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A SHORT CONTROVERSY STUDY ABOUT REMBRANDT'S PAINTING

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Introduction

This paper is a controversy study about the painting *Tronie*[1] *with Rembrandt's features.* This particular painting used to be attributed to Rembrandt, but is currently on exhibition in The Mauritshuis museum in The Hague as 'a copy made by an apprentice of Rembrandt'. It is interesting to see how statements about what is true can change once in a while. It seems to be common to scientific practice that every couple of years a researcher announces that previous knowledge should be discarded, because new knowledge has arrived. That is also a practice common to Rembrandt research.

It takes, undoubtedly, far less time to learn how to describe the controversy, than to become an expert on Rembrandt. I therefore feel obliged to make clear that I am nowhere near an expert on Rembrandt; I have been trained as a sociologist of science and technology. This background allows me to investigate the use of science in art-research, because it provides new insights in expert disagreement and the establishment of Rembrandt's style. Along with this controversy-study, some of the epistemological issues associated with the sociological study of science will be clarified.

There is a special reason to investigate contesting claims in either art-history or other disciplines: it provides an interesting perspective on science and experts in controversies. This view amounts to the following: 1) experts do not always agree; 2) when experts disagree, more research will not necessarily resolve the disagreement even though intuition might tell us experts disagree because we just 'do not know enough'; 3) current 'true knowledge' has usually been contested at one point in history; and 4) the contesting argument is not necessarily incorrect, even though we currently believe the opposite.

In this article I would like to argue that scientific knowledge is interpreted and mobilized for rhetorical purposes by experts, just as brushstrokes and background colors are. It therefore does not have a special evidential status over other informed arguments. Such a notion of scientific knowledge can be of help in understanding why disagreement between experts can exist, and also perhaps shed a light on the question of how we should deal with this disagreement. My suggestion is that there should be more transparency about the once contested status of a claim, especially if there is hardly a way to gain absolute certainty about who is right or wrong. Furthermore, in the discussions about the attribution or de-attribution of a painting, more is at stake than determining who painted it. In those discussions, Rembrandt's style is determined.

In the tradition of the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK) controversies are researched with a symmetrical approach towards the success or failure of the contesting claims. The 'losing' and 'winning' claims are considered as equal concerning the truth of theory. This approach has had different spin-offs, of which Actor Network Theory can be considered one of the more radical ones.[2] It implies a sort of 'philosophical light-reading' if the epistemological consequences of this radical constructivism are neglected. However, as this case study will show, a symmetrical approach can be informative, even if the ontological status of scientific facts is not debated. The main radical constructivist point is formulated by Bruno Latour:

'Since the settlement of a controversy is the cause of Nature's representation not the consequence, we can never use the outcome – Nature – to explain how and why a controversy has been settled' (Latour 1987: 99).

In terms of the case study this comes down to the following: The Mauritshuis museum presents the *Tronie with Rembrandt's features* as the work of an apprentice of Rembrandt because it *became* the work of an apprentice, since the controversy about it settled in favor of that hypothesis. Two sociological explanations for this settlement will be discussed later on. But first the philosophical burden of using social explanations in the investigation of scientific debates needs to be discussed.

Positivism in science studies

When studying science, the question arises whether it is legitimate to research a controversy with sociology. The reason to use sociology is associated with the four above mentioned points on expert knowledge. When three experts all hold rational positions, as is the case in the controversy about Rembrandt's painting, rationality itself cannot be an explanatory factor to favor one position over another. So, some forty years ago the idea arose to study the social aspects of knowledge formation. Doing so has both epistemological reasons and consequences.

Two discernable positions in this debate are extensively discussed by John Zammito in his critical *A nice derangement of epistemes* (2004). The first position, developed by Merton, is a positivistic view on the sociology of science. The positivistic element of his stance is that the investigation of scientific *practice* does not have any consequences for the analysis of the scientific *outcome*. Sociology is very capable of researching the practice of the sciences but:

'No account of the process whereby a scientific idea came to be formulated could ever govern its validity. Validity and justification were either matters of approximation to the real ("truth"), which only the natural scientists themselves could judge, or they were formalities best appraised by the elaborate logical apparatus of the philosophers of science' (Zammito 2004: 129).

