

## the rembrant search party / jean-marie clarke

## Practice\_4

## Entering the Vortex / questions of scale

Well, Picasso told me that, for example, when he accepted to sign a series of drawings for Kahnweiler, which seemed quite fastidious to me, 100 or 150, 250 drawings: ‘No, no, my signature is a drawing, and so I never sign twice in the same way. And so it’s not boring at all.’

Geneviève Laporte in an interview with Pierre Lhoste (1973)

THE IMAGE IS NOT an idea. It is  
a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce,  
call a VORTEX,  
from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are  
constantly  
rushing.

Ezra Pound, *Vorticism* (1914)

Serendipity is the lot of the researcher. Today, in my emails, I found the above quotation from Ezra Pound in a call for papers for a conference on ‘The Image as Vortex’ at Oxford. The image of the vortex fired my imagination: it is a spiralling thing that pulses between the small and the large, inward and outward. This brings the idea of scale to mind.

In the same essay on Vorticism, Pound wrote in a footnote: ‘An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.’

Again there is the idea of scale. Experiences and thoughts made over a long period of time can be compressed – with a lesser expenditure of time – into an image, or a text, like this one, which can be read in a short time. A mere set of lines, like the two that form a cross, can contain the programme of a religion. These thoughts are useful in approaching the visual implications of my research on the Rembrandt signatures.

As for the vortex, it is guaranteed to happen when it comes to issues that pit the word and the image, the verbal and the visual, against each other. I am trying to bridge this opposition by tuning down to the scale of individual letters, the simplest meaningful forms. The perception of a letter of the alphabet – like the reading of a text – and the perception of a picture both obviously involve vision. This points to common, or shared, neurological functions.



I will begin by returning to the *Portrait of the Artist in Oriental Costume* (see illustration next page) that I mentioned at the close of the last chapter, a work dated 1631. Rembrandt was still in Leiden, but busy with commissions for the court of Prince Frederik Hendrik at The Hague and already making connections in Amsterdam, where he settled definitively the following year. Thus the impression that one gets of him exotically flaunting himself in this self-portrait is entirely correct. The pomp verging on the ridiculous is more apparent in the copy painted by Isaac de Jouderville (left), which is believed to record the initial version by his master. The latter was inspired in adding a poodle to cover his legs. Yet the poodle has a hangdog expression that, to the modern eye, introduces an involuntary pinch of humour into the picture.

Speaking of humour, I cannot resist showing this graphologically tendentious version of the 'Portrait of the Artist as Himself'. The letter superimposed on the figure is the first one in the word 'Ick' as penned by Rembrandt on his first apprentice slip in May 1631 (see chapter 1).



1631 (+ 'Ick')



1633 (+ 'R')

The impression of a mood that is difficult to decode and take seriously today can be seen in an etched self-portrait from 1633 (B 17; 12 × 11 cm), shown here reversed, as Rembrandt would have engraved it, and with an 'R' from 1631 superimposed on it. The ductus, the attitude is similar, especially when one considers that the dog and the artist both have curly hair (see the illustration on the next page). It may be that this attitude was to be understood as the melancholy of the creative genius. Things get funny in another way, however, when I project a Rembrandtesque 'R' onto it: the jump in scale from the tiny letter reveals a similar ductus, like a visual formula.

But first I want to return to the self-portrait with poodle and draw your attention to a detail tucked behind the figure, along the left margin: a table covered with a cloth on which stand some shiny metal objects. This juxtaposition of a standing figure and a table in an otherwise empty room reminds me of a painting that is often considered as a self-portrait because it shows an artist in his studio. It is dated about 1628 (and shown here in its uncut state). The interesting thing to note is that

