



## An Extended Critique of the Van Gogh Museum's Exhibit *Rembrandt/Caravaggio*

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This paper serves as an extended critique of the Van Gogh Museum's exhibition *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* (co-sponsored by the Rijksmuseum), which took place in Amsterdam from February 24 - June 18, 2006. The paper unfolds in the form of both a theoretical engagement with the issues raised by the exhibition and a pragmatic evaluation of its use of art historical sources. The theoretical issues in question are organized into four areas of inquiry. First, the paper explains the failures of "context analysis" in art history in light of semiotic theories of art criticism, such as psychoanalysis, and their relevance to exhibition settings. Then, the paper contrasts the exhibition's deployment of "context analysis" with scholar Mieke Bal's application of psychoanalysis and narratology to the artworks. More specifically, the paper evaluates the efficacy of two juxtapositions presented in the exhibition: (1) Rembrandt's *Bathsheba Bathing* (1654) and Caravaggio's *St. Jerome Writing* (1605); and (2) Rembrandt's *The Blinding of Samson* (1636) and Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes* (c. 1599). The juxtapositions are then contrasted with Mieke Bal's semiotic analyses of these works. Second, the paper locates the notion of attribution within the discourse of authorship as male genius. It also evaluates the attribution of Caravaggio's influence to Rembrandt in the exhibition and critically compares it to the attributions made in the *Sinners and Saints: Darkness and Light: Caravaggio and His Dutch and Flemish Followers* exhibition (North Carolina Museum of Art, Milwaukee Art Museum, Dayton Art Institute, 1998). Third, the paper engages with the "death of the author" theories developed by Foucault and Barthes, and applies their central tenets to undermine the male genius paradigm in the visual arts perpetuated by the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition. Finally, the paper reviews the historical discourses on imitation and their possible impact on Rembrandt's and Caravaggio's creative processes. Moreover, it notes the pertinence of these historical discourses to the "death of the author" thesis. Above all, the paper aims to facilitate an exercise in the opening up of analytic approaches relevant to art history.

### I. Failures of "Context Analysis" as Exemplified by the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* Exhibition

The *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition devotes portions of the catalogue to describing autobiographical details of the artists' lives and their artistic milieu (though superficially), presumably to provide viewers with information that will enhance their viewing experience. <sup>1</sup> However, the nature of this information is ideologically biased. It is experienced under conditions where the expository role of the museum professionals is invisible yet "authoritative" to the viewer. <sup>2</sup> Mieke Bal is interested in how conditions of reception, and the phenomenon of museum exhibitions in general, produce these biases; she finds particularly significant the narrative that unfolds when images are juxtaposed together. <sup>3</sup> Since juxtaposition is the specific expository method adopted by the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition, it therefore renders Bal's approach particularly applicable as an analytic tool. Her examination of the condition of reception, which she calls the acts of "showing," "alleging illustration," and "laying bare," leads her to conclude that they are cultural acts that can be united under the "museal discourse." <sup>4</sup> A characteristic of the "museal discourse" is that it positions certain artists, such as Rembrandt and Caravaggio, and their works, as authoritative. In this sense, it confers on them "epistemic authority"—namely, canonical and point-of-origin status. <sup>5</sup>

The cultural acts that make up the "museal discourse" and covertly determine the viewers' reception can be studied through semiotics; according to Roland Barthes, semiotic investigation is concerned with "the logic according to which meanings are engendered." <sup>6</sup> In contrast to historical analysis, when semiotics is applied to art criticism it promotes a type of questioning that results in a proliferation of meaning (the notion of meaning as inherently polysemic) which can help to illuminate a particular presentation of a work of art as a cultural text. <sup>7</sup> Bal notes that the semiotic approach to characterizing reality stands in stark opposition to "positivism"—a dogmatic approach to knowledge construed as factual and empirical rather than based on revelation and intuition. <sup>8</sup> It is this positivist approach to art history which is manifested in what Bal terms "context analysis"—an examination of the social and historical conditions out of which art emerges. <sup>9</sup> This type of analysis often relies on a simplistic causal model and fails to acknowledge, according to Jonathan Culler, that "context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events." <sup>10</sup> By way of example, Avigdor Poseq is one of the many exponents of "context analysis" who, in his article "Caravaggio and the Antique," reduces Caravaggio's artistic license to the copying of classical sculpture. <sup>11</sup>

Bal adopts Culler's terminology of "framing" in order to characterize "context analysis" more accurately. Culler's central question is "how are [in our case visual] signs constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of value, semiotic mechanisms?"

