

## **Eavesdropping on Painting / A *bisbilhotice na pintura***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article claims that the principles of dialogic discourse are applicable to both verbal and iconic languages, because they share certain functions, such as the all-important metalinguistic one. The article studies in detail, from a Bakhtinian perspective, a series of six paintings created by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch artist, Nicolaes Maes (1634–93). Each painting depicts different poses and gestures of an eavesdropper, in such a manner that the Bakhtinian analyst-viewer is obliged to see how painting of this curious sort combines surprising verbal and visual languages. Maes' eavesdropper paintings concern curiosity, bringing together characters who might have preferred to remain independent of one another. The paintings deploy gestural, bodily, linguistic, and colour codes and make the visual material work creatively, allowing each language to take advantage of the expressive advantages of other languages. Several vantage points combine to show that the expressive capabilities of any given language are necessarily poorer when they rely on a single medium. A Bakhtinian perspective can shed new light on the paintings of Nicolaes Maes, while the analysis illumines new semantic possibilities in the thought of Bakhtin.

**KEYWORDS:** Painting; Iconic Languages; Verbal Language; Dialogic Discourse; Curiosity

### **RESUMO**

*Este artigo defende que os princípios dialógicos do discurso são aplicáveis tanto a linguagens verbais como a linguagens icônicas, já que compartilham certas funções, como a importantíssima função metalinguística. O artigo estuda detalhadamente, por uma perspectiva bakhtiniana, uma série de seis pinturas criadas pelo artista holandês do Século XVII Nicolaes Maes (1634-1693). Cada pintura representa poses e gestos diferentes de um bisbilhoteiro, de tal maneira que o analista-observador bakhtiniano é obrigado a ver como a pintura desse tipo curioso combina de maneiras surpreendentes linguagens verbais e visuais. As telas de bisbilhoteiros de Maes concernem à curiosidade, reunindo personagens que poderiam ter preferido permanecer independentes umas das outras. As telas apresentam códigos gestuais, corporais, linguísticos e cromáticos, fazendo o material visual funcionar criativamente e permitindo que cada linguagem se beneficie das vantagens expressivas das outras. Combinam-se aí várias perspectivas para mostrar que as capacidades expressivas de toda linguagem dada são necessariamente mais pobres quando recorrem a um único meio. Uma perspectiva bakhtiniana pode derramar nova luz sobre as pinturas de Nicolaes Maes, ao mesmo tempo em que a análise ilumina novas possibilidades semânticas no pensamento de Bakhtin.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pintura; Linguagens icônicas; Linguagem verbal; Discurso dialógico; Curiosidade

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Over the past thirty to forty years, people from around the world have done much work on Bakhtin the theoretician of verbal language, and especially on Bakhtin the literary scholar. More often than not, they have stressed his now (in)famous ideas on the novel and dialogism. Over time, they began to work on Bakhtin the cultural anthropologist, including therein his scattered thoughts on the chronotope, the philosophy of life, his phenomenological leanings, and his Neo-Kantian thinking on responsibility. And then they discovered that much of what he had to say about the carnival was plagiarized from unnamed sources, and that it was time to look more thoroughly at what he knew at the time of his writing, and time to be more careful about his possible sources of inspiration. Amidst all this soul-searching, we constantly discovered that we had never quite managed to exhaust all the theoretical possibilities of his work.

At the present juncture, I believe we still have a very long way to go before reaching the point of exhaustion on at least two important fronts, namely music<sup>1</sup> and the visual arts. Since it is impossible to do justice to both of these in a single contribution, my aim here will be to treat just one of these, namely artistic painting. This is not to say that no one has done any meaningful work in this particular area in the past. On the contrary, one of the most theoretically suggestive, but unfortunately least well known, of earlier works in this field is Wolfgang Kemp's groundbreaking book (written in German and only partially available in translation) where the scholar from Hamburg works on Dutch art of the Renaissance period with the extensive help of Bakhtin's chronotope (KEMP, 1996).<sup>2</sup> Other significant contributions have included Deborah Haynes' book (1995) on modernist French art, and certain journal articles written by international scholars such as Eduardo Cañizal Peñuelo (1998) in Brazil and Mikhail Sokolov (1998) in Russia. I should be remiss, when speaking of images, if I did not mention the pioneering work done by film theorists such as Robert Stam (1992) and Karl Sierck (1994) as well as very recent work published by Martin Flanagan (2009). And of course I need to bear in mind much of the innovative thinking that has been published on Bakhtin's relationship with icons and Orthodox Christianity as can be found in the work of Alexandar Mihailovic, Susan Felch, Paul Continuo, Ruth Coates,

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1 Editor's Note: For a discussion on music from a Bakhtinian perspective, see Hutcheon's articles, entitled "The Review as Bakhtinian Rejoinder: Edward W. Said as Music Reviewer," in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> Partial translation-adaptation in Duro, 1996, pp. 11-23.

and, much more recently, almost despite himself, Graham Pechey (2007). All this material is relevant to the present contribution on Bakhtin and seventeenth-century Dutch painting, even if in what follows I propose to travel along slightly different paths.

When looking for a Bakhtinian approach that is appropriate for studying visual material, it is important, I believe, to avoid two theoretical traps: the first of these consists in considering that images form a type of language so utterly different from verbal discourse - claimed by many, rightly or wrongly, to be Bakhtin's true home base - that it is impossible to imagine how a framework devised for studying the metalinguistic dimensions of verbal discourse (and more specifically conceived for the study of *written* verbal discourse) could ever be appropriate for the study of visual languages. My position concerning this first theoretical impasse consists in asserting that verbal and visual languages, while obviously distinct from one another on a number of ontological and functional fronts, nevertheless share a number of important metalinguistic features, which I propose to explore in this article. And here, I take the expression "metalinguistic features" both in the Bakhtinian and the Jakobsonian sense.

The second theoretical trap concerns the all-too-frequent tendency, at least as it was witnessed within the first generation of French semiotics (during the 1970s and the 1980s), to study visual language as if it functioned according to the same principles operable within verbal language. A second fang in this trap consists in relying on a vision of human language in general that is entirely based on verbal discourse in particular. Here, my position consists - bearing in mind the first theoretical trap - in agreeing that we must indeed treat visual language as something distinct from verbal language. But this is not to say that it would never be reasonable to look for certain Bakhtinian principles of language in general within all the languages deployed, including, in particular, artistic works of visual art. More specifically, my claim will consist in saying, at the very least, that principles of dialogic discourse are applicable to iconic languages. In saying this, I am not thereby enslaved to a view of visual languages entirely dependent on a model of verbal language. Once again, in view of our second theoretical trap, my contention is that, while verbal and iconic languages share certain functions, such as the all-important metalinguistic capacity (in the Jakobsonian sense), any such capacity assumes a great number of variant guises.

The object of the present article concerns specifically a series of six eavesdropping paintings created by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist, Nicolaes Maes (1634-1693).<sup>3</sup> Each one of the six paintings depicts different poses and gestures of an eavesdropping person (five females and one male), in such a manner that the Bakhtinian analyst-viewer is obliged to see how painting of this curious sort combine verbal and visual languages in a number of ingenious ways. Maes' eavesdropper paintings concern a special type of curiosity that brings together characters who might otherwise have preferred to remain independent of one another. They enlist the help of gestural, bodily, linguistic, and colour codes and make the visual material work in creative ways, allowing each individual language to take advantage of the expressive advantages of other languages. Several vantage points combine to show that the expressive capabilities of any given language are necessarily poorer when they rely on a single medium.

