All the narrative clues that are present in similar scenes painted by Jan Steen or Gabriel Metsu have been erased[24]: nothing allows us to fathom where the letter comes from, nor what it says, not even the effect that it produces on its reader.[25] Nor is the representation is truly realistic: the female figure casts no shadow, unlike the chair and the map which are lit in exactly the same way.[26] As for the *Milkmaid,* the theme itself is not traditional — in fact this is the only known example in Dutch painting[27]; and while the foreground composition seems to conform to the then current taste for still lives and vanities, it does not include any of the symbolic foods usually represented (such as oysters for lust, crabs for misconduct, grapes for pre-marital chastity, overripe fruits for decomposition, onions for trifles that make us cry, etc.). Nor does it obey the conventions of the genre, which would have the same food depicted in different states (for example lemons are often presented whole and sliced, so as to indicate the fate of all mortal things). It is thus dubious that the painting was intended to give a moral lesson to the spectator. X-ray examination shows that here too a map attached to the wall in the background was painted over,[28] again reducing to the minimum any contextual indications. Furthermore, given that the light comes from the window on the left, as indicated by the shadows of the baskets and the face of the woman, it was not very realistic to lighten the *right* side of the wall which then seems to be the object of a direct illumination itself made unlikely by the shadows on the ground of the milkmaid and the foot warmer. Finally, the top of the table is angled

[23] Cf. Edward Snow, *A Study of Vermeer,* University of California Press, 1994, p. 10 sq).
[24] See *A Study of Vermeer,* p. 4.
[25] Another painting of the same subject (*The Reader*) attests to the same intention to lose obvious symbolic elements: X-ray examination reveals that in an earlier version a representation of Cupid was attached to the wall, which would have given the viewer a strong clue as to the nature of the letter. By removing it (even at the risk of destabilising the composition as Cupid was placed at the vanishing point), Vermeer clearly indicates that the importance of the picture is not connected to any obvious symbolism.
[26] There is a similar effect in *A Lady at the Virginal and a Gentleman*: one should see a shadow on the left top corner of the wall since there is also one in the corner of the window: yet there is none. In the same way, the tiles on the right are in shadow while the white pitcher that sits on them isn't, which reinforces its importance for the composition but is hardly realistic in spirit.
[27] *Johannes Vermeer,* p. 110.
[28] *Johannes Vermeer,* p. 110.

upwards in an exaggerated manner (unless the table is slanted, which is unlikely), probably to draw the spectator's attention to the jug (this is accentuated by the fact that the milkmaid is looking down).

One could multiply these examples: they indicate both the interest and the limits of the realistic and contextualist lines. Although they point out some pertinent and interesting features, one is left with the sense that something important is missing. But what is that? To try to find out, let's return to the paintings and look afresh. So what do *Woman in Blue* and the *Milkmaid* show? Blue cloth, a half opened box, pearls, the usual elements of a feminine interior ; kitchenware and simple foods. Objects, then, and characters: a woman reading, a maid pouring milk. Nothing extraordinary, nothing interesting even, from the standpoint of historical painting: situations so average that 17th century Dutch people could experience them daily without giving them much thought. But this, then, might be precisely a good starting point: in these paintings, practices and objects that are usually covered up by their everyday usage are called forward to a new visibility. But what kind of visibility is this? And what is the mode of being of the depicted objects?

It may help here to turn briefly to *Being and Time*. As it is well known, Heidegger distinguishes explicitly between three modes of being: firstly, Dasein, the mode of being of entities for whom being itself is an issue. Entities that have Dasein as their mode of existence comport themselves in such a way that an understanding of being and of themselves is embodied in their practices, and this without the need for conscious thematisation. To use an example given by Bill Blattner, just by walking on the pavement rather than on the road or on my neighbour's lawn, I open up the space in which I move in specific ways: I differentiate between various areas, some of which are safe (the pavement) or not (the road), some of which legitimate or not. I also convey a certain understanding of myself, for example as someone cautious, mindful of other people and respectful of regulations. By contrast, if a Sony robot dog happened to walk on the same pavement, the normal inference would be that this is just chance or a result of its programming, and that this behaviour does not presuppose or denote any particular understanding of the world. Contrary to Dasein, the second mode, readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit)*, is not self-interpretative: it is the mode of being of entities which are disclosed by the manner in which we use them within the wider context of an equipmental totality (for example the hammer in the workshop). What is characteristic of this mode is that if the activity goes smoothly, the entities encountered are not thematised by us: if I am in my kitchen and need to stir something in a cooking pot, I'll grab an appropriate tool and so long as it stirs, it won't make any difference to me and thus I won't notice whether I'm using a wooden or silicon spoon. As Heidegger puts it, 'the "things" which are closest to us are … encountered in the concern which makes use of them without noticing them explicitly' (BT §15: 97). Importantly, ready to hand entities are not

encountered in isolation: they presuppose a complex network of assignments[29], a point to which I'll come back later. Just like the entities that rely on them, these 'assignments themselves are not observed: they are rather 'there' when we concernfully submit ourselves to them' (BT, §16: 105). Finally, the third mode of being, presence at hand (*Vorhandenheit*), is the mode of being of objects which are explicitly thematised as such by our reflecting on them: present at hand objects emerge for the observer as decontextualised, discrete entities offered to the scrutiny of a disengaged spectator. Should this scrutiny take a scientific form, then the entities will appear as having specific, measurable properties (such as size, weight, shape etc).

