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# “The sad, proud old man stared eternally out of his canvas...”: Media Criticism, Scopic Regimes and the Function of Rembrandt’s “Self-Portrait with Two Circles” in John Fowles’s Novel *Daniel Martin*

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**Abstract:** On the surface level, Fowles’s novel sets the trust in the timelessness of art and the possibility of a recourse to some kind of ‘true self’ against American hyperreality. Though the novel’s verdict on the American scopic regime of simulacra is devastating, England’s morbid theatricality does not represent an alternative. However, a novel which criticizes visuality only to accord Rembrandt’s “Self-Portrait” a place of utmost importance necessarily runs into problems of self-contradiction: Rembrandt’s self-portrait refuses any one-dimensional functionalization and contains self-reflexive/revocative elements pertaining to its capitalist dimension and to the dangers of commodification/narcissism/serialization. Moreover, Rembrandt’s portrait is located at the centre of a whole series of *mises en abyme* and contains significant autotelic elements which link it with the criticized American scopic regime, question its representational dimension by stressing the pure materiality of the work of paint and revoke Fowles’s novel and its didactic media-theoretical underpinnings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Bryan Knowlton, Simon Loesch, Keith Hollingsworth and Bettina Jansen for their constructive help at various stages of work on this article.

Et comme on luy reprochoit un jour la singularité de sa manière d'employer les Couleurs qui rendoient ses Tableaux raboteux, il répondit qu'il étoit Peintre, & non pas Teinturier.

Roger de Piles, *Abregé de la vie des peintres* (1699)<sup>2</sup>

Since the second half of the twentieth century, at the latest, image-based media like photography, video, film, and television have played an ever more important role in shaping and transforming the social imaginary as well as social reality. These media have not only “dramatically transformed our economy, polity, and society in ways that we are only now becoming aware of”, but they have also led to “a great transformation, perhaps as significant as the transformation from feudalism to industrial capitalism” so that, as Douglas Kellner argues, “we are engaged in a process of dramatic mutation, which we are barely beginning to understand, as we enter the brave new world of media saturation, computerization, new technologies, and new discourses” (n.d.: n. pag.).

Maybe it is exactly for these reasons that John Fowles repeatedly granted the question as to the importance and function of the ‘new’ media central importance in his non-fictional and fictional texts, most prominently in his 700-page novel *Daniel Martin* (1977). Here, as I will argue, Fowles not only anticipates important media-critical approaches of the 1980s and 1990s by exploring film and television symbolically, but he also contrasts the ‘new’ media with more traditional forms such as painting and writing. In a first step, and in analogy to Fowles’s novella “The Ebony Tower” (1974), *Daniel Martin* acts out an “opposition between visual and narrative representations of reality” and takes up what Lynne S. Vieth has called “a constant theme” (1991: 217)<sup>3</sup> in Fowles’s fiction which has largely gone unnoticed by critics. In a second step, *Daniel Martin* goes beyond the traditional discussion of *ut pictura poesis*: the novel’s critical comparison of two scopic regimes or economies is not brought to a conclusion by the protagonist writing a novel, as the text seems to suggest, but by his confrontation with Rembrandt’s famous self-portrait in Kenwood House.

Although *Daniel Martin* seems to confirm Fowles’s hierarchy of the arts, already well known from *The Aristos*, where he places writing on top and, more specifically, poetry, I will argue that it is finally less writing that can contain a deeper, richer, and more complex reality, composed of various layers of time, than art in general,<sup>4</sup> and in this case Rembrandt’s mysterious “Self-Portrait with

<sup>2</sup> Piles, qtd. in Suthor (2014: 8).

<sup>3</sup> For an extended analysis of visuality and its criticism in Fowles’s fiction see also Horlacher (1998).

<sup>4</sup> The text admits this even explicitly, when it equates “buildings, paintings, musics” and “passages of great poetry” (*DM*: 364).

Two Circles”; a painting which has been discussed most controversially by art criticism. Rembrandt’s self-portrait, I contend, does not only occupy a pivotal place in the novel and in the development of its protagonist so as to drive *Daniel Martin*’s didactic and almost ideological human existentialist message home (see Wilson 1995; Boomsma 1980–1981) but, as a critical re-reading reveals, it simultaneously questions, undermines and finally refuses such a one-dimensional functionalization and contains significant self-reflexive, autotelic elements which partly link it with the heavily criticized American scopic regime, question its representational dimension and significantly complicate, if not revoke Fowles’s novel and its didactic media-theoretical underpinnings.

*Daniel Martin* features the characteristics of a fictional autobiography, describing the education of the protagonist as breaking away from narcissistic structures and suggesting that Dan’s narcissism originates in his occupation in the film industry. Indeed, Dan seems to experience the world – as well as his own life – like the spectator of a movie. He constantly transfers film terminology into his private sphere, thus suggesting that the visual medium is the cause for his own superficiality and that his loss of identity is media-related as well. This impression especially forces itself on the reader when we consider that the movie, in the logic of the novel, is not suitable for a complete representation or comprehension of reality (*DM*: 20). As a consequence of this, the novel presents Dan’s development – at least at first sight – as a path from image to writing, a “journey away from the visual nowness of Hollywood into the hidden depths of his English past” (Vieth 1991: 228).

Since the protagonist, at least initially, is supposed to appear to be the author of *Daniel Martin*, the novel imitates techniques and visual structures borrowed from film in many instances. Pretending to be the text of a scriptwriter and “visual person” (Fowles 1993: 211, § 92), the book seems to document how the medium of film influences and impoverishes our perception. This is noticeable in Dan’s imagination and in the writing as its concretization. In this, *Daniel Martin* exhibits a surprising narrative complexity, which is derived from the pervasion of filmic, literary, realistic, and mythical structures, as well as from its circularity, “in which the real and the imaginary, the written and the unwritten, the actual and the potential, merge” (Onega 1989: 99). As a matter of fact, the meticulously built-up distinctions between different levels of time and reality lose their contours and are blurred within a vortex of narrative levels and stylistic characteristics, so that the novel turns out to be “a huge hide-and-seek game of identities” (Onega 1989: 99): The presumed author Daniel Martin (and his alias, Simon Wolfe), who seems to present himself differently at different moments in life, proves to be as badly hidden as John Fowles, whose anagram he bears and who reveals himself as the author so that “the dissolving membrane between narrator and character (and

between author and narrator) completely disappears” (Fawcner 1984: 102). This fuzziness of the narrative levels and the juxtaposition of varying fragments of time are paralleled by a multiplication of levels of reality. Moreover, on the last page of the book, after 704 pages, we learn that the novel is never going to be written, and that the last word of Dan’s unwritten novel is the first word of John Fowles’s book: “WHOLE SIGHT; OR ALL THE REST IS DESOLATION”.

While the multiplication of levels of reality mirrors the polyvalence of Dan’s education or *Bildungsweg*, the latter appears as a geographical and backward-looking chronological journey, a transit through the media of image and writing (from plays to movies and from painting to autobiography), as well as a psychological search for individuation. The complexity of the novel allows for a strategy of de-automatization that captures the protagonist as well as the reader, as Fowles’s well-known mechanism of the *godgame* represents more than just a stage in the protagonist’s (and the reader’s) education. In fact, the *godgame* shapes the text narratively and stylistically and determines the contrast between the old and the new world, illustrated through the media of book/novel, theatre, painting and film.

