

# VERMEER IN THE AGE OF THE DIGITAL REPRODUCTION AND VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

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**ABSTRACT:** The twentieth century was responsible for the revival of the visual arts, lending techniques to literature, in particular, after the advent of cinema. This visual revival is illustrated by the intersemiotic translations of **Girl with a Pearl Earring**: a recent low-budget movie was responsible for the revival of ordinary public interest in an art masterpiece from the seventeenth century. However, it was the book about the portrait that catalyzed this process of rejuvenation by verbalizing the portrait and inspiring the cinematographic adaptation, thereby creating the intersemiotic web.

In this media-saturated environment we now live in, not only do books inspire movie adaptations, but movies inspire literary works; adaptations of screenplays are published; movies are adapted into musicals, television shows and even videogames. For James Naremore, every form of retelling should be added to the “study of adaptation in the age of the mechanical reproduction and electronic communication” (NAREMORE, 2000: 12-15), long previewed in Walter Benjamin’s milestone article (1936). Nowadays, the celebrated expression could be changed to the age of the digital reproduction and virtual communication, since new technologies and the use of new media have been changing the relations between, and within, the arts.

The objective of this essay is to explore Vermeer’s influence on contemporary art and media production, with focus on the collection of portraits from the book entitled **Domestic Landscapes** (2007) by the Dutch photographer Bert Teunissen, confirming the study of recycling within a general theory of repetition proposed by James Naremore, under the light of intermediality.

**KEYWORDS:** Oil painting; Literature; Cinematographic adaptation; Photography; Intermediality.

**RESUMO:** O século XX foi responsável pelo retorno das artes visuais, especialmente depois do advento do cinema que passa a emprestar técnicas para a literatura. Este retorno é ilustrado pelas traduções intersemióticas intituladas **Moça com Brinco de Pérola**, em que um filme britânico independente (2007) chama a atenção do público geral para um retrato feito no século XVII, lembrando que o ciclo não seria fechado sem seu principal catalisador: o romance (1999). Criando assim uma rede semiótica.

No ambiente de mídia saturada que vivemos hoje, não somente livros inspiram adaptações fílmicas, mas filmes inspiram obras literárias, roteiros adaptados são publicados, filmes são adaptados para musicais e até mesmo para videogames. James Naremore propõe um estudo de reciclagem dentro de uma teoria geral de repetição. Para ele, toda forma de recontar deveria ser adicionada ao “estudo de adaptação na era de reprodução mecânica e comunicação eletrônica” (NAREMORE, 2000: 12-15), há muito prevista no artigo de Walter Benjamin. Hoje em dia, a celebrada expressão poderia ser substituída para era da reprodução digital e comunicação virtual, uma vez que as novas tecnologias e o uso de novas mídias têm mudado as relações entre, e dentro, das artes.

O objetivo deste ensaio é explorar a influência do legado do mestre Vermeer na produção de arte e mídia contemporânea, em especial nas fotografias exibidas na exposição **Domestic Landscapes** (2007) de autoria do fotógrafo holandês Bert Teunissen, confirmando o estudo de reciclagem dentro de uma teoria geral de repetição proposto por Naremore, sob a luz da intermedialidade.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pintura; Literatura; Adaptação cinematográfica; Fotografia; Intermidialidade.

Johannes Vermeer was born in 1632 in Delft, Netherlands. There are only thirty-six paintings attributed to him nowadays. Most of his paintings were not for the general public; he would mainly paint for specific clients. Vermeer's art was not worth its real value at his time and many of the paintings were credited to other painters in order to increase their monetary value. He died practically unknown at the early age of 43 years old in 1675.

Dutch painting is rich in observation of the world, showing its virtues and domestic worries. Vermeer had a very strong trademark: the representation of silent, industrious women depicted under perfect technique especially the lighting. His work anticipated the impressionist movement and was only recognized in the 19th century by Théophile Bürger-Thoré, a French journalist and politician who collected most of the master's work in his traveling around Europe.

In the mid-nineties, an art exhibit gathering all known oil paintings by Vermeer took place simultaneously in two venues, the National Gallery, Washington D.C. and the Mauritshuis, The Hague. This exhibit produced a catalogue, symposia, and seminars. As a consequence there was a boom of intersemiotic translations with Vermeer's work serving as an inspiration for literature, in form of poetry, novels, and movies.

My object of study is the artwork of Vermeer and two cultural products inspired by the portrait **Girl with a Pearl Earring**: the novel written (1999) by an American author living in London, Tracy Chevalier and its movie adaptation directed by Peter Webber, which came out in 2003 as an independent British production. The story is based on the portrait, blending fiction, Vermeer's life and historical facts.