So to get back to our original question of what the paintings show: how are the entities depicted by Vermeer disclosed? Strictly speaking they are not Dasein since by themselves they do not convey any self-interpretation: this is obvious in the case of objects such as the jug or the bread, which would not be considered as Dasein in the real world anyway, but it equally applies to the represented human figures: the real milkmaid would certainly have qualified as Dasein, but just as the concept of a dog does not bark (as astutely pointed out by Spinoza), in the same way the painted milkmaid does not ek-sist. Nor are the depicted entities ready-to-hand: by virtue of their being represented, none of them is usable for us, and unless faced with trompe-l'oeil effects (which Vermeer uses rarely), we are aware of that fact: unlike the pigeons famously deceived into pecking at Zeno's grapes, we would not try to drink the milk poured from the jug. So are the depicted entities present-at-hand? At first sight this seems to be the most promising hypothesis: although the objects and characters are not real (in the sense of spatio-temporal presence), their representations are fully exposed to our gaze. We can leisurely assess their shape, colour or size and work out their mutual positions in space and their relations to the real world, or seek to reconstruct their symbolic meaning by referring them to their historical context. In fact, this is exactly what the realist or contextualist interpretations do. But is this really the main way in which we relate to the paintings? Or even the most immediate way? Do we stand back and look at the objects and figures on the canvas in the detached manner of the realist or the contextualist?

Let's return to *Woman in Blue*. For one thing, our perspective on her is not a view from nowhere: we are seeing her from below, and further afar from behind the table on the left. How is this possible? If we look at the positioning of the two chairs (and in particular the one on the right of the painting) in relation both to the reader and the angle at which we see her, we realise that we are viewing her as we would if we were sitting *inside* the depicted space, on a third chair positioned opposite the map and next to the table. The panoramic aspect of the scene, which extends beyond the

[29] (thus a spoon is made of (say) wood, designed in order to stir for the sake of preparing meals)

sides, top and bottom of the painting and thus is not closed in by the canvas (contrary to what happens in Italian *vedute,* for example), facilitates our being drawn into the space opened up by the positioning of the chairs and our perspective on the reader. Thus our relation to woman in blue is not that of a detached observer who stands outside of the painting: we belong to the virtual space deployed on the canvas to such an extent that our place in it is specified by the internal arrangement of the scene. Our perspective on her is not an abstract ideal point, as in perspectival constructions, but a *situated* position. Furthermore, we are drawn in by her reading. Her gaze directs us to the letter. What does it say? There is no movement in the painting, everything is suspended to her occupation. We can reflect on this and discover, for example, that this mood of distance, this intense turning inwards which brackets all other activities are reinforced by the use of cold colours that stand out on a white and ochre background — blue (the two chairs, the bar of the map, the dress) and silver (the pearls, some of the nails on the chairs, the reflection on the brass of the map). We can also see that the impression of suspension in time and space is emphasised by the absence of any Cartesian reference points in the painting (no floor, ceiling, etc.). We can note that the overall impression of immobility is reinforced further by the fact that the main shapes in the painting are all static and closed (by opposition to open curves, diagonals or hyperboles): they are either rectilinear (the map, the chairs, the table) or well circumscribed and solidly planted on the ground (the reader herself). Yet all these various facts only became apparent to us because in the first place our involvement with the painting allowed our attention to focus on aspects which otherwise would have remained hidden.

So are the depicted figures and objects really disclosed as present-at-hand? Insofar as I can adopt the attitude of a dispassionate, detached observer, perhaps. But as we have seen above, there is something in the painting which calls for a different response: I project myself in the scene. In order to answer the question above, we now need to focus on this process. What is meant by such projection? Is it simply, or even primarily, a case of psychological identification with the characters depicted? It seems unlikely. Such forms of identification usually require that the figure or person one identifies with should be individualised by a set of specific propositional attitudes or character traits which are deemed valuable and motivate the desire for projection. This process is often supported by a narrative that allows these traits to surface. Thus in the *Red and the Black*, Julien Sorel identifies with Napoleon: he admires his courage, his intelligence, his decisiveness and acuity of judgment, his total dedication to making his dream of the European unification come true. For Julien, these qualities are evidenced by reports of Napoleon's statements and by what he knows of his life; [on this background, some specific events (such as his victory at the Arcole bridge) acquire a symbolic dimension which encapsulates the heroic features Julien identifies with, in particular Napoleon's self

