

VERMEER: INTERRUPTIONS, EXCLUSIONS, AND 'IMAGINING SEEING'

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This article proposes an essential interrelatedness of Vermeer's strategies of inclusion and exclusion of an implied beholder. I will argue that such strategies mutually reinforce each other, to the extent that the plausibility of one is arguably dependent upon the possibility of the other. This is evidenced by Vermeer's subtle manipulations of pictorial space, and the article traces a decisive shift in his familiar use of barriers (*repoussoir*) from those aimed at an external presence to those oriented towards an internal beholder. The feasibility of this interdependence rests upon a theory of imaginative engagement with paintings that can accommodate both an internal beholder and the felt lack of occupancy of the imagined situation's point of view. I argue that the Dependency Thesis, as set out by M. G. F. Martin, can provide plausibility for both kinds of imaginative engagement with paintings, when sensory imagination is conceived as an instance of *imagining seeing*. These engagements exploit the notorious emptiness of imagination's necessarily perspectival point of view.

Johannes Vermeer's genre paintings from the early 1660s register a vital shift in his conception of the role and location of the beholder. Though the evidence is limited to the paintings themselves, we may infer from their revised structure a newfound dialectic, where works alternately acknowledge or seek to deny the beholder as an implicit and internal presence. These imaginative engagements are *prescribed* by the work. In a series of subtle manipulations of pictorial space,



Figure 1: Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*, c. 1660–61. 39.3 × 44.4 cm. Frick Collection, New York

The article has greatly benefited from insightful comments of three anonymous reviewers.

Vermeer instigates what I contend are fundamentally interrelated strategies of inclusion or exclusion. Here, the beholder is imaginatively conceived as occupying, *or not*, a position internal to the world of the painting – a position corresponding to what we might term the picture's depiction point, unrepresented yet part of the representational content of the picture.¹ The catalyst for this shift, where the beholder is now conceived as an internal rather than external presence, is arguably *Girl Interrupted at Her Music* (c. 1660–61), in the Frick Collection, New York (fig. 1). This work ingeniously utilizes the device of the 'interruption'² as a means to assimilate the implied beholder, situated at the point of view of the imagined situation, into the autonomous narrative logic of the painting: an encounter requiring that we imagine seeing the scene through the eyes of the interrupter. By contrast, subsequent works, such as *A Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (c. 1663–64), in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (fig. 2), seek to exclude this newly conceived beholder from the imagined situation, through the use of barriers oriented towards this very same internal viewpoint. This is not a mere



Figure 2: Johannes Vermeer, *A Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, c. 1663–64. 46.5 × 39 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

¹ I take the term depiction point from Robert Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

² At around the same time, Rembrandt also evolves an interruption as a unifying device in *The Staalmeesters* (better known as *The Syndics*, 1661–62), now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

indifference to such a presence, but an active exclusion. These latter paintings sustain a complex imagining of the scene from a viewpoint which is paradoxically 'experienced' as proximate (an analogue of the immediacy of perception) yet unoccupied.

We might gain the measure of this reconfiguration of the spectator position by comparing Vermeer's mature scenes of absorption with his early intensely absorptive work *A Lady Reading at a Window* (c. 1657), in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden (fig. 3). This earlier work, a single figure painting of a woman reading, orientates Vermeer's familiar barriers towards an external rather than internal point of view. These impediments include the foreground table, with its crumpled carpet and bowl spilling out fruit, and what X-rays reveal as the late addition of a *trompe l'oeil* rendering of the covers that once protected paintings in Dutch interiors (Vermeer's only known use of this familiar Dutch genre device). The addition of this illusory curtain, arguably part of the work's *outer* rather than *inner* reality, is compelling evidence that Vermeer has yet to conceive of the excluded beholder as potentially an internal presence. By contrast, within three or four years Vermeer's instigation of an interruption as a self-contained autonomous device prompts a fundamental



Figure 3: Johannes Vermeer, *A Lady Reading at a Window*, c. 1657. 83 × 64.5 cm.
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden

rethinking of the occupation, or not, of the scene's implied point of view. To reiterate, this is a position now explicitly conceived as a pictorial extension of the depicted scene, and hence distinct from the viewpoint of the beholder looking at the painting from the room or gallery in which it hangs.

I begin by setting out the argument in relation to the paintings themselves (Section I). However, I believe this argument has philosophical as well as art historical consequences. In Section II, the article will briefly consider Vermeer's innovative use of the interruption within the remit of what Richard Wollheim calls the 'Spectator in the Picture', as outlined in Chapter III of *Painting as an Art*.³ This offers a distinctive engagement ancillary to *seeing-in*,⁴ through an imaginative identification with an internal spectator from within the world of the painting. Wollheim's restrictive thesis on the role of imagination in pictorial seeing, however, would seem to contradict what I claim to be the fundamental interrelatedness of the strategies of inclusion or exclusion I have described above. It cannot accommodate an 'experienced' absence of such an implied presence, thus suggesting distinct phenomenal engagements despite their similarity of pictorial structure.