## 1 Dialogic Curiosity

One of Maes' inventively listening housewives, today part of the Wallace Collection in London (Illustration 1), requires that its viewers "lend" their eyes to the eavesdropper-heroine who cannot see what the beholders of the canvas are able to see.

This painting gives visual body to an enterprise of "conjoint curiosity," if not to speak of "dialogic curiosity." What we mean by these terms is that, here, the enterprise of sticking one's nose into someone else's business is not undertaken by a single person (in secret) but in cahoots with someone else (at a third double-party's expense). In other words, curiosity just doesn't *happen* out of nowhere but is generated dialogically by an invitation from one character to another, and then reinforced by the second for the benefit of the first. Proposed in the first instance by a painted character who looks the beholder straight in the eye, the eavesdropper's curious desire to see something more consists in making an implicit request using several semiotic means. The request is accompanied by several other verbal clues about "looking" that come from an almost invisible portrait hanging on the upper left of the canvas and from a mirror placed just to

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<sup>3</sup> This goal is greatly assisted by the German-language book, *Nicolaes Maes*, published in 2000 by León Krempel and by two other insightful texts, printed in English: (1) Hollander (2002), in particular the sections entitled The Eavesdroppers and Pictorial Space at Mid-Century, pp.103-112 and pp.112-119 respectively; and (2) Robinson (1987).

our right of the doorway. It can be paraphrased more or less as asking the beholder to observe in detail, from his or her privileged viewpoint, what she, the painted character, cannot see from the vantage point in which she is trapped. That she is caught between two worlds in the vestibule of her house (a space referred to in seventeenth-century Dutch by the chronotopically significant word *voorhuis*)<sup>4</sup> is represented by Maes by putting her in between two very different scenes, one unfolding in the background, above, which shows what might be a rather boring set of visitors<sup>5</sup> and the other visible below, in the cellar, which shows a flirting scene between, presumably, two of the family's servants.



**Illustration 1.** Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper (The Listening Housewife)*, 1656. Oil on canvas. London: Wallace Collection. 84.7 x 70.6 cm.

<sup>4</sup> *Voorhuis* literally means a “pre-house,” the place in the house that is “not quite” the house proper, because its purpose is to provide an entrance area from which it is possible to go to all the other areas of the home. Cf. Franits (2004, p.156).

<sup>5</sup> For the issue of “boredom,” I refer to Gardiner, M. (2000).

The encounter between the painted character, situated more or less at the centre of the canvas, and the invisible but active viewer (presumably placed just outside the canvas) gives birth to an almost irrepressible linguistic exchange, which is not only *imaginable*, but more importantly *encouraged* (if not *demanding*) by the painted eavesdropper. It could be suggested that, without some kind of verbal-gestural exchange, Maes' painting cannot even function aesthetically. This exchange unfolds in such a way that both the explicitly painted scene laid out before our eyes and the logically present (but invisible) outside world<sup>6</sup> now become part of what we could reasonably call a series of linguistic rejoinders that hark back to the visual material that the painting presents. Maes' painting is not satisfied to be just a "silent picture." It multiplies references to other eavesdropper paintings (through the colour red, a chair to the right of the doorway, a map on the wall, a sword which replaces the broom); it plays with several spaces lined up, one after the other, a visual trick that many other Dutch painters of his time adored.<sup>7</sup> It multiplies inhabited spaces both in the background and in the foreground of the composition.

To appreciate Nicolaes Maes' eavesdropper works, the spectator needs not only to look, but especially to listen. The Wallace Collection painting makes painting audible in a very peculiar way, literally suggesting, if we can be allowed to play with *The Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, that it is not enough for us to *see* the painted eavesdropper, we must also *hear* her.<sup>8</sup> We have to listen to her cries for help using the

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<sup>6</sup> The mirror hanging on the wall doubly connotes absence in the space of the viewer. Whereas the mirror in Jan van Eyck's famous *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) gives the painter a technical excuse to paint two human figures in the space normally occupied by the viewer - in Van Eyck's case they are no doubt wedding guests coming into the room occupied by the young couple - the mirror in Maes' painting shows only what appears to be an open space, at the very most an open door. No human silhouettes are visible. We are thus allowed to catch a glimpse of the space we occupy, but are unable to see ourselves in that space. If the viewer can be assimilated for a moment with the painter—both are outside the picture frame—it would make sense to think, along with Bakhtin, that there can be no image of the viewer as creator in the created work. "We can create an image of any speaker; we can objectively perceive any work or any speech; but this objective image does not enter into the intent or project of the speaker himself and is not created by him as the author of the image" (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.109).

<sup>7</sup> Specialists of Netherlandish art often use the Dutch terms *doorzien* (seeing through) and *inzien* (seeing into) to describe how these consecutively depicted spaces allow viewers to see well into a house or courtyard and observe symbolically significant things happening in these second or third spaces. They commonly refer to Samuel van Hoogstraten as the master of such geometrically aligned spaces. The point of Wolfgang Kemp's book (*Die Räume der Maler*) is to study how such hallways and backrooms can become an efficient means for creating pictures of narrativity, inasmuch as they imply the passage of time from one room to the next. Painters were wont to encourage the viewer's eye to move from one room to the next, thereby showing several episodes in a single story organized more or less chronologically.

<sup>8</sup> "Dostoevsky's hero is not an objectified image but an autonomous discourse, *pure voice*; we do not see him, we hear him" (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.53).

visual clues the painting provides. This painterly enterprise of making the visual work *audible* occurs in a number of ways we propose to explore. It coincides theoretically with Bakhtin's belief that dialogic relations are indeed possible "among images belonging to different art forms" (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.185).

Such an exploration seems entirely faithful to the spirit of Bakhtin's work on art and literature, to the extent that, for him, even within the realm of verbal discourse, we must learn to detect the hidden presence of seemingly absent words active within the linguistic body of present words. In Maes' works, painting explores its relationship with verbal discourse in a number of original ways. Significantly, it accomplishes this work not through a direct depiction of words painted on the canvas or wood panel,<sup>9</sup> but rather by making verbal discourse explicitly *absent* in the iconic depiction, showing only its indirect effects on the persons we see. First and foremost, the six eavesdroppers painted by Nicolaes Maes are all related both communicatively and artistically to many other characters in Dutch painting who sometimes hold one of their ears with a cupped hand, thus indicating with their hands or fingers from where the voices originate of certain undetermined others, and at other times come dashing in through a door, are chatting through an open window, leaning out of it in order to gossip or to gain a better vantage point for seeing or hearing what is going on below. Other characters peek into a house through an uncovered window, or listen from behind a closed door or hide behind a curtain. Maes' contemporary, David Teniers (the younger), also develops the painterly subject of eavesdroppers, but the latter artist (Illustration 2) does this in ways that are both "peripheral" to the main visual material being explored and parodically reminiscent of certain types of religious iconology, that of the Italian *Annunciations* for example and, more specifically, a work originally painted by Giotto.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Svetlana Alpers explores several classical modes of making words visible in seventeenth-century Dutch art, discussing such devices as (1) showing a person reading a book and painting the pages being read; (2) painting a plaque on the walls of a building or inscriptions on a pillar or the floor of a church; (3) showing a blackboard filled with writing near a table; (4) painting messages alongside the artist's signature; (5) adding legends or scrolls at the bottom of the page; or (6) writing in transparent script the words someone is saying, etc. This fascinating discussion is found in Alpers (1983, pp.169-221).