belief and energy]. Variations on this sort of identification are elicited by many 16th and 17th century artworks. This is particularly clear in the case of Italian painting, where the required character traits are often provided by the viewer's knowledge of the story the scene refers to. [Consider Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*: if not for the title and/or the biblical background it evokes, it would be very difficult to work out what is going on in the scene. Furthermore, the expression of the Virgin Mary is *per se* rather undecipherable: she is both attentive and pensive, but little more can be said. Yet knowing who she is and the sad future that will unfold for her and her son helps us flesh out the undertones of her expression (as humble and sorrowful, almost mourning in advance the death of her son) and creates a strong sense of sympathy with her.] Even in Dutch paintings, where there is no obvious narrative to support the psychology of the characters, similar factors are often at play. Thus Gabriel Metsu's *Lady Reading A Letter with Her Maid Servant*[30] is very close in theme to *Woman in Blue*: yet to viewers of the period there were many clues in the painting that would help understand the psychology of the characters. Thus they would know that the letter is a love letter from the stormy seas on the painting unveiled by the maid (note that the unveiling itself is rather theatrical, as if to explicitly present an illustration of the lady's inner turmoil as she is reading the letter). They would also know that the person who sent it is far away because this was traditionally signalled by the inclusion of another painting within the painting (a symbolic representation of absence). They would have reason to think that the letter comes from the lady's husband because of the shoe lying on the floor, which alludes to Dutch sayings and emblems of the period emphasising the virtues of domesticity (not wearing shoes is staying at home, as a good wife should).[31] So they would likely understand that the lady received a love letter from her husband, himself still at sea and possibly in danger (the storm). This would help them to flesh out her expression and to sympathise with her worry and faithful longing for her husband (itself symbolised by the intent and rather sad posture of the little dog, looking up with its tail tucked between its legs).

Yet the Vermeer paintings provide very little in the way of idiosyncratic features or narrative. There is no recognisable story. The situations evoked are decontextualised and devoid of moralising purposes which would single out specific psychological traits. Unlike the truculent or jovial figures depicted in tavern scenes of the same period, the characters are not drawn to elicit definite reactions such as hilarity or indignation: they are emotionally opaque. While it is possible to attribute them specific thoughts or intentions, there seems to be little to guide or motivate such attribution. In fact,

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[30] (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Beit collection).

[31] This is noted by Wayne Franits with reference to another painting which shows a shoe lying on the floor, Caspar Netscher's *The Lace Maker*. See *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art,* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. The thimble lying on the floor could also by symbolic of the virtues of domestic life.

the identity of the figures seems irrelevant to the paintings, and this to such an extent that most of Vermeer's works can only be referred to, not by the names of the places or characters depicted, but by the activities shown (*Woman Writing a Letter, The Slumbering Maid, Woman Playing the Guitar, Officer and Laughing Young Woman,* etc.)[32]. Thus while the paintings may allow for weak forms of the psychological identification described above, it seems unlikely that the type of projection they invite should be *grounded* in the latter. So what happens then? I would suggest that what matters and draws us into the paintings is not *who* the characters are, but what they *do*. The depicted figures are all engaged in some form of daily activity we can understand unreflectively, without any need for symbolic decryption or recontextualisation: although it may have been by electric light or out of a plastic bottle, we have all read letters or poured milk before. This unreflective and immediate grasp is facilitated by the very anonymity of the characters and the absence of specific contextual elements which would over-determine the scenes. It is also encouraged by the fact that the characters do not look at us, which would create personal contact and interrupt the flow of their engagement with their practices. In this context, for us to project ourselves in the paintings means to *understand* the practices depicted. Such understanding, in turn, is not tantamount to having an insight into the psychology of the characters or to cognizing how to do what they do. It requires us to be able to intuitively open up the network of relations and possibilities associated with the practices themselves, a peculiar ability which is afforded to us by our competence in performing similar practices. Thus such projection is *existential* rather than psychological in that it rests on our ability to be in the world and to press ahead into our own possibilities.

However this presents us immediately with a paradox: after all, newspapers and magazines afford us daily opportunities to see practices from the outside and we don't give them a second glance. Yet the paintings capture our attention thoroughly. So there must something in the depicted practices themselves which attracts us. In my view, what draws us in is the *style* of the practices: not just what the characters do, but *how* they do it. The practices are not simply intelligible to us in the pragmatic manner suggested above: they seem expressive of a way of being which is in a large part independent from the intricacies of the characters' putative inner life but which is embodied in their comportment. Such expressivity is implicitly normative: the stylised practices do not merely denote the characters' competence at performing certain activities. They communicate to us an implicit understanding of how these activities *should* be done, an understanding which is conveyed by the specific nature of the stance or gestures shown on the canvas. As we shall see, what appeals to us in the case of Vermeer is both the fact *that* the depicted practices display a high degree of style, and the

[32] There are a few but not many exceptions, in particular the *View of Delft* and early works such as *Diane and Her Companions* or *Christ in Front Of Martha's and Mary's House.*

sort of style they have. What do I mean by style? Style is notoriously elusive and resists full articulation. Hubert Dreyfus defines it functionally, as what 'opens a disclosive space and does so in a threefold manner: (a) by *coordinating* actions; (b) by determining how things and people *matter*; and (c) by being what is *transferred* from situation to situation' (Dreyfus 2005: 408). In each painting, the manner in which the characters engage with their own practices displays these characteristics. Irrespectively of what the represented Dasein might be thinking, the manner in which they read or pour conveys a very strong mood of peaceful concern and intense absorption with what they do. This coordinates the actions of the characters across the paintings (thus giving them a common style) and allows both the activities and the objects involved (like the letter or the jug) to matter. The overall (transferable) impression is one of harmony and *care*, both about the activity itself and the world in which it takes place. For reasons which I shall return to in conclusion, this care is deeply attractive to us. For the moment, however, let me focus on how the style of the practices orients the manner in which we perceive the scene and allows the various objects represented to stand out in particular ways.