I believe part of the problem here is that Wollheim does not adequately characterize the phenomenal nature of such an engagement, beyond an explicit acknowledgement that it involves mental imagery (that is, visualization). My own proposal, that this should be regarded as a case of 'imagining seeing', draws upon the Dependency Thesis as formulated by M. G. F. Martin.⁵ This thesis, which I briefly summarize in Section III, is not only in a position to provide plausibility to the imaginative engagement where we identify with an internal spectator, but more contentiously to the contrary but closely related imaginative engagement where we 'experience' the picture's point of view as unoccupied (Section IV). In making the case, I will argue that the thesis is well placed to provide a phenomenal account of the sort of visualizing involved in imagining the spectator in the picture, and thereby to solve the riddle of the interrelationship of Vermeer's strategies of inclusion and exclusion.⁶ Both strategies exploit the 'emptiness' of imagination's necessarily perspectival point of view: the former to imagine a protagonist other than oneself; the latter to imaginatively experience a poignant absence.

³ Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), chap. 3.

⁴ Following common practice, I here use Wollheim's term *seeing-in*, but without taking on Wollheim's theoretical position on twofoldness. Unlike Wollheim, I do not regard depiction as necessarily experiential.

⁵ M. G. F. Martin, 'The Transparency of Experience', *Mind & Language* 17 (2002): 376–425.

⁶ See, for instance, Paul Noordhof, 'Imagining Objects and Imagining Experiences', *Mind & Language* 17 (2002): 426–55.

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I start with a brief consideration of some of the paintings themselves. Consider Vermeer's early work *The Procuress* (1656), in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden (fig. 4). This is a brothel scene, where a soldier is just about to place a coin into the open palm of a smiling and compliant woman. The detached figure on the left, possibly a self-portrait,⁷ invites the viewer to comment upon, rather than 'participate' in, this scene of venal love. He is the only figure unabsorbed by the imminent exchange of money. The raising of his glass is a direct equivalent to an aside in the theatre, where the viewer is addressed as an audience member external to the events portrayed. The art historian Louis Marin defines a 'figure of the frame' as just such an internal figure aligned with the work's boundary, whose role is to invite comment upon the painting's anecdotal content.⁸ The gesture, unregistered by any of the other figures, forms part of the work's 'outer' rather than 'inner' apparatus, in that it is there to be interpreted by the spectator of the picture, the viewer standing before the work, rather than a beholder internal to its



Figure 4: Johannes Vermeer, *The Procuress*, 1656. 143 x 130 cm.
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden

⁷ Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Vermeer* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 54.

⁸ Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, trans. Meete Hjort (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 83–84.

world.⁹ Our externality is reinforced by the objects insistently piled up against the 'picture plane,' while the scene's viewpoint makes little sense as an extension of the virtual world. This work has much in common with other anecdotal Dutch genre works, such as Nicolaes Maes's numerous 'eavesdroppers,' where the figure of the frame is conceived as a surrogate watcher/listener: someone who 'plays' to the audience, alerting them to the narrative events the painting depicts.

Vermeer's *The Girl with a Wine Glass* (c. 1659–60), in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Brunswick (fig. 5), seems on the cusp of a new relation. A predatory male encourages the woman to drink, while she turns towards 'us' with an embarrassed smile. In contrast to this lascivious attention, a second male figure, at the rear, seemingly asleep, has withdrawn from the scene (perhaps drunk from too much wine).¹⁰ While the depiction point is now conceivable as a spatial extension of the scene (in that it makes sense as a continuation of the domestic room in which the figures are placed), the painting's residual



Figure 5: Johannes Vermeer, *The Girl with a Wine Glass*, c. 1659–60. 78 × 67 cm.
Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Brunswick

⁹ For such a distinction, see Wolfgang Kemp, 'The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception,' in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 191.

¹⁰ See Wheelock, *Vermeer*, 70.

theatricality is evidenced by the unbridged distance between this viewpoint and the unoccupied figures.¹¹

Despite a similarity of content with *The Girl with a Wine Glass*, a profound shift seems to have taken place with *Girl Interrupted at Her Music* (fig. 1), probably painted slightly later than the work in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum. Here, an interruption disrupts the music making, the two figures united by the sheet music they both grasp. Not only is this a more nuanced and less predatory depiction of seduction (if, at all, this is the content), but the much tighter framing of the image and corresponding intimacy suggest an 'interruption' that is now intrinsic to the scene: an intrusion of an implied yet unpainted figure within the inner logic of the work's narrative. The woman no longer solicits our attention; she registers not a stranger standing before the canvas but someone with whom she is (perhaps intimately) familiar.¹² Given the tighter framing, Vermeer's familiar low viewpoint now seems to genuinely belong to the depicted room, such that the painting no longer seems 'staged' for our benefit.¹³ If the earlier Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum and later Frick works similarly allocate the spectator the task of 'interrupting' the scene, there are differences in the implied spatial relation to