The author of the novel, Chevalier, chose to create a fictional character, Griet, a Dutch Protestant middle-class teenager who becomes a maid in the house of the painter after her father, a tile artisan, loses his sight in a work accident and cannot support his family anymore. The Vermeers need a maid to clean the master's studio, once his wife is again pregnant.

The growing intimacy between the master and maid creates disruption and jealousy. At first, Griet describes the artworks to her father, who has always been a great admirer of the master's work, when visiting her family over the weekends. Griet is elevated to master's assistant by helping him with the colors preparation and they start discussing his art pieces. Vermeer's patron, van Ruijven, becomes interested in Griet since the very first time he sees

her. This obsession leads to the climax of the story when Griet becomes Vermeer's muse, culminating in her sitting for the portrait *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The novel can be considered a *Künstlerroman*, a literary work in which a work of art or the figure of an artist is the backbone element, because the core of its narrative is built on Vermeer's real life told by the mysterious fictional girl he painted. Chevalier makes vast use of ekphrastic descriptions of Vermeer's paintings in the narrative of the novel. Griet lays out the core of the story through a series of descriptions.

The movie adaptation was produced by independent British producers and directed by Peter Webber. Eduardo Serra was the director of cinematography and Olivia Hetreed wrote the screenplay as Chevalier refused to change the story herself. It stars Colin Firth as Vermeer, newcomer Scarlett Johansson as Griet and the experienced Tom Wilkinson as the patron van Ruijven. The movie plot is faithful to the novel; however this was not a relevant issue for the production, which focused on translating not only the novel's core, but especially Vermeer's aesthetics. The movie was nominated for three Oscars. Not surprisingly all nominations are connected to visual aspects.

The movie is more concise than the novel since it cuts and combines the parallel plots, such as the ones related to Griet's family, strengthening the narrative. In contrast to the novel, which focuses on the maid's thoughts, the movie is principally concerned with the master/maid relationship. It also presents the aesthetics of Vermeer's paintings on the big screen through Eduardo Serra's unique use of light.

The movie adaptation also tells about Vermeer's life. In this sense it can be considered a Biographical picture, shortened to Biopic, which is the film co-relate to the literary *Künstlerroman*. Besides the life of the artist, it explores the progress of his creative process. Vermeer always uses the same elements of composition in his work. Through words, Chevalier is able to reproduce these same elements in the ekphrastic descriptions inside the

novel. She repeats words to refer to the same elements just like Vermeer does in his paintings. In the same way, Webber, with the help of the cinematography director Serra, is not only consistent but also fortunate while transposing both Vermeer's artwork and Chevalier's story to the screen. He not only uses the same elements in composing his scenes but also reproduces the most relevant characteristic of Vermeer's technique: the use of light.

But why revisit Vermeer's aesthetic techniques and values – the representation of silent, industrious women – in the beginning of the twenty-first century? Why not revisit the best know Dutch painter from the Golden Age, Rembrandt? Or even the later Dutch genius, Van Gogh?

In order to answer this question it is crucial to take a few theoretical aspects into consideration. According to Gérard Genette, transtextuality can be understood as the agent of a round trip. That is, through its study it is possible to perceive how the semiotic web is triggered, especially through the most silent relationship which relies mainly on reception: the architextual relationship. The spectator (who may be a reader, a viewer or, more likely, an internaut) is the one likely to identify transtextual relationships, even when the author himself has not premeditated these connections. As Robert Stam notes when discussing intertextuality: “any text that has ‘slept with’ another text . . . has also slept with all the other texts that that text has slept with” (STAM, 2005: 27). This statement leads me to another one by Jean Cocteau, which says that “the danger with cinema work is that if you try to set the effect of a Rembrandt you end up with a Roybet. It's much safer not to worry about that quality then and find you've achieved a Vermeer after all” (COCTEAU, 1950: 108-9). Evocation without an explicit citation, therefore, can be understood as a transtextual procedure. Vermeer's artwork is more popular today than it was at the end of the twentieth century, aided by the movie adaptation which, in turn, could not exist without the novel. Vermeer's work continues to inspire today. Because of Naremore's suggestion of a general

theory of repetition,<sup>9</sup> it becomes necessary to look into what contemporary artists have been doing.