The second position introduces the turn to post-positivism in science studies such as we are familiar with today and which was inspired (unwillingly[3]) by Thomas Kuhn. This position paved the way for radical constructivism. Unlike Merton, who stated that sociologists should focus on the context of discovery (the scientific practice), the Kuhnian approach resulted in a more daring attempt that included sociology in the context of justification (the scientific outcome). This Kuhnian approach comprises the idea that there are no rational grounds to choose between theories, as follows from Kuhn's paradigm of incommensurability. If rational arguments for theory change are impossible (because of the incommensurability as proposed by Kuhn), than validity and justification cannot be investigated by natural scientists and 'the logical apparatus of the philosophers of science'. As a result we should become impartial to both truth and the rationality of a theory. But how now to account for theory change? Sociological and psychological theories should help to understand why a certain group of scientists would embark upon investigating new theories or why theory change would occur. The immediate problem at hand now is that sociological explanation tries to fit into the glove of rational explanation. The descriptive sociology used in science studies, and of which the following case study is an example, will inevitably fall short of providing causal-analytical explanations for theory change, of 'winning' and 'losing' claims, with any predictive value.

Post-positivism seems to consider the sociological analysis of scientific practice a better approach to reality than rational scientific argument. This seems, just like Merton's position, quite positivistic. The symmetry principle ought to solve this issue by being impartial to truth. However, one could argue that it merely shifts the burden of scientific 'truth-talk' to sociological descriptions: symmetry implicitly states that validity and justification are a derivative of the context of discovery (the scientific process or 'what actually happened'), which according to the symmetry principle is a social process.

As an inter-discipline between sociology and philosophy, SSK and its grown-up little sister Science and Technology Studies, suffer from this kind of disciplinary (philosophical) critique. Is SSK bad sociology because it fails to give thorough sociologically causal explanations for theory choice? Is it bad philosophy, because it fails to take a thorough epistemological stance? Is it neither, because an interdisciplinary field can never (and doesn't have to) meet the demands of its disciplinary siblings? Is it neither because it is merely a heuristic research methodology that just shifts our gaze to the social instead of the rational? One should discuss this after having seen an example in the field: it is time to take a closer look at the controversy about the painting.

Case study: Tronie with Rembrandt's features

As mentioned before, the controversy is about the authenticity of the painting *Tronie with Rembrandt's features* exposed in the Mauritshuis in The Hague. The debate about its authenticity took place in 1999. Since then, a painting by Rembrandt in Nuremberg, Germany resembling it has gained the status of 'autograph Rembrandt', whereas the version in The Hague has lost it. The Mauritshuis' website categorizes the painting as 'workshop copy' without further information, and the audio tour in the museum informs the visitor as follows:

'[...] Is this one of Rembrandt's eighty self-portraits? Until 1998 people thought so, but then it turned out to be a copy of a self-portrait. Technical research showed that the composition had been painted almost in one go. Nothing like Rembrandt, who was used to having a romp with the paint in countless changes to come to a final' result. [my translation].[4]

The audio tour dates the de-attribution of the painting to 1998, one year before the symposium of 1999. This de-attribution resulted from a joint investigation by Mauritshuis staff and other art-historians.[5]

The controversy goes back to the nineteenth century; the painting in the Maurtishuis has switched status a couple of times in the last 150 years. It was generally considered an original Rembrandt for a long period of time due to its high quality. In 1876, Wilhelm Bode, former director of the Berlin museum said that 'the painting in The Hague is artistically of a higher level and must therefore [...] be considered a repetition [of the Nuremberg version] by the master himself' (Buijsen 2000: 157). Other connoisseurs like Von Wurzbach considered both the Nuremberg and The Mauritshuis version a copy after a lost original. Against Bode it was argued that a beautiful painting does not necessarily have to be painted by Rembrandt, and that the painting was indeed of unusual quality, but very unlike other material by Rembrandt (160). Connoisseurs like Gerson and Bredius have considered the Mauritshuis version a Rembrandt without further explanation, and the Nuremberg version was hardly mentioned as a related piece of art. However, in the beginning of the nineteen nineties, new scientific research renewed the old dispute. Claus Grimm introduced the Nuremberg painting as an original after a comparison of both versions using x-radiography and photographs of details (160).

The opinions presented below were presented at a symposium in 1999 organized by the Mauritshuis and the Netherlands Institute for Art History in connection with an exhibition of Rembrandt's self-portraits (Ekkart 2000: 153). The presentation by the speakers and organizers have been adapted to fit the demands of an article and were published side by side in *Oud Holland*, a Dutch journal on the history of art.

Before reading the interesting arguments of the experts it might be interesting to take a look at the two paintings (fig. 1 and 2). The difference in style between the paintings is easily noticeable, also to the museum visitor's eye. The Nuremberg painting is painted with rough strokes, while the Mauritshuis painting is painted in a smooth manner and has a different expression in both face and (upright) position.