¹¹ This distance is a notable feature of Pieter de Hooch's works dealing with similar subject matter, such as *A Woman Drinking with Two Men* (c. 1658), in the National Gallery, London. With many de Hooch paintings, the virtual spaces appear to be staged inventions (though no doubt founded upon real spaces), such that the depiction point, whilst an objective property of the perspectival scene, does not belong to the depicted room. Indeed, as with a stage set, the angle of vision would frequently necessitate the viewpoint falling outside the confines of the fictional room. Even when objects are here cut into at the frame edges, there is a sense of an unbridgeable distance between the staged scene and a notional viewpoint conceived as external (that is, belonging to the beholder of the painting) rather than an intrinsic extension of the virtual. See Jørgen Wadum, 'Vermeer in Perspective', in *Johannes Vermeer*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art; The Hague: Mauritshuis; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 67–79. Vermeer's newfound intimacy, by contrast, is no doubt at least partly due to his use of a *camera obscura*, if not in the actual painting then certainly in constructing the scene. See, for instance, Philip Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera: Uncovering the Truth behind the Masterpieces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹² This parallels paintings implying an 'offstage' arrival of someone we do not see, but whose presence is revealed by how the depicted figures react, perhaps by pointing at the unseen figure, or simply through a pattern of gazes. Vermeer's implied intruder is as much 'placed' there by the painter as an offstage figure we do not see, such that we are invited to imagine his or her presence within the fictional scene. However, we now imagine the scene from this subjective point of view in such a way that what we imaginatively see is mediated by the psychological repertoire of the interrupter.

¹³ This might be taken as an extreme form of the 'open' composition characteristic of the a-tectonic, where in Heinrich Wölfflin's classic distinction, unlike the tectonic work constructed just 'for this frame', with Vermeer 'the filling has lost touch with the frame'. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, 1950), 125.

the respective scenes. For all her embarrassed awkwardness, the woman's appeal to us in *The Girl with a Wine Glass* is not without a joviality typical of other genre works. With *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*, however, the implied figure the woman turns to address now seems *already to inhabit the space of the representation*: a known presence that no longer transgresses the metaphysical divide between fictive and real. In her very neutrality of expression, she does not so much invite comment as psychologically implicate the spectator in the proceedings.

Here, I concur with Christiane Hertel's view that Vermeer's use of the extended interruption is distinguished from other contemporary genre paintings where a figure turns towards the beholder: a distinction whereby Vermeer 'determine[s] the moment of viewing, however short or long its duration, as one that actively interrupts and arrests the scene beheld'.¹⁴ The woman's role is no longer to invite comment, but rather she registers a suspension of action initiated by the presence of an internal spectator as participant. Hertel assumes that 'the specific device of arrest can be seen to focus Hegel's general structure of the implied beholder in all painting and to locate it in the motif of the exchanged looks, that is, in the most external of motifs'.¹⁵ This fails to register the 'ontological' shift between the external and essentially 'shared' moment of *The Girl with a Wine Glass* and the intimate and private address of the woman in the Frick's *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*. Indeed, this distinction makes much more sense of Hertel's own Hegelian interpretation that with the latter work this extended moment of interruption is not only 'the moment that constitutes the painting's content', but 'withdraws it as something that actually cannot be shared' – in other words it loses the communal conviviality of genre representations of everyday life.¹⁶ The Frick painting thus anticipates the intensely private moments of later single figure works such as *A Lady Writing a Letter* (c. 1665–66), in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

If the evolving of an internal spectator is one pictorial strategy by which Vermeer's work is distinguished from that of his contemporaries, in a series of parallel works he develops a natural pause in the action to suggest the obliviousness of the depicted figure to anything other than the object of their internal absorption. We might think of the great mature works such as *A Woman Holding a Balance* (c. 1662–64), in the National Gallery of Art, Washington. In these scenes of absorption there is an inference that this newly conceived

¹⁴ Christiane Hertel, *Vermeer: Reception and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 52.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 53, 54. By contrast, see Rembrandt's avowedly communal *The Staalmeesters*, referred to earlier.

implied presence might now potentially intrude upon the scene, to disrupt the self-contained nature of the picture. I would suggest that the beholder excluded is no longer the spectator of the picture, but Vermeer's new conception of what Wollheim terms the spectator *in* the picture – the implied beholder of an equivalent mature work such as *A Lady Writing a Letter* in Washington. Indeed, Vermeer faces a particular problem of maintaining the newfound intimacy and psychological involvement of his use of the interruption while retaining the distancing required by works of absorption.

Unfortunately, we lack contemporaneous accounts that would verify claims for such a shift in the conception of the beholder. Such a contention might thus be seen as mere conjecture, were this meditation on distance in Vermeer's absorptive works not reinforced by an intriguing shift in a much observed pictorial strategy that registers the artist's detachment while effectively excluding the viewer. That this shift is intentional – something developed by the artist in successive works – is evidenced by decisive changes in the use of the barriers (or *repoussoir*)¹⁷ so typical of Vermeer's entire *oeuvre*. Lawrence Gowing notes:

In only three of the twenty-six interiors that we have is the space between painter and sitter at all uninterrupted. In five of the others passage is considerably encumbered, in eight more the heavy objects interposed amount to something like a barrier and in the remaining ten they are veritable fortifications. It is hard to think that this preference tells us nothing about the painter's nature. In it the whole of his dilemma is conveyed.¹⁸

Gowing, however, fails to register a vital adjustment in the use of these barriers. We have already noted the 'fortification' presented by *The Procuress*, which despite (or, perhaps, because of) its evident theatricality seeks to delimit our participation. There is a decisive shift from the insistently 'staged' frontality of barriers used in early works of absorption, such as *A Girl Asleep* (c. 1657), in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, where the presence held back is still external, to the integration of furniture and objects as barriers in works such as *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (c. 1664), in the Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Berlin-Dahlem (fig. 6), in a way that now feels entirely natural relative to a point of view internal to the scene. Strategies for excluding a beholder in scenes of absorption thus register an equivalent shift to that of the implication of an internal beholder, in that devices of exclusion are now conceived as oriented towards a point of view *internal* to the scene. In other words, the painting is likewise structured towards the depicted scene's internal point of view, but in order to suggest an absence of any beholder situated here.