<sup>10</sup> *Annunciation to Saint Anne* (1303–1305).



**Illustration 2.** David Teniers, *The Alchemist*, mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century. Oil on wood panel. Brunswick: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum. 50.7 x 71.2 cm.

Another of Maes' paintings, an *Adoration of the Shepherds*, through a direct rehearsal of Giotto's composition, including its walls, also portrays just such a listening character who breaches the boundary between inside and out (Illustration 3).



**Illustration 3.** Nicolaes Maes, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, ca. 1658–1660. Oil on canvas. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum. 119.2 x 94.8 cm.



Here, he captures from the right the words exchanged in the house to the left. However, for our purposes of studying Maes' eavesdroppers, the canvas hanging in the Getty Museum was painted some three to five years after the eavesdropper series had been completed.

In the main, the iconic thinking developed by Nicolaes Maes in the mid-1650s for dealing with eavesdropping remains largely non-religious in nature, although it could be argued that his series studies a peculiar social sin. More importantly for our needs, his eavesdroppers have a specific dialogical dimension that is largely absent from Teniers' works. Maes' eavesdroppers explicitly appeal to the place and the semiotic powers of the viewer; they place the viewer in the uncomfortable place of a linguistically-endowed voyeur.<sup>11</sup> The eavesdropper's multiple gestures, eye movements, contortions of the body, and facial expressions encourage the viewer to verbalize that which is hidden from the painted character's sight, things which might even be too far from the eavesdropper's ears for the latter to capture them all intact. We can readily imagine the need, either on the eavesdropper's part, or on the viewer's, to ask the other to repeat what was just said, to say it more clearly, or perhaps even to give some more explicit details. Many words are called upon to fill in some of the holes left by incomplete visual material or to compensate for overly ambiguous physical gestures.

## 2 Discursive "Holes"

To a certain degree, the visual appeals for words launched by these eavesdroppers in the direction of the viewer operate like the discursive "holes" theorized by Wolfgang Iser and his colleagues of the Constance School. First, these appeals underscore the existence of an incomplete semantic space, one which the beholder must then fill in, according to the types of gaps indicated by the eavesdropping figure.<sup>12</sup> In certain respects, we can even imagine the painted character filling in the

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<sup>11</sup> See Sluijter (2000).

<sup>12</sup> The role of semantic gaps is central to the hermeneutic approach developed by Wolfgang Iser for understanding the reading process. In *The Implied Reader* (1978), he writes the following sentences: "The reader is stimulated into filling the 'empty spaces' between the chapters in order to group them into a coherent whole" (p.226); "Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself" (p.280). It is quite possible that, through this link between text and reader, or more

holes of what the *viewer* says or thinks. But the eavesdropper's semiotic gestures are also much more complex than what we have just indicated, to the extent that they must especially be understood dialogically.

All of Nicolaes Maes' eavesdroppers are faced with a physical barrier of some sort placed between them and the object of their desire. Indeed it is this barrier that, for the painted eavesdropper, transforms what is (for us) of a visible nature into something that is primarily audible. Furthermore, these barriers possess the chronotopic nature of a threshold. More often than not, we see a doorway and sometimes an entire hallway; on two occasions these hallways indicate a second stairway leading either up or down; they can also show a half-closed door. In another of the eavesdropper scenes painted in 1655, and now part of the Guildhall Art Gallery, in London's Mansion House (Illustration 4), there is an additional barrier that Maes decides to include in his composition.



**Illustration 4.** Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper Listening in on her Scolding Mistress*. 1655. Oil on wood panel. London: Mansion House (Guildhall Art Gallery). Harold Samuel Collection. 46.7 x 72.1 cm.

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precisely between a represented character and the reader/beholder, a solid theoretical connection can be established here between visual theory in general and Bakhtin's dialogism in particular. Significantly, this link is already established in one of Bakhtin's early texts, *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* (1990), presumably written in 1929-30, in passages where he discusses processes of empathy at work in self-portraiture. Concerning the tendency of self-portraits to create a feeling of empathy, Bakhtin writes: "I must empathize or project myself into this other human being, see his world axiologically from within him *as he* sees this world, I must put myself in his place and then, after returning to my own place, 'fill in' his horizon through that excess of seeing which opens out from this, my own, place outside him." He then goes on to mention self-portraits painted by Rembrandt and Mikhail Vrubel (p.25). My thanks to the students and colleagues of Beth Brait (PUC-SP/USP/, Brazil) for having insisted, during a stimulating course given in April 2009 (Presence and meanings of quotations in languages/discourses: verbal, visual and verbal-visual), on the theoretical significance of these passages.

Here, we see a moveable curtain that has been painted in the foreground, a device which could potentially cut the *viewer's* vision from the scene unfolding in the background. This is the scene that interests our eavesdropper hiding at the bottom of a first flight of stairs, a scene she cannot see unfolding in the room at the end of a second staircase.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the Mansion House painting stresses the possibility (and even the reality) of sight being blocked for the viewers of this painting in particular, and perhaps also for the reality of art in general. Basing his comments on the study of a Rembrandt painting published by Wolfgang Kemp (1999), Victor Stoichita (1999, pp.98-99) claims for this device the power of showing to the viewer the impossibility of entering the represented scene in the same way that the eavesdropping woman cannot herself enter the space of the scene she wants to overhear. It serves to underline the helpless position of someone who can do no better than passively observe. The servant who attracts the viewer's attention and the curtain that hides a significant part of the desired scene constitute a pair of figures that, for Stoichita, repeat the structure of the work as a whole. "This structure is even more obvious for us to see," he writes, "to the extent that it not only puts representation into play but it also plays with consciousness of representation" (STOICHITA, 1999, p.99). With her smile and her finger, the servant becomes the "focus of events," as Kemp writes, and encourages us to behave like her (KEMP, 1998, p.189).<sup>14</sup>

In this (arguably) first painting of Maes' eavesdropper series,<sup>15</sup> we see that the young Dutch painter is still very much fascinated by an iconic device used on several occasions by his teacher Rembrandt.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, there exist several drawings sketched

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<sup>13</sup> It has also been suggested by several art historians that the curtain serves to hide the person being scolded from our view (quite possibly the older woman's husband or just a person not overly appreciated by the listening housemaid). Whatever the truth of these speculations may be, the curtain is a *trompe-l'oeil* device whose aesthetic purpose could quite well be to indicate that the best place for the viewer to place himself or herself, in order best to appreciate the composition, is precisely to the left of the wood panel, not, coincidentally, in the same general area towards which the maid's eyes are turned. Unless the viewer moves to that spot, he or she will be as blind as the painted heroine herself, and will therefore be unable to serve as an eye witness for this heroine who only has her ears to help her out. The viewer must first move to the left, lend his or her eyes to the eavesdropping maid (who thus can take advantage of the viewer's invisibility) and then be prepared to inform the heroine of what can be seen.