## I Media Criticism: The Scopic Regimes of America and England

On the level of contents, *Daniel Martin* exhibits a scathing criticism of the world of movies.<sup>5</sup> This is complemented by a general media critique, in which one can see Fowles’s didactic finger-wagging. Unfortunately, this critique, presented from an auctorial position, is not much more than a mixture of well-known stereotypes and prejudices. Fowles’s criticism is polemic, does not meet academic standards, and as didactic excursus, it does not assist the plot. Even Fowles’s (and the narrator’s) ingenious control and manipulation of reader sympathies threatens to fail when Dan is represented as a clueless and helpless victim of the film industry, described as “BORDELLO” (*DM*: 154). Repeatedly, the text pits the idealistically exalted book as medium against film, which is portrayed as being completely corrupted by its commercial interests. The visual media stand accused of the usurpation of the audience’s imagination and the fostering of their fragmentation.

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<sup>5</sup> Parts of this chapter are based on Horlacher (1998: 233–330).

As the novel observes: "Somewhere the cinema, like television, was atrophying a vital psychic function: the ability to imagine for oneself" (*DM*: 308).<sup>6</sup>

*Daniel Martin's* alleged crusade against visual media is more convincing when the text forgoes didactically motivated passages and instead voices its justified critique by using symbolically charged plot elements and narration. To that end, it presents two different scopic regimes or economies that characterize the United States of America and England respectively.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding their developmental differences, the two economies overlap in their periphery. Repeatedly, the reality of the technologically highly advanced America, in the form of a specific use of visibility and technology, intrudes upon a still largely rural England, whose idyllic depiction, however, quickly proves to be illusory. England appears as a society that flees from camera reality and presents itself as a country in which all optical phenomena are deceptive and in which "the continual evasion of the inner self, the continual actual reality of saying one thing and thinking another" (*DM*: 307) has become the national character.

Due to this duplicity, England's reality is inaccessible to the camera, which, in Fowles's text, is unable to transcend the surface: "The film cannot be the medium of a culture all of whose surface appearances mislead, and which has made such a psychological art of escaping present, or camera, reality" (*DM*: 306). English reality can only be captured by words, which, however, paint a very negative image: The vibrant England from Dan's memory is as much part of the past as part of the literature of Thomas Hardy or François Rabelais. In present-day England, fantasy and literature are necrotic, and the country resembles an over-aged, morbid theatre, which symbolizes the retrograde as well as deceitful character of society: "But it was all so retrospective, so past; like going into a theatre and finding a production one had seen there half a lifetime before still on stage" (*DM*: 210).

On the temporal horizon, the triumph of visual media heralds an end to this condition and lets the reader perceive an English society that will follow the technological-optical traces of America. Progress no longer finds its representation in literature or theatre, but in television, which simultaneously works as a connection between England and America. Initially, *Daniel Martin* presents television as a manipulative medium that is unable and unwilling to take on social responsibility. The accusation of manipulation, however, is only one aspect in the

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<sup>6</sup> See also Fowles's criticism in an interview 17 years after the publication of *Daniel Martin*: "This is something that I hate in England, the way that all young people now seem unable to see things unless they are on television, unless Hollywood has done them [*sic*] the 'imaging' for them first" (qtd. in Kefalea 1995: 141).

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the American scopic regime see Horlacher (2004).

novel, which entails more innovative concepts in addition to this conventional ideological media critique. As a matter of fact, Fowles's novel sees the real risk in the effect television has on the audience and not in any kind of straightforward manipulation. Repeatedly, the text expresses its assumption that television images do not manipulate as much as they 'vanish' into the viewer because of their indifferentiation, arbitrariness, fast pace, and superficiality. The images do not affect, leave no strong impressions, and in their "excess of diffusion" liberate the viewer from assigning meaning to them.<sup>8</sup> TV-personality Barney Dillon complains about "how no one really listened any more, nothing registered, an audience of fifteen million was an audience of no one, the speed of forgetfulness was approaching the speed of light" (*DM*: 294), and Dan and Jane concede that even "very literate scripts. Seen by millions of people" are "forgotten by them. The next day" (*DM*: 624).

Ultimately, the viewers reflect the images impassively on their pupils so that they disappear as much in the mass – which has become an integral element of the media machine – as the subject itself. If the mirror is the place where – in the imaginary – the subject creates itself by falling prey to misrecognition, the screen is the place where it disappears, so that in technologically advanced societies, the "mirror stage" is being replaced by the "screen stage" (see Baudrillard 1993b: 81–95). Intangible and captivated by trivialities, the individuals disappear in "the British mania for television" (*DM*: 140); they "change themselves into an impenetrable and unintelligible surface [...]. They disappear, they coalesce with the superficial screen in a way that their real existence can be radically disbelieved" (see Baudrillard 1991: 103; trans. by B.K. and S.L.). Or, as Baudrillard argues in "I like the Cinema":

[T]elevision doesn't even constitute an image. An image isn't only a technical reality: to have an image you need a scene, a myth, the imaginary. Images on television are not blessed with all that. It's there. It's a screen and nothing but a screen, and I think that is how we perceive it as without consequence, no emotion, no passion. (1993c: 30; see also 1988a: 21)

Many of the characters who work for the mass-media appear as artificial figures and medial events without their own existence outside of the medium. By having the individual vanishing in the medium and by celebrating its resurrection as a medial product in the form of the "Amalgamated Society of Schizophrenics" (*DM*: 292), reality dissolves and a new dimension arises which Baudrillard has

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<sup>8</sup> "Basically there is no strong image; what it requires of you is a sort of immediate, instantaneous participation, in order to read it, make it exist but not make it signify" (Baudrillard 1993a: 69).

described as hyperreality. Instead of reporting objectively, the eye of the camera kills and creates a new reality which the audience demands as compensation for its own incapability to live a creative and fulfilled life.

However, Dan or the medium of television are not the only examples of this dissolution of visual media in life and life in visual media. Indeed, the descriptions of America and Hollywood’s film world are particularly pronounced instances of this conflation. It is neither archeology nor mystically connoted materiality, neither darkness nor deception, but light, artificiality, and surface that stand for the North American continent since *Daniel Martin* characterizes it primarily, if not even exclusively, by optical criteria. The discreet palimpsest-like layers of Europe and especially England implode in America and fuse within the medium of film as the symbol of a new reality: “Nothing existed except as a record of another pair of eyes, another mind; the perceived world was as thin as an eggshell, a fragile painted flat, a back-projection ... *and behind, nothing*” (*DM*: 597; my emphasis). Or, with Kellner:

[S]imulacra and simulation play such a key role in social life that previous boundaries and categories of social theory dissolve altogether. All dichotomies between appearance and reality, surface and depth, life and art, subject and object, collapse into a functionalized, integrated and self-reproducing universe of ‘simulacra’. (1991: 77)

The text portrays a narcissistic America that is convinced of its own perfection. Partially, it unmasks itself, but simultaneously it dissolves old modes of perception. In California, “the real” does not disappear for or “concede anything to the benefit of the imaginary: it concedes only to the benefit of the more real than the real (the hyperreal) and to the more true than the true. This is simulation” (Baudrillard 1988b: 188).<sup>9</sup> The masks and roles do not hide any deeper layers, and the visible things do not end in darkness, in English fog, or in British silence. They rather volatilize or disappear “into what is more visible than the visible: obscenity” (Baudrillard 1988b: 188).<sup>10</sup>

In *Daniel Martin*, John Fowles anticipates an America, where the law of transparency rules as an implosion of deep structures into surface structures. Contrary to England, the images of California do not distort, they do not deceive, and they hide nothing: there is no theatre, no stage, but only two dimensions: “Culture is space, speed, cinema, technology”, Baudrillard argues in accordance with Fowles, and continues: “In America cinema is true because it is the whole of

<sup>9</sup> See also Gane (1991: 94–95); Baudrillard (1994: 1–42).