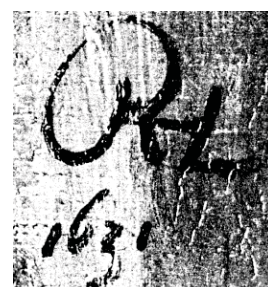
both pictures feature two figures paired with two accessory motifs: an easel in the one and a poodle in the other. From the one to the other, the relation in size between each 'couple' is inverted: the figure in the 1628 self-portrait is dwarfed by the easel, whereas the figure in the 1631 self-portrait looms above the poodle. This shift in scale could be considered as an expression of enhanced self-esteem, a change in self-image. Nevertheless, there is a repetition, a recycling of patterns. This is even more apparent when one notices that there is an analogy of shape between the easel and the dog, both of which are roughly triangular and have a pair of legs. In my imagination, I have no difficulty seeing a morphed image of the 'RHL' monogram in these two motifs.



1631

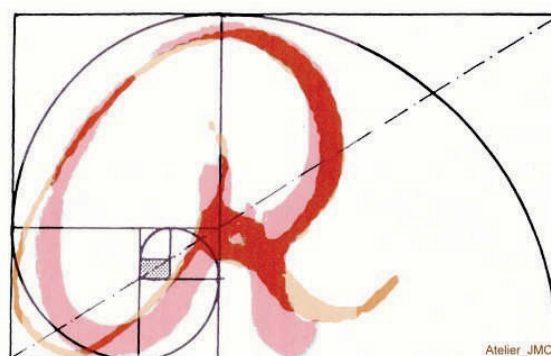


c.1628



1631

Visually speaking, I see the reproduction of a pattern across scale, from the small to the large. It may seem far-fetched when it comes to comparing a signature – or an initial – and a motif or an entire composition, but the logic being applied here is a visual one: it does not need to be reasoned, it just has to work. Let's take the example of the logarithmic spiral expressed by the golden ratio  $\phi$  (the Greek letter 'phi', for Phidias), also known as the Golden Mean. It seems to provide a neat fit when superimposed on Rembrandt's classic 'R' (here, two versions from 1631):



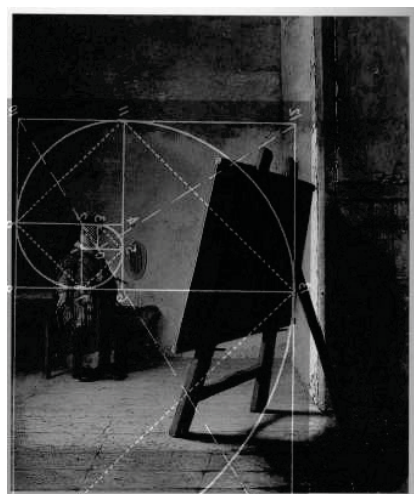
Now look what happens when I project this logarithmic spiral onto some early compositions:



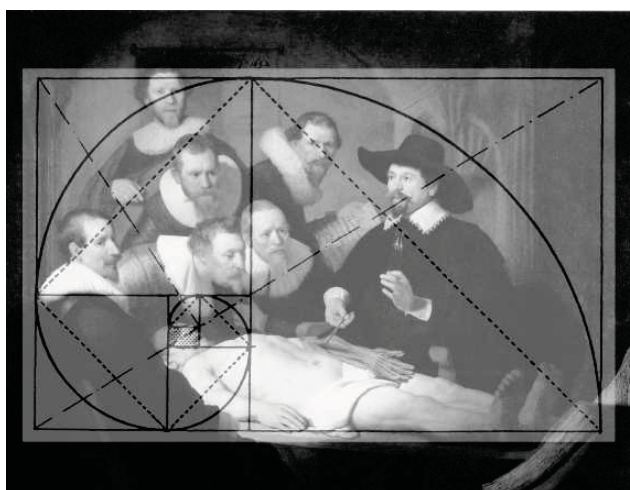
1627



1627-28



1628



1632

I am not suggesting that Rembrandt was in the habit of using the Golden Mean to compose his paintings. Instead, I am using the logarithmic spiral as an analogy – an image – for a pattern of relationships that has a visual correlative: that is, it structures attention, connecting the small – the details – and the large – the overall composition/gestalt – in a continuous flow of perception. In the same way, an initial can stand for the whole individual. It is easier to see this than it is to describe.