Naremore proposes a study of recycling within a general theory of repetition. In this media-saturated environment we now live in, not only do books inspire movie adaptations, but movies inspire literary works; adaptations of screenplays are published; movies are adapted into musicals and television shows (NAREMORE, 2000: 12-5). Linda Hutcheon goes further when adding “theme parks, historical enactments, and virtual reality experiments” to Naremore’s list of possibilities (NAREMORE, 2000: xi). For him, every form of retelling should be added to the “study of adaptation in the age of the mechanical reproduction and electronic communication” (NAREMORE, 2000: 15), paying homage to Walter Benjamin’s milestone article (1936). Nowadays, the celebrated expression could be changed to “the age of the digital reproduction and virtual communication”, since new technologies and the use of new media have been changing the relations between, and within, the arts.

Naremore suggests that the cinematographic adaptation process is a multidirectional, dialogic and intertextual kind of translation (NAREMORE, 2000: 12-3). His proposal is in accordance with Robert Stam’s view that adaptation is a process of exchange that is not hierarchical and biased as it used to be not so long ago (STAM, 2005: 46). Moreover, Hutcheon explains that “because adaptations are to a different medium, they are re-mediations, that is, specifically in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images)” (HUTCHEON, 2006: 16). As explored previously, the studies of transformations occurring throughout the translation process are connected to the movie adaptation of **Girl with a Pearl Earring**, as it is the result of an intersemiotic transposition in which an independent British cinema production focuses

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<sup>9</sup> A general theory of repetition is proposed by Naremore taking into account the doors the study of intermediality have recently opened with regard to the study of the inter-relation between different semiotic signs including new media and technology.

the attention of the general public on a seventeenth century portrait. However, the cycle would not be complete without its main catalyst: the novel.

Although Naremore proposes his theory for film studies, I extend it to the world of fine arts because it is here that his approach offers the most corroboration. During my research, I realized that art has outlets through many media. The static piece of artwork has given way to highly interactive art and media. This kind of interaction is called intermediality. However, intermediality is not new to literary production since authors have always found inspiration in other art forms by crossing the boundaries which separate the arts, leading us back to Naremore's proposal of a general theory of repetition.

In order to illustrate how artworks can be interwoven, I will explore the revival of the portrait **Girl with a Pearl Earring** in what is known as new media – not considered high art – through images I randomly found on the Internet. This is the kind of revival we deal with in our quotidian through electronic mail or while surfing the net. For my surprise, I found not only the same images I studied in 2007 available online, but also a wider variety of playful transformations of Vermeer's work. For instance, on the website Worth1000, there were almost fifty pages available evoking the master's art in February, 2012.



Fig. 1 – Wade Scott. **Dirt Car Art.**

The first one shows the work by the American artist Scott Wade, known for his dirty car ephemeral art style (see Fig. 1). The second image refers to an advertisement hyperlink, which adds anyone's picture to a masterpiece and, according to the site, turns your picture into artwork (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 – Digitaldrops. **Coloque seu rosto na Mona Lisa.**

The images from the website **Worth1000** use a similar technique to show the girl in all sorts of fashions and make portraits of celebrities such as Hollywood actress Sandra Bullock back in 2007, or Angelina Jolie who has been more on evidence. It now promotes different photo effects and illustration contests in which we find the model represented from a gorilla to a Japanese character in Manga fashion (see Fig. 3). According to Gennete's hypertextual practices diagram these manifestations fit the category of playful transformations: parody. They illustrate the revival of the portrait **Girl with a Pearl Earring** in electronic media.





Fig. 3 – Worth1000. **Girl with a Pearl Earring**.

But what have contemporary artists been doing nowadays? Conceptual art and art for art's sake are not the mainstream anymore. A recent exhibition at Aperture Gallery, Chelsea, New York City, which closed on May 10, 2007, produced a book entitled **Domestic Landscapes** by the Dutch photographer Bert Teunissen.<sup>10</sup> It is a collection of photographs taken over the past decade. Teunissen depicts ordinary people in their ordinary houses mainly built before the Great World Wars.



Fig. 4 – Bert Teunissen. **Domestic Landscapes** (Belin Beliet 3, France, 1997). Website fig.#199.

<sup>10</sup> Bert Teunissen has had his photographs “exhibited across Europe and the United States and published in numerous magazines. . . . The complete **Domestic Landscapes** archive can be viewed at [www.bertteunissen.com](http://www.bertteunissen.com)” (**Domestic Landscapes** Back Flap).