The authors I will discuss are Ernst van de Wetering (who considers the Mauritshuis painting to be a copy of the Nuremberg one by an apprentice of Rembrandt), Jørgen Wadum (who shares this opinion) and Eric-Jan Sluijter (who considers both the Mauritshuis painting and the Nuremberg painting to be autograph Rembrandts). They present their opinions as following:

Ernst van de Wetering

Ernst van de Wetering is an authority in the field of Rembrandt research. He is the head of the Rembrandt Research Project which he joined as an assistant about thirty years ago. He contests the authenticity of the painting in the Mauritshuis. Even though the former head of the project, Josua Bruyn, had attributed the painting to Rembrandt, Ernst van de Wetering dismissed this opinion in the Corrigenda et Addenda[6] chapter of *A Corpus Of Rembrandt Paintings IV* (2005). The former attribution was based on the rationale that 'attribution to Rembrandt […] is fully […] justified not so much by a clear similarity to comparable works in its overall "handwriting", as by, on the one hand, resemblances in motifs and details, and, on the other, a strong impression of authenticity that is born out of examination of the paint structure' (*A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings III,* 1989). When Van De Wetering saw the painting in the Mauritshuis for himself in 1993 he concluded that it was not a Rembrandt. Investigation of the painting with infrared reflectography in 1998 led to the generally accepted view that the *Tronie with Rembrandt's features* in the Mauritshuis is a copy, because underdrawings are atypical of Rembrandt (Sluijter 2000: 188). According to Van De Wetering the painting displays the typical faults of a copyist 'for example the enlargement of the figure or the elongation of forms that took place in the process of copying' (Van De Wetering 2005: 598).

The Rembrandt Research Project's change of mind is not without consequences for other paintings previously catalogued as Rembrandt. The painting in The Hague belongs, on stylistic grounds, to a group of paintings. If one of these paintings is de-attributed, the entire group must be reinvestigated since some paintings were attributed to Rembrandt due to stylistic similarities with that group of paintings. Due to the de-attribution of *Tronie with Rembrandt's features*, other paintings that were attributed to Rembrandt due to a resemblance to the Mauritshuis painting also lose their status as 'autograph Rembrandt'. This happened to the *Study in the mirror* in the Mokichi Okada Association (MOA) museum in Japan. The *Study in the mirror* in the MOA was considered to be the prototype for a similar painting in Indianapolis in the first volume of *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*. The X-radiograph of the Indianapolis version pointed to a complex genesis which would 'normally […] indicate that the Indianapolis painting should be considered the original' (Van De Wetering 2005: 598). Those scientific findings were not considered to be of more importance than the 'qualitative appreciation of the paint surface [of the MOA painting] looked at on its own as well as in comparison with [The Hague Painting]' (598). With the de-attribution of the Mauritshuis painting the main argument for attributing the MOA painting – that it resembled the Mauritshuis painting in style – disappeared. Therefore the *Study in the mirror* in Japan also lost its status of autograph Rembrandt, and the Indianapolis version gained it.

Jørgen Wadum

Jørgen Wadum, former head conservator of the Mauritshuis, shares the viewpoint of Ernst van de Wetering and elaborates his point in a long article in *Oud Holland*. Since the 1998 joint investigation report was unavailable, the article in Oud Holland will be used as a representative of the investigation Wadum was a part of. His main argument is that 'the smooth, linear technique in the Mauritshuis work is totally unlike any other painting by Rembrandt' (Wadum 2000: 164). X-radiography and infrared reflectography revealed an underdrawing on the canvas of the *Tronie with Rembrandt features* that appears sketchy at first hand, but is executed with considerable care for the facial features (166). The painter would have followed the final underdrawing carefully in the face, 'but elsewhere the sketchy lines served only to give a rough indication of form' (168). To research whether other early Rembrandts have underdrawings as well, 'a substantial number of early Rembrandts were subjected to systematic Infrared reflectography investigation for the first time' (170). That research concluded that no underdrawings were revealed in Rembrandt's paintings. Incidentally, this is the technical research the audio tour refers to.

The genesis of a painting (of which an underdrawing is a part) can be of importance for attribution (as seen in the Indianapolis self-portrait). A more complex genesis, using a build-up of several layers to achieve certain effects, usually leads to an attribution to Rembrandt. As Jørgen Wadum argues:

'It is obvious that comparison of two seventeenth-century paintings, one by Rembrandt and one by an apprentice, would reveal few if any differences in the material employed: everyone working in [Rembrandt's] workshop would share the same materials. In one crucial respect, however, the two works would be very different: the characteristic manner in which the materials were built up in order to achieve *the desired effect*' (Wadum 2000: 171, my emphasis).