<sup>14</sup> This article contains a section entitled An Analysis: Nicolaes Maes's *The Eavesdropper* (pp.189-194).

<sup>15</sup> Krempel argues that the Boston Eavesdropper is the first of the series (KREMPEL 2000, p.49), whereas Hollander claims this place for the *The Listening Housewife* hanging in Buckingham Palace (2002, p.104). As Maes painted at least three eavesdropper compositions in the same year of 1755, it is perhaps impossible to know which one was actually painted first.

<sup>16</sup> Krempel gives the example of Rembrandt's *Holy Family behind a Curtain* (ca. 1645–1646) as a work of the master which bears heavily on the early work of the pupil. Martha Hollander (2002, pp.106–7) also

by Maes' hand which amply document this fascination. Two of these deserve particular mention: one, catalogued in Werner Sumowski's work on the Rembrandt School, gives a complete version of Rembrandt's *Holy Family with a Curtain*;<sup>17</sup> the other, part of the magnificent collection of drawings housed in Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum (no doubt a study leading to the Mansion House painting), clearly delineates the curtain device (which further highlights the beholder's point of view) and the physical posture needed for the eavesdropper's act. At the same time, however, it omits entirely what the eavesdropper is trying to hear.<sup>18</sup> Such a "pragmatic" view of eavesdropping imputable to Maes the painter is totally compatible with Bakhtin's stress on the (communicative) act: "Bakhtin's emphasis is on the act, the determinate deed of a particular person, the artist or creator in great time, which includes a special relationship to the future" (HAYNES, 1995, p.166). Further, this conscious omission of the object of sight has much to do with what Kemp aptly points out about these painted subjects: they are called "eavesdropper" paintings and not something like "The Couple being Spied Upon" (KEMP, 1998, p.190).<sup>19</sup> In the other two eavesdroppers of 1755, the curtain disappears and our attention is therefore monopolized by another variant of the Bakhtinian threshold chronotope (already doubly present in the Mansion House work), namely the stairway. In the Boston panel (Illustration 5), no doors are closed, but a carefully crafted spatial barrier separates the eavesdropper, this time a man, from what he wants to hear and see.

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draws attention to this link, as does Kemp. While there can be no doubt that Maes borrows the curtain from his master Rembrandt, it is also clear that he uses it in entirely original ways. Behind the curtain can be seen a chair, presumably a nod in the direction of the other two paintings of 1755, which Maes has either already completed or still has in the works. In addition, this chair is empty, perhaps a comment on the invisible space that the real viewer occupies in relation to the painting. To the left of the panel (the direction in which the viewer is encouraged to move) can be seen a still-life scene, hinting once again at the "vanity" of the viewer's "real-life" existence. And this scene includes, among other things, the same pitcher that will appear in the left hand of the Wallace eavesdropper, one year later.

<sup>17</sup> *The Holy Family* (drawn after Rembrandt) (MAES, ca. 1748-1750); see Penny (1987, p.57, fig. 59) and Sumowski (1979, no. 1790x). Kemp indicates that Maes copied this painting not once, but several times (1998, p.192). As is well known, the curtain device was practiced by many Dutch painters including Gerrit Dou, Jan Steen, and Johannes Vermeer. On this point, see Bailey (2002, p.87).

<sup>18</sup> *The Eavesdropper* (MAES, ca. 1660-1655); this elision of "what is seen" in favour of "the apparatus for seeing" can be documented in other works drawn or painted by Maes. William Robinson points in particular to the sketch he calls a *Man descending a staircase* (ca. 1655), where the physical space of the spying act is clearly delineated in contrast with the scene at the bottom of the stairs, which remains sketchy. There is another significant feature in this work: it contains another *male* eavesdropper. For an illustration, see Robinson (1989, p.149, fig. 7).

<sup>19</sup> Curiously enough, Christopher Lloyd (2004, p.92), in comments reproduced on the official website of the Royal Collection, refers to one of the eavesdropper paintings (hanging in Apsley House, London) as *Lovers with a Woman Listening*.



**Illustration 5.** Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, ca. 1655–56. Oil on wood panel. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts. 72.4 x 52.1 cm.

He is on his way down a winding stairway, made ostensibly of wood, therefore experiencing great difficulty in not making too much noise. One must, of course, consider that he may be wearing wooden-soled house shoes and, even if he is wearing linen slippers, the wooden stairs are bound to creak. Too much noise would naturally startle the man and woman visible in the small room to our right. In order for the eavesdropper painting to function, the spied upon couple must not know that they are being watched.<sup>20</sup> Not only is the eavesdropper being careful not to make any noise, but something else is bothering him, perhaps a sound, perhaps a surprising turn of events issuing from his right, or even from his left, maybe a sign of movement he was not

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<sup>20</sup> In the *Salon of 1765*, Denis Diderot (1995, p.43) refers to certain generic scenes for which it is aesthetically necessary that the persons being viewed not know that they are being observed. In his comments, he thus objects to the *Roman Charity* presented during that year by Louis-Jean-François Lagrenée (this genre normally shows a well-endowed woman secretly giving her milk-filled breast to an old prisoner - her father according to certain authors - in order to keep him from starvation). Diderot writes: "I absolutely reject the notion of having this unfortunate old man and this benevolent woman suspicious of being observed; this suspicion impedes the action and destroys the subject."

expecting to see. Hollander refers to this painting as *The Jealous Husband*, thereby hinting at yet another reason why he is curious to learn what is going in his house. Moreover, if this is a jealous man, he is certainly not jealous in solitude and he is also not jealous in the expected way, because the woman in the back appears to be a servant (not his wife), and he is clearly gesturing toward someone to his right, thus indicating he wants to share his discovery with someone else. His hand could of course be simply fondling his beard—perhaps as a sign of puzzled thinking (“How I am going to pull this off without attracting their attention?”) - or, then again, it might signal to the author of some noise coming from his right (a careful look at the eavesdropper’s eyes show that his attention is directed towards the left of our ideal vantage point) that the two of them are in this together - “So please! We had better be careful.”

This series of physical and spatial barriers - Maes deftly exploits the newel of the staircase—indicates that our male eavesdropper has probably not yet seen or heard everything that he would like to apprehend. This barrier space is adorned with an elaborate lamp, as if to highlight its importance. We, the viewers, are situated in a space that the eavesdropper would like to be able to occupy—a potential passageway or a near future for him - the place where his trajectory would lead him, if only he could figure out a way to get there without being noticed by the flirting couple in the back room; that is to say, he realizes, suddenly, that he must avoid stepping onto the straw floor mat at the bottom of the stairs, as it most certainly lies in the couple’s field of vision. One notices the eavesdropper’s right foot as it dangles over the edge of the last step, a physical gesture which gives visual form, as Wayne Franits and Martha Hollander have inventively pointed out, to a significant moment of hesitation (HOLLANDER, 1994, p.156).<sup>21</sup> For in the Boston eavesdropper, a special moment lies, as it were, *outside of time* inasmuch as it puts a halt to the normal passage of time, or at least to the normal movement of someone on a stairway passing from top to bottom. The eavesdropper wishes for a way to reduce the number of directions ordinarily available to the sense of hearing, going so far as to hope that hearing will now work in one direction only: “We can hear them but let’s not let them hear us.” He wishes for a similar one-way direction

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<sup>21</sup> We should further point out that the dangling foot of the Boston eavesdropper is seen in profile, while the feet of the Buckingham Palace (Wallace Collection, Dordrecht and Apsley House) eavesdroppers droop forward *toward us*, a much more technically difficult pose to paint on Maes’ part. Only the Mansion House eavesdropper is all the way down (or up) the stairs and she appears to have removed one of her slippers in order to be sure that her feet make no noise.

for sight as well, perfectly prepared, as was the eavesdropper of the Mansion House panel, to put the fact that the real viewer is invisible to his own advantage. As in all the other eavesdropper pictures, the listening hero wishes to catch the viewer's attention in order to show the latter an important detail tucked away in the corner of the composition. "Acting as our pictorial ambassador within the work, [the eavesdropper] enters into a teasing and illusory intimacy with us, mediating our perception of the painting" (COLE, 2006, p.31).