According to Saskia Asser, the relation between Teunissen's and Vermeer's works in "atmospheric light" was first made in an exhibition review in an American publication. It was only after reading this commentary that Teunissen actually visited "the Frick Collection in New York to see first hand what the critics meant by this comparison." Despite Asser's argument that the photographer has been influenced by the "painterly dwellings of farmers and fishermen" present in the work of Jozef Israëls (1824-1911) and not by "the interiors belonging to the urban, well-to-do merchant class," Asser admits that Israëls had previously been influenced by the "Dutch tradition that emphasizes and sublimates the intrinsic value of everyday life" so well represented by Vermeer (ASSER, 2007: 128). Such reasoning confirms that intertextuality may not be conscious on the artist's behalf, relying on the viewer's reception. If Israëls's paintings have 'slept with' Vermeer's, Teunissen's photographs have in kind slept with both Israëls and Vermeer's work, as Robert Stam would put it.

As we can see from the previous photograph (see Fig. 4) its vermeerization<sup>11</sup> is patent. The use of natural light, the depiction of people at home in ordinary positions in the very characteristic Dutch windows transposes the observer to the quiet life present in Vermeer's artwork. It is true that the use of Vermeer's aesthetics is not necessarily an innovation. It all started with contemporaries of Vermeer who were even credited for his work for more than two centuries. As the impressionist movement had been anticipated by him, he was again imitated in the nineteenth century.

In the thirties, Jean Cocteau deliberately did the same in his movie *The Beauty and the Beast* (COCTEAU, 1950: 108-09), and so did many other artists who work *a la manière* of Vermeer. Although Teunissen admits he does not have the intention to imitate Vermeer, he is able not only to use the painter's outstanding technique, one of the main elements present in

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<sup>11</sup> Gennete uses the word Mallarméization when discussing the transstylization process. He means appropriating the style in the manner of Mallarmé. I use the word vermeerization with the same intent.

the master's work, but also to produce a work of art stamped with his own personality. The intertextuality of Vermeer's perception of light is present, but Teunissen's pieces of art leave no doubt as to his creative potential. It is a collection of portraits using photography as a tool, which may be considered art pieces.

Kathryn Shattuck, in an interview with Teunissen for the American newspaper **The New York Times**, calls attention to the fact that it may sound obvious to compare the photographs to the master's work. The photographer's goal is to "preserve memories of a lifestyle fast becoming obsolete" (TEUNISSEN, 2007: par. 07). This aim is faithful to Vermeer's who, in his turn, targeted the representation of the Dutch lifestyle and the promotion of better habits for women who were known to be somewhat idle in the seventeenth century. The purpose of the works is different indeed, but there is a similarity in preserving the memory of the Netherlands. It is true that Teunissen has extended his work throughout Europe and even Japan, which can be seen at the photographer's website. But since we do live in a globalized world, and there is no going back, Teunissen's work only proves Naremore's theory of repetition.

In order to illustrate further, next I will present some photographs by Teunissen and Vermeer's paintings, as well as scenes from the movie.



Fig. 5 - Johannes Vermeer, Fig. 6 – Peter Webber, DVD, **Girl with a Pearl Earring** painting, **The Love Letter** (Delft (London, 2003), movie still chapter 3. 1667-70).

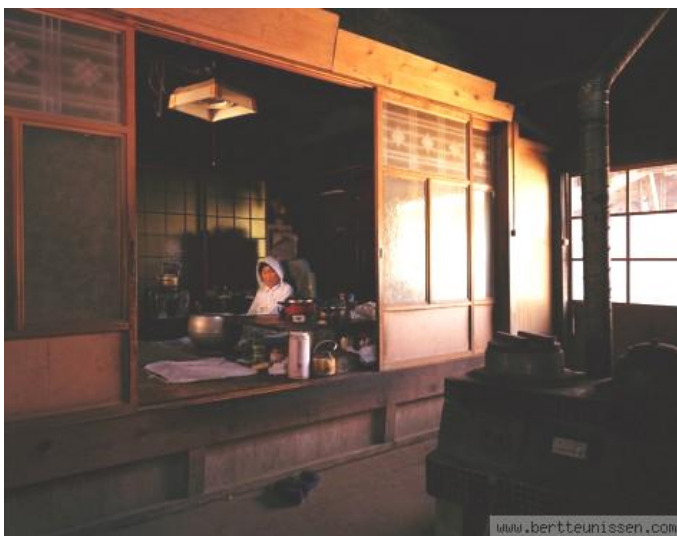


Fig. 7 – Bert Teunissen. **Domestic Landscapes** (Nara 24, Japan, 2003). Website fig.#164.

The illustrations are in accordance with Liliane Louvel’s statement of how the windows, a trademark in Dutch painting, are likely to inspire a writer’s imagination in the “never ending dialogue between Word and Image” (LOUVEL, 2006: 11-12). Here, in contrast, we perceive art inspiring art rather than art inspiring literature, which proceeds since my focus is on the multi-directional effects produced by the semiotic web of **Girl with a Pearl Earring** (see Fig. 5, Fig. 6 and Fig. 7).