Eric-Jan Sluijter

The 'desired effect' is in important element in the argument of our third guest in this controversy. Sluijter is professor in the history of art of the early modern period of the University of Amsterdam. His hypothesis is that:

'the self-portrait in Nuremberg is undoubtedly an authentic earlier version. Rembrandt then made a second version to show off his ability to paint in two different manners, demonstrating that, apart from the loose manner [losse manier] with which he experimented in the Nuremberg painting [...] he was also capable of painting in a "neat", detailed and smooth manner [nette manier]' (Sluijter 2000: 188).

Thus, Sluijter recognizes the differences between the paintings but argues for the intentionality of those differences. The 'smooth manner' can also be found in other seventeenth century paintings. Portraits of members of the Royal Dutch court were all painted in that style and it is sometimes argued that Rembrandt might have experimented with this style to gain the appreciation of the Dutch court (Schwartz 1984). The alterations made to The Mauritshuis' *Tronie with Rembrandt's features* in comparison to the Nuremberg one all give the portrait a more aristocratic look, with a more upright position and a slightly smiling expression.

The underdrawing found with infrared reflectography (IRR) is, according Sluijter, not a valid argument against attribution because it may simply be used to make a second version of the Nuremberg painting in the quickest and most efficient way possible (Sluijter 2000: 189). Furthermore, the 'typical faults of a copyist' – like the reflection of light on the lower lip of the Mauritshuis painting[7] – could also be due to a different shape of the lip. Sluijter argues that the different shape of the lip is not the result of a mistake during the process of copying, but the result of the artist's choice. After all, Sluijter continues, why would a painter of such great quality – a judgment all critics agree upon – do things differently when 'nothing would be easier for him than to imitate this highlight carefully' (2000: 191).

In this argumentation Sluijter makes an effort to point out that things could be otherwise if only a certain interpretation changes, like the reason for the underdrawing. According to Sluijter connoisseurs start to point out weaknesses in a painting that no one ever noticed before when it loses its aura of authenticity, 'easily persuading those afraid of being uncritical' (Sluijter 2000: 191). With any alleged copy, the possibility that it is a copy by the master himself should be reflected on (2000: 193).

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the debate closed in favor of Wadum and Van De Wetering. From our current beliefs we would say that they where right, and Sluijter was wrong. However, from a position of impartiality towards the truth, it is necessary to find other reasons for closure of the debate. Within the sociology of science, there are some hypotheses about the process of closure. Sismondo (2004: 102) argues that 'one of the most important rhetorical resources is the idea of science itself'. In the controversy about the *Tronie with Rembrandt's features*, the three connoisseurs certainly differ in their opinion about what sort of questions should be asked

in their field: should the discussion focus on style and technique as Wadum and van de Wetering do? Or should it be about what is historically possible and perhaps plausible as Sluijter does? Sluiter aims to reshape the debate, but by doing so, he moves away from the traditional field of connoisseurship and thus his argument loses credibility within that field. However, his hypothesis as such has not been falsified.

Furthermore, the Mauritshuis, which owns[8] the painting and where the painting is exhibited, was able to transform the arguments of their conservators into a concrete decision: the status they would attribute to their painting. The museum thus has the strongest position to mobilize others (e.g. visitors) to take up their point of view. Latour elaborates the point of mobilization in the following principle: 'the fate of a statement depends on others' behavior' (Latour 1987: 104).

The scientific enquiry with infrared reflectography did not reveal the truth about the origin of the painting, nor did it resolve the controversy instantly. The infrared reflectography had to become part of an argumentation that interpreted the meaning of the underdrawing. A sociological explanation for theory change thus involves 'the idea of science itself' and the ability to mobilize others to adopt the argumentation. To witness the discussions of the experts would undoubtedly provide valuable insight.

Conclusion

This paper departed from two points: 1) scientific enquiry does not necessarily resolve disagreement between experts; and 2) since knowledge considered to be true has usually been contested at one point, it is fruitful to investigate disagreements with an impartial attitude towards current beliefs. These assumptions found support in this case study: new scientific information could not settle the controversy between connoisseurs. In this case science itself can therefore be considered a piece of information that needs interpretation to gain meaning. Furthermore, the investigation from a position of impartiality towards the outcome of the controversy allows a more distant analysis that has its focus on aspects of mobilization of others, and rhetorical techniques that can contribute to the understanding of closure. As an epistemology however, symmetry is contested.