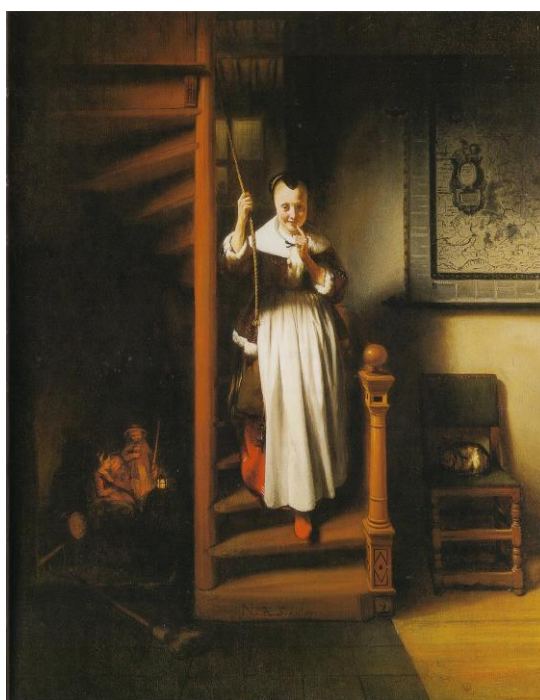
This is why he dare not step any further, why he has ostensibly stopped in his tracks. He no doubt wishes to remain invisible like the viewer outside the frame whose complicity he now wishes to enlist. "I'll do the listening, if you can do the looking. And then we can compare our notes." What is at issue here is the capacity of both words and images to make metalinguistic comments *about* one another - and *with* one another. If, for example, the listening housewife in the Wallace Collection can be said to incarnate a painterly figure of visual incompleteness - she is deprived of the ability to see the scene in detail and she can only cobble it together from the bits and pieces she hears—she is also a character willing to turn to verbal language in order to gain a more complete picture of the world in which she lives. We the beholders can thus be said to be characters in her world, figures who translate our view of the entire picture into verbal language for her benefit.

I believe that there is a tidy Bakhtinian framework for explaining how the various semiotic viewpoints at work within this painting come together in a more or less cooperative manner. Each semiotic viewpoint is itself incomplete and turns to another to get a more comprehensive perspective on the world. One "language" comments on the other, as it were, pointing out its blind spots and offering supplementary material for the other: mutually and reciprocally. With Bakhtin, we must hold that all types of language, *in order to be called human*, need not only to be able to analyze themselves, but also to comment on other types of language as well. They do this through such mechanisms as indirect speech, quotation, allusion, paraphrase, and the definition of terms, discursive phenomena which are clearly relevant to a dialogic analysis of how each of our eavesdropper compositions works.

While it is clear that verbal language can be used to comment upon visual works - and this we do whenever we attempt to respond to the eavesdropper's invitation to say

what we can see - Bakhtin also give us several useful tools for understanding how visual art comments, from its own particular point of view, on verbal language. It is important not to forget the tremendous weight that Bakhtin gave to seeing as the implicit model of many of the Goethean chronotopes<sup>22</sup> he uncovered in the German writer's works. It is not a question of visual art getting the upper hand over verbal language or, for that matter, of verbal language displaying much more explanatory power than does painting. On the contrary, what we have in Nicolaes Maes' eavesdroppers is an interesting experiment in the dialogic art of making verbal language and iconic expression work together in imaginative ways.

In what is sometimes claimed to be the simplest of the eavesdropper paintings,<sup>23</sup> the listening housewife of the Royal Collection (Illustration 6) demands that we understand the implicitly exchanged words between painted character and invisible beholder in a peculiar way.



**Illustration 6.** Nicolaes Maes, *The Listening Housewife*, 1655. Oil on wood panel. London: Buckingham Palace (Royal Collection). 74.9 x 60.3 cm.

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<sup>22</sup> Editor's Note: In this issue of *Bakhtiniana*, Tatiana Bubnova, in her article "Bakhtin and Benjamin: On Goethe and Other Matters," comments on Bakhtin's "aesthetics of the eye" in reference to Goethe.

<sup>23</sup> Hollander bases her claim that the Buckingham Palace painting must be the first in the series on the alleged simplicity of the composition.



It is almost as if they constituted, to use an anachronistic Bakhtinian comparison, one half of a telephone conversation, a conversation that we can overhear when only one of the participants in the conversation is speaking from a space that is within our normal range of hearing. This idea is akin to that of semiotic objects which “are from one side highlighted while from the other side [are] dimmed by heteroglot social opinion, by an alien work about them” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.277). It is probably necessary to qualify this metaphorical comparison involving telephones, frequently used by commentators to explain Bakhtin’s notion of “hidden dialogicality.” As Caryl Emerson has aptly underscored, Bakhtin was more or less allergic to communications technology, preferring even to avoid the telephone.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, the image of a person speaking on the telephone is not exactly pure, unadulterated Bakhtin.<sup>25</sup> Hidden dialogicality is developed in the last chapter of the book on Dostoevsky as being related to (yet significantly different from) “hidden polemic.” Our Russian thinker asks us to “imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.197). Bakhtin continues his imaginary example in a way that strongly suggests the possibility of adapting it for use in our study of Maes’ eavesdropper. He further writes: “The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.197).

Four comments are perhaps in order at this point: first, I do not believe that we are distorting Bakhtin’s thinking if we suggest that the “deep traces” of which he speaks, in reference to the first speaker, could indeed be given a meaningful form by iconic means. For our Dutch painter, they correspond to the simultaneously (and ambiguously) puzzled, bemused, inviting, and startled looks we have seen on our eavesdropper’s face. We remember, too, that these looks are coupled with inquisitive eyes and a highly significant gesture of the index finger.

Second, Bakhtin speaks of a first speaker who is visible (in our case the eavesdropping figure), and of a second speaker whose words and body are absent except in the effects they exert on the expressive means of the first speaker, the one we can hear (or in Maes’ case, the one we can see). Once again, these descriptions correspond

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<sup>24</sup> Such remarks can be found in Emerson, 1994, p.298 and 1997, p.54.

<sup>25</sup> The image is already cited in Holquist and Clark, 1984, p.207 as “a common illustration.”

amazingly well to the invisible but implicitly active viewer or viewers who are constantly addressed in a number of ways by the movements, gestures, eyes, and bodily posture of the eavesdropper.