12 The main thrust of Culler's argument, taken up by Bal, is that art historians often take as a given that the evidence which informs the "context" is more "legible," more "revealing," than the work of art – the work of art being "the visual text upon which such evidence is to operate." 13 This point is well exemplified by David Carrier's analysis of the different constructions of Caravaggio's biographies and their impact on the interpretations of his work and his artistic legacy; he describes the projection that occurs in art criticism informed by bibliographic information and the construing of artistic "intention" read into a given work. 14 Bal, Bryson, Culler, and Carrier seem to agree that a work of art changes with the different conditions of its reception affected by generational and cultural factors that shape spectatorship. 15

Prior to delivering a more substantial example of the failures of "context analysis," this essay explains the role of psychoanalysis as one variant of the semiotic approaches to art history—the example is an instance where the "museal" and semiotic discourses intersect, hence the need to explain the significance of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is "a mode of reading the unconscious and its relationship to expression" 16 which presupposes that "art bears traces of the unconscious." 17 Bal and Bryson grapple with how one can reconcile psychoanalytic theory, which is intended as a cure enacted through disclosure and self-reflection, with art criticism and spectatorship. They posit that a work of art that undergoes "psycho-criticism" assumes the role of the "silent analyst" who directs the analytic process and it is the critic whose unconscious is revealed upon confrontation with the visual work; moreover, the parties involved in the psychoanalytic discourse on art are assembled differently than in a therapeutic context in that "psycho-criticism" involves the psychoanalytic theorist, the work itself, and the critic. 18 Bal and Bryson identify three psychoanalytic modes of interpretation employed in the visual arts: the "analogical model," which finds an artwork relevant insofar as the work demonstrates psychoanalytic principles of development such as Oedipal desire, castration anxiety, etc.; the "medical model," which approaches art as specific illustration or proof of a psychoanalytic principle; and the "specification model," (their favored approach) which attempts to interpret visual details more broadly via psychoanalytic concepts. 19

It will become clear from the following example that when psychoanalysis is wielded in the third manner it need not upstage the primary or "immediate" reading of a given work, but offers additional insight that serves to "culturally frame" the work. 20 Upon seeing the Caravaggio Room during an exhibition at the Berlin-Dahlem museum, which included *Amor Vincit Omnia* (ca. 1602) ( Fig 1 ), *Doubting Thomas* (ca. 1600-1601) ( Fig 2 ), and Giovanni Baglione's *Heavenly Amor Defeats Love* (ca. 1602-1603) ( Fig 3 ), Bal was struck by the *Thomas* because its visual elements, including its classical composition, forcibly drew her attention towards the wound. In this sense, the *Thomas* exemplifies what Bal would characterize as a "'navel' painting"—a painting characterized by a detail that "upstages," "detracts," and "provokes resistance" to the main subject of the painting and in this sense destabilizes the image. 21 The contemporary artist Jeannette Christensen seems to have incorporated Bal's reading of the painting in *Ostentatio Vulnerum* (1995) ( Fig 4 ) where the lower frame contains blood-red strawberry Jell-O which, throughout the course of the Caravaggio exhibition at the Gemaldegalerie in Berlin-Dahlem, dried up in patterns of enlarged blood cells, molded, and cracked, conveying a sense of being "inside the wound." 22 Bal quotes Hibbard describing the wound as a "surgical detail" that is "unbearable" to look at; in contrast to Hibbard's description, Bal argues that Christensen's work comments on the "abject" and "grotesque" aspect of Caravaggio's work that Hibbard has difficulty gazing upon. 23