<sup>10</sup> See also: “Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when everything becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication” (Baudrillard 1988a: 21–22).

space, the whole way of life that are cinematic. The break between the two, the abstraction which we deplore, does not exist: life is cinema” (1993d: 101). The images hold such a power that they substitute their own sources, become reality, and stand on their own.

The originals are dead, and the visual representation in movies proves their loss as they deal the fatal blow just as photography does to its motive. We witness the disappearance of persons and objects in their very representation and, just as Dan, have to admit that “[t]oday cinema can place all its talent, all its technology in the service of reanimating what it itself contributed to liquidating. It only resurrects ghosts, and it itself is lost therein” (Baudrillard 1994: 48).<sup>11</sup> Or, as the narrator puts it when talking about a Kitchener movie: “And you may find someone who can act him. But you’ll never find that presence ... that emblematic quality” (*DM*: 350). In a similar vein, Dan states much earlier in the novel:

‘It was on the *Camelot* set. It suddenly hit me. How well I matched it. The betrayal of myths. As if I was totally in exile from what I ought to have been.’ He added, ‘Done. [...] Something to do with the artifice of the medium.’ ‘And?’ ‘That if I could ever hope to describe it, it would have to be beyond staging or filming. They’d just ... betray the real thing again.’ (*DM*: 20)

Reality becomes a decal, the Grand Canyon a “toy gash” (*DM*: 78), and “what was intended to capture the individuality of the real world, actually causes its liquidation” (Grivel 1990: 182; my trans.). Real life is replaced by virtual reality, not only in the medium, but also in the environment of the protagonists, as images gradually take over the world of objects. Instead of being determined by existentialist decisions and creative projects and ideas, the behaviour of the American “nation of automata piling down the freeways in search of a life that isn’t worth having anyway” (*DM*: 266) is increasingly regulated by specified and codified “idiotic cheap models of how successful people should dress, speak, furnish their houses” (*DM*: 265). Just as in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* electrical circuits determine the topography of Los Angeles, in Fowles’s *Daniel Martin* the life of Americans duplicates models and codes (*DM*: 546).

It is in this context that Dan as a famous scriptwriter starts to look for a medium beyond staging or filming. However, the traditional formula of the *Entwicklungsroman* used by Fowles, portraying itself on the plot level as a path of progress from movie to novel, is less consistent than it pretends to be since the

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<sup>11</sup> “In America between 1920 and 1950 [...] the movies provided the main cultural format for the discovery and description of our national identity (television gradually replaced movies after 1950). Historians argue whether the movies simply reflected the national culture that already existed or whether they produced a fantasy of their own that eventually came to be accepted as real” (Monaco 1981: 218).

novel repeatedly hints at the fact that the real causes of Dan’s narcissism also stem from his childhood and not only from his occupation in the film industry (see Kochhar-Lindgren 1993). As will be shown in the following, and though the novel pretends the opposite, the binary opposition between writing on the one hand and visual media on the other does not hold. Though *Daniel Martin* glorifies the novel, we find rare instances in which, paradoxically, the text acknowledges a superiority of visual media – “For once a camera would have done better” (*DM*: 176) – over verbal language: “Gradually it became clear that the gist could be conveyed in the way Kitchener rode up, in his gaze and face, the way he rode away; he needed to say nothing himself. It could all be done in the silence of other voices, was better so. [...] But he circled that one phrase as he re-read the new draft: *in the silence of other voices*” (*DM*: 618).

## II Approaching ‘Whole Sight’ or: Rembrandt’s “Self-Portrait with Two Circles” Revisited

After having left Hollywood as well as his young actress-girlfriend Jenny, after having broken with the world of visual media in order to live together with his old love Jane and to tap into the literary myth of the *lost domaine*, Dan’s unexpected confrontation with visuality, that is Rembrandt’s self-portrait at the end of the novel, turns out to be sheer coincidence: “He walked round the place, not really looking at anything, until, by chance in the last room he came to, he stood before the famous late Rembrandt self-portrait” (*DM*: 702). The portrait Dan encounters is the Kenwood self-portrait which is also known as “Self-Portrait with Two Circles”. In what follows, I will first analyze the self-portrait and its dialogical structure (in relation to Dan as well as to the text in its totality) according to the mainstream of established art-criticism; in a second step, I will problematize certain aspects of the painting and of its traditional interpretation and discuss how these divergent, contradictory and self-reflexive aspects complicate and question the philosophical message as well as the media criticism the novel seems to propound.



**Fig. 1:** Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn: “Self-Portrait with Two Circles”

## II.1 Traditional Readings: “Rembrandt [...] asks us in – to reflect, to consider”

The “Self-Portrait with Two Circles” was painted between 1665 and 1669. It is considered to be the most ambitious self-portrait in which Rembrandt is depicted at work and a masterpiece of his last years,<sup>12</sup> showing Rembrandt in a red garment and a fur-lined robe. He wears a white linen cap resembling those he wears in other late self-portraits, a gilt chain is hanging around his neck, and he is working with his brushes, maulstick and palette in front of an easel visible at the right edge of the painting. An X-ray of the “Self-Portrait with Two Circles”

<sup>12</sup> For a short survey on criticism on Rembrandt’s self-portraits see Hall (2014: 150–161); Small (1996: xv–xviii); see also Raupp (1993: 87–97, 98–90).

reveals that Rembrandt began by showing himself in the very act of painting, with a brush being applied to the canvas by his raised hand. But in the end he settled for a more frontal and monumental pose, concentrating on meditative stillness and the all-important act of looking. His dark eyes stare in a steadily appraising way, while his left arm shoots down in a fierce diagonal toward the vigorous thrust of the brown palette below. As for the brushes, they bristle with pent-up energy and almost erupt from the darkness threatening to envelop them. Indeed, they confirm the sense of defiance in Rembrandt’s face (Cork 2014: n. pag.).<sup>13</sup>

In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Jonathan Jones has called the portrait “the greatest painting in Britain” arguing that Rembrandt “at the age of about 59, looks at us from the depth of his years, and with the authority of his craft” (2013: n. pag.). In accordance with this, art historian James Hall argues that the “Self-Portrait with Two Circles” is “the most grandiose and heroic that Rembrandt ever made” (2014: 158):

Rembrandt stands there almost challenging us. You sense determination – we’re not going to get past him easily. It’s all autumnal oranges and reds – it almost looks as though it’s mouldering. The sheer size of it is also impressive. What’s so moving and powerful about Rembrandt is that sense of his own dignity and selfhood. (Hall, qtd. in Sooke 2014: n. pag.)<sup>14</sup>

H. Perry Chapman emphasizes the “monumental scale” of the portrait, the frontal pose that “creates an overwhelming, immediate presence” and the “assertive handling of the face” which focuses the spectator’s attention on Rembrandt’s direct gaze (1990: 98). What is also striking in this self-portrait is the enigmatic background consisting of a shallow space with the fragments of two circles. These have been interpreted in various ways ranging from hemispheres in a map of the world, via the circularity of Rembrandt’s “R”, the *rota aristotelis*, kabbalistic signs, emblems of Theory and Practice, to the O of Giotto, the symbols of perfection of artistic skill, and finally humanity.<sup>15</sup>

When Dan pauses in front of this painting, it is because the image, in its “presentness beyond all time, fashion, language” (*DM*: 703),<sup>16</sup> seems to speak to him. He visually experiences something and responds accordingly to the “profound and unassuageable vision” (*DM*: 702) of the person in the self-portrait. In regard to Dan’s disengagement from narcissism as well as to the logic of the text, it

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<sup>13</sup> See also Chapman (1990: 98).