The closure of the debate is not without consequences. First, it has consequences for the aura of authorship of the painting; expressed both in monetary value and perception by the museum visitor (Goodman, quoted in Giovanelli 2005). Second, it rewrites the history of the painting and it (re)defines the elements of 'Rembrandt authorship'. In this controversy we see that there is disagreement about whether Rembrandt uses underdrawings and whether he would or would not paint in a neat manner. After the debate, Rembrandt's style is determined as 1) not using underdrawings; and 2) not painting in a neat manner. Thus, when a painting is attributed to Rembrandt it establishes an image of Rembrandt's features. As we learnt from the controversy, underdrawings are not 'Rembrandt-ish', and in fact, finding one more underdrawing (or anomaly) in a painting that is currently attributed to Rembrandt would be an interesting test for the new hypothesis on Rembrandt's style. Would that painting be de-attributed? Would the Mauritshuis painting be reattributed, which would lead to a new interpretation of Rembrandt's style? In other words: what is considered a convincing argument against attribution – the characteristics of Rembrandt's method – is not so much a solid explanatory entity but a rather dynamic feature attributed to Rembrandt by experts and their agreements and disagreements. If the prevailing vision in fifteen years from now would become is that Sluijter was indeed right and that Rembrandt does sometimes use underdrawings or a 'nette manier' (smooth manner) of painting, the entire oeuvre, and current thought about style and technique, would have to be redefined. And such a conclusion would touch the aura of authorship of many paintings.

That a painting sometimes does, and sometime does not belong to Rembrandt's oeuvre leans in the direction that impartiality towards truth in discussions about Rembrandt is not a far-fetched idea. And after this controversy study we might agree that the position of impartiality towards contesting statements is a useful tool for historical analysis for the abovementioned reasons. However, such a notion cannot argue either for or against different interpretations in current controversies. According to post-Kuhnian science studies, there are social reasons that account for

theory change. But if we were to accept those as an account of 'what really happened' then positivism would have found a back-door entrance into post-positivism. What can be learned from this case study is that there might be different reasons for the closure of a debate which do not necessarily involve the truth of theory. And that provides a legitimate reason to call for more transparency in museums. To achieve transparency it is important to map the different non-social and non-cognitive potential influences on closure. Such transparency is becoming standard in medical research papers in which authors are obliged to mention all competing interests, affiliations and the origin of the research funds. Furthermore, it is interesting to debate why museum visitors are only informed with the results of a debate between specialists. Why are they not provided with the different viewpoints, so that they can educate themselves and, most importantly, judge for themselves? Would it be problematic if they where to disagree with those who know most about the subject (who themselves do not agree)?

As discussed in the opening of this article, science studies seem to fail to meet with the scrutiny of philosophers of knowledge. As this analysis shows, the positivism of the rational arguments is easily substituted with the positivism of, ironically, post-positivism. It is not rational argument or scientific proof that approximates truth, but social explanation. However, as an inter-discipline *between* sociology and philosophy, it is perhaps justified to be pragmatic and look at the merits of a sociology of science without forcing it into a disciplinary category it does not (want to) belong to. This modest case study pointed out that science studies has some quality as a rudimentary methodology for a descriptive sociology of science. It can be used in an analysis that can conclude with a recommendation, (the call for transparency). It is only rudimentary because it still has the (impossible?) task of developing a well-founded sociological or cognitive theory that can account for 'theory change' better than rational arguments. Until such theories have been developed, it would be wise to have a symmetrical view on the value of both social and rational explanations. The science wars have ended, so let's call it peaceful coexistence.

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APPENDIX: The two paintings

Figure 1. The Nuremberg painting

Figure 2. The Mauritshuis painting

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[1] Face / head.

[2] The word spin-off might suggest a false relatedness. First, Latour's work was published some fifteen years after SSK emerged. Second, Latour's argument is quite different from that of SSK. However, in the light of a 'symmetrical approach', which Latour 'radicalized', it is possible to speak of spin-off.

[3] Chapter five of Zammito (2004: 123-150) titled 'How Kuhn Became a Sociologist (And Why He Didn't Like It)' deals with this issue thoroughly.

[4] I would like the thank The Mauritshuis for providing me with the text of the audio tour.

[5] I would like to thank the reviewers of the first draft for pointing me to this and other interesting particularities.

[6] Corrected and added material.

[7] The three connoisseurs pointed out that the highlight on the lip is not positioned similarly to the Nuremberg painting; compare the highlight on the lower lip in fig. 1 and 2).

[8] To be precise: The painting is owned by the Dutch art collection and part of the museum collection of the Mauritshuis.