¹⁷ An object or figure placed in the foreground to increase the sense of depth.

¹⁸ Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (London: Giles de la Mare, 1997), 34.



Figure 6: Johannes Vermeer, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, c. 1664. 55 x 45 cm.
Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin-Dahlem

While Gowing is no doubt right to suggest such barriers reflect something of Vermeer's nature (and his own relation to his sitters), the shift in their deployment arguably suggests that the beholder so persistently excluded in such absorptive works is not Michael Fried's antitheatrical notion of the spectator standing *before* the painting.¹⁹ Rather, Vermeer constructs barriers that seek to exclude such a presence from disturbing the self-contained scene, a presence now internal to the scene. We have a complex experience of intimacy yet absence – an experience that trickles back to the perceptual experience of the beholder *of* the painting. Revealingly, these barriers are diminished in those works where we are invited to reciprocate in the guise of a spectator in the picture. Strategies for inclusion and exclusion of such a presence are thus intimately tied to each other, two aspects of the same re-conceptualization of the depicted scene's point of view.

II

In Chapter III of *Painting as an Art*, Richard Wollheim makes a claim for a distinctive imaginative engagement with paintings, applicable only to certain works. This engagement is ancillary to *seeing-in*, offering a form of access distinct from

¹⁹ See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

what we perceive in the picture through an imaginative identification with the 'Spectator in the Picture'.²⁰ The internal spectator is an implicit yet unpainted presence occupying an extension of the virtual scene, who is viewing the depicted scene from more or less the position from which the scene is depicted. Wollheim thus differentiates the spectator *of* the painting, the viewer standing within the gallery or room in which the work hangs, from this implicit yet non-depicted presence within the virtual scene the picture depicts, the spectator *in* the painting. Wollheim argues that only a very limited number of paintings imply such an internal spectator – most do not.²¹ We gain a distinctive access to the *content* of these rare pictures through centrally imagining (that is, imagining 'from the inside') the internal beholder (and his or her inner life), imagining 'seeing' the scene – as it were – through her eyes, and from the specific viewpoint (indeed, point of view in a wider sense) the painting presents.²² In so doing, we adopt the requisite psychological repertoire of this internal spectator, taking on a prescribed repertoire of beliefs, desires, attitudes, and responses. 'The net result will be that the external spectator will find himself in a residual state analogous to that of the internal spectator, and this state will in turn influence what he sees in the picture when he reverts from imagination to perception.'²³

Wollheim has in mind certain works by artists such as Edouard Manet, Caspar David Friedrich, and Frans Hals. With Manet, Wollheim claims that the paintings present us with figures

who, at the moment at which we see them, are turned in upon themselves by some powerful troubling thought: they are figures who are temporarily preoccupied, figures who have retained and cherish, who cosset, a secret, to which their thoughts have now reverted. A moment later and the mood may dissipate, but, until it does, they are absent from the world.²⁴

Wollheim thus contends that Manet places the implicit spectator in relation to the single-figure works in a situation that replicates the male figure's relation with the woman in the painting *In the Winter Garden* (1879), housed in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin. Indeed, the internal spectator is seen as a solution to the problem of manifesting psychological content and physical presence, apparent in the group pictures, in the single-figure pictures.

²⁰ Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, chap. 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²² *Ibid.*, 129, 104.

²³ Richard Wollheim, 'On Pictorial Representation', in *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting: Art as Representation and Expression*, ed. Rob van Gerwen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 25.

²⁴ Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 141.

Wollheim's position on the internal spectator has been contested in relation to Manet, most notably by Fried.²⁵ Other critics have attempted to account for an imaginative engagement using more minimal means (to which I will return). Despite these criticisms, Wollheim's general argument remains persuasive. Certainly, the kind of interruption implicit to *Girl Interrupted at Her Music* might readily be accommodated within Wollheim's theory of the spectator in the picture. In many ways it offers a more straightforward example than those Wollheim uses. There is, however, a problem that needs addressing here. Wollheim's restrictive thesis on the role of imagination in pictorial seeing would seem to contradict what I claim to be the fundamental interrelatedness of the strategies of inclusion or exclusion employed by Vermeer. Alternate works would thus engage or refuse a role for the imagination, in works seeking to suggest or deny the possibility of an unseen presence within the scene. Vermeer's intimately connected mature works would thus, implausibly given the similarities of their structuring mechanisms, employ distinct phenomenal engagements in constructing their unprecedented spatial and psychological intimacy: one involving an imaginative identification and the other, according to Wollheim, ruled out from such an imaginative engagement (or at least with nothing to gain).