<sup>14</sup> See also Chapman (1990: 97–101) and Dagmar Hirschfelder, who argues that the Kenwood portrait looks like a monumental self-promotion (2008: 170).

<sup>15</sup> For an extensive discussion, see Porter (1988: 189–212). See also Chapman (1990: 98–101); Broos (1971: 150–184); Suthor (2014: 185–186); Clarke (2006: 71).

<sup>16</sup> See also Cork: “Although Rembrandt painted them [these facial features] several centuries ago, he appears to live and breathe here with uncanny conviction” (2014: n. pag.).

is important to note that this is a self-portrait that, according to Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, “acts to move Martin beyond a narcissistic point of reference and to mediate between Daniel’s private world and the more encompassing realities of temporality and intersubjectivity” (1993: 108). Not only that a visual medium says more than Dan, the potential novelist, could ever verbalize – “it [...] said all he had never managed to say and would never manage to say” (*DM*: 703) –, but within this medium, it is the gaze of the painter that is central: “The sad, proud old man stared eternally out of his canvas, out of the entire knowledge of his own genius and of the inadequacy of genius before human reality. Dan stared back” (*DM*: 702). What really affects Dan are Rembrandt’s eyes which the narrator describes as “a pair of rheumy eyes” (*DM*: 703) and as “remorseless and aloof Dutch eyes” (*DM*: 703). This effect is explained by Julius Bryant’s reading of the original painting:

In contrast to the rich flesh, the eyes have been painted in with delicate glazes and do not have the sense of confidence conveyed by the altered pose. In the X-ray they appear as deep empty sockets, lacking any lead white, and the result is to intensify the gaze, with one eye in shadow, keeping their expression in imbalance, ambiguous, animate and enigmatic.<sup>17</sup>

Here, as before, Fowles’s description, or better: interpretation of Rembrandt’s self-portrait is totally in line with the major strands of academic but also popular art-criticism; just consider Jonathan Jones contending that Rembrandt’s eyes “contain so much knowledge and melancholy that even looking at this painting on a computer screen produces the eerie feeling that Rembrandt is looking back and weighing up the failures of the observer” (2013: n. pag.). Even if Jones’s is not exactly a scientific analysis, it still paraphrases exactly what happens to Fowles’s protagonist: “Dan felt dwarfed, in his century, his personal being, his own art. The great picture seemed to denounce, almost to repel” (*DM*: 703).

Rembrandt was in troubled circumstances and reduced to poverty when he painted this self-portrait, but apparently still a proud man who “throws it back” on everyone who looks at it. “Art is not a business; it is a struggle with eternity”,<sup>18</sup> Jones argues, and this is exactly one of the messages which hit Dan, the scriptwriter who has sold out to Hollywood. Rembrandt “has mapped himself with such craggy truthfulness that we simply stand and look back, wondering if we can ever be as real as he is”, Jones writes and thereby paraphrases Dan’s experience. As Barry Olshen contends, it is the “gaze of the old artist from the canvas [which] gives Daniel the secret he has been searching for: ‘choosing and learning to feel’” (1978:

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<sup>17</sup> Bryant (2003: 74); see also Chapman (1990: 98).

<sup>18</sup> “Rembrandt stands not proudly or arrogantly, but in the full consciousness of the heroic nature of his work” (Jones 2013: n. pag.).

119). Not only did “the sad, proud old man” stare out of his canvas but “Rembrandt’s eyes still seemed to follow Dan” (*DM*: 703) and, reminding him of his father, even turn into the eyes of Christ: “Christ’s eyes followed ... wherever you went, whatever you did, they watched” (*DM*: 704).<sup>19</sup> Once Dan’s gaze is captured by the painting, the protagonist undergoes a didactic-dialectic process of change while wrestling with the portrait and its aesthetic codes. But instead of losing himself in the painting, instead of the implosion of the subject in the media so typical of American society, Dan rediscovers himself in the artwork, or, as Svetlana Alpers argues, “Rembrandt [...] asks us in – to reflect, to consider” (1976: 25).<sup>20</sup>

Rembrandt’s expression or rather production of ‘psychological depth’ in the self-portrait has repeatedly been characterized as “the result of what is loosely called his humanism” (Alpers 1976: 24).<sup>21</sup> Alastair Sooke argues that Rembrandt, in his late portraits, “depicts himself with rugged simplicity and honesty. As a result, these images seem to suggest a refreshing, and strikingly modern, interest in introspection”, refusing to limit themselves to reflect the visually observable surface structures of the lifeworld. This is a characteristic feature of Rembrandt’s mature works and his late portrayals, in which “the isolated quality of the figures [...] is less a testimony to the fragmentation of human experience than a means of giving room [...] to be fully himself or herself” (Alpers 1976: 25),<sup>22</sup> in which “figure and ground are bound together and thus elided through the medium of paint” (Alpers 1983: 225), and in which, far from being the mere medium of representation, “paint is acknowledged as that common matter, like the very earth itself in the biblical phrase, out of which the figures emerge and to which they are bound to return” (Alpers 1983: 227). Recalling the art of Henry Breasley (see Horlacher 2000a) – whom David Williams in Fowles’s novella “The Ebony Tower” compares to Rembrandt<sup>23</sup> – the painting seems to reaffirm the roots of self-knowledge and

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19 See also Sooke, who argues that Rembrandt’s “stare remains indomitable, while the dark forms of his body suggest a solid, immovable presence” (2014: n. pag.).

20 See also Nash: “What we are drawn to do, as we contemplate these compelling presences [of Rembrandt’s subjects], is not merely to project our thoughts onto their blank faces, but to rehearse in our minds the matters that are taxing their minds” (1989: 238).

21 See also Judge: “We look at him, as he looks at us, and we feel that we understand him. [...] [W]hen we stand before a Rembrandt self-portrait, we realise that being ordinary – being human – is where the real interest lies” (2014: n. pag). See also Fowles, qtd. in Kefalea (1995: 144); Vieth (1991: 229).

22 See also Vieth: “Rembrandt surrounds his figures with a sense of room, projecting the impression of historical depth and fullness – as if each had a potential story to tell” (1991: 230).

23 For an in-depth discussion of visuality and painting in “The Ebony Tower”, see Horlacher (1998: 141–232); for an analysis of the importance of Pisanello and Uccello for the novella, see Horlacher (2000b).

creative vision in nature, and more specifically in human nature. As Fowles's novel demonstrates, Dan succeeds in peering through the mirror of his own image, abandoning his narcissistic structures and opening himself up to a new view of the world. "The authoritative gaze of *the* other – as father, Christ, or superego – is [finally] broken, so that the gaze of *an* other – as Rembrandt or Jane – may come more fully into being" (Kochhar-Lindgren 1993: 112). The work of art makes Dan experience a world "whose key we do not own" (Merleau-Ponty 1984: 108; my trans.) and encourages him to think in new and different ways. If Rembrandt made the individual, or rather the right to be an individual, the very centre of his art, this is exactly what Dan wants to regain: himself, his past, his connection to England, to go back to the sources of the man he could have been.