Third, this use of “hidden dialogicality” — and our adaptation of words “with a sideward glance” or “with a two-fold direction” — amply demonstrate that it is not necessary, when reading Bakhtin, to share views concerning what has been described as mistrust on his part vis-à-vis the “immediate and non-negotiable impact of images” (EMERSON, 1994, p.298).

Fourth, it is surely no coincidence that the Bakhtinian passage we quoted above concerning a dialogue that is only half-present should occur in the context where he has just mentioned the autobiographical genres of literature. Significantly for us, autobiography and self-portraiture are obviously connected in important ways. In the “Author and Hero” essay, for example, autobiography constitutes one of those important considerations where painting is explicitly referred to.

If Maes’ eavesdroppers demand that we be creative with what we as viewers can see, this is because they will also demand that we transfer what can be seen into something that might be heard. Furthermore, when looking at this series of works, what we “hear” is really nothing more, and nothing less, than what we see. From what we as absent and invisible others creatively hear from a visible person, standing very nearby, we feel the need to fill in the inaudible remainder; that is to say, from what the painting shows with its details, we are given the desire to see more.

For all these reasons, I find it difficult to accept the claim that the Buckingham eavesdropper painting (Illustration 6) is rather simple. The look on the listening housewife’s face is anything but simple or straightforward. Like the male listener in the Boston painting (Illustration 5), this eavesdropper also brings her index finger to her mouth. This finger and mouth gesture can take on several entirely different meanings, wavering as it does between a request not to make any noise, an invitation to join in the fun and, much more clearly than in the Boston picture, an indication of either mischievous curiosity or even outright temptation. Different also from the finger-to-the-lips and chin gesture of the eavesdropper in the Wallace Collection (Illustration 1) - which has an admittedly much fuller set of “other” objects in the in-between space between kitchen and basement than does the Buckingham piece - the facial expression,

combined with an ambiguous finger in the Queen's wooden panel provides for a complex ensemble of possible interpretations.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, this wooden panel contains an element that serves to highlight the enterprise of looking in ways that the other "listening" character could never do: here there is an added character in the desired space, perhaps the housewife's husband, who is holding a lamp in an effort to shed light on the racket downstairs. This third person who now sees has obviously beaten the listening housewife to the mark, a situation that makes an additional candidate for possible verbal interrogation. All this explains the housewife's complex face, which could also be interpreted as sheer disbelief, or utter astonishment. From the housewife's perspective, there are now at least four persons who will now have a lot of explaining to do about this whole episode.

### 3 "Listening" Carefully to the Painting

A Bakhtinian study concerned with the pragmatics of imagery requires a careful examination of all the components of the "utterance" and its context. We need to give particular relevance to the agents of listening, observing, and reading as three integral parts of the communicative act. We also need to consider elements of time and chronology. Certain images call out to us, ask us implicitly to perform such and such an act, require that we "listen" very carefully to some complicated instructions. Listening is built into the general compositional structure of these paintings and words are engendered for our minds' ears by the iconic signs they include. An attempt to describe, in Bakhtinian terms, what it would mean to listen to painting should perhaps start with images which seem to call out to us. While good conversation is premised on the art of

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<sup>26</sup> Hollander adds further possible meanings for this thoroughly "equivocal" gesture: its implicit intertextual allusions to famous paintings from the past. Let us add to what she says the desirability of returning to even older paintings than those by the early seventeenth-century Dutch. It is instructive to remember that Fra Angelico's famous fifteenth century fresco depicting Saint Peter the martyr (ca. 1440-43), with his finger prominently represented as touching his lips, is itself a repainting of Giotto's (1325) fresco depicting an allegory of obedience. It, in turn, is a Christian remake of ancient statues of Harpocrates, the Greek god of silence. The ambiguity of the finger placed on the lips stems from the fact that the index finger can indicate not only a command, but can also fulfill the functions of inviting, singling out, and especially of showing. These issues make for fascinating reading in the work of André Chastel (1986 and 2001).

listening, good appreciation of the type explored by Maes also requires perfected techniques for listening.

For this inquiry, it is important to explore listening not in the ways Peter Szendy's most recent work would encourage us to do, i.e., as something based on almost paranoid fear of the outside, but rather as an essential component of a more generally happy and productive exercise of active understanding.<sup>27</sup> Here, listening becomes not only an ethical desideratum, but also a semiotic necessity, possessing definite links with what I referred to above as "dialogic curiosity." An active listener can be seen in the person of John Oswald, for example, an almost contemporary Canadian "musician" who produced a unique album, called *Plunderphonics* (since banned from public distribution) containing all his electronically enhanced ways of listening to other musicians' music. Szendy describes the dustcover of the 1989 album, including the fake photo of Michael Jackson's head pasted over the body of a nude woman (SZENDY, 2001, pp.118-19). The photomontage was a perfect image of how Oswald manipulated music in his listening work.

In a similar way, a visual study of Maes' eavesdroppers can give us an opportunity for exploring "active understanding" as deployed in the medium of painting. It also provides a unique way of exploring, in Bakhtinian terms, a surprisingly profound unity between art and literature, inasmuch as it concentrates on a limited number of agents who are crucial to the communicative act. These agents give visual flesh and blood to those varied forms of communication which embody "a sideward glance." When viewed as portraits of everyday people experiencing their everyday life situations, Maes' painted characters look at us squarely in the eye. But they do this in a way that is subtly different from the means employed by the great Protestant portraitists of Maes' time, Rembrandt, Gerard Ter Borch, van Dyck, or even the Catholic Rubens. The subjects painted in Maes' eavesdropping portraits - if we can be permitted for a moment to call them portraits, for Maes will indeed become a very reputable portraitist *after* he has completed his eavesdropper series—are not content with merely looking the

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<sup>27</sup> Whereas a paranoid vision of listening is largely present in Peter Szendy's *Sur écoute. Esthétique de l'espionnage* (2007), a much less cynical vision of listening is developed in his earlier *Écoute. Une histoire de nos oreilles* (2001). The term "active understanding" stems, of course, from Voloshinov's *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*: "Word comes into contact with word. The context of this inner speech is the locale in which another's utterance is received, comprehended, and evaluated; it is where the speaker's active orientation takes place" (1986, p.119).

viewer straight in the eye but, more importantly for us, they insist on making specifically verbal appeals and initiating a time sequence consisting of answers and further replies. These paintings of eavesdroppers thus point out a peculiar non-self-sufficiency on the part of the painted hero or heroine. As Voloshinov writes in a key passage: “I can realize itself verbally only on the basis of *we*” (VOLOSHINOV, 1976, p.100).

Part of the need for linguistic completion has to do with what I have earlier referred to as “dialogic curiosity.” In Western cultures, the history of what we today call curiosity is a particularly complex one, winding its way between, on the one hand, an increasingly moralizing vision of curiosity, which denigrated people unable to “mind their own business” and, on the other, an ancient Latin tradition, based on the etymological meaning of the word curiosity. The latter is tightly knit into a civil vision of human society and it involves *cura* in the Latin sense, that is to say, *care* for the other: care for the other’s well-being, care for the other’s problems, beliefs, and preferences. Curiosity in the Roman sense is the ability to take the other’s well-being into account within one’s own parameters and ways of behaving. Beginning more or less with the age of Rationalism (the seventeenth century), Western societies tend toward a rather strict separation of two sorts of curiosity, the *lower* type which involves indiscreet meddling in other people’s affairs and the *higher* one that is epitomized by a scientist’s disinterested desire to learn new things. Note in Illustration 7, for example, in Rembrandt’s famous painting of *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, the distinctly scientific version of curiosity which is painted on a student’s fascinated, if not fascinating face.