Part of the problem is that Wollheim provides little detail as to the phenomenal nature of this 'distinctive' imaginative engagement. Wollheim clearly does not believe the kind of imagining from the inside to be merely a case of make-believe, a belief-like or propositional form of imagining.²⁶ While Wollheim allocates a role for mental imagery as the 'vehicle' of this distinctive imaginative engagement with painting, he unfortunately does not expand upon how such mental imagery stands in relation to seeing-in. Moreover, he treats visualization with a certain suspicion when he argues that 'mental imagery, taken in isolation, absconded from the thoughts and intentions that motivate it, is no sure guide to the mental processes of which it is the vehicle.'²⁷ This suspicion stems from a concern as to how such visualizing might be constrained by the picture in front of us. What is

²⁵ See Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism; or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 344–45, 512n30; Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 364–65n34, 369n71. Fried states that Wollheim's 'tendency to attribute definite if unspecifiable psychological states to the personages in Manet's pictures seems to me largely mistaken, and that in general I believe his attempt to distinguish between external and internal spectators of paintings cannot be sustained'. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 512–13n30. In the same endnote, Fried claims that Wollheim went on to rethink the issue, and quotes from an unpublished paper ('Who's Looking at the Painting') where Wollheim concedes that 'Fried's conceptualization makes do with one less spectator'.

²⁶ See Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²⁷ Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 103.

to stop our imagining simply drifting off from the content of the picture? As Wollheim notes elsewhere, 'seeing-in requires that we continue to fix our eyes on the marked surface, whereas imagination does not. With imagination we can shut our eyes, and it can continue unhindered.'²⁸ It is these concerns that I address in the following sections, where I attempt to clarify the phenomenal engagement not only of the spectator in the picture, but works that exclude such an internal presence.

III

What might the Dependency Thesis contribute to this discussion? My intention here is not to interrogate the theory as such, nor to intervene in the dispute between disjunctivist and intentional approaches to perceptual experiences.²⁹ Given limited space, neither do I attempt to defend the thesis against the so-called Similar Contents View.³⁰ Rather, my sole concern is to see whether the thesis, as originally presented by M. G. F. Martin, can add plausibility to the two types of imaginative engagement described above in relation to Vermeer. The Dependency Thesis might readily be thought of as offering support for the claim that the imagining of the spectator in the picture is an 'imagined seeing' where the point of view is necessarily part of the imagined scene, in that it can provide the necessary subjective component of 'visualizing' the painted scene. However, it might initially be seen to threaten my paired claim that we might imaginatively identify with a point of view which is 'experienced' as unoccupied.

Before addressing the issue of the implied beholder, let me first briefly summarize the Dependency Thesis as formulated by Martin. This is a claim that 'to imagine sensorily a ϕ is to imagine experiencing a ϕ '.³¹ As such, 'one kind of phenomenally conscious state', the imagining in question, takes 'as its object another type of conscious state of mind, a sensory experience'.³² The thesis seeks to explain certain key features of imaginative experience, such as its perspectival nature and the claim that it does not involve the presentation of sensory qualities.

²⁸ Richard Wollheim, 'A Reply to the Contributors', in Gerwen, *Richard Wollheim*, 249.

²⁹ See Fabian Dorsch, 'Transparency and Imagining Seeing', *Philosophical Explorations* 13 (2010): 173–200; Noordhof, 'Imagining Objects'; Tyler Burge, 'Disjunctivism and Perceptual Psychology', *Philosophical Topics* 33 (2005): 1–78.

³⁰ See Noordhof, 'Imagining Objects'; Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Bence Nanay, 'Perceptual Content and the Content of Mental Imagery', *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming).

³¹ Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 404. Martin acknowledges that his thesis has much in common with Peacocke's 'Experiential Hypothesis': 'to imagine being ϕ in [cases of sensory imagination] is always at least to imagine from the inside an experience as of being ϕ '. Christopher Peacocke, 'Imagination, Experience and Possibility', in *Essays on Berkeley*, ed. John Foster and Howard Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 22.

³² Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 404.

Within the remit of visualizing, the Dependency Thesis commits us to the notion that we visualize objects by imagining visually experiencing them, representing the situation of the instantiation of the subjective perspective.³³ Visualization is thus derivative, dependent upon perception rather than sharing a common structure. This is not to deny that we imagine the scene when we imagine a visual experience of the scene; rather, the former (comprising the external things imagined) is given to us by the latter (an imagined seeing).

As Martin concedes, the thesis is open to the objection that the correspondence between visualizing and imagining the visually experiencing of something simply follows ‘from the fact that we can imagine the same things as we can perceive, and not that we imagine things sensorily by imagining perceiving them’.³⁴ This would potentially explain the correspondence on the basis of a community of shared properties (that is similar contents), though these might not necessarily be experienced to the same degree. What is needed, therefore, is a stronger defence such ‘that it is internal to the nature of imagery that there is an imagined sensory experience whenever one sensorily imagines an object’.³⁵ In order to construct this defence, Martin uses the example of a bodily sensation. The existence of an itch is, he claims, dependent upon actually feeling an itch. There simply is no itch otherwise. But what about the case of imagining an itch from the inside, that is from a subjective standpoint? Here, Martin states:

it does not seem right to say that in this case one is still feeling an actual itch, albeit one that is less intense in character than itches not brought about through imagining. Nor does it seem right to suppose that in imagining an itch one is aware of anything other than the quality of itchiness itself.³⁶

Rather, the Dependency Thesis maintains that imagining an itch is a representing of the occurrence of itchiness – a representing of the experience of having an itch, where the itch is before the mind, but without an actual itch being present. This is indicative of conscious episodes that are experiential but do ‘not involve the instantiation of the experiential characteristics’; rather, they constitute the ‘imaginings of experience’.³⁷

The thesis, however, faces a potential problem when we shift from the subjective instantiation of the quality of itchiness to representing the experience of objects outside the subject. Indeed, even critics of Dependency, such as Paul Noordhof,

³³ Martin’s remit is therefore limited to episodes of visualizing involving certain subjective properties.

