Manet and Vermeer: 
The Nature of the Excluded Spectator 

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Abstract. This paper addresses a debate between Michael Fried and Richard Wollheim around issues of the implied spectator of Manet’s paintings. Manet’s work is central to core themes of Fried and Wollheim’s respective theories of art. Fried uses Manet’s work to argue his core modernist notion of radical facingness, the inclusion of the beholder-function within the painting itself; Wollheim, in turn, uses Manet’s paintings to develop his theory of the internal spectator, an implicit presence within the virtual scene. While I side with Fried on Manet, Fried’s refusal to acknowledge a distinction between internal and external spectators leads to a misconstruing of the nature of the excluded spectator with respect to Vermeer. Not only do certain mature works by Vermeer offer a stronger case for the spectator in the picture, but I trace a corresponding shift in devices used to exclude a spectator: from those aimed at the external beholder, to devices which exclude a presence potentially internal to the scene. I argue that the emergence of Vermeer’s interrelated strategies for the inclusion/exclusion of an internal presence historically correspond to his compositional use of the camera obscura, which brings about the kind of spatial relation on which the possibility of a painting presenting someone’s ‘point of view’ depends.

1. 
In this paper, I develop an argument between Michael Fried (Fried 1996, pp. 344-345 n., p. 512 n. 30) and Richard Wollheim (Wollheim 1987, pp. 364-365 n. 34, p. 369 n. 71) which focused on certain figure paintings

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by Manet. Manet’s work is fundamental to core themes of Fried and Wollheim’s respective theories of art. Yet art historian and philosopher use the very same feature of Manet’s work—a pattern of empty or distracted gazes—to arrive at diametrically opposed standpoints on the relation of the external beholder to the virtual scene. Fried uses Manet’s work to introduce a core modernist notion of ‘radical facingness’, which he describes as the inclusion of the ‘beholder-function’ within the painting itself. Rather than maintain the fiction of an absence of a beholder in front of a work, which Fried claims had dominated French painting since the mid-eighteenth century, Manet structures scenes such that they reveal their essential ‘staging’—but in such a way that the main protagonist stares out blankly, denying any possible reciprocity. These same paintings are, in turn, used by Wollheim to introduce his key theme of the internal spectator, the ‘Spectator in the Painting’: an implicit yet unpainted presence within the virtual scene the picture depicts (Wollheim 1987, ch. III). Here it is claimed we are granted a distinctive access to the content of Manet’s pictures through an imaginative identification with an implied figure occupying the work’s point of view.

While Fried and Wollheim both suggest that the beholder is anticipated by the work, they disagree fundamentally as to the nature of that foreseen presence (whether it is internal or external to the closed structure of the work). I will argue that Fried is right to suggest that with Manet’s work an internal spectator is supererogatory to the experiencing of this absence. Wollheim misconstrues Manet’s figures’ distractedness as dependent upon an internal presence, rather than a property of the work’s staging relative to the beholder of the painting. Nevertheless, Fried’s own refusal to acknowledge the logic of any distinction between internal and external spectators is itself problematic. I will argue the efficacy of such a distinction with respect to Vermeer. Fried not only denies a distinctive means of access certain Vermeer paintings afford, but he thereby misapprehends the nature of the excluded spectator in Vermeer’s supreme studies of absorption. Certain mature works by Vermeer offer a far stronger case for the

1 For the specific term ‘beholder function’ see Fried (2011, p. 170). For reference to Manet’s ‘radical facingness’ see Fried (1969, pp. 28-82; 1996, ch. 4).

2 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
spectator in the picture, but I will also trace a corresponding shift in Vermeer’s devices in works seeking to exclude a spectator: from those aimed at the external beholder, to devices which exclude a presence now potentially internal to the scene.

I will argue that it is perhaps no coincidence that Vermeer’s alternate strategies for inclusion or exclusion of an internal beholder historically correspond to his use of the camera obscura. I do not claim Vermeer uses such a device in the actual production of his paintings (an issue on which I remain agnostic), but maintain that its deployment in a scene’s composition structures a work’s depiction point as integral to the painting’s spatial schema.