Consider the *Geographer*: we see him slightly from below, perhaps from a sitting position on a stool next to the one depicted on the right. Like the chairs in *Woman in Blue,* the curtain on the left subtly invites us in and provides a visual transition that helps homogenise our own space and that opened up by the painting.[33] This space itself is both oriented and dramatised by the geographer's bodily stance: his dynamic posture grabs us. He is leaning intently forward and yet does not look at us but at something we cannot see. Suddenly, and in spite of our own inability to know what is seen, that particular spot *matters* to us. The direction of his gaze is at ninety degrees from that of the compass he is holding in his right hand, and our own line of sight intersects roughly at 45° from each: this draws us in further into the space of the painting (by deepening it and establishing further continuity with ours) and increases our sense of dynamic tension. The compass itself points towards the geographer's left hand, firmly closed upon a book: this (and the table it rests upon) grounds the painting and provides a sense of solidity from which the dynamic space can unfold. The weighty way his hand clutches the book draws our attention to the equally heavily bunched up folds of the carpet on the table, which convey the same sense of movement and self-contained energy (whereas a tidy, smooth surface like the milkmaid's table is peaceful and static). Both compass and book draw our attention to the opened metal square on the stool, which itself points towards the roll and paper on the floor. These draw us back to the blindingly white parchment on the table (which is parallel to

[33] This is also the case in other paintings by Vermeer, in particular *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window, Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid, The Love Letter* and the *Art of Painting* where a similar effect is produced by a different means, namely the positioning of a thick curtain at the front of the painting: the curtain functions as a transition from the viewer's space into that of the painting and thus establishes virtual continuity between the two.

them and similarly coloured) and thus (through the reflection of the light on his right thumb) back to the geographer himself[34]. This renews our awareness of the tension expressed by his posture and deploys further energy lines (for example, from the left side of his face to the light flooding from the window to its reflection on the globe on the cabinet behind him). Thus the objects depicted are not perceived in an atomistic way, as discrete entities coexisting in a neutral, geometrical space: they are disclosed through the geographer's style, his concernful, energetic and inquisitive attitude. Although none of these objects is in movement, the geographer's stance opens up a dynamic web of relations whereby all the tools of his trade are linked. In another context, for example in a vanity where they often feature, representations of the same objects would be perceived very differently, as the harbingers of death and the marks of the folly and emptiness of human knowledge.

So is the Geographer disclosed as present-at-hand? And what about his compass? Because of our projective understanding of the depicted practices, both acquire a paradoxical mode of being. They are present-at-hand in the minimal sense that they are represented on the canvas in a way that is open to visual inspection. Yet our projective grasp of his practices discloses the geographer as a virtually ek-sistent Dasein engaging with his world in a meaningful way. In the same way, we see the depicted tools both as present-at-hand for us *and* on the background of his involvement with the world: we are sensitive to their equipmental character in a way which would not be possible if we were ourselves engaged in the activity that discloses them. Interestingly, this is doubly similar to what happens in another kind of liminal situation described in BT, i.e. when the user of a tool is unexpectedly faced with various forms of resistance. Firstly, Heidegger observes that in such cases 'the modes of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness and obstinacy[35] all have the function of bringing to the fore the characteristic of presence-at-hand in what is ready-to-hand. But the ready-to-hand is not thereby but *observed* and stared at as something present-at-hand; *the presence-at-hand which makes itself known is still bound up in the readiness-to-hand of equipment. Such equipment still does not veil itself in the guise of mere things'* (BT G74, my italics). Thus if my spoon breaks as I stir the stew, or proves to be too short, it suddenly emerges to presence-at-hand but in a way which is still coloured by my previous equipmental engagement with it: it doesn't work as a tool anymore, but it is not quite an object I could relate to in a decontextualised, neutral way yet. I am annoyed with it; I am sensitive

[34] (Note the subtlety of Vermeer's use of light here: the right side of the Geographer's face is directly exposed to the light flooding from the window, which is so strong that one would expect the left side of the man's face to be deeply shadowed. Yet the white parchment on the table works as a reflective surface which projects a softer light back onto the geographer's face, thus allowing Vermeer to depict it in a much more expressive way than otherwise).