³⁴ Martin, ‘Transparency of Experience’, 404.

³⁵ Ibid. We should note that this limits the remit of the Dependency Thesis.

³⁶ Ibid., 406.

³⁷ Ibid., 407.

would concede the plausibility of the theory in relation to imagined bodily sensations.³⁸ Martin's contention is that visualizing likewise involves the representation of a subjective (visual) experience rather than its actualization, in this case arguing: 'The aspects of visualizing in question are the perspectival elements of visualizing and visual experience.'³⁹ He goes on to claim that these perspectival elements are only explicable if we take visualizing to be an imagining seeing. In so doing, Martin directly confronts Bernard Williams's assertion, in his chapter 'Imagination and the Self' in *Problems of the Self*, that although visualizing may be presented from a perceptual point of view 'there can be no reason at all for insisting that that point of view is one *within* the world of what is visualised'.⁴⁰ Williams, who denies that visualizing is a case of imagining seeing, makes his case by drawing upon an analogy to the stage, where the audience – external to the narrative events – are 'spectators of a world they are not in'.⁴¹ While they might see a set constructed from canvas and paint as a palace, and see this from the vantage of a particular theatre seat, unlike the characters on stage they are not at any specifiable distance from this represented location. And while the cinema, with its shifting viewpoint, offers a more complex consideration of this position (such as when we are presented with the point of view of a character), for Williams what again is certain is that 'we are not *there*'.⁴² Drawing upon these analogies, he thus claims that we can 'even visualise the unseen'.⁴³

Martin, like Christopher Peacocke before him, points out that Williams's analogies are in fact flawed, in that theatre and film – unlike visualizations – are able to employ distancing devices particular to each medium (conventions such as the fourth wall of the proscenium arch or particular film-editing techniques).⁴⁴ Martin and Peacocke acknowledge that sensory imagination *can* be part of a wider cognitive project, with both imagistic and non-imagistic aspects.⁴⁵ 'The same imagery can be put to different imaginative purposes'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, that our perspective on a visualized scene changes its fundamental content

³⁸ Noordhof, 'Imagining Objects', 446.

³⁹ Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 407.

⁴⁰ Bernard Williams, 'Imagination and the Self', in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 37.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 408; Peacocke, 'Imagination, Experience and Possibility'.

⁴⁵ Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 403; Christopher Peacocke, *Being Known* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 212.

⁴⁶ Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 403. See also Peacocke, 'Imagination, Experience and Possibility', 19.

follows from the fact that visualization *inherits* the orientational aspects of visual experience. In a key move that reverses Williams's position, Martin states:

Now Williams assumes that if the point of view does not have to be imagined within the scene, then it is also true that a seeing does not have to be imagined within the scene. I suggest the converse is true as well: if one does have to imagine a point of view within the scene, then one thereby must be imagining an experience within the scene, as Peacocke also claims. The reason for this turns on the way in which perspectival aspects of visualising can fix elements of what is visualised. It is here that we encounter the close parallel with the case of itchiness and the way in which for something to be imagined without being actualised it must be an aspect of what is represented by the state.⁴⁷

Martin takes from John Campbell the notion that in perception the egocentric frame of reference employs monadic spatial relations ('to the right', 'to the left', 'above', 'below'), as opposed to self-relational notions ('to my left', 'below me' and so forth).⁴⁸ The distinction, for Campbell, follows on from the fact that 'visual proprioception' is possible for creatures lacking self-consciousness or first-person thoughts.⁴⁹ The term monadic thus refers to 'primitive' egocentric terms of reference, acknowledging (as Campbell argues elsewhere) the nonconceptual content of early vision. This facilitates our ability, by means of the neurologically well-accepted notion of focal attention, to track or index things in space *prior* to conceptualization. Martin, after Campbell, argues: 'this phenomenal aspect of the visual experience – something's being leftish as opposed to being rightish – is sufficient in the case of visual experience itself for the thing then to be presented as in a determinate region of one's environment.'⁵⁰

How are such monadic spatial relations given in visualization? Clearly they are, since it is uncontroversial to state that visualizing is likewise perspectival. One might 'project' onto the perceived world, the actual environment one occupies (as an architect might do), such that the visualization directly inherits the indexing capacity of the visual (and/or proprioceptive) system.⁵¹ But this is not the only or even the most straightforward form of visualizing; frequently one imagines situations radically disconnected, spatially and temporally, from our actual location and bodily situation. Given that the perspectival aspect of what we visualize is here relative to the *imagined* rather than the *actual* situation, what is needed to instantiate the necessary subjective aspects of monadic spatial relations – such as leftishness – is to imagine an object being perceptually

⁴⁷ Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 409.