In accordance with Rembrandt's previously mentioned attempt to efface the surface with paint and brush in order to evoke through a new kind of pictorial depth the things that lie beneath the surface – "We speak of these late works as having or displaying depth, as if their difference is determined by Rembrandt looking deeper into himself" (Alpers 1988: 115) – Fowles's novel, too, postulates a deep structure for the portrait, hinting at a truth behind the surface: "Dan began at last to detect it behind the surface of the painting" (*DM*: 703). He does neither have to undertake archeological work in order to access the suggested deeper level of the self-portrait, nor prove the surface to be deceptive: "it lived, it was timeless, *it spoke very directly*" (*DM*: 703). If Richard Cork argues that in the self-portrait Rembrandt "concentrates [...] on telling the truth" (2014: n. pag.), and if James Hall writes that the "vision of this easel painter is visionary: his paintings offer profound truths" (2014: 160), in Fowles's novel, too, the "truth" is not concealed or hidden but becomes apparent in the dialogue between the painting and the observer, stemming from something "behind the surface of the painting" (*DM*: 703). As a result, Dan gets the chance to view the world through fresh eyes and to find "the declaration of the one true marriage in the mind mankind is allowed, the ultimate citadel of humanism. No true compassion without will, no true will without compassion" (*DM*: 703). Thus – and this is where traditional interpretations of Rembrandt and conservative readings of Fowles's *Daniel Martin* coincide – the Rembrandt portrait facilitates in Dan what Fowles calls 'whole sight'<sup>24</sup> and functions as an incarnation of humanistic values:

The picture of Rembrandt reminds Dan that he cannot go back to selfishness any longer; it leaves him with the understanding that one must choose and learn to feel. [...] Whole sight

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<sup>24</sup> This constitutes "'the ultimate of humanism' for Dan [...], who wants to reconnect his rural past to present and future in a novel with the 'whole sight' of Rembrandt's gaze" (Vieth 1991: 229); see also Alpers (1983: 222–228).

contains willed compassion: the self-knowledge necessary to freely choose; the recognition of relationship which makes compassion (to sympathize *with*; to suffer *with*) possible. (Boomsma 1980–1981: 334; see also 335 and *DM*: 702ff.)<sup>25</sup>

## II.2 Re-Readings: Commodification, Narcissism and Serialization

A novel which vehemently criticizes visuality only to accord Rembrandt’s self-portrait a place of utmost importance necessarily runs into problems of self-contradiction on several levels. By using Rembrandt’s “Self-Portrait with Two Circles” in a very prominent place, that is right at the end of the novel, *Daniel Martin* does not only explicitly (and almost paradoxically) rehabilitate visuality but simultaneously limits ‘good’ visuality to a specific ideologically occupied form. On the one hand, Rembrandt’s self-portrait is functionalized as an incarnation of humanistic values, on the other hand, it also conforms to the traditional understanding of *high art*:

In our culture, painting is art *par excellence*, and in a capitalist society, that excellence is taken quite literally, not only in the form of prices reached at auction, but also in the central position painting retains institutionally and ideologically within Western culture. There is nothing in the literary institution, for example, that really compares with the *museum*.

Within the institution of art, ‘Rembrandt’ is a most representative figure, fetching among the highest prices ever paid per canvas, with the authenticity of the works – their autographic reliability – fully determining their worth. (Bal 2006: 9–10)

If we assume for a moment that Rembrandt really manages to represent his individuality or his self in his paintings, we must keep in mind that it was in his time “that the individual came to be defined in [...] economic terms”, i.e. in terms of property (see Alpers 1988: 115).<sup>26</sup> If, however, we take into consideration that Rembrandt’s late self-portraits “offer a concrete instance of an individual representing himself as possessing, and hence having property in, himself,” we must also take into account that in the instance of Rembrandt’s self-portraits “the self as possession, the self possessed [...] is marketable in a literal sense” (Alpers 1988: 118) – a logic which is less characteristic of humanism than of capitalism (unless

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<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of the concept of humanism in *Daniel Martin*, see Temple-Thurston (1984); Olshen (1978: 119); Cichoń and Szynal (1999). See also Fowles, who writes, “[that *Daniel Martin* was] intended as a defence and illustration of an unfashionable [*sic*] philosophy, humanism” (qtd. in Chittick 1985: 70).

<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, both, Rembrandt and Dan, gain the proprietorship in and of their own person and capacities.

one considers humanism and capitalism as two sides of the same medal) and is characterized by a market strategy “that substitutes personal ‘authority’ for ‘authenticity’” (Silver 1989: 1409). According to this logic, one can argue that Rembrandt “invented ‘the Rembrandt’, alienated it from himself, and fetishized it” (Berger 2000: 351) as “a calculated response to the market economy of seventeenth-century Holland” (Silver 1989: 1409).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Rembrandt sentimentalized the image of himself and, “[r]ather than being driven by an internal, proto-Romantic compulsion to explore his own soul via his self-image”, was mainly “meeting a demand for ‘portraits of the artist, by the artist’” (Judge 2014: n. pag.).

Thus, Fowles’s epitome of humanism is most of all “an entrepreneur of the self” (Alpers 1988: 118) who finally serializes himself and by doing so ironically becomes a brilliant example of Fowles’s media criticism of the disappearance of originals and the taking over of simulacra. With reference to the selfie-culture of the early 21st century, Rembrandt can even be seen as “prophetic of the social media-age” (Sooke 2014: n. pag.), and David Carrier argues that Rembrandt “creates ‘the *effect of originality*’ which is linked, now in Soho as in seventeenth century Holland, to an artmarket in which what is for sale is the appearance, or illusion of creative originality” (1988: 521). Therefore, to characterize Rembrandt’s representation of himself in traditional Cartesian and existentialist terms with “I paint (or I am painting), therefore I am” (Alpers 1988: 115) runs into difficulties, and the more so since Rembrandt depicted himself “approximately fifty times in paint, twenty in etching, and about ten times in surviving drawings” (Alpers 1988: 120; see also Hall 2014: 151).<sup>28</sup>

This astonishing number of self-portraits provokes the question as to whether there is a strong narcissistic element in Rembrandt’s painting; a narcissistic element from which Dan is supposed to break free, and which Fowles’s novel almost viciously detects and criticizes in American culture. Because of the enormous number of his self-portraits, Rembrandt was not only “the first artist whose features were widely recognized throughout his working life” (Hall 2014: 150–151), but he was also “among the most recognizable artists in the world” (Hall 2014: 151).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rembrandt’s self-portraits become “commodities distinguished from others by being identified as his; and in making them, he in turn commodifies himself” (Alpers 1988: 118).

<sup>28</sup> Sooke argues that one of the constants of Rembrandt’s “up-and-down career was a fascination with self-portraits. Over four decades he made around 80 of them in various media, including paintings, drawings and prints, transforming the genre in the process. Estimates differ, but this represents up to 20 % of his entire oeuvre” (2014: n. pag.). For a discussion whether all of these paintings are really self-portraits or *tronies* see Hirschfelder (2008); see also Hall (2014: 151).