[35] (In *Auffällighkeit*, the tool is encountered as unusable or un-ready-to-hand, for example because it is damaged. In *Aufdringlichkeit*, we have the same tool in front of us but we want another one: on this background the first one becomes obstrusive. Finally, in *Aufsässigkeit*, the tool is neither missing nor un ready-to-hand but it 'stands in the way' of our concern (BT G74). We must attend to it before doing what we really want (for example, mixing colours before we can paint).

to its sudden lack of usefulness rather than to its own independent qualities. In a similar way, the objects depicted by the paintings are disclosed to us on the background of the characters' engagement with them, and our perception is coloured by this involvement. The milkmaid's careful gesture discloses the bread and the milk as valuable; the geographer's stance conveys that the acquisition of knowledge is a worthy activity, and this inclines us to regard the tools of his trade, not as the symbols of the futility of human enterprises, but as important technical innovations. Similarly, although the pearls on woman in blue's desk have a higher intrinsic value than the letter, her absorbed reading discloses the latter as more valuable. Thus the paintings present us neither with equipment nor with, as Heidegger puts it, 'mere things', but with ambiguous representations that bear some of the characteristics of each: they have the visibility of present-at-hand objects and yet just like ready-to-hand entities they are made relevant to us by specific practices.

The second similarity with equipmental breakdown is that this ambiguity draws our attention of the complex network of relations presupposed by the practices. Importantly, this network is independent from the characters' putative thoughts or desires, which is why it (and the associated practices) can be grasped with very little or no psychological identification with particular individuals. In BT, Heidegger shows how all ready-to-hand entities are such by virtue of belonging to an 'involvement whole' (*Bewandtnisganzheit*): the latter is structured by various relations (mainly in order to, where-in, where-of, with-which, towards-which and for-the-sake-of which (BT: §16). When taken as a formal whole and related to Dasein as their ultimate for-the-sake-of-which, these relations form what Heidegger calls the worldhood (*Weltlichkeit*) of the world[36]. One way of articulating the difference between world and worldhood is to point out that while neither is an entity, the first is a horizon which is contextually dependent on historical practices (which in turn presuppose its existence); by contrast, worldhood is the structure which is involved by all historical worlds or sub-worlds.[37] In normal situations of fluid equipmental use, the relations that comprise worldhood are operative but not thematised. But in the case of equipmental breakdown these

[36] [BT G72] The world itself is not an entity within the world; and yet it is so determinative for such entities that only insofar as 'there is' a world can they be encountered and show themselves, in their Being, as entities which have been discovered. But in what way 'is there' a world? (...) Does not Dasein have an understanding of the world — a pre-ontological understanding which indeed can and does get along without explicit ontological insights?'

[37] Thus 'worldhood itself may have as its modes whatever structural wholes any special "worlds" may have at the time: it embraces in-itself the *a priori* character of worldhood in general' (BT: G64). Note that the claim that worldhood is a priori should not be read in a metaphysical way, as entailing that worldhood can exist before and independently from any actual world. What is meant by it is twofold: although it can be artificially separated from its embodiment in a particular world by and for the purpose of reflective analysis, the structure of worldhood only exists as instantiated in a particular world. And conversely, anything that qualifies as a world must exhibit the distinct features of this structure. Whether Heidegger is right to think of worldhood as a priori is a hotly debated point. The Vermeer paintings certainly exhibit the sort of worldhood that he analysed in *Being and Time* but it may be pointed out that even though there are very significant differences, they are not that culturally removed from our own world and that therefore the structural continuity may be explained in terms of the empirical persistence of similar practices (rather than by the transcendental dependence of all practices on worldhood).

relations acquire a higher degree of visibility: as the equipment slowly emerges as present-at-hand, in the same way some elements of the involvement whole come to the fore — for example as I burn myself I realise that the spoon I grabbed was made of metal, not wood or silicon (and thus become aware of its whereof), that its length is inappropriate for stirring (which highlights its in order to), etc. As Heidegger puts it, 'the context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection' (BT: 103).

Up to a point, something of the same order happens in the Vermeer paintings. The milkmaid's gesture and the direction of her gaze focus our attention on the jug she holds and the milk that flows from it. This in turn highlights the other objects on the table (the bread, the basket, the pitcher) and their relations both to each other and to the milkmaid herself. The former are governed by specific in-order-tos (thus the basket, pitcher and jug are all containers; bread and milk provide nourishment), and the latter, by various for-the-sakes-of-which (feeding the household, fulfilling her task as a milkmaid, etc). Following the implicit thread of these relations, the scope of our gaze widens to the rest of the room. More equipmental connections appear (the basket and the pail hanging on the wall are also containers), the foot warmer is for the sake of warming up the milkmaid's feet. At the same time, we develop an awareness of the diversity and texture of the materials depicted (the where-of of the objects): the gleaming clay of the jug, the pearliness of the milk, the coarseness of the cloth… These materials themselves resonate in a coloured network which reinforces the correspondences between the objects: the blue of the tablecloth and that of the apron, the drops of light on the breadbasket and the reflections on the pail, which themselves evoke the yellow of the woman's dress, etc. As our gaze wanders from jug to basket, we become aware of the kitchen itself as the environment in which all these relations coalesce (their where-in). The more we look at the painting, the more the network of relations widens, and the more it widens, the higher our awareness of it becomes. The milk maid appears as the focal point of a potentially infinite set of relations which cannot themselves be depicted but which my projective understanding of her activity and posture makes me sensitive to.