2.

For Fried, Manet’s work represents a radical response to a crisis of beholding which emerges in mid-nineteenth-century France. Fried claims the preoccupation with excluding the beholder, which had dominated French painting since absorptive themes are first theorised by Diderot in the mid-eighteenth-century, had degenerated to the point that painting needed to be severed from the antitheatrical tradition (Fried 1996). This was a tradition that maintained the ‘supreme fiction’ that paintings are not made to be beheld, ostensibly by depicting protagonists absorbed in their activities, oblivious to the presence of a beholder in front of the work. Fried suggests that there were two strategies open for realist artists of Manet’s generation: (i) to continue, regardless, the increasingly outdated strategy of maintaining absorptive themes; or (ii) to acknowledge a painting’s staging for the benefit of the beholder by having figures face directly out of the painting in the manner of group portraiture. The first strategy ran the risk of the figures being construed not as genuinely absorbed in their labours, but merely pretending to be. But the second strategy also faces an inherent risk of portraiture, of seeking to directly engage an external

that in general I believe his attempt to distinguish between external and internal spectators of paintings cannot be sustained’ – see Fried (1996, pp. 512-513, n. 30). 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’ – see Fried (1996, p. 513, n. 30).
presence in a way that flouts the ontological separation between pictorial space and the space of the beholder.

Manet adopts the latter strategy, but radically transforms it [Figure 1]. He meets theatricality head-on by confronting the viewer. But this is not a straightforward theatrical engaging of the external beholder. This frontal facing orientation is accompanied by a blankness or opaqueness on the part of depicted figures, who are ‘noncommunicating, without psychological interiority of any kind’ (Fried 1996, pp. 282-284) [Figure 2]. For Fried, this remoteness is evidence of Manet needing ‘to build into the painting the separateness, distancedness, and mutual facing that had always characterized the painting-beholder relationship’, such that it evades the ‘worst consequences of the theatricalizing of that relationship’ (1996, p. 265). This mutual facing takes on the form of a ‘declaration of flatness’, such that the painting is presented as self-sufficient tableau, so that it faces ‘the beholder as never before’ (1996, p. 266). But it also transforms the relation with the model [Figure 3]. Fried states: ‘I can think of no previous
canvases ... that direct attention quite so forcefully to a (real or imagined) relationship between the painter, the painting, and the model or models that served the painter in its making’ (1996, p. 337). The model’s resistance is therefore built into the painting’s very dynamic right from the work’s inception.

For Fried, this ‘radical facingness’ marks the inclusion of the beholder-function within the painting itself. The viewer is in effect ‘supererogatory to a situation that ostensibly demanded [their] presence, as if [their] place before the painting were already occupied by virtue of the extreme measures that had been taken to stake it out’ (1996, p. 344). In a deft remark, Fried suggests that:

[M]uch of the strangeness and uncanniness derives from the sense that in the pictures in question Manet’s models have been represented not simply as posing before the painter but as somehow frozen or immobilized ... It’s as if the viewer is made conscious of a
fundamental tension or contradiction between the inherent temporality of posing, the heldness and stillness it implies, and the rapidity or instantaneousness of visualization and execution. (1996, p. 340)

The very indeterminateness of both technique and pictorial space [Figure 4], the source of so much negative contemporary comment, is utilised in order to deliberately problematize the beholder position in such a way that the relation that comes to the fore is that of the painter to absent model.

Figure 4. Édouard Manet, Woman with a Parrot, 1866. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Manet, likewise, is crucial to one of Wollheim's key themes. Wollheim differentiates the spectator of the painting, the viewer standing within the space in which the work hangs, from an implicit yet unpainted presence
within the virtual scene the picture depicts, the spectator in the painting (Wollheim 1987, ch. III). Wollheim argues that a limited number of paintings imply an unseen yet implicit presence occupying an extension of the virtual space of the painting (1987, p. 102). We gain a distinctive access to the content of the picture through imaginatively identifying with this internal beholder, seeing the scene through their eyes, and from the specific viewpoint (indeed, point of view) the painting presents.