<sup>29</sup> “‘There’s also some inner drive there [...]. However much they were marketed and how much he could sell them, the sheer effort and intensity and engagement and how varied they are indicate that he was kind of obsessed with it’ [...]. That focus on himself was probably not an

Paradoxically enough, “the self-portraits are what make Rembrandt famous rather than his art”:

His early self-portrait prints are sent all over the place, so everyone would have known what he looked like even if they’d never seen another work by Rembrandt. As an independent artist, not a court artist, he had to make more of an effort to put himself on the map. Making a self-portrait suggests that you are already famous even if you’re not. (Hall, qtd. in Sooke 2014: n. pag.)

Several critics have argued that the “17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch painter was arguably the original master of the ‘selfie’”,<sup>30</sup> a claim which gains in relevance if we connect it with Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra which is a lot closer to Rembrandt’s pictorial production than Fowles’s novel is ready to admit, given that Rembrandt had his studio do copies of his own self-portraits; not to mention all those works “which are described today as copies after lost Rembrandt self-portraits, composite works that are made up after several of his self-portraits, or portraits done in the manner of Rembrandt self-portraits” (Alpers 1988: 120–121). Critics even argue that “Rembrandt virtually promoted these mistakes and deceptions himself,” that at “the core of his own work were his self-portraits, and Rembrandt appeared to have been willing, even anxious, to encourage others to pass themselves off as himself” (Alpers 1988: 121).<sup>31</sup> This opens up the question as to what self-portraits actually represent and also evokes Rembrandt’s known fascination with theatricality and performance. Therefore,

the salient question is perhaps not whether this or that drawing is after life, but what, on the evidence of his artistic practice, Rembrandt considered ‘life’ to be. It made little difference on a particular occasion if they worked after players or imagined a play in the mind, for in either case Rembrandt got a ‘real’ life through attending to the re-enactment of it. (Alpers 1988: 45)

If it does not matter whether a portrait or self-portrait is drawn from life, if characters are simply imagined and turned into a painting, this is reminiscent of how simulacra create a medial reality bereft of references. In the case of the “Self-Portrait with Two Circles”, Hans-Joachim Raupp has argued that it is less Rembrandt’s personality we are confronted with but a painting of a painter who looks

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indication of self-consciousness as we think of it in the post-Freudian sense [...] but rather an interest in establishing his own place in the art historical pantheon” (Chapman, qtd. in Siegal 2015: n. pag.).

**30** Siegal (2015: n. pag.); see also Judge (2014: n. pag.); Sooke (2014: n. pag.).

**31** “What seems positively dismaying about the recent reattributions of many Rembrandts is that this painter whose art ‘give[s] off an effect of singularity, and of individuality’ did not himself create many of these ‘originals’” (Carrier 1988: 521).

like Rembrandt and which glorifies Rembrandt's art, or, with Harry Berger jr.: "In the self-portraits the artist, like an actor, performs before himself, indeed, performs himself, 'presenting himself as a model in the theatrical mode'" (2000: 13).<sup>32</sup> Still, we can push this one step further, and theatricality gives way to hyperreality: If the model for a supposed portrait or self-portrait is "a play in the mind" (Alpers 1988: 45), that is if the supposed self-portrait does not represent an extratextual or extrapictorial reference but creates the illusion of this reference in the very act of painting, if "the image of the artist [...] at the center of his art," that is at the centre of his own self-portrait, is nothing but "a fiction" (Berger 2000: 499), then we transcend the confines of theatricality towards what Baudrillard has called the fourth phase of the image, in which the latter is no longer "the reflection of a profound reality", does not mask or denature a profound reality, and does not mask "the *absence* of a profound reality" either but "has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1994: 6).

### II.3 Self-Knowledge and/or Misrecognition

As we have seen, traditional art-criticism sees Rembrandt as a painter who looks at himself closely, honestly, and compassionately, making his 'true' self and our humanity visible for us. However, before Rembrandt the question as to the true self, even in self-portraits, had not really been posed; instead, self-portraits served the functions of *memoria* and of *memento mori* (Parmentier 1997: 728). Michael Parmentier contends that neither of these functions is of interest to Rembrandt and that in his late portraits he indeed endeavours to solve a "problem of the self" ("Ichproblem"), that is to learn about his self by analyzing and recomposing it in the highly reflexive but also productive and liberating act of (self-)projection on canvas. Parmentier reads the self-portrait as an autobiographical utterance akin to literary autobiography and as a record of a process of personal development and increasing self-knowledge ("Selbstbildungsprozess"). But what knowledge of the self is exposed by the "Self-Portrait with Two Circles"?

If we look at the interpretations art-criticism but also Fowles's novel offer, we can say that the self-portrait supposedly evokes some kind of presence, of respect but also of sadness and maybe even melancholia. To link these emotions to the reduced circumstances Rembrandt faced towards the end of his life is the traditional, if also superficial and somewhat profane explanation, especially if the self-portrait is simultaneously hailed as giving unprecedented insight into the *conditio*

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<sup>32</sup> See also Berger (2000: 499); Alpers (1988); Nash (1989: 239).

*humana*. So what could this *conditio humana* be? In accordance with Arthur Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre” as well as Lacanian psychoanalysis, critics such as Parmentier suggest that Rembrandt’s “Self-Portrait with Two Circles” demonstrates that what the subject sees in the mirror is only a distorted image, a product of the imaginary, and not the real self; thus, any inner truth of the subject is inaccessible, if it exists at all. The artificiality of this construction of wholeness represented by the painting is also stressed by Mieke Bal, for whom the self-portrait is “the false locus of self-reflection” (2006: 17), and when Andrew Small calls “*self-portraiture* [...] a *rhetoric of the self*” (1996: 9), this also underlines its constructive, productive and self-reflexive,<sup>33</sup> but not representational or mimetic ‘nature’.

Maybe it is this insight which Rembrandt’s painting symbolizes, namely the realization a) that the self-portrait as a genre based on the mirror image and its fallacies can never offer more than a distorted reflection, b) that its “representation is always dubious”, never a ‘natural’ image or a perfect copy but “potentially subversive of realism itself” (Bal 2006: 254–255), c) that painting may produce the effect of reality (“*effet de réel*”) but never (re)produce reality itself, and d) that what the observer sees is “an image of the painter checking himself out and trying to monitor the impression he plans to transmit through his art to posterity” (Berger 2000: 3). The self-portrait does not lead to the truth of the person portrayed but finally “presents – performs, displays, stages – [...] the representation not of a person but of an act of self-representation” (Berger 2000: 13). Therefore, on a first level of interpretation and in contrast to Dan’s experience in the novel, there is no representational inner truth of the self in Rembrandt’s “Self-Portrait with Two Circles”, neither on the surface nor as part of an alleged deep structure. On the contrary, Rembrandt does most evidently *not* “represent what he must have seen when he faced his own gaze in the mirror” (Nash 1989: 239), so that the painting can be read as a symbol or even allegory of lack and misrecognition (in a self-dramatization as ‘The Painter’) – two ‘essential’ factors which characterize the human subject and which can never really be overcome. As such it functions as a *mise en abyme* of possible misrecognitions and imaginary identifications on several levels, including reader identification,<sup>34</sup> without the

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<sup>33</sup> Bal argues that “self-portraiture implies mirroring. In this sense alone, can self-portraiture as a genre be taken to be self-reflexive by definition. Many of the ‘Rembrandt’ self-portraits-without-mirror foreground the self-representational aspects of the works. Either the work emphatically explores the face [...] or it foregrounds the constructive aspect of the posture, as in the two late self-portraits representing the self as painter” (2006: 251).