However there are three important dysanalogies between the cases of equipmental breakdown and that of the paintings. For one thing, the ambiguity of the depicted objects is not the result of any *defect* or lack from their part. They are not broken tools: it is constitutive of their nature to be disclosed in this paradoxical manner (as ready-to-hand for another Dasein and yet present at hand for us in a way which is coloured by our projection unto the practices of that other Dasein). Secondly, in the kitchen or workshop our ambiguous perception of the defective equipment [as present-at-hand but on the background of our ready-to-hand involvement with the world] is only

temporary: soon we find another way of using it or use something else, and the tool fades back into inconspicuousness. Not so with the depicted objects: the ambiguity does not resolve itself. Furthermore, it is precisely because it does not resolve itself that we are drawn to explore the network of relations presupposed by the various not quite ready-to-hand objects displayed on the canvas. Thirdly — and this is perhaps where the most important dissimilarity lies — in the case of equipmental breakdown, 'with this totality [worldhood] the world announces itself' (BT: 103). Which world? Not any world: *my* world. Not as my private world (as this would only make sense metaphorically), but as the world I share with the other Dasein that live in my culture. When prompted by the equipmental breakdown, I am able to 'fill in' the formal structure of worldhood without any difficulty and beyond doubt about my understanding of the world (whether I am right *that* the world is truly as I understand it is a different question). I can articulate what I already implicitly understand, namely why one cooks, with what, for the sake of what, etc. But in the case of the painting, it is impossible for me to attribute any *reliable* content to the assignments I have become aware of. Perhaps the for-the-sake-of-which of the pouring is to prepare a morning meal, but for all I know it could be to sell the milk, or to make butter, or more crucially to fulfil some other purpose that I have no idea of. Perhaps a whole dimension of the painting is closed off to me so completely that I am not even aware of it because the range of existential possibilities open to the milkmaid is out of my reach. Although I may hazard a few guesses and even happen to be right, the understanding of being that was spontaneously shared by the various Dasein of her time is closed to me. Clearly it is what contextualist interpretations try to recapture, but such an understanding cannot be reconstructed in a theoretical way: knowing about the meaning of particular objects or symbols is not the same as experiencing that meaning directly through one's practices (and letting the experiencing guide these practices).

So *which* world is it that 'announces itself' with the worldhood disclosed by the paintings? It can be neither the world of the Dutch Golden age nor the one we ourselves belong to. I would suggest that it is a hybrid, imaginary world born from our attempts to fill in the formal structure of worldhood, which the paintings make us aware of through our grasp of the practices depicted, with elements of the world we live in. Strictly speaking, it is not a world at all as it is not shared by other Dasein. It is our projective understanding of what the world of 17th century Holland, as instantiated in a milkmaid's kitchen, might have been. Because of the way worldhood transcends particular sub-worlds and is thus common to all, we are still able to grasp the structure of intelligibility underlying the depicted practices and to project ourselves in the way analysed above. Yet at the same time almost every detail in the paintings makes us aware, often painfully, of the inadequateness of our projection:

the characters' clothes, the objects that surround them, all these point directly to another epoch in a manner which we cannot ignore. We are thus placed in a strange, *unheimlich* [not at home] position: on the one hand, we grasp the practices depicted and the structure they rely on well enough to become sensitive to what the paintings cannot show directly, namely the existence of a world as the horizon of significations to which the practices and related objects belonged. On the other hand, we're equally aware of the fact that for all our efforts, the original meaning of these practices and objects is inaccessible to us. A fictitious world arises, from and beyond the represented objects, which at the same time points towards what it cannot be: the *lost* world of the Dutch Golden age. Thus our grasp of its ontological lineaments is accompanied with a strong sense of the inadequacies of all the projections that are now available to us. From this arise an impression of loss and loneliness and a keen perception of the fragility of everything human.

To some extent, this phenomenon is similar to what happens in the case of anxiety: recall that in such instances Dasein becomes incapable of engaging with its world anymore. Because of this sudden breakdown of *Befindlichkeit*, the structure of worldhood comes to the fore in an estranging manner. 'The utter insignificance which makes itself known in the 'nothing and nowhere' [of that in the face of which one has anxiety] does not signify that the world is absent, but tells us that entities within the world are of so little importance in themselves that on the basis of this *insignificance* of what is within the world, *the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself*' (BT: 231), second italics mine). Thus things and people are still intelligible to Dasein, but somehow they do not matter anymore. Dasein is made aware that this is a deficiency both by its former ability to engage with the world and its acquired sensitivity to the norms implicitly conveyed by that world: although it is incapable of caring anymore, Dasein knows that it did before. It also knows what should matter to it. The more incapable of caring it is, the more the worldhood of the world looms over it and oppresses it with demands which it cannot meet. In the paintings too worldhood comes to the fore, and in the same way (although for different reasons) the world it was instantiated in appears as something we cannot relate to: we understand its structure well enough to realise that there was such a world, but we also sense that that it is closed to us. Like anxious Dasein, we are faced with a world which we don't belong to and are helpless in the face of this phenomenon. The reason why we don't feel anxious, however, (or at least not necessarily so), is that our awareness of the fact that this world is lost prevents it from making *demands* on us: it would not make any sense for us to feel compelled to engage with the world of 17th century Dutch men or women — this would be analogous to Don Quixote's deluded desire to live in the past world of chivalric deeds. Thus while in both cases we become sensitive to worldhood, in anxiety, Dasein is faced with the loss of its connections to its *own*

world; through the paintings, we are made aware of our inability to reach a world that was never *ours*.