Figure 5. Édouard Manet, *In the Winter Garden*, 1879. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

Manet’s 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 ... a moment later and the mood may dissipate, but, until it does, they are absent from the world’ (1987, p. 141). Wollheim claims that Manet places the implicit spectator in relation to single figure works in a situation that replicates the male figure’s relation with the woman in the painting *In the Winter Garden* [Figure 5]. This 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.
However, the very features Wollheim seeks to explain here might plausibly be accounted for by Fried’s claim as to our responding to ‘the double logic of (absent) model and (present) painting’ (Fried 1996, p. 345). The poignant denial of reciprocity is explicable without recourse to imagining an internal presence, making it unclear what role the internal spectator is playing that cannot be fulfilled by the external beholder. Moreover, the very indefiniteness of pictorial space [Figure 6], where Manet’s backgrounds detach from the foreground, attest to Manet’s ‘staging’ of the scene such that it is not at all clear where within this ambiguous painted world we might stand relative to the virtual. Wollheim appears to see this spatial indefiniteness as a contributory feature to imagining the presence of a spectator in the picture. This seems unconvincing to me. Indeed, the very lack of spatial continuity between the virtual scene and an implied yet unrepresented extension of the representational space to my mind renders Wollheim’s claims for an internal spectator unpersuasive.

Figure 6. Édouard Manet, Mademoiselle V. in the Costume of an Espada, 1862. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Manet therefore offers Wollheim a less than convincing case for the ‘Spectator in the Picture’. Nevertheless, Fried’s refusal to acknowledge the viability of any distinction between internal and external spectators in turn leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of the excluded spectator with respect to that most consummate painter of scenes of absorption, Vermeer [Figure 7]. Why does Fried reject such a possibility? It might be said to constitute a threat to his deeply held conviction as to the self-sufficiency of tableau painting. Manet’s acknowledgement of the beholder is not a threat as such, in that here the beholder is given no work to do – the beholder-function has already been fulfilled by the work. But Fried also objects to Wollheim’s theory of the ‘Spectator in the Picture’ on art historical grounds. He suggests that Wollheim fails to ‘give weight to the historical problematic of beholding’ (Fried 1996, p. 345), by which I take Fried to be suggesting that Wollheim’s theory lacks corroboratory evidence in terms of contemporary accounts of the reception of Manet’s work. But does this historic argument hold up with regard to Vermeer?

Figure 7. Johannes Vermeer, Woman with a Lute, c. 1662-4. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
We need to bear in mind that Fried still shares much of Diderot’s antagonism to the theatrical, and a longstanding commitment to the Diderotian ideal of an absorptive art. This is an antitheatrical art that presents ‘the image’s absorption in itself’, oblivious to the presence of a beholder in front of the canvas (Fried 1980, p. 50). Thus Fried writes of genre works such as those by Chardin [Figure 8]:

[The persuasive representation of absorption entailed evoking the perfect obliviousness of a figure or group of figures to everything but the objects of their absorption. These objects did not include the beholder standing before the painting. Hence the figure or figures had to seem oblivious to the beholder’s presence if the illusion of absorption was to be sustained. (Fried 1980, p. 66)

Figure 8. Jean-Siméon Chardin, *The House of Cards*, c. 1737. The National Gallery, London.

Fried documents an absorptive strategy that both Vermeer and Chardin employ to suggest the obliviousness of the depicted figure to anything other than the object of their internal absorption:
But Chardin’s genre paintings, like Vermeer before him, go much further than that. By a technical feat which virtually defies analysis—though one writer has remarked helpfully on Chardin’s characteristic choice of ‘a natural pause in the action which, we feel, will recommence a moment later’—they come close to translating literal duration, the actual passage of time as one stands before the canvas, into a purely pictorial effect. (Fried 1980, pp. 49-50; Fried here quotes Châtelet 1964, p. 204)