<sup>34</sup> See also Bal: “The transgression suggested in the identification of viewer with painter thus instills in the act of viewing a sense of regression to the imaginary stage, delimited by the experience of the mirror and its alienating effect” (2006: 269).

observer even knowing whether the painting represents “the painter gazing in the mirror or the specular image he sees” (Berger 2000: 499). What is also important here is the fact that, just as Dan (the novelist to be) has not written a single line of his novel yet, and never will, the “Self-Portrait with Two Circles” is a self-portrait of the painter as non-painter (the person in the painting does not actually paint) and as such

a *dissemblance* – not a deception but a disguise, an act of mimicry, a self-portrait masquerading as a portrait. In this dissemblance there lurks the orthopsychic possibility of a gesture of self-negation, a fantasy of self-idealization, a drama of heteromorphic identification that first splits the artistic subject into painter and sitter and then integrates the fragments into the alterity of the specular double. (Berger 2000: 354)

On a second level of interpretation, and this seems to be stressed by Dan’s reaction to the self-portrait, we can ask whether it is not the ephemeral recognition of misrecognition, alterity and self-alienation which characterizes the relation between Rembrandt and his self-portrait. Maybe the self-representation of Rembrandt as the “sad, proud old man” (*DM*: 703) is due to the fact that the supposed (auto-didactical) project of self-portraiture did not lead to any kind of inner truth or core identity, and maybe it is the recognition of this ‘failure’, the transitory realisation of lack and absence which causes the taint of melancholy so characteristic of many later portraits. In Lacanian terms we can argue that

*the failure of its representation is its positive condition.* The subject tries to articulate itself in a signifying representation; the representation fails; instead of a richness we have a lack, and this void opened by the failure is the subject of the signifier. To put it paradoxically: the subject of the signifier is a retroactive effect of the failure of its own representation; that is why the failure of representation is the only way to represent it adequately. (Žižek 1989: 175)<sup>35</sup>

Wholeness is always constructed and does only exist in the imaginary, the self-portrait seems to say, emphasizing this insight by its apparent “lack of finish” (Porter 1988: 190) as well as its incompleteness, that is the absence of a signature and a date. Rembrandt’s self-portrait may indeed portray the transitory moment where misrecognition gives way to an insight into self-alienation such as “I paint myself where I am not, therefore I am where I do not paint” (see Parmentier 1997: 734). However, the possibility of this awareness of lack and absence alluded to in the self-portrait is never really spelled out in the novel and safely contained in or glossed over by Dan’s double identification, first of Rembrandt with the self-

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<sup>35</sup> See also Berger (2000: 155).

portrait, and second of himself with what he imagines the portrait to represent, that is ‘whole sight’.

## II.4 Non-Representational Aspects, Style and Materiality

As has already briefly been mentioned, Rembrandt’s self-portrait does not really match the then conventional codes of Dutch painting and refuses “to produce the transparent mirror of the world of the Dutch *fijn schilderkunst*” (Alpers 1983: 225). Rembrandt’s “late painterly manner” is out of step with the then “current taste for smooth, polished surfaces” (Chapman 1990: 98) so that he even has an “outsider” status in a Holland dominated by Baconian scientific knowledge and visual classification” (Silver 1989: 1409).<sup>36</sup> The question, then, is whether Rembrandt turns away from the craft of representation in his self-portrait, thus also turning away “from the certainty and knowledge attributed by Dutch culture and its art to the world seen and to sight itself” (Alpers 1983: 227).

As has already been shown, Fowles’s novel postulates the (metaphorical) three-dimensionality of the self-portrait and the existence of a deep structure or some kind of depth (*DM*: 703) that makes Dan experience the negation of his own familiar codes and values, of the life he has lived and the media he has embraced. This three-dimensionality attributed to the painting by Dan can, of course, only be an illusion and “a matter of surface”, in the sense that Rembrandt

dwells on himself in paint. It is not that Rembrandt looks deeper into himself, but that he closes in – identifying self, himself, with his painting. The embodiment characteristic of many of the later works – not only the thickness of the paint but the congruence between paint and flesh [...] comes to be the rooting of identity in the painting itself. (Alpers 1988: 115)

What is negated here is the idea of Rembrandt’s introspection; what is championed is the performative dimension of ‘painting-as-identity-construction’ but not through representation but through self-referentiality. “The self-portrait can become self-reflexive, not because it shows us the face we know to belong to the painter, but because it stands for study – for the practice of painting and its difficulties” (Bal 2006: 254).<sup>37</sup> This is further enhanced through the aforementioned

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<sup>36</sup> See also Alper’s conclusion in *The Art of Describing*, where she sees Rembrandt as an exception in his time, and her interpretation in *Rembrandt’s Enterprise*, where she regards him more as the product of his time and an instrument of change (see Bal 1990: 139).

<sup>37</sup> See also Bal (2006: 255) and Alpers: “The sliver of canvas just visible along the right edge of the Kenwood self-portrait [...] to which he does not turn or lift a brush is Rembrandt’s anti-illusionistic way of calling attention to the painter’s condition” (1988: 117–118).

congruence between paint and flesh which stresses the self-reflexive, the artistic and the material dimensions of painting. As a matter of fact, it has been argued that the “surfaces of Rembrandt’s late works [...] do not enable one to see better on the model of sight embraced by the culture. They are surfaces of a maker of pictures who profoundly mistrusted the evidence of sight. This point becomes the very subject of Rembrandt’s art in his fascination with blindness” (Alpers 1983: 227).<sup>38</sup>

We can even say that the thick surfaces of paint so characteristic of Rembrandt’s mature works “obfuscate the world seen”, and that Rembrandt repeatedly stresses “the materiality of his medium itself” given that his paint “is something worked as with the bare hands” and almost becomes “a material to grasp, perhaps, as much as to see” (Alpers 1983: 225). Thus it is the materiality of the paint, “not the world seen” which “becomes his frame of reference” (Alpers 1983: 225–227). Paint “is worked to engage our sense of touch as it is mediated through our sense of sight” (Alpers 1988: 22),<sup>39</sup> and Rembrandt’s originality and individuality, his ‘truth’ and ‘honesty’, do not reside in the person or pose we see in the painting but in the way it is painted, not in the representation but in its style, not in its content or its supposed referent but in how this content is created through specific characteristics of his brushwork, application of paint, use of colours, and composition.<sup>40</sup> From this it follows that it is the uniqueness of Rembrandt’s art which testifies to the uniqueness of his self: “Le style, c’est moi”.<sup>41</sup> Or, as Chapman argues: “Thick impasto, visible brushwork, quickly incised lines, and seeming lack of finish [...] all call attention to the painting process. [...] Yet the extreme painterliness of the Kenwood self-portrait suggests a consciousness of, and pride in, his own style” (1990: 98; see also Parmentier 1997).