**Illustration 7.** Rembrandt, detail from *Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632. Oil on canvas. The Hague: Mauritshuis. 169.5 x 216.5

Significantly, however, both of these types of curiosity leave behind the fundamentally “dialogic” nature of the ancient notion of curiosity, the one based on civilized *cura*, and very much present within Renaissance notions of polite conversation. It is important therefore to understand that the third type of curiosity, the older one based on *cura*, had not yet been entirely forgotten in seventeenth-century Europe, despite the increasingly aggressive character of the moralizing and scientific forms. In religious iconology, it takes on a multi-sensorial dimension, for example in paintings that depict Christ’s *Noli Me Tangere* encounter with Mary Magdalene. The positive examples of dialogic curiosity, within seventeenth-century religious art, stand in stark contrast with its negative forms, both monologic and objectifying in nature, which can be seen in the numerous paintings depicting Suzanne and the two Elders. In contrast to such works, Nicolaes Maes’ eavesdropper paintings represent a secularized

version of dialogic curiosity, with all its productive ambiguities in relation to their attitude vis-à-vis curiosity *per se*, and to the issue of whether it is best to be curious alone or with someone else. Together, the religiously cast paintings and the secular ones allow us to see how many paintings of the seventeenth century give us a multi-sensorial depiction of curiosity, one that can also foster a direct intellectual link with the ancient notions of curiosity based on *cura*. We suggested above that the eavesdroppers might be bored in their mundane existence; we now suggest that their desire to share their amusing adventures with someone else can be construed in positive terms.

Within Maes' own corpus of works, we can extract a number of significant clues as to how just such a positively construed version of curiosity would work. First, dialogic curiosity needs an element of vocative discourse, by means of which a painted character makes a direct appeal to the person looking at the painting from "the outside." The inside character voices an appeal to that same invisible viewer. The vocative function of human language is expressed in ways which make the artwork impart visual form to a sort of second person pronoun, even in the absence of any verbal language *per se*. This scenario would suggest, at the very least, that the "vocative case" is not exactly specific to verbal language since it can also be carried out by figurative painting with its abundance of bodily-based figures and movements, including in particular careful representations of the human eye.<sup>28</sup> In the earliest of Maes' known works, those painted approximately two years before he began his eavesdropper series, such an element is not yet in place. Specialists remark that in 1655, for unexplained reasons, something almost magical transpires in Maes' artistic career that resulted in two amazingly productive years. In 1755, in addition to three eavesdroppers, Maes will also paint one of his first portraits, that of a young girl crouched beside a cradle where a baby is sleeping. With her remarkably detailed eyes, this girl seems to be staring into an empty space, not yet into the viewer's eyes.<sup>29</sup> In that same busy year of 1755, Maes will also paint *De slapende Keukenmeid* [*The Idle Servant*], a work that shows, next to the woman sleeping in the middle of a rather large pile of dirty pots and pans, a second standing woman (presumably the mistress of the house), who is gesturing with her left hand towards the sleeping maid while looking at her viewers straight in the eye<sup>30</sup> as if to say

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<sup>28</sup> See on these points my essay *Le vocatif des textes écrit et visuel* (2003).

<sup>29</sup> *A Little Girl Rocking a Cradle* (MAES, ca. 1655).

<sup>30</sup> *The Idle servant* [*De slapende Keukenmeid*] (MAES, 1655).

“Would you take a look at this lazy kitchen maid?” or “When you think that the neighbours called her a hardworking young lady!” Such are the first necessities of dialogic curiosity in the early paintings of Nicolaes Maes: there needs to be some sort of mechanism whereby one (or more) of the painted characters makes a direct appeal to someone situated outside the picture frame.

Second, a core element in the appeal launched by a painted character needs to include an enjoinder not to make any noise. Peace and quiet are necessary in order to allow our painted characters to execute what promises to be a delicate task. In yet another of the many 1655 paintings in Maes’ repertoire, this delicate task takes the form of a woman showing to the viewer that her husband has a nasty habit of falling asleep at the most inopportune of moments.<sup>31</sup> His slumber is so deep that it is possible for anyone, while he sleeps, to rob him of virtually everything he owns. Maes’ heroine thus decides to give us a convincing demonstration of her husband’s weakness: before our eyes, she will sneak her left hand into his left pocket and remove all his money. And lo and behold, he will continue to snore. Just one word of caution however: in order for this demonstration to work, the viewer will have to remain perfectly still so as not to distract either the robbing wife during this tricky operation, or the sleeping husband beside her. With her left hand in his pocket, and her right index finger in front of her smiling lips (this must be one of Maes’ best smiles), the task of stealing the sleeping man’s money is carried out without a hitch.

Third, the element of someone looking in on the eavesdropper from an outside space is also necessary, even if in early experiments Maes’ person on the outside does not yet interact with the person painted in the inside.<sup>32</sup> While interaction between an inside character and an outside one is essential, any old type of interaction will not do. In the eavesdropper compositions, the ambiguity of threshold chronotopes is exploited in particular ways. All of the eavesdropping figures are represented in a twilight zone, something the early genre paintings do not do. If in *The Virtuous Woman* (also of 1655) this outside person is present, there is nevertheless no possible contact between the

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<sup>31</sup> *A Sleeping Man Robbed by a Woman* (MAES, ca. 1655). For a reproduction of this painting, see Krempel (2000, p.140, fig. 16).

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, *The Virtuous Woman* (MAES, ca. 1655). The painting features what appears to be a young boy, outside on the left side of the canvas, who is leering through a window in the direction of the virtuous woman who, inside the house, is busy sewing (when she is not busy reading). She seems to be completely unaware of the young boy outside.



person on the outside and the heroine inside her home. And even though contact occurs in this painting between heroine and viewer, their communication does not concern any third person or party.

Only when these (and other) elements have been put into place will Maes the painter be ready to undertake his eavesdropper works in a context of dialogic curiosity. In addition to the elements we have just described, the curious eavesdropper painting needs to adopt certain fundamental ambiguities in its iconic language (Illustration 8).



**Illustration 8.** *The Eavesdropper* (MAES, 1657). Oil on canvas. Dordrechts Museum (on loan from the Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst of The Hague). 92.5 x 122 cm.

Here we have a work in which the eavesdropping woman is coming down the stairway toward us, much like the eavesdropper in Buckingham Palace. And like most of Maes' other eavesdroppers, she suddenly stops her movement up or down the stairs, wondering whether she really has enough courage to undertake one final step. Will she perhaps turn around and go back up the stairs without ever having seen what we see? The near-empty wine glass she is holding may be enough to give her the fortitude she needs to dally a little longer. The finger on her right hand has not quite made its way to her lips, thus underscoring, in the clearest of ways, the intrinsic ambiguity of an index finger: is this a gesture asking us not to reveal her secret arrival? Or is it rather a private gesture, for her alone, as if the gesture were itself part of her inner speech made visible, suggesting more or less the question "What should I do now?", or constituting a falsely

naïve interrogation put to herself: “What was it that I wanted to do down here?” The finger pointed in the air might be a “naughty you” (“Do you find what’s going on downstairs acceptable?”), just as it could signify “naughty me” (“I can’t believe I tolerate this type of behaviour in my own house”). This rich ambiguity is palpable everywhere within the space occupied by the eavesdropping mistress. It especially concerns the possible addressees of her pointing finger. This same ambiguity is enhanced by the eavesdropper’s exquisite smile and her glimmering eyes. We cannot help but notice that the finger is really not placed on her lips, but rather is pointing upward, in the direction of a sculpture we can barely see, perched high up on the wall above the entrance way. With a bit of concentration, we can decipher four letters under this figure: J-U-N-O. Is the protectress of married women now going to keep our tipsy mistress from straying any further in the direction of the flirtatious couple visible to the right?