In this paper, I have tried to offer a phenomenological alternative to both contextualist and realist approaches to Vermeer's paintings, in the hope that this would help us understand better their nature as artworks. This analysis revealed both the ontologically disclosive nature of the paintings and the projective process whereby we become sensitive to the style of the depicted practices. As in the cases of equipmental breakdown or anxiety analysed by Heidegger, albeit in a different manner, the paintings make us aware of the formal structure of assignments presupposed by the practices — the worldhood of the world. Correlatively, the style of the practices orients our perception of the paintings in ways which the theoretical attitude underlying both the contextualist and realist approaches cannot capture. Yet at the same time various elements in the paintings make us aware that the projective understanding of the world that organises our perception is hopelessly anachronistic and cannot capture what the depicted practices might have encompassed in 17th century Dutch society. Thus the sense of world which arises from the works is accompanied by a keen awareness of the inadequacies of the projection.

In conclusion, I now wish to stand back and offer a few reflections on the implications of this phenomenological analysis for Heidegger's views about artworks. Prima facie, it confirms one of Heidegger's main claims, namely that artworks characteristically perform an ontological form of disclosure that goes beyond what they actually represent (or beyond their immediate phenomenal appearance in the case of non figurative artworks). Yet whereas Heidegger thinks that this disclosure consists in the opening up of a world, what emerges from our encounter with the Vermeer paintings is that they *fail* to do so. However, this does not mean, *pace* Heidegger, that they have become inoperative (or to use Blanchot's very apt term, *désoeuvrées*): the paintings make us sensitive both to an ontological structure that goes beyond the depicted objects (worldhood) and to the fact that we cannot reach its former instantiation (the lost world). To understand this proximity to and distance from Heidegger, we must remember that OWA is concerned with the relation of a whole people to the artworks *of its own time*. Thus most of the artworks evoked (the Greek temple, the cathedral) are massive in scale and were meant for permanent collective display: this heroic and public dimension is what allowed them to perform to the sort of world articulation that Heidegger deems characteristic of great artworks: they presented a people with the major ontological and ethical lineaments of its own understanding of the world (or in the case of world re-configuration, brought forward a new

paradigm from existing marginal practices).[38] This exclusive emphasis on the relation between artworks and the community they belonged to led Heidegger to the pessimistic conclusion that once they are removed from their native context and exhibited in a museum, artworks of the past cease to be artworks in the sense that they are unable to disclose the world in the way they once did.[39] Thus 'world withdrawal and world decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is themselves, to be sure, that we encounter there, but they themselves are gone by. As bygone works they stand over against us in the realm of tradition and conservation. *Henceforth they remain merely such objects*' (PLT: 41, my italics). The premise is certainly right: as we have seen, the world the Vermeer paintings belonged to is gone, and they won't resurrect it. However the conclusion that the works *themselves* are 'gone by' does not follow. On the contrary, the ontological disclosure performed by the Vermeer paintings is significant at least in two ways: firstly, by bringing to the fore the structure of worldhood, they enhance our awareness of what being in the world entails. Whether our projective understanding of the world hinted at by the paintings is *correct* or not (in the sense of matching a 17th century Dutchman's putative understanding of that world) is, in my view, fairly irrelevant: what matters is that the Vermeer paintings are able to lead us beyond the visible to what articulates it.

Heidegger's later reflections on art, and in particular on Cézanne and Klee, indicate that this view may have not been as uncongenial to him as may seem from the perspective of OWA only, which brings me to the second reason why the ontological disclosure performed by the Vermeer's paintings is important. According to J. Young, the main drive for Heidegger's development after 1936 was the desire to understand artworks which, like Cézanne's or Klee's (or for that matter, Vermeer's), do not have 'world-historical significance'[40] and this, without falling into the trap of subjective aesthetics. This led him to recontextualise his approach to art within the new framework of his critique of metaphysics as resulting from a 'fundamental mistake': the 'failure to see the dependence of truth (as correspondence) upon the world disclosure that happens in, and only in, human (...) forms of life. Because of this, one fails to see the *projected* character of one's horizon of disclosure (...), one takes its articulation to be *the* uniquely correct articulation of the fundamental structure of reality

[38] Thus the temple indicates 'what is brave or cowardly, what is noble and what is fugitive' (PLT: 44). It points out towards an understanding of being which is intrinsically normative (cf. Young, p. 25 sq). Young rejects the 'Promethean reading' (attributed to Hubert Dreyfus, see p. 52 sq) according to which the artwork would *create* a world. Perhaps in reply to this, Dreyfus has provided a more nuanced account of the possible relations between artworks and world (articulation, reconfiguration). See H. L. Dreyfus, 'Heidegger's Ontology of Art', in *Blackwell Companion to Heidegger*, Blackwell, 2005, p. 407-419.

[39] (Both the emphasis on the relation between an artwork, its people and its time on the one hand, and the claim that there are no great works anymore on the other hand are deeply Hegelian in spirit. Cf. Jay Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, and J. Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*.

