

Review

Ulrike Kern, *Light and Shade in Dutch and Flemish Art*, Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2014, 224 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-54994-6.



In 2003, the producers of the movie *The girl with the pearl earring* released a film-still of leading actress Scarlett Johansson posing as the unknown girl in Vermeer's painting. If anything, the comparison between this modern re-enactment and Vermeer's original painting reveals the complications of reconstructing the lighting. Johansson's nose throws too much shadow, while the right side of her face remains too pale; the reflection of the white collar on the jaw and pearl are absent in the photograph; the three-dotted strike of highlights on the lower lip is remarkably reduced; the juicy lightspots in the angles of the mouth do not show at all. Moreover, the neck is overexposed instead of receding into darkness. The modern light technicians, invited to work on a movie on Vermeer, tried very hard to come close to the original, but apparently the seventeenth-century effects were impossible to capture.



This failure is telling about the naturalism of Dutch seventeenth-century art. Painters such as Vermeer painstakingly studied light effects in nature in order to create faces such as the girl with earring, but between the observation of the model and the perfection of a painting lies the so-called pictorial intelligence that takes the license to re-arrange the naturalistic repertoire. Especially in the rendition of light and darkness, there is a gap between deriving from reality and arriving at art. This is the fascinating subject and in a way the message of the book of Ulrike Kern, a German art historian who studied at the Warburg Institute in London.

The title of her book, *Light and Shade in Dutch and Flemish Art*, might suggest an art historical survey on the use of light and shadow, highlighting the introduction of luministic inventions in the course of 16th to the 18th century. But it turns out to be something different. In fact, the book

is about art literature and can be characterized as a terminological study of light-related terms in contemporary treatises. A title or subtitle indicating this confinement would have been helpful. Only inside the book we discover that it belongs to the series *Théorie de l'art 1400-1800* guided by Michèle-Caroline Heck.

Fortunately, Kern's book is more than theory. The concepts and discussions from the literature are illustrated with about 100 well-selected art works, covering two centuries and a wide arrange of genres. The way Kern discusses Dutch art theory recalls the famous article of Paul Taylor on *houding*, already 25 years old by now. As a matter of fact, Taylor was the supervisor of the dissertation that lies at the basis of the present book. Defended in 2010 at the Warburg, she revised the manuscript afterward during a stay at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

In the introduction Kern presents and typifies the sources she has used. The five chapters that follow are each dedicated to a specific concept from the realm of light and darkness. Kern explains that she ordered her chapters going from dark to light: from the darkest aspects of shadows, via reflections within the shadows to a last chapter on the style of *helderheyt* (clarity). The introduction (that should have been better edited) and the first two chapters are harder to read and remain somewhat obscure. The subsequent chapters become more and more elucidating. Kern here succeeds in bringing citation, interpretation and visual example together, even to the extent that the book helps us to understand what artists meant when they claimed that one should learn 'the rules of art'.

The second chapter on "the concept of *reddering*" contains the most complicated discussion on the book. The concept was first introduced by Willem Goeree in his treatise on

the art of drawing (1668), but is also to be found in Lairese's *Groot Schilderboek* (1707). As Kern states, *reddering* has received little scholarly attention and she feels it her task to trace the meaning of this hard-to-grasp term. While discussing *reddering*, Goeree explains that every object and especially objects placed behind each other need a gradation of light and shade in proportion to their surroundings and the whole. Otherwise the positioning of the objects becomes unclear and the image as a whole will not work. Kern holds the rendering of depth as key to the concept and believes it has to do with a kind of luministic relation to the background. Therefore, she searches for its roots in ideas on background that bring her to the 6th-century Johannes Grammaticus, cited in Franciscus Junius's *De pictura veterum*, and to the notes of Leonardo. In my opinion, this does not help us to understand the significance of *reddering*. Nor does Kern's attempt to uncover its etymological roots. Even for a Dutch speaker the term is enigmatic, but it is clear that the archaic word *redderen* denotes steering, ruling and putting something into order. In modern Dutch it is better remembered by its negation *ontreddering*, which refers to losing control and feeling rudderless (although etymological dictionaries do not tell us so, the term may come from the term *roeder* = rudder). In my opinion, then, the noun *reddering* is simply translated as 'putting into order', 'regulation' or 'arrangement'. Goeree's use of the term hints at an arrangement in the sense of scaling the right grade between light and darkness. That makes us think of the proportional system of degrees of luminosity on a scale of 0-100 as proposed by Samuel van Hoogstraten in his *Hoogeschoole* of 1678. Van Hoogstraten did not use *reddering*, here nor elsewhere is his treatise. Apparently, not everyone considered the term apt for art literature. Kern's explanation that *reddering* refers to "a specific organisation of light and dark as distributed in alternating bands over the surface ... used to contrast foregrounds and backgrounds to evoke a sense of spatial recession" results in a too long-winded significance that cannot have been the aim of seventeenth-century terminology. Chapter 2 ends with the *Avenue of Middelharnis* by Meindert Hobbema in order to suggest a connection between *reddering* and perspective. Kern is generally clear, but here the point is hard to grasp. It leaves the reader behind in *ontreddering*.