Part of the complexities this canvas suggests with all its spatial configurations has to do with the eavesdropper’s intention to look at others, while hoping not to be seen herself. Seeing without being seen does not, however, explain why our eavesdroppers love to be seen by us; they only balk at being seen by those on whom they themselves are spying. The Dordrecht painting displays a whole series of figures (both animal and human) that remain unaware that we may be looking at them. Who is looking at whom? Are the multiple cats of these paintings simply to be observed as ornaments or are they secretly looking back at us?

We especially notice many different spaces joining onto the Dordrecht eavesdropper’s complex *voorhuis*. The space depicted in the canvas is composed of eight conjoint rooms, some of which permit a glimpse of what they contain. It should be noted moreover that such a complex interior does not in any shape or form correspond to how a real Dutch house would have looked during the Golden Age (FRANITS, 2004, p.155). Not about representing domestic space in a realistic manner, but much more about how space organizes sight, Maes’ eavesdropper paintings also explore the transgressions of sight. The Dordrecht painting deals with how smaller spaces can join together to form a single ambiguous zone. As Georgina Cole writes:

The space of this painting is composed of a series of perforated architectural layers superimposed on one another, each revising and

fragmenting the other until the composition is entirely framed within the arch or rectangle of a doorway. The doorway is the central motif among a series of architectural frames that allow the eye to enter deep into the space of the house (COLE, 2006, p.28).

Each one of these represented spaces is always attached to another one. This is “double-voiced discourse,” coming in the form of a painterly discourse with “a two-fold direction” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.185). Everything appears to be in between a first thing and a second one. Richard Helgeren counts at least four ways in which the “inbetweenness” (as he calls it) is so strongly suggested in the Dordrecht *Eavesdropper* that it becomes for him the main subject of the entire composition: “between upstairs and down, between black coat and red, between husband and soldier, between domesticity and worldliness” (HELGERSEN, 2000, p.94). The notion of unfinished work (holding on to a hanging rope, the appearance of knitting needles, a broom, a dangling foot) is closely linked to the threshold: the visual thematization of stairways, entrances, windows, hallways, and apertures occurs everywhere on the canvas in conformity with the multiplication of “other spaces.” But there is something else at work here: this painting is not so much about spaces *within* spaces (MARIN, 1996, pp.79-95) as it concerns a multiplication of more or less contiguous spaces. None of them seems to be “the master space,” and none of them appears to encompass the others. We notice, in addition, several listening housewives who carry keys, indicating not only that they must be the mistresses of their respective households, but further that such a character incarnates spectatorship for the viewer, given that she has a secret access to every visible space.

Further, as we said earlier, we have yet to consider the element of time, the fact that moments of time are likewise tucked away between other moments. We have assumed until now that the eavesdroppers we see are calling out to us at the *beginning* of an exchange. But there is no reason to believe that what we see is necessarily the first moment of such an encounter. Imagining a sequence of questions and answers provides an additional tool for grasping the many ambiguities of our eavesdroppers’ smiles. For indeed, certain smiles may be a reaction to what the eavesdropper has just learned *from us* about the scene she cannot see. Whatever the truth of such a temporal suggestion may be, we are nevertheless alerted, once again, to the fact that the smiles and fingers of our eavesdroppers bear the traces of others’ invisible words.

We have not yet spoken of the second-last eavesdropper that Nicolaes Maes painted (Illustration 9), a composition which comments, as does the Boston panel, on an interrupted act of working with a book. It is of course tempting to say that the painting of open books merely constitutes a playful allusion to the multiple portraits of the Dutch Golden Age, where someone, young or old, is depicted in the act of reading. And yet the Apsley House painting does something more than merely allude to contemporary artists, much more than suggest a parodic link with those hundreds of *Annunciation* paintings, which also show a young maiden caught in the act of reading.



**Illustration 9.** *The Eavesdropper on two Lovers (Allegory of the sense of Hearing)* (MAES, ca. 1656-57). Oil on canvas. London: Apsley House (Piccadilly Room). 57.5 x 66 cm.

The Apsley House eavesdropper is a work about unfinished business, the open books leading us to believe that someone or something important has interrupted her reading. In this respect, it stresses the time of an exchange in ways that are complementary to what we have just said about the effects of a smile. The painting of interruption necessarily contains, in addition, an element of surprise, a Bakhtinian topos *par excellence*. Other eavesdroppers, too, had their ways of connoting an interrupted act, whether it be a dangling foot, a glass of wine, or a pencil behind the ear. The Apsley House eavesdropper appears to be an avid reader (there are books behind her and a large

open book in front of her to the right), and she is the only one of our painted heroes and heroines who has been placed directly behind a very large door. Will it be enough to hold her back?

Of course, the door can be seen either as an obstacle or as an opportunity. Discussing the doorway chronotope, Georgina Cole refers to Edward Casey in saying that the doorway is a “non-place,” that is to say, “an extraterritorial zone of spatial experience without a specific topology.”<sup>33</sup> The doorway both delineates a space, different from other spaces, at the same time as it joins different spaces together. Viewed at one moment as a possible barrier, a doorway can also prompt us to ask two further questions: (1) If the doorway constitutes an obstacle, for whom is it a barrier? (2) If the doorway can be seen as an obstacle, to what precisely can it be said to be preventing our access? Does it tend, in the eavesdropper paintings, to incarnate an impediment that keeps the listening character from entering our invisible space, thus serving to keep him or her *in their place*? Does it merely serve to remind us that it is impossible for the eavesdropper to be part of our own chronotope? The doorway functions in these paintings “as a liminal, ‘in-between’ area, as it is a zone that remains ‘uncaptured’ by either spatial institution—being neither inside nor outside, private nor public, civic nor domestic, upper class nor lower class” (COLE, 2006, p.23). It further underscores an important set of contrasts: solitary work on the left, sexual foreplay on the right; serious learning and calculations on the left, dallying and small talk on the right; the desire to hear more on the left, the desire to be left alone on the right. In many respects, the door serves a purpose similar to that of the curtain in the Mansion House eavesdropper, but its effects apply first to the painted heroine, and only secondarily to us as viewers.

If the intellectual work of our last eavesdropper has been interrupted, it is no doubt up to us to carry on with this same sort of chore. At least this time, the passage to the room the lovers occupy is entirely accessible: we do not have to go up even a single step. We can pretend to read along with our latest heroine, our attention being purportedly given over to our reading, while our real focus is dominated by the hot exchanges going on in front of an open window in the background. Are these goings-on more interesting than what the listening housewife, once again adorned with