Now a step back for an aside.

In coming to this chapter, I was aware that I would have to treat in writing for the first time some pictorial experiments that involved both Rembrandt and my own imagination. The call for papers from Oxford ('Image as Vortex') came as a providential hint in the direction of the right problem to address. It has everything to do with the complex issue of trying to define images with words. I quote from the Oxford call for papers: 'It is hard to find a definition of what an image *is*. Most of those "definitions" content themselves with saying what an image *is not*.'<sup>1</sup> This seems quixotic to me, an exercise in confusion, a wrestling with one's own shadow. Words are out of their water; discursive reason does not work in the same way. Try figuring out a labyrinth while you are still in it: the only reasonable thing to do is to get out. We know that Daedalus and Icarus accomplished this by radically switching dimensions and flying out of the labyrinth.

To return to my demonstration with the Golden Mean and images by Rembrandt: My visual experiments are not meant to illustrate any principles or laws, but to show how images – even the simplest signs – lend themselves to and derive from visual play. As I have already said: the main thing is that the resulting image works. The rules of the game, if any, are purely visual. They constitute a way of thinking that is necessarily a way of seeing – but that does not mean that it is always intentional, deliberate, or conscious. In fact, I suspect that images may be more apt than

texts to put us into threshold ‘trance’ states that are conducive to daydreaming – even if texts also have a hypnotic or soporific power. The question is, Having presented my case for Rembrandt’s attention to letters and letters as elementary particles of meaning – as images – how plausible are my own visual games in connection with Rembrandt? What do my experiments with the particle accelerator of my mind tell us about Rembrandt – and about images?



Rembrandt on the brain

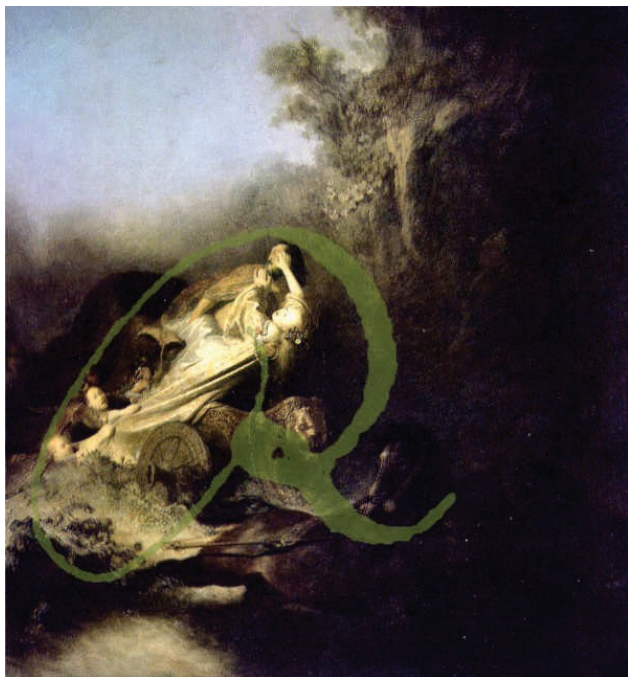


I am not going to pull the trick of seeing the brain represent itself in Rembrandt’s ‘R’, as in Dr. Frank L. Meshberger’s sighting of Michelangelo’s depiction of *The Creation* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling<sup>2</sup> – even if there is still some work to be done by neuroscientists on the brain’s ability to switch from the verbal to the visual mode when presented with simple signs/symbols such as letters of the alphabet. Nor am I going to try the easier and more obvious trick with the palette (a beret would do as well).