After being captivated by *Thomas's* wound, Bal found an analogous point of entry, another "navel," in Caravaggio's *Amor* which culminated in the hole located beneath or underneath the boy's penis. 24 After finding that point of entry, she focused on the caption beneath Baglione's painting describing the rivalry between Baglione and Caravaggio – the painting itself depicts rivalry between men, which from Bal's point of view alludes to homosocial power relations in which older men dominate younger ones and in which youth is highly valued. 25 It became significant for Bal that in both Baglione's *Amor* and Caravaggio's *Thomas* she saw older men vying for access to younger men. 26 The most important point to be drawn from Bal's viewing experience is that the perceived homoeroticism of Caravaggio's *Amor* was imported into her reading of the *Thomas* and then became "invested with rivalry" from Baglione's *Amor*. 27 Further influenced by the issue of physical and visual access to "the whole," she inferred a connection between desire and vision where difficulty of access enhances desire. 28 Consequently, the wound became for her a metaphor for the anus. 29

Regardless of whether Bal is accurate in characterizing the paintings as statements that homosocial relations are predicated upon the denial of homosexual relations, 30 more pertinent for the above discussion of the "museal discourse" and "context analysis" is the instance of "the wall" (the exhibition wall) as the narrator competing with the "biblical narrator" who would ordinarily emphasize the biblical narrative. 31 It is not readily apparent that the first "overrules" the latter as Bal claims. However, it is not the purpose of this analogy for the reader/viewer to accept or reject her subjective point of view—rather, its illustrative value is located in the juxtaposition of the three paintings as an instance of competing narrative voices and the application of psychoanalysis as one of many interpretative discourses that can legitimately inform contemporary spectatorship.

The characteristics of both “context analysis” and Bal’s semiotic analysis will become evident from the following review of two juxtapositions from the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition. For instance, the exhibition catalogue characterizes Rembrandt’s *Bathsheba Bathing* (1654) and Caravaggio’s *St. Jerome Writing* (1605) as both depicting contemplation. <sup>32</sup> ( Fig 5 Fig 6 ) Samson Spanier objects to this reading because he argues that Rembrandt achieves Bathsheba’s contemplative effect through “reticent gesture” and the locking of his figure’s gaze within the pictorial space as opposed to outward; Caravaggio’s *St. Jerome* on the other hand is preoccupied with writing. <sup>33</sup> Moreover, the catalogue does not comment at all on the distortion of the biblical narrative in *Bathsheba* and its impact on our reading of the painting. Spanier’s iconographic analysis, apart from the fact that it is an improvement on that of the exhibition catalogue, can be said to constitute a variant of “context” analysis in the sense that he implicitly situates Bathsheba’s contemplation in Rembrandt’s oeuvre as a master of depicting the inner psychology of his sitters—just like in the exhibition catalogue, she is reduced to his masterly style.

However, in Bal’s interpretation of this painting, she turns to Barthes’ theory of narratology which informs her that there is a narrative code that readers rely on to organize elements of a story which she thinks is analogous to an iconographic code relied upon by art viewers. <sup>34</sup> Bal focuses in particular on the narrative importance of the letter to convey meaning – this is the letter that King David writes to the leader of his army ordering the death of Uriah of which, in the story, Bathsheba is never aware; the painting rearranges the elements of the story in order to accentuate the ones with “dramatic function” (e.g. the letter) and combines them with elements that have a “stark visual effect” (e.g. Bathsheba’s nudity). <sup>35</sup>

This type of narrative reshuffling has ideological connotations because it allows Rembrandt to implicate Bathsheba in her husband’s death and therefore endorses a reading of femininity as morally weak and cowardly. <sup>36</sup> The implicit tendency in Spanier’s analysis towards analyzing the painting in terms of its place in its master’s canon contrasts with Bal’s analysis, which is concerned more with power hierarchies depicted in the painting and enacted in the viewing experience. (This contrast will become more meaningful in the next section on authorship.)