⁴⁸ John Campbell, *Past, Space, and Self* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 119.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 410.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Zenon Pylyshyn, *Things and Places: How the Mind Connects with the World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 208.

presented to the left of the point of view of such an imagined situation: 'In this way, an experience-relative aspect of a visualized scene, how it and its elements are oriented, is imagined through imagining an experience with the appropriate property, and hence in such cases of imagining the Dependency Thesis holds.'⁵²

This focus on the subjective properties of imaginings involving a certain kind of perspectivalness has a direct bearing on the imagining of the spectator in the picture. Indeed, I believe a sensorily imagining, constituting an imagining seeing, is necessary to imagine the pictorial contents of a picture 'from the inside'. A sensorial imagining furnishes the requisite experience-relative aspect of the scene: an experiential imagining where the imaginative point of view is aligned with the work's implicit depiction point, thus overcoming our extraneousness to the world of the painting. As noted earlier, from this internal point of view the picture surface has no status. Rather, we imagine experiencing objects and figures located within a vividly imagined three-dimensional space that encompasses the embodied viewpoint.⁵³ While this might incorporate extra-visual aspects of propositional or suppositional imagining (such as the adopting of a more or less replete psychological repertoire), it is the experiential core which facilitates suppositional attitudes gained through our reciprocity with the imagined scene.

IV

I have argued for the essential interdependence of Vermeer's strategies of inclusion or exclusion of an implied beholder. In the previous section, I claimed that the Dependency Thesis offers plausibility to the notion of an imaginative identification with the implied beholder as, literally, an imagining seeing. However, an imaginative identification with an unoccupied point of view would initially seem to contradict Martin's insistence that the point of view has to be imagined subjectively as part of the scene, something we have noted that Williams (who argues that we can visualize the unseen) does not require.⁵⁴

Let me be clear about what is needed here in relation to Vermeer's exclusions. It is not merely a case of indifference to the occupation of the scene's viewpoint; it is an active denial. The vast majority of figurative paintings have no implied spectator and have only limited gains in imagining the scene from their implicit

⁵² Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 410.

⁵³ Here, my position echoes that of Malcolm Budd, who maintains that it is the 'imaginative projection of the third dimension into the marks on the picture's surface' that provides a 'vivid' experience of pictorial depth, on the condition that the work in question supports such a projection. Malcolm Budd, 'How Pictures Look', in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 392.

⁵⁴ Williams, 'Imagination and the Self', 35.

points of view, such as an enhanced experience of depth. What is required by the relevant Vermeer works is something much stronger: an imaginative engagement where this absence is *felt* – an experienced spatial proximity with an accompanying psychological cogency at least equivalent to that afforded an identification with the internal spectator. Is this even coherent?

One is reminded here of Berkeley's famous denial of the possibility of imagining an unperceived tree. Now, we have noted that suppositional imaginings are needed to differentiate type-identical experiences: the same image might thus serve different imaginative projects.⁵⁵ Regarding Berkeley's puzzle, Dominic Lopes claims that the

Berkeleyan argument requires that visualizing an unseen tree be construed as (1) having an experience of a tree, (2) propositionally imagining that one perceives the tree, and (3) propositionally imagining that nobody perceives the tree. The incoherence of the conjunction of (2) and (3) cannot be dissolved by an appeal to the distinction between (1) and (3).⁵⁶

This same objection might be directed at my claim that with certain Vermeer works we (1) have an intimate imaginative experience of a figure absorbed in her task, (2) propositionally imagining that one perceives the woman from within the virtual world of the painting, and (3) propositionally imagining that nobody perceives the woman. But is step (2) really necessary? This seems to misjudge the degree to which in imagining a subjective perspective the experience is, firstly, *not* exhausted by its propositional content,⁵⁷ and, secondly, does not necessarily commit us to imagining a subject. As Martin states:

One objection is that the [Dependency Thesis] account is liable to collapse the distinction between simply imagining a tree and imagining oneself seeing the tree, or imagining someone seeing the tree. What the Dependency Thesis commits one to is the claim that in visualising a tree, one is imagining visually experiencing a tree. But this is not equivalent to imagining oneself visually experiencing a tree. There is a link between the perspective from which one imagines and the first person in as much as one can exploit that point of view in first person thoughts, and so judge with respect to the imagined situation, 'I am situated before a tree'. But this is not the same as visualising someone within the scene standing before the tree (or imagining oneself reflected in a puddle in front of the tree). The two kinds of imagining are clearly different, and we indicate the latter kind of imagining when we talk of imagining someone seeing the tree. Likewise in talking of imagining oneself seeing the tree, the project indicated is consistent with imagining from a distinct point of view a scene including a person identical with oneself staring at a tree.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Peacocke, 'Imagination, Experience and Possibility', 29.

⁵⁶ Dominic McIver Lopes, 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind', in *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts*, ed. Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2003), 211.

⁵⁷ See John Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

⁵⁸ Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 411. Martin here references Peacocke, 'Imagination, Experience and Possibility', 21, and J. David Velleman, 'Self to Self', *Philosophical Review* 105 (1996): 39–76.

With respect to the Vermeer works at issue, the Dependency Thesis would thus merely commit one to (1) having a visual imaginative experience from a perspective internal to the situation and (3) propositionally imagining that nobody perceives the scene of absorption presented from this point of view.