*La Pisseuse* + ‘R’

Instead I will start with an example at the limits of propriety: a scatological etching very primly signed ‘RHL’ and dated 1631, *La Pisseuse* (B 191) – which has a male pendant, naturally standing (B 190). The small scale of the etching medium (8 × 6.5 cm) has something private, intimate, and secretive about it, as does the subject. To engrave plates, artists hunch over their work and collectors keep their prints stashed in portfolios. This etching shows how confident Rembrandt was of his position as an artist in 1631. Talk about scale: in that year, he spanned in his subject matter the entire social spectrum from high society to lowlife. Now I will continue in this vein without making any further comments (illustrations not to scale).



c.1632. *The Abduction of Proserpine*



1632. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*



1632. *Tobit and Anna ('Philosophe en méditation')*

Having done that, I would now like to let the sceptics have a word. I start with this famous quotation from Eric Gill, all-round arts and craftsman and type designer (twentieth century): 'Letters are things, not pictures of things.'<sup>3</sup>

Much closer to us in time is this dialogue by Douglas Hofstadter, from his latest doorstep, *I Am a Strange Loop*, between SL #641 (a believer in the ideas of *I Am a Strange Loop*) and SL #642 (a doubter of the ideas of *I Am a Strange Loop*):

SL #642: I agree that letters have no power of meaning. But words, yes! They are atoms of meaning out of which larger structures of meaning are built. You can't get big meanings from atoms that are meaningless.

SL #641: Oh really? I thought you just conceded that exactly this happens in the case of words and letters.<sup>4</sup>

Other men of letters have expressed the exact opposite view. Here are a few examples that exhibit a disturbing propensity for martial imagery:

I have been passing my time very pleasurably here. But chiefly in lounging on a sofa (a la the poet Grey) & reading Shakspeare. It is an edition in glorious great type, every letter whereof is a soldier, & the top of every 't' like a musket barrel.

Herman Melville, letter to Evert A. Duyckinck, February 1849<sup>5</sup>

He concluded from this that, if [Kaiser] Wilhelm liked this letter K so much, it was because it displayed the posture of a Prussian soldier doing the goosestep.

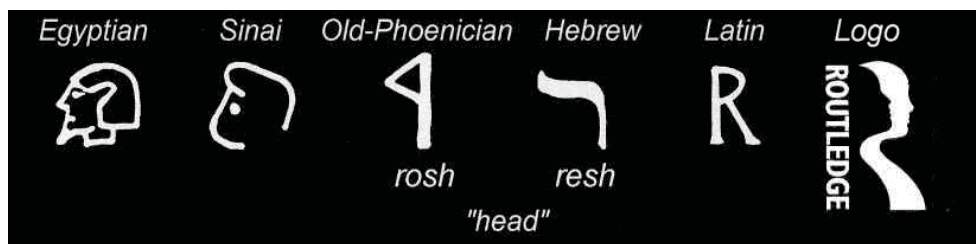
Bruno de Perthuis<sup>6</sup>



ABC, New York and London, Frederick Warne & Co., Chromolithograph, ca 1880

This view is borne out by the history of writing, which began thousands of years ago with *pictures of things*. Pictograms can be found at the root of most major writing systems in the West and in the East.<sup>7</sup> Not only that, but even phonetic alphabets have a pictorial component since they render speech *visible*.

As for the genesis of the letter (and phoneme) 'R' it began with the image of a head.



The reciprocal play between letters and images is as old as writing.<sup>8</sup> Many figure alphabets were designed from the late Middle Ages until today, although most were never used to make words or texts. Advertising and graphic designers thrive upon them. Google regularly uses original pictorial alphabets on its browser homepage to celebrate the birthdays of famous people.