The characteristics of both “context analysis” and Bal’s semiotic analysis can be also assessed in reference to Rembrandt’s *The Blinding of Samson* (1636) and Caravaggio’s *Judith and Holofernes* (c. 1599). ( Fig 7 Fig 8 ). The exhibition catalogue focuses on *Samson*’s status as among one of Rembrandt’s first history paintings and compares it in technical terms with the depiction of violence in Caravaggio’s *Judith*; the catalogue offering some stylistic sources from the past, namely, in case of *Judith*, the writings of Comanini on visual depictions of personality types, and in the case of Rembrandt, the engravings of Cornelis Cort after Titian. <sup>37</sup> In opposition to this type of “context analysis,” Bal interprets *The Blinding of Sampson* as a representation of secondary narcissism—when a child for the first time relates to him or her self as “non-mother,” generating a negative relationship with the mother. <sup>38</sup> It is the struggle of the separation from the mother, this “imaginary birthing” which Bal sees represented in the painting. <sup>39</sup> On the one hand, the painting depicts blinding as a dreaded moment of castration (a fear which occurs in secondary narcissism) but the womb-like cave also hints at blinding as the fantasized moment before the separation from the mother (“the sensory oblivion and bliss associated with primary narcissism”). <sup>40</sup> Thus the painting contains a psychic tension, a visually represented schism between the pleasurable and the horrifying.

The introduction of Bal’s psychoanalytic approach to *The Blinding the Samson* and her narrative approach to *Bathsheba Bathing* is not intended to privilege these semiotic approaches as somehow more efficacious – a historical (contextual) approach can often be more academically rigorous. However, this essay capitalizes on the propensity of these semiotic approaches to destabilize the position of the author.

## II. Attributions and the Male Genius Paradigm

According to Bal and Bryson, much like “context,” authorship is a consequence or an effect of “framing” – “something [art historians and viewers] elaborately produce rather than something [they] simply find.” <sup>41</sup> Moreover, the authors note that attributing authorship is an exclusionary practice exemplified by the changing status of artists in the graphic arts which has oscillated between authorship and anonymity. <sup>42</sup> (This issue will be discussed in section IV). Furthermore, the notion of authorship evokes and, according to Bal, “naturalizes” a series of ideological concepts such as “genius as masculine,” “the subject as unitary,” and “masculinity as unitary.” <sup>43</sup> These themes resonate in the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition in that it is structured like a monograph of the author-genius. The exhibition maintains the canon of male artistic genius by positioning Rembrandt as a linear extension of this canon preceded by Caravaggio, Titian, Michelangelo, etc. The paper addresses both the historical and philosophical consequences of this tendency within the exhibition. The historical consequences of configuring Rembrandt as an artistic descendant of Caravaggio entail a diminishing of the influences of the Dutch and Italian Caravaggisti and other Italian painters on Rembrandt. The philosophical consequences of asserting both artists’ genius will be addressed in section III.

It is significant that the 1998 exhibition entitled *Sinners and Saints: Darkness and Light: Caravaggio*

and *His Dutch and Flemish Followers* mentions only one of Rembrandt's paintings, *Parable of the Rich Man* ( Fig 9 ), as a Caravaggesque painting and compares its play with candlelight effect to the works of Honthorst and Ter Brugghen rather than Caravaggio. 44 Weller (in the same catalogue) highlights the role of the Utrecht Caravaggists in mediating some elements of Caravaggio's style, such as "dynamic tenebrism," "limited foreground space," "compelling psychological realism," and "rustic figures." 45 Slatkes' most relevant argument concerns the influence of Protestantism on Dutch Caravaggism in that it significantly reduced the demand for commissions of large-scale altar pieces, religious cycles, and heroic depictions of the lives of saints; it was for this reason, Slatkes argues, that Caravaggio's early genre paintings were readily adopted by the Dutch Caravaggists in need of new themes, such as gamblers, musicians, and mercenary love. 46 Slatkes' argument illuminates the notion of patronage displacement which affected Rembrandt and his Dutch contemporaries. Among Caravaggio's Dutch followers Spear notes the importance of Bloemaert and Lastman in transmitting Caravaggism to Dutch painters. 47 The Utrecht Caravaggisti (such as Terbrugghen, Honthorst, and Baburen) played an "independent" role in this transmission; Spear comments in particular on Terbrugghen's development of a nocturnal light motif which has no precedent among the other Caravaggisti. 48 They contributed to the movement by "secularizing religious themes," "popularizing genre subjects," and "exploiting dramatic illumination." 49 In this sense, Spear's argument demonstrates the complexity of Caravaggio attributions that have been erased in the 2006 exhibition.