However, there is a vital distinction between Chardin’s exclusion of an external presence in a work such as *The House of Cards* and the equivalent exclusion of an internal presence in a work such as Vermeer’s *A Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* [Figure 9]. I believe the evidence is manifest in the works themselves. With Vermeer’s mature works, the presentation of
scenes of absorption never appears to be orientated toward the beholder in the way it can with Chardin. Vermeer conceives of these works’ viewpoints as (intrinsically) an internal property of the self-contained depicted scene, regardless of whether this position is occupied or unoccupied. It is a logic that I contend arises with Vermeer’s use of a camera obscura as a compositional aid. In other words, with Chardin, what we might term the work’s depiction point is structured relative to a position assumed as external to the pictorial world. Hence, the occupancy of this position by the beholder has to be denied in scenes of absorption. With Vermeer, a profound change has taken place, in that no such external position is posited, and hence such an external position is no longer intrinsic to the work’s self-contained and (hence) sufficient internal structure. I hope to demonstrate this by tracing a shift in devices used by Vermeer to exclude a spectator, from those specifically directed at the external beholder to barriers which exclude a presence now conceived as potentially internal to the scene.

Figure 10. Jean-Siméon Chardin, The Card Castle, c. 1737. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Let me develop this further. Chardin’s presentation of absorption in works such as The Card Castle [Figure 10] acknowledges the external beholder’s
space by having objects intrude or project, drawing attention to the ontological juxtaposition of the two spaces. With regard to *The Card Castle*, Fried writes: ‘By virtue of fronting the beholder and what is more opening toward him, the drawer serves to enforce a distinction between the beholder’s point of view and perception of the scene as a whole and the quite different point of view and limited, exclusive focus of the youth balancing the cards’ (1980, pp. 48). The beholder is afforded a privileged viewpoint to which the scene orientates itself. Fried then goes on to emphasise the externality of the depiction point to the inner scene of absorption by stating: ‘There is even a sense in which the contrast between the two cards – one facing the beholder, the other blankly turned away from him – may be seen as an epitome of the contrast between the surface of the painting, which of course faces the beholder, and the absorption of the youth in his delicate undertaking, a state of mind that is essentially inward, concentrated, closed’ (1980, pp. 48-49).

![Figure 11. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, 1655. Collection of Harold Samuel, London.](image)

Overtly theatrical Dutch genre works such as Nicolaes Maes’s *The Eavesdropper* [Figure 11] also face the beholder in this way. Here, the maid’s
gesture directly addresses the external viewer as audience, the equivalent of a theatrical aside. The art historian Louis Marin would refer to the maid as a ‘figure of the frame’, an internal figure aligned with the work’s boundary whose role is to invite comment upon the anecdotal content (Marin 1995, pp. 83–84). To adopt Wolfgang Kemp’s terminology, the gesture forms part of the work’s ‘outer’ rather than ‘inner’ apparatus, in that it is there to be interpreted by the viewer standing before the work (Kemp 1998, p. 191). We experience the maid’s gesture from outside of the world the painting presents, as an audience external to the fiction. The trompe l’œil curtain further encourages and delimits our participation; it entices us to draw it open while detaching us from the fictional space. The work thus foregrounds its own fictional structure in a way that is genuinely theatrical, though one might also say that the problematizing of the spectator position in a sense becomes its content.

**Figure 12.** Johannes Vermeer, *The Procuress*, 1656. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

This theatrical tradition is not entirely absent from Vermeer’s œuvre. In
his early work *The Procuress* [Figure 12], the figure on our left similarly invites the viewer to comment on rather than participate in the scene. Our externality is insisted upon by the objects piled up against the ‘picture plane’.

![Figure 13. Johannes Vermeer, The Girl with a Wine Glass, c. 1659-60. Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Brunswick.](image)

However, subsequent works such as *The Girl with a Wine Glass* [Figure 13] seem on the cusp of a new relation. While the viewpoint is now conceivable as a spatial continuation of the room in which the figures are placed,
a residual theatricality is evidenced by the implied distance between the viewpoint and the un-cropped figures. (This distance is a notable feature of equivalent Pieter de Hooch works dealing with this subject matter such as *A Woman Drinking with Two Men* [Figure 14].)

**Figure 14.** Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman Drinking with Two Men*, c. 1658. The National Gallery, London.