1634. Giovanni Battista Braccelli

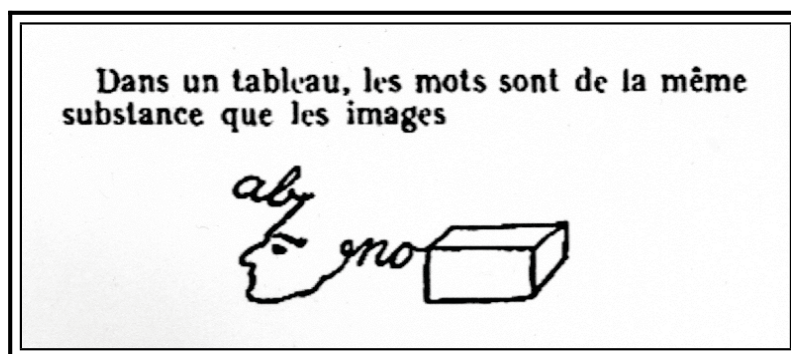
Here, an example closer to our own time:



2002. 'Terror der Ökonomie'



In the pictorial article titled ‘Les mots et les images’ (1929), that latter-day philosopher of images, René Magritte, wrote: ‘In a picture, the words are of the same substance as the images’.<sup>9</sup> that is, paint. In any given medium, in the brain, in a computer, words and images are going to be of the same substance (even if enhanced with sound, speech, music) and of the same essence: visual.



1929. Magritte

The word-image, verbal–visual opposition, is a standard intellectual topos, as are our obsession and games with meaning. Ultimately, on the level of elementary particles, the brain and the universe are of the same substance, subject to the same forces. The meaning, if any, that we give to this condition is up to us.



Many years later (2012), I was taking digital photographs of a log burning in my wood stove, when this happened! What are the odds of a recognisable letter of the alphabet appearing in a dozen photos taken at random? If I had used a slower or faster shutter speed, the pattern of the flames would have turned out differently. We are on the scale of fractions of a second. My stove – extended by my camera and my mind – had suddenly become an accelerator of elementary particles of meaning.

This is a demonstration of how observers and their instruments can affect, or even create, the reality that is being observed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Image as Vortex: An Interdisciplinary Conference on the Question of What an Image Is by Examining What It Does, University of Oxford, 18 June 2016, call for papers

<<http://www.conferenceimageasvortex.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 25 July 2016].

<sup>2</sup> Frank Lynn Meshberger, 'An Interpretation of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* Based on Neuroanatomy', *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*, 264.14 (1990), 1837–41

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1001/jama.1990.03450140059034>> [accessed 28 August 2016].

<sup>3</sup> Eric Gill, *Autobiography* (London: Cape, 1941; repr. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1968), p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), p. 287.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. by Lynn Horth, The Writings of Herman Melville (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press; Chicago: The Newberry Library, 1993), p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> Bruno de Perthuis, 'Du Capitaine à la Grande Guerre des K', in *Images de l'étranger: Actes du colloque de Université de Limoges 28–29 mars 2003* (Limoges: Pulim, 2006), pp. 143–159. Bruno de Perthuis was a collector of popular imagery, in particular postcards.

<sup>7</sup> See Károly Földes-Papp, *Vom Felsbild zum Alphabet. Die Geschichte der Schrift von ihren frühesten Vorstufen bis zur modernen lateinischen Schreibrift*, Stuttgart, 1966, chap. 8. 'Alle natürlich entstandenen Schriftsysteme, die nicht aus einer bereits bestehenden Schrift hervorgegangen sind und die die Entwicklungsstufe der Verlautlichung (Phonetisierung) erreicht haben, weisen mehr oder weniger eindeutige Spuren einer bildschriftlichen Vorstufe auf' (ibid., p. 56, my translation; All writing systems created naturally that did not derive from an already existing script and that have reached the level of phonetisation, display more or less clear traces of a preliminary phase of pictorial writing).

<sup>8</sup> It was not until the twentieth century that René Magritte plumbed the depths of the ambiguities inherent in representational images and the pictorial representation of words: René Magritte, 'Les mots et les images', in *La Révolution surréaliste*, 12 (1929), pp. 32–33.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 32, my translation.