Bruyn further complicates the question of Caravaggio's influence on Rembrandt. He posits that the Utrecht Caravaggists and Rembrandt's teachers produced "derivatives" of other Caravaggisti and of Caravaggio while Rembrandt was more "autonomous" in his adoption of their stylistic elements. 50 For instance, Bruyn draws a comparison between Lastman's and Rembrandt's versions of *The Sacrifice of Abraham* ( Fig 10 Fig 11 ). Both painters treat the human figure as a spatial diagonal, which is a Venetian motif; however, Lastman's version is directly based on the upper portion of Caravaggio's *St. Mathew* ( Fig 12 ) while Rembrandt's version "reinterprets the prototype." 51 Contrary to the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition which remains largely silent on the issue of stylistic influences, Bruyn further argues that Annibale Carracci and Guido Reni were Rembrandt's most important Italian models; both he and Kenneth Clark stress the influence of Italian prints on Rembrandt, many of which he owned. 52 Bruyn discusses several Italian paintings and engravings that might have had an impact on Rembrandt's works, most notably, Procaccini's *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1593), Veronese's *St. Barnabas Healing the Sick* (1566), and Reni's *The Apostles Peter and Paul* (1605-06). 53

Most importantly, however, Clark notes that in 1630 Amsterdam was a world center of the art trade; collections from all over the world, particularly from Italy, were sent there to be sold at auctions. 54 Rembrandt himself became a dealer after developing a business connection with the dealer Hendrik van Uylenburgh—he even lived at Uylenburgh's house and eventually married his cousin Saskia. 55 Rembrandt also had a close relationship with the dealer Pieter de la Tombe and antiquarian Abraham Francen. 56 He was an avid collector; artists of the past approached their collections (referred to as *Kunst Caemer*) as "sources of ideas, technique, and style." 57 However, due to Rembrandt's financial carelessness, his entire collection was auctioned off. The inventory of the sale lists numerous works by Italian artists of the preceding generation. These include two copies of Carracci works; two paintings by Raphael; three volumes of prints after Raphael's works; Marcantonio's *Plague in Phrygia*—a sixteenth-century engraving after Raphael; paintings by Palma Vecchio such as *Rich Man*, *Descent from the Cross*, *Raising of Lazarus*, and *Courtesan Doing Her Hair*; Giorgione's *Samaritan Woman*; books with woodcuts and copper-plate engravings after Raphael and Tempesta; a book with erotica by Raphael, Rosso, Carracci, and Bonasone; etc. 58 This type of information is scarce in the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition. As noted by Samson Spanier, the exhibition would have benefited from a comparison of the artists' educational backgrounds and influences, and how they each departed from them. 59

It would have also been an interesting point of comparison for the exhibition to comment on the artists' interaction with the commercial aspects of the art market. Svetlana Alpers comments on Rembrandt's ability to fashion himself as a commodity and to increase his marked value by creating scarcity—specifically, delaying the delivery of his commissions which increased his prestige and the demand for his works, 60 and leaving his works unfinished in order to increase their price after taking the paintings back from the unsatisfied patrons to make alterations. 61 Similarly, Sheila McTihe comments on Caravaggio's increasing concern with the social power and the wealth of his patrons; for instance, Caravaggio associated with powerful families which were either connected to the order of St. John of Malta (and could help him expedite his knighthood) or could help him acquire commissions. 62 Moreover, his financial concerns are reflected in his ability to sell two paintings from a single religious commission—a rejected version would be acquired by a wealthy collector while Caravaggio would paint a more "modest" version and sell it to the church. 63 Such a comparison makes for a more historically accurate equivalence between the two painters rather than the series of stylistic comparisons which have little historical resonance and do not engage with contemporary perspectives (such as those offered by Bal's semiotic approach).