Despite a similarity of content, a profound shift seems to have taken place
with the slightly later *Girl Interrupted at her Music* [Figure 15]. Not only is this a much more nuanced and less predatory depiction of seduction, but the much tighter framing of the image and corresponding intimacy suggests an 'interruption' that is now internal to the scene, an intrusion within the inner logic of the work's narrative. The implied figure the woman turns to address now seems to already 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.

Figure 15. Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*, c. 1660-1. The Frick Collection, New York.

And if *Girl Interrupted at her Music* might still be considered a transitional work, there is little doubt that with single figure works such as *A Lady Writ-
ing a Letter [Figure 16] the protagonist most certainly addresses someone she now knows intimately in a way that poses no metaphysical transgression between the fictive and real.

Around this time, Vermeer starts to use 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 mature works such
as *A Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, or *A Woman Holding a Balance* [Figures 9 and 17].

I would like to suggest, however, that the beholder excluded is no longer the spectator of the picture, but Vermeer’s new conception of the spectator in the picture. Such a claim might be seen as mere conjecture, were it not the case that this meditation on distance in Vermeer’s absorptive works is reinforced by an intriguing and indisputable shift in a much observed pictorial strategy that registers the artist’s detachment while effectively excluding the viewer. 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. (Vermeer 1997, p. 34)

Gowing, though, fails to register a vital adjustment in the use of these barriers. We have already noted the ‘fortification’ presented by The Procuress. There is a decisive shift from the insistently ‘staged’ frontality of barriers used in early works of absorption, such as A Girl Asleep [Figure 18] and A Lady Reading at the Window [Figure 19] (the latter reinforced by the addition of a trompe-l’œil curtain), where the presence held back, as with Chardin, is still external, to the integration of furniture and objects as barriers in works such as Woman with a Lute [Figure 7] or Woman with a Pearl
Necklace [Figure 20] in a way that now feels entirely natural relative to a point of view internal to the scene.

While such barriers no doubt reflect something of Vermeer’s nature (and his works certainly draw upon his own relation to his sitters), the shift in their deployment suggests that the beholder so persistently excluded in such absorptive works is not Fried’s antitheatrical notion of the spectator standing before the painting, but a presence now potentially internal to the scene. Strategies for inclusion and exclusion of such a presence are thus intimately tied to each other, two sides of the same re-conceptualisation of the work’s point of view.

Figure 20. Johannes Vermeer, Woman with a Pearl Necklace, c. 1664. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

4.

My position here, like Wollheim’s, draws upon Riegl’s The Group Portraiture of Holland (1999), and to his specific concept of inner and outer unity.
Paintings described as having a ‘closed internal coherence’ are founded on the reciprocity of pictorial elements contained within the picture; works having an ‘external coherence’ are completed only by the presence of a spectator, and establish a rapport with the viewer (Riegl 1999). In *Painting as an Art* (1987), Wollheim argues that Riegl’s notion of an outer unity offers a precedent for the spectator in the picture: he ‘treats the existence of an internal spectator as inseparable from a role that he must play within the represented scene’ (1987, p. 182). Now, this supposition as to a strictly ‘internal spectator’ is questionable in the context of the communal reception of such group portraiture; more importantly, Riegl’s thesis itself presents a particular difficulty with regards to the case for Manet.

![Figure 21. Henri Fantin-Latour, *Homage to Delacroix*, 1864. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.](image)

Interestingly, Fantin-Latour’s *Homage to Delacroix* [Figure 21] was criticised for the very problem that faced early Dutch portraiture: a lack of inner unity left the figures feeling isolated, physically and psychologically. We are presented with a collection of individual portraits rather than a convincing and unified group. As we have seen, Manet might be said...
to have made this ‘problem’ central to his art. He pointedly rejects the very strategies of subordination or coordination on which Riegl claims the respective Amsterdam and Haarlem Schools of group portraiture are based, isolating his figures whilst negating any compensatory rapport (that is outer unity) with the viewer by problematizing the beholder’s relation to the psychologically absent model. Seen in this light, Manet’s modernism might be said to emphatically reject both inner and outer unity; denying the very notions of reciprocity on which Riegl claims Dutch portraiture is founded.