Berger interprets this feature as “the displacement of power from the image to its production, from the portrayal of the act of posing to the portrayal of the act of painting” (2000: 498). Moreover, by “emphasizing the materiality of paint and its relation to sculpture, to touching as a specific way of seeing, and to a problematization of representation [...] Rembrandt’s manner of paint handling” can be read as another “sign of self-reflection” (Bal 1990: 42), that is a statement about

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**38** Referring to Rembrandt’s painting of the blind Homer, Alpers argues that the “aged Homer is represented dictating to a young scribe: an unseeing speaker speaking words that remain unseen. Paradoxical though it may seem, Rembrandt makes images that show us that it is the word (or the Word) rather than the world seen that conveys truth” (1983: 227).

**39** For a phenomenologically oriented discussion of Rembrandt’s paintings and use of paint see Suthor (2014).

**40** See also Berger who argues that “the conspicuous display of facture or paint texture directly challenges the graphic principle and goes against the grain of a form of visual rhetoric that promises to bestow clear, persuasive, and knowable meanings on passive observers” (2000: 359).

**41** See Parmentier (1997: 735–736); Hirschfelder (2008: 170); Raupp (1993: 90–91).

painting, with “the pure materiality of the work of paint” producing “a sort of self-implosion that counters the representational dimension of the work. [...] This self-implosion does not make the work less meaningful; it changes the meaning, from the unproblematic, realistic representation of an outside world to a statement about how problematic such a representation is, and how central to representation is paint in its materiality” (Bal 1990: 140).<sup>42</sup>

### III Conclusion

If we follow the partly existentialist and humanistic logic of *Daniel Martin*, Rembrandt’s self-portrait affirms not only Fowles’s claim that “Art springs from humanity as it is” (1993: 191, § 24), but also positively influences Dan’s vision of reality and of his self-concept. On a first level, the self-portrait functions as an example of Georg Simmel’s idea that “in the ideational order of the artwork, an image of meaningful, human life appears, which can reverberate as an objectifying form of spiritual life in the everyday life of vital long-term causes and purposes” (Winkgens 1988: 207; my trans.). Thus Rembrandt’s painting portrays a “transformation” of the “vital current of existence and life” in “objectified, cultural form” (see Winkgens 1988: 201, 203; my trans.) and thereby represents a crystallization of life as a cultural phenomenon. At least on the surface level, the novel sets the dream of the humanist, the trust in the timelessness of art, as well as the possibility of a recourse to the sources (which are supposed to be still accessible in the present), to an origin, and to some kind of ‘true self’ against hyperreality and a society of simulation, in which the only reality that can be reached is the reality of the medium and in which the images have become self-referential. Though the novel’s verdict on the American scopic regime of simulacra is devastating, England’s overaged and morbid theatricality does not represent an alternative to the US – “California is the future and England is already a thing in a museum, a dying animal in a zoo” (*DM*: 265) – and is already about to follow the American model of the masses vanishing in the media.

However, a novel which vehemently criticizes visuality only to accord Rembrandt’s self-portrait a place of utmost importance necessarily runs into problems of self-contradiction, especially when one considers that Rembrandt’s self-portrait is much more complex than traditional readings – and the novel itself –

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<sup>42</sup> This interpretation is further supported by the curious absence or dematerialization of the Kenwood sitter’s hand which “correlates with the increased materialization of the paint surface: as the hand disappears the traces of its activity spread out and take over the whole image” (Berger 2000: 498).

admit. As a matter of fact, Rembrandt's "Self-Portrait with Two Circles" seems to refuse any one-dimensional didactical or ideological functionalization and contains various self-reflexive and revocative elements pertaining to the capitalist dimension of Rembrandt's work as well as to the dangers of commodification, narcissism and serialization. Not only that the very "notion of individual pictorial identity embodied in Rembrandt's painting [is] [...] threatened by the very proliferation in which his studio – and others – engaged" (Alpers 1988: 121) What this finally leads to is almost evocative of Andy Warhol's silkscreen printing process as a mechanical and commercial means "to make a practically limitless number of precise repetitions and variations of his key subjects".<sup>43</sup> In both cases, we face a multiplication and serialization of something which should originally be unique and testify to individuality. Moreover, if it does not matter whether a portrait or self-portrait is drawn after life, if in Rembrandt's studio characters are simply imagined and turned into a painting, this anticipates the creation of a medial reality bereft of references, so that the question arises whether Rembrandt's painterly production, instead of leading to 'whole sight', fosters and structurally anticipates exactly the medial conditions which *Daniel Martin* so vehemently criticizes and denounces in America.

If, as postulated by Fowles's novel, Rembrandt's self-portrait really contains a universal message about the *conditio humana*, this message, which, as most critics agree, is reflected in the sadness and melancholy of the self-portrait, remains ambiguous and is not contributive to ideas of wholeness or something like a 'true' self. On the contrary, it testifies to the transitory recognition (which itself runs the danger of becoming a misrecognition) of lack and absence as being at the 'heart' of the subject – and this leads to a further contradiction: Though *Daniel Martin* argues in favour of the existence of "the real" (*DM*: 454), Fowles's art as well as his concept of 'whole sight' (as part of his sometimes quirky philosophy) are less naïve and certainly encompass – when at their best – this kind of 'negative' knowledge of absence and lack. In *Daniel Martin*, however, this dimension of 'negative' knowledge is never openly acknowledged and seems to be repressed in favour of another flight into the imaginary, a happy ending with the protagonist joining the Labour Party and starting a new life with his old love Jane in the mythical *lost domaine* or *bonne vaux*. If we take this happy ending literally – after all, the fact that Fowles's novel never really abandons the

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43 "I find it easier to use a screen. This way, I don't have to work on my objects at all. One of my assistants or anyone else, for that matter, can reproduce the design as well as I could" (Warhol, qtd. in Reder 2015: n. pag.).

literary mode of realism and consistently sticks to its didactic overtones seems to argue in favor of such a reading and against any parodistic or ironical interpretation – we have to conclude that *Daniel Martin* opts for an interpretation of Rembrandt’s self-portrait which ignores not only the questions of commodification, narcissism/misrecognition and serialization but also of representation. This is especially important given that in the novel Rembrandt’s self-portrait is located at the centre of a whole series of *mises en abyme* and, as I have tried to show, insists on its self-reflexivity, that is on portraying an act of (self-)portrayal, as well as on its material dimension, that is the pure materiality of the work of paint. To a certain degree, however, and notwithstanding its realism, this is exactly what holds true for Fowles’s novel in its totality; for a text which incorporates filmic terminology and structures of representation, boasts a multiplicity of levels of reality and allows for a complex strategy of de-automatization that targets the protagonist as well as the reader. Maybe the surprising narrative complexity of the novel as well as its circularity should be read as a powerful demonstration of textuality and a celebration not of the (realistic) worlds created through literature, but of literature’s power to be creative and productive, that is of literariness and poeticity.

The fact that after 704 pages, the reader learns that Dan’s novel is never going to be written, and that the paradoxical last word of Dan’s unwritten novel is the first word of Fowles’s book points to the fact that if Rembrandt demonstrated what painting can achieve beyond naïve notions of representation, Fowles’s novel is probably on a similar mission and should not be reduced to its realistic representation of reality and traditional happy ending. *Daniel Martin* not only depicts how the novel can incorporate visual media ranging from humanistic paintings to postmodern simulacra, but it also demonstrates in a highly self-reflexive manner what literature can do with language (see Onega 1989: 99), how the self-reflexivity of painting mirrors the self-reflexivity of literature, and how the materiality of paint mirrors the materiality of the word/world.

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