All of the authors mentioned above tacitly acknowledge the uncertainty of the categories applied to works and painters that have been described as Caravaggesque. They implicitly agree that the choice of subject, figure, chiaroscuro, and naturalistic traits are unreliable categories of attribution. Ironically, Caravaggio claimed to have had no followers, according to Spear <sup>64</sup> and Caravaggio's biographers who highlight his artistic independence. <sup>65</sup> In order to define what it would have meant to be considered a Caravaggisti in the 17th century, Spear cites Van Mander who required that one must have visited Italy or have been in direct contact with Caravaggio's paintings and one must have also made an effort to emulate what Caravaggio and his followers had achieved. <sup>66</sup> Rembrandt did not fulfill either requirement. <sup>67</sup>

Chong traces the historical trajectory of the critical attitudes towards Rembrandt's refusal to visit Italy and to explicitly model himself on Italian artists. <sup>68</sup> Historically, the critical opinion concerning Rembrandt shifts from being described as an amateur to that of a national genius. <sup>69</sup> Since the late 17th century, when the term "genius" enters into vocabulary, academic attacks on Rembrandt's art are tempered with the acknowledgement of his abilities. <sup>70</sup> This is relevant to the essay because in attributing Caravaggesque characteristics to Rembrandt, art historians borrow from Rembrandt's "genius" to build up Caravaggio's "genius" who does not acquire monumental status until the 20th century.

### III. The "Death of the Author" and the Male Genius Paradigm

The first sections of the paper reviewed the tendency of exhibitions to invest painters with "epistemic authority" and the propensity of semiotic approaches to undermine such investments and thereby question the primary position of the author. The second section attempted to demonstrate the historical and theoretical impossibility of establishing a genealogy of artistic genius due to the lack of definitive historical evidence and due to the issue of historians' own ideological investments in how they "frame" (produce) the life and work of a particular artist. Foucault and Barthes were the first philosophers to rigorously question the notion of unity behind authorship and the so-called canonical works. In his seminal essay "What is an Author?" Foucault focuses on the symbolic function of the author's name: "Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition it establishes a relationship among the texts. <sup>71</sup> In this sense an author comes to signify a canon which in turn becomes endowed with the "author function" and begins to shape other authors. <sup>72</sup> Within this cycle, the author (for the purposes of this essay, the artist) is perceived as a "constant level of value" whereby inferior paintings will be attributed to a lesser artist or not displayed and/or written about. <sup>73</sup> Moreover, the artist is seen as "a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence" whereby departures from a recognized style, subject matter, or artistic philosophy will be erased. <sup>74</sup> Furthermore, an artist is conceived as "a stylistic unity" whereby inconsistencies in his production will not be critically engaged with. <sup>75</sup>

The above points implicate the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition in perpetuating the myth of authorship; they hint at a tendency in the exhibit to monumentalize the artists and to iron out and/or not critically engage with contradictions. For instance, Duncan Bull describes the artists as both perpetuating "great themes of humanity." <sup>76</sup> Moreover, Dibbitts treats the characteristics of the Dutch Caravaggisti as stable stylistic categories that readily informed Rembrandt's style. <sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Manuth minimizes the influence of Rembrandt's Italian predecessors by failing to discuss his extensive collection of Italian art. <sup>78</sup>

Foucault characterizes the author as a vehicle of cultural forces who articulates an "uncontainable meaning"; this is why Western culture has tried to contain and unify the authorial figure in order to overcome its own fear of the "proliferation of meaning"—in this sense, the desire to reduce a painting to its master is a culture's means of doing away with contradictions. <sup>79</sup> In agreement with Foucault, Barthes articulates a similar sentiment:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author ... beneath the work: when the author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic. <sup>80</sup>

The notion of containing meaning through classifying and qualifying the dissemination of ideas has been practiced in biographical accounts of works which claim to "explain" them based on the supposed psychology of their writers. <sup>81</sup> In Carrier's critique of the characterizations of Caravaggio's art as autobiographical, he echoes the same concern articulated by Barthes.

Similarly to Foucault, Barthes finds the unity and authority attributed to both a work and its author problematic.

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture... <sup>82</sup>

Barthes' concern with originality, authenticity, and the impact of cultural milieu on artistic production and reception anachronistically invokes the very concerns of Renaissance artists addressed in the next section.