![Rembrandt, The Syndics, 1662. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.](image)

**Figure 22.** Rembrandt, *The Syndics*, 1662. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

So what of my claims as regards Vermeer? Riegl maintains that certain painters combine both an inner and outer unity: indeed, he argues that Rembrandt ‘must have realized early on in his career that complete and well-defined external coherence – meaning the connection between the viewer and the figures depicted in the painting – depends on an already resolved internal coherence – meaning a subordinate relationship among the figures portrayed’. And with Rembrandt’s *The Syndics* [Figure 22], the
solution to the problem of group portraiture has, for Riegl, been found, in that ‘the figures charged with establishing internal coherence are the same ones responsible for external coherence, which is now perfectly specific in time and space’ (Riegl 1999, p. 285). With *The Syndics*, Rembrandt extends a commonality to include the viewer as an implied yet social presence drawn into the inner logic of the work. It depicts a single moment of time instigated by the viewer’s physical arrival at the scene. Despite the fact that this work is not strictly integrated into its architectural context, it was commissioned for a specific location and for ‘institutionally’ anticipated viewers. This was not a work for private consumption, and the anticipated spectator’s psychological repertoire is determined, at least in part, by the specificity of the original context – the Staalhof, where the Staalmeesters met. This is a shared experience.

The significance of Vermeer’s *Girl Interrupted at her Music* [*Figure 15*] is precisely that it transforms the institutionally anticipated interruption of *The Syndics* (painted within a year of Vermeer’s work) into an intensely private interruption which is entirely internal to the scene. As a non-shared experience, it demands the kind of imaginative identification required by Wollheim’s spectator in the picture.

Simultaneously, in those works seeking to exclude a beholder [*Figure 17*], Vermeer develops a novel sense of an image’s self-absorption. Such self-absorption is now dependent upon the fiction not so much of the absence of the viewer of the work, but a presence that might now potentially intrude upon the space of representation. If the work’s viewpoint is thus integrated into the virtual as never before, in attempting to identify with this point of view we are faced with barriers that allow us to experience a poignant and necessary absence. As such, we cannot separate Vermeer’s concurrent development of strategies of inclusion and exclusion of a beholder, as one informs and reinforces the other.

5. I make a final claim with respect to the mutual interdependence of efforts to include or exclude the beholder. I do not believe it is a coincidence that Vermeer’s alternate strategies of inclusion or exclusion correspond historically to his use of the *camera obscura* (probably from around the late 1650s).
There is a considerable literature on the photographic quality of Vermeer’s paintings, prompting speculation about his use of a portable device or cubicle installed into his studio. However, the discussion of Vermeer’s use of the camera obscura has largely focused on either the feasibility of its use in the production of his paintings, or upon its influence on his painterly technique (the fuzzy out-of-focus diffusion of certain objects). I would like to suggest a novel take on the relatively uncontested suggestion that he may have, at the very least, used a portable device to aid the composition of his paintings.


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It is certainly feasible that it is the compositional use of a camera obscura which brings about Vermeer’s novel conceptualization of the relation between scene and viewpoint [Figure 7]. Within the confined space of his studio, the camera obscura structures a scene relative to a viewpoint that is now, necessarily, a continuation of the virtual space. The device not only structures the kind of arbitrary cut into a prior reality characteristic of photographic images, but the resultant intimacy affords the possibility of an unrepresented beholder occupying the work’s point of view; correspondingly, this possibility demands new solutions to exclude such a potential presence in scenes of absorption. His compositional use of the camera obscura thus transforms familiar contemporary themes in such a way that the occupation, or not, of the viewpoint is made integral to a work’s content. The camera obscura’s automatic inclusion of the painting’s viewpoint relative to the virtual scene not only brings about a fundamentally different spatial relation, but a relation on which the very possibility of a painting presenting someone’s psychological point of view ultimately depends [Figure 23]. Conversely, the shift in Vermeer’s compositional use of barriers relative to this point strongly suggests that he is perhaps the first painter to recognise the need to exclude such an implied presence in works demanding his subjects’ complete absorption in their depicted tasks [Figure 9].

References


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