Other chapters deal with concepts that are less enigmatic, and are well-analysed and illustrated. Only the introduction elicits some comments. The confinement to art theory is an understandable choice and relieves the author from the obligation to discuss all that there is to say about light and shadow. But it also brings the obligation to be explicit about the selection of sources. In the introduction Kern lists the protagonists of art historiography Carel van Mander, Philips Angel, Samuel van Hoogstraten, Willem Goeree, Gerard Lairese, Arnold Houbraken, Johan van Gool and Jacob Weyermans. Of course, no one would doubt their relevance. But what about those not included? Why are Cornelis de Bie and Willem Beurs only mentioned as sources of Houbraken, but not included as subjects in their own right? Another question that Kern fails to answer is why some translations of French treatises are mentioned, while others are not. If the Dutch edition of Roger de Piles's *Beredeneerde Beschouwing der schilder-kunde* from 1756 is quoted, I do also expect to hear something about *Zamenspraak over het Koloriet*, or his *Termes de peinture; konstwoorden of spreekwijzen van de schilderkunst* that were published already in 1722. Kern refers to Abraham Bosse's *Algemene manier van Desargues* from 1686, but not to the first edition from 1664 or his *Algemeen middel tot de practijck der doorzicht-kunde op*

tafereelen, of regel-lose buytengedaenten from the same year. I stress this point because if we want to understand the development of Netherlandish art theory, we should include the translations of foreign texts in the corpus of art theoretical texts.

Another question begged by Kern's selection of theoretical books is whether *tekenboeken* (drawing books) such as Crispijn van de Passe's *Het ligt der tekenkonst* might have told or illustrated something on the practice of lighting models and objects in drawing sessions. Indeed, I wonder whether artists' letters might have added to the discussion. Rembrandt's phrase '*hang my op een sterk ligt*' (lit. 'hang me on a strong light') might not tell us much about his ideas, but does the vast correspondence of Rubens say nothing about light and shadow? If so, it would have contributed to the Flemish share in the source material, which is now absent.

I do not mention all this in order to claim that they contain essential information that Kern has overlooked. I would have hoped for an explanation why certain treatises or categories of source materials were excluded. If so, the reader would understand that certain texts have nothing to say about the subject or that they are still waited to be analysed.

A last point is the positioning of this book. The author hardly discusses her scholarly kinships. This omission is somewhat remarkable given the fact that her kind of research is situated in the very nucleus of a recent debate. In the fifth volume of *The Rembrandt Corpus*, published in 2011, Ernst van de Wetering made a passionate plea for a different reading of the art literature of the 17th century. He contests those art historians who analyse these treatises as exercises in intertextuality or as a self-contained discourses of rhetoric or intellectualism. Instead, he calls for taking the relevance of these text for the art of painting seriously, as it brings us closer to what these paintings are about.

Kern does not mention the appeal of Van de Wetering. This might be explained by the fact that she concluded her dissertation in 2010, but as she revised it afterwards some kind of response would have been in order. The more so, because it might have helped her to position her own approach, as she both professes philology and treats theory as a reflection of the actual practice. In this combined way, her book is a demonstration of a reading of art literature in the service of understanding art that Van de Wetering calls for.

Despite these criticisms, Ulrike Kern's book is a highly valuable contribution to an essential aspect of the art of painting. Not only does she help us to understand the writings on the subject, she also makes us realize how infinitely complicated – and fascinating – the mastering of light has been for the 17th-century artist.

Arjan de Koomen, University of Amsterdam