#### IV. Renaissance Discourses on Imitation and the Collaborative Nature of the Artist's Workshop

Contemporary approaches to art criticism, such as psychoanalysis and narratology, have aided in the deconstruction of the author's hegemonic unity and authority. In his essay concerned with the "death of the author," Foucault asks at what point an author becomes "individualized" and at what point does "a work" acquire its unified status? <sup>82A</sup> The following section serves as both an answer to this question and at least a partial engagement with Spanier's suggestion that the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition would have benefited from a comparison of the artists' educational backgrounds and how they departed from them. The more modest goal of this section is to characterize the Renaissance principles of imitation which informed the study of visual art, in particular, their impact on the construction of authorship as a value-laden category; the dynamics of the artist's workshop and how it contradicted the emerging discourses on originality; and the growing popularity of engraving prints which were also uncomfortably situated within the discourses on originality. The essay attempts to situate Rembrandt and Caravaggio in the Renaissance discourses on imitation which the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition generally fails to do (it does only in select instances). <sup>83</sup>

Lisa Pon describes the Renaissance as the "culture of copying" which drew its inspiration from past models and was characterized by debates over the proper goals and types of imitation. <sup>84</sup> The growing demand for paintings inaccessible to the general public allowed the print industry to flourish. <sup>85</sup> For instance, inventory records from the 16th and 17th centuries indicate that even cartoons (preparatory drawings) executed by famous artists were popular collector items among lay people. <sup>86</sup> The practice of drawing freehand copies after works of art can be traced back to Medieval manuscripts and extended into 20th century training academies; "copying had served as a means of training young artists, of perpetuating significant images or models, and of homogenizing the style and production in a master's workshop." <sup>87</sup> Even Titian was asked by his most important patrons to copy paintings. <sup>88</sup>

The modern notion of authorship originated during the Renaissance when the concerns of classical rhetoric seemed to have increasingly shaped the process of attribution and the notion of authenticity. The aforementioned "copying" was in tension with emerging discourses on originality championed by Alberti, who in order to praise painting, used the technique of "epideictic rhetoric"—which is a manner of appraising the skill of a speaker in terms of praise and blame. <sup>89</sup> Other writers, following Alberti, used the terms corresponding to those of rhetoric and applied them to the visual arts; in fact, there was such close overlap between art criticism and rhetoric that it was difficult to distinguish between them. <sup>90</sup> Pigman figures as the key author on literary modes of imitation which influenced the "aesthetic ideologies" <sup>91</sup> of Caravaggio's and Rembrandt's day. Pigman notes the following classes of Renaissance metaphors adopted from classical rhetoric: transformative, dissimulative, and eristic. <sup>92</sup> These in turn translated into a hierarchy of "copying:" *imitatio* described an attempt at achieving similarity to the original, <sup>93</sup> *disemulatio* described the ability to disguise the relationship between the copy and the original, <sup>94</sup> and *aemulatio* characterized the ability to rival and surpass the original model and implicitly criticize it. <sup>95</sup> Important to note is that a dissimulative copy posed philosophical problems because it did not give credit to the original, but instead erased the relationship between text and model and led to an inability of assessing authorial intention. <sup>96</sup> These were the beginnings of the controversy which culminated in the 20th century with the erasure of the authorial figure by Foucault and Barthes.

The emerging Renaissance concept of the artist as an individual was reflected in the demand for works made by specific artists. <sup>97</sup> This trend stood in opposition to the collaborative nature of the Renaissance art workshop and the emphasis on learning through imitation of style, motif, subject matter, and interpretation. <sup>98</sup> Vasari in his book *Lives of the Artists*, published in 1550 and 1568, helped to maintain the credibility of this traditional method. <sup>99</sup> Importantly, the 1568 version included an addition on the international array of printmakers and the life of Marcantonio. <sup>100</sup> Marcantonio is the most notable exponent of reproductive engraving famous for his works after Raphael and his school. <sup>101</sup> There was a significant demand for engravings of antique works due to the desire to study ancient art. <sup>102</sup> Regardless of Caravaggio's acclaim as a unique artist he was embedded in this culture of print-making and "copying."

Similarly, Rembrandt's exposure to the northern print culture influenced his development as an artist. The earliest engravings produced in the Netherlands were modeled after Italianate models created by Dutch artists who had studied in Rome. For instance, Cornelis Bos emulated Raimondi's engravings after Raphael, and Hendrick Goltzius made engravings after Polidoro and Raphael—works of which he had seen in Rome. <sup>103</sup> Karel van Mander's *Book on Picturing* is replete with reproductive prints after regional artists but also descriptions of prints after Italian masters such as Federico Barocci and Girolamo Muziano. <sup>104</sup> More importantly, Van Mander's book explains the role of

reproductive prints as more than “illustrative” but as “catalysts that shaped Netherlandish art.”  
105 His high valuation of engravings takes precedent from the humanist Lampsonius who in his correspondences with Vasari, Titian, and Giulio Clovio drew a connection between reproductive prints and the formation of stylistic canons. 106 Theoretically, prints contradicted the notion of *ekphrases* – a rhetorical device used to describe images to the mind’s eye. 107 Thus, Lampsonius had to reconfigure the relationship between the painter and the printer by attributing to the engraver qualities such as *colorito*, *inventione*, and *disegno* (“manner of line and command of human figure”) and characterizing the skilled engraver as a “translator” rather than an imitator of the masterpieces. 108 Based on their traditional artistic training, both Rembrandt and Caravaggio would have been exposed to numerous prints and drawings and would have been familiar with the aesthetic hierarchies and educational methods of the artistic workshop which the exhibition does not acknowledge.

## Conclusion

The “museal discourse,” as defined by Bal, confers on artists such as Rembrandt and Caravaggio “epistemic authority.” Traditional art historical analysis and art criticism have exacerbated this problem but the emergence of competing analytic paradigms, such as semiotics, has facilitated new interpretative discourses—psychoanalysis being one of them—that legitimately inform contemporary spectatorship. The essay capitalizes on the propensity of the semiotic approaches to destabilize the position of the author. This theoretical move, with the aid of Foucault and Barthes, facilitates a critique of the *Rembrandt/Caravaggio* exhibition for perpetuating the author-genius paradigm. This paradigm is the primary culprit behind the exhibition’s diminishing of the influences of the Dutch and Italian Caravaggisti and other Italian painters on Rembrandt. Moreover, the same myth of authorship influences the exclusion from the exhibition a discussion of Renaissance discourses on copying and imitation which Rembrandt and Caravaggio were firmly embedded in.

Fig 1. Caravaggio, *Amor vincit Omnia*



[picture included from print edition]

Fig 2 . Caravaggio, *Doubting Thomas*



[picture included from print edition]

Fig 3 . Baglione, *Heavenly Amor Defeats Love*



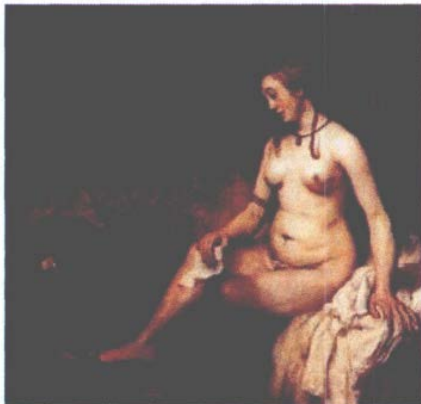
[picture included from print edition]

Fig 4 . Jeanette Christensen, *Ostentatio Vulnerum*



[picture included from print edition]

Fig 5 . Rembrandt, *Bathsheba Bathing*



[picture included from print edition]



Fig 6 . Caravaggio, *St. Jerome Writing*



[picture included from print edition]

Fig 7 . Rembrandt, *The Blinding of Samson*



[picture included from print edition]

Fig 8 . Caravaggio, *Judith and Holofernes*



Fig 9 . Rembrandt, *Parable of the Rich Man*



[picture included from print edition]

Fig 10 . Lastman, *The Sacrifice of Abraham*



[picture included from print edition]

Fig 11 . Rembrandt, *The Sacrifice of Abraham*



Fig 12 . Caravaggio, *St. Matthew*



[picture included from print edition]

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