[40] As in the case of Van Gogh's shoes, their scale was too small. They were meant for private display and thus could not have performed the sort of heroic world-articulation that Heidegger had in mind with the temple or the cathedral.

itself. (...) The art which is important for our "needy times" is art which provides an antidote to metaphysics' (Young: 124, Young's italics). In this light, what is important both about Cézanne and Klee is not so much that they should articulate a paradigm for their contemporaries but that they show *all of us* the 'worlding' of the world, and this in such a way that its projected character remains evident throughout the experience of the work. Thus Cézanne's Montagne Sainte Victoire materialises itself out of perceptual chaos and yet trembles on the brink of dissolving back into an abstract jumble of lines and colours. Similarly, Klee's ambition was to 'deform the world of natural appearances' so as to go back to the *Ur-bildliche*, the origin of the pictorial (Young: 159), the forming powers that generate the visible. His work reinforces Cézanne's tendency to abstraction but remains focused on letting objects emerge from abstracts patterns and hover on the verge of intelligibility. In both cases, 'we take the "step back' so as to become aware not only of the projecte*d* but of the project*ing*' (Young: 157).

Although Vermeer's paintings are not abstract and thus do not show how a world emerges from chaos, they perform a structurally similar kind of ontological disclosure: they highlight the *un-worlding* of a past world. They prompt and allow us to imagine the world of the Dutch golden age, and yet in the same movement make us aware of the fact that it is out of our existential reach. The poignancy of such un-worlding is emphasised by the way in which the *worth* of what was lost comes to the fore. As indicated above, the practices depicted share a common style which is one of deep *care,* both for the activities themselves, the objects involved and the world they belong to.[41] This is particularly obvious in the case of the *Milkmaid* but equally visible in the intensity of the geographer's stance and woman in blue's quiet concentration. All three of them fit in harmoniously with their world. Furthermore, their care allows the objects they use to emerge for us in yet *another* way: not just as ready-to- and present-at-hand in the ambiguous mode described above, but also as 'things', to use later Heidegger's vocabulary, as focal points that gather their world further around them. Thus far from being realistic, Vermeer's paintings give us an idealised depiction of how one can be *at home* in one's world.[42] This ideal aspect explains the scarcity of individual features and contextual elements I pointed out earlier (since both would get in the way of the idealisation) and is further emphasised by the golden, Arcadian light that suffuses all three paintings. Its cosy radiance enhances the impression of being at home and generates a sense of wonder akin to what Heidegger notes about the festival in Hölderlin, the 'wonder that around us a world worlds at all (...), that there

[41] I owe this observation to Edward Pile.

[42] Another way of expressing the same idea would be to say that they *dwell* in their world. Cf. 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking': 'the fundamental character of dwelling is (...) sparing and preserving' (PLT: 149). As astutely pointed out by Julian Young, in this context *schonen* is dual-aspected: on the one hand, the dweller is 'preserved from harm and danger (...), safeguarded' (PLT: ibidem) and on the other, s/he 'safeguards each thing in its nature'. Thus 'dwelling is, in brief, both caring for and being cared for' (Young: 129).

are things and we ourselves are in their midst, that we ourselves are' (GA 52, p. 64). In this regard, perhaps one of the paradoxes of Vermeer's paintings is that such wonder should not require a heroic step out of the drabness of 'everydayness' (as in the festival) but on the contrary attach itself to the most ordinary, often insignificant practices. Yet it is precisely this homely character which allows the works to shed a new light on our *own* everyday life and practices, and thus afford us an opportunity to understand and possibly change them. In doing so, the paintings fulfil a similar kind of goal to that of *Being and Time* itself; yet whereas the changes enabled by the latter require reflection and conscious thought, by showing us a form of dwelling as both 'caring for and being cared for' (Young: 129) the paintings can prompt us to alter our practices unreflectively.

Thus the paintings present us with a transfiguration of the everyday which explains our deep attraction for their world and makes them relevant to our own lives. Yet there is (even) more to the ontological disclosure they perform. Our sense of wonder is tinged with melancholy. The way in which the figures belong to their world intensifies our own sense of homelessness. Beyond this, our inability to deploy their world emphasises its fragility, and by extension the transience of *all* worlds. It is not a vast jump to see from the precariousness of that lost world that one day ours will be lost too. I believe that it is not even a logical inference: just as ruins, for Schopenhauer, make the passing of time and our own mortality directly perceptible to us, in the same way our sadness at the loss of the Dutch world intuitively leads us to feel that ours is destined to the same end. Thus whereas Cézanne and Klee's work show us how worlds emerge out of chaos, the Vermeer paintings point towards the inherent fragility not just of the Dutch golden age, but of *all* worlds, towards their dependence on historical practices that may become less prominent or even cease to exist. They make our own thrownness and finitude palpable. Thus the 'fundamental mistake' of metaphysics is averted: the Vermeer paintings make it impossible for us to believe that the world we live in is the only possible one. That they are able to do so almost four centuries after they were created is, notwithstanding Heidegger, a testimony to their enduring power as artworks.

Professor Béatrice Han-Pile
University of Essex
Philosophy Department

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