Therefore, even though the previous photograph depicts a culturally different environment, the influence of Vermeer’s artwork is evident in the superposition of plans formed by windows, the disposition of furniture and props, the modeling of the silent figure captured by means of precise technique and, of course, the use of natural light (see Fig. 7).

In the following comparison, the similarity in the use of light is remarkable in the photograph that portrays a man also by the window in a very dark Spanish kitchen (see Fig. 8 and Fig. 9). The way a pot is set in the sink under a round tap resembles the globe. This procedure fits what Gennete calls transtylization or “a stylistic rewriting, a transposition whose sole function is a change of style” (GENNETE, 1997: 226). Teunissen, *a la manière* of Vermeer, stylistically transposes the light from Vermeer’s genealogic influence to his photographs. I could not avoid relating the painting with this photograph, although there are no other obvious elements in common: intertextuality comes from my reception. Vermeer’s work is being evoked, not imitated, recalling once again what Stam says about texts “sleeping with” other texts. Teunissen’s photographs have “slept with” Vermeer’s work, calling his aesthetics to mind.

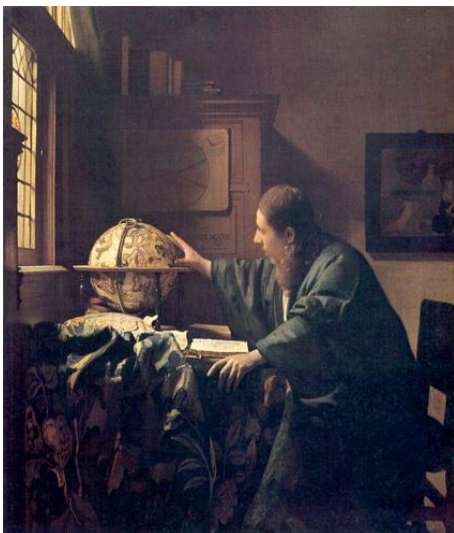


Fig. 8 – Johannes Vermeer, oil painting, 19 3/8 x 17 3/4 in. **The Astronomer** – *De astronoom* – (Delft, 1668). The Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 9 – Bert Teunissen. **Domestic Landscapes** (La Alberca 5, Spain, 2005). Website fig.#376.

This last photograph reminds me of the painting **A Woman Asleep** (see Fig. 10). The Japanese lady seems to be not only absorbed into Vermeer's world, but also part of it (see Fig. 11).



Fig. 10 - Johannes Vermeer, oil painting, 34 1/2 x 30 1/8 in. **A Woman Asleep** – *Slapend meisje* – (Delft, 1656–57). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Benjamin Altman.



Fig. 11 – Bert Teunissen. **Domestic Landscapes** (Wakayama 22, Japan, 2003). Website fig.#176.

One can note the similarities of plans and the dark and light contrasts. It is true that fidelity is not a relevant matter for discussion, since a new version will never replace its original, but the way the reception of the source-text is influenced does matter (Clüver, 2006: 15-16). Therefore, this illustration can go beyond being just another comparison of how much the painting and the photograph have in common, and reach the level of an intermedial case study based on its high level of intertextuality. There are obviously no mixed media involved in each piece of art, but in terms of reception, the superposition of texts/images becomes a reality.

According to Clüver, “intertextuality always also involves intermediality . . . an individual text may be a rich object for intermedial studies” (Clüver, 2006: 12). But, can a photograph, or a book of photographs, be considered intermedial material? Maybe intermedial is not the most accurate term, but intertextuality is indeed present. And this intertextuality is not necessarily carried out consciously by the author at the moment of

inspiration; it may be identified only at the reception by the reader/listener/viewer, recalling the silent category of architextuality proposed by Genette. Teunissen himself may not have planned to imitate Vermeer, but the evocation of the painter's aesthetics on the photographer's work is more than simply impressionism.

The exhibition of Vermeer's work, in Washington DC and The Hague in the mid nineties, was not coincidentally a starting point for intersemiotic transpositions from the master's artwork. There is a reason behind it. The idealization of values, of aesthetics, of beauty even when using technologies from our media-saturated world, confirms Naremore's idea that translations must belong to a general theory of repetition. Movies do recycle art in the age of digital reproduction and virtual communication. Vermeer's artwork is more popular today than it was at the end of the twentieth century, aided by the movie adaptation which, in turn, could not exist without the novel. Vermeer's work continues to inspire today.

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