Indeed, Martin goes on to argue with respect to visualization, 'the point of view within the imagined scene is notoriously empty enough that one can in occupying that point of view imagine being someone other than one actually is'.⁵⁹ The Dependency Thesis thus potentially offers support for Wollheim's thesis against accounts which abandon the need in such imaginings 'to identify with some represented other, an internal spectator'.⁶⁰ If the Dependency Thesis is correct, there is no need to accept arguments utilizing less conceptual resources. Furthermore, Martin's position can support my claim that certain paintings exploit the emptiness of the scene's point of view to suggest an absence that is palpably experienced rather than simply a consequence of an indifference to the occupation or not of the scene's point of view. Given that the same mental image can potentially serve different imaginings, we need not imagine ourselves, or, indeed, someone else, as part of the imagined scenario. It is this very indeterminacy of the point of view that facilitates the kind of imaginative enterprise where the scene's viewpoint is experienced as unoccupied. Vermeer's extraordinary ability to depict absorptive themes, plus his novel arrangement of barriers against an internal rather than external point of view, reinforces the unprecedented intimacy yet poignant sense of absence such works afford.

Here it is important to consider Vermeer's output as a body of closely related paintings that work through the significance of the occupation, or not, of the scene's point of view.⁶¹ We might conceive of this interrelatedness as a kind of 'haunting', where the potential for such an internal presence transfers from one work to another, only to be confronted by barriers that emphatically seek to keep out such an intruder. Indeed, the means for establishing a repertoire for the kind of figure thus excluded is no different from those works implying a spectator in the picture. Though this requires a suppositional element (of the emptiness of the scene's point of view) so does the imaginative identification with the spectator

⁵⁹ Martin, 'Transparency of Experience', 411.

⁶⁰ Robert Hopkins, 'The Spectator in the Picture', in Gerwen, *Richard Wollheim*, 221–23. For Hopkins, we might propose a parallel 'default' solution where 'whoever sees the scene in the picture is to imagine herself seeing that scene face to face, and engaging with it (in whatever ways the particular renders appropriate)' (ibid.).

⁶¹ In making a case for the spectator in the picture in relation to Friedrich's work, Wollheim stresses that the works were intended as a series, with a 'transfer from the pictures that contain a *Rückenfigur* to those which do not'. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 168. I am claiming a similar transfer of repertoire with respect to Vermeer, from works implying an internal beholder to those that actively deny such a presence.

in the picture (where we take on a repertoire), and likewise such propositional imagining colours the visual experience, psychologically inflecting our experience of the painting when we revert to perception.

Indeed, in at least one work we have direct evidence of the extraordinary lengths to which Vermeer goes to suggest the absence not only of any implied beholder but also of the artist himself. I conclude with a brief consideration of Vermeer's *The Music Lesson (A Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman)* (c. 1662–65), part of the collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, London (fig. 7). Gowing's observation about Vermeer's detachment was never truer than with this work, which is also manifest in the psychologically charged gap that separates the man and woman. The distance between the couple and the scene's viewpoint is accentuated by an extreme variant of Vermeer's barriers, including the table, chair and discarded viola da gamba. This is a very strange composition. The proximity of the table corner, in particular, is startling when one imagines the scene from within its world. Edward Snow refers to the work's 'cavernous space', and of 'a charged interval not directly bridged'.⁶² And yet he intriguingly argues that the work realizes 'the sense of intimate access to the human content of the scene, not only in spite of but as a function of the remote perspective that suspends life in images'.⁶³



Figure 7: Johannes Vermeer, *The Music Lesson (A Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman)*, c. 1662–65. 73.3 × 64.5 cm. Collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, London

⁶² Edward Snow, *A Study of Vermeer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 104.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 112.

The complexity of these seemingly contrary relations is focused by the role Vermeer assigns the mirror, a device that draws us into the scene's reciprocity, despite our very real sense of exclusion. Thus Snow writes that the mirror structures a different relationship to the 'pathos of abject or unrequited love,' such that in the reflection 'the woman becomes a *viewer*, gazing unseen across one threshold toward a man who gazes similarly across another threshold toward her real presence.'⁶⁴ The reflection of the woman is subtly manipulated by Vermeer to emphasize an implied twist already apparent in her head and neck: the mirrored woman turns noticeably towards the man. In a key observation, Snow goes on to suggest that the mirror 'reads more convincingly as a projection of her inner, otherwise unexpressed aspect – of what she might be thinking, of how she would *like* to gaze – than as a straightforward reflection of her look.'⁶⁵ And it is the extreme angling of the mirror away from the wall, made apparent by Philip Steadman's meticulous reconstructions of the painting, which allows Vermeer to reveal the woman's look.⁶⁶ And yet it is also the angled mirror that doubles up to reveal configurational signs of Vermeer's activities as a painter – it acknowledges the scene's viewpoint and the painting's configured reality (an easel, an artist's box) while negating any suggestion of an actual presence (Vermeer's, or that of an internal viewer). This 'palpable' absence is compensated by a privileged access to the woman's inner world, affording an unprecedented psychological reciprocity. This imaginative identification with the woman, provided by the mirror, is thus a surrogate for the kind of imaginative identification we are offered by other Vermeers as a spectator *in* the painting. In this single work, which goes out of its way to acknowledge its constructed basis, Vermeer reveals his interrelated strategies of identification and exclusion, as we alternate between the two.

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⁶⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁶ Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera: Uncovering the Truth behind the Masterpieces*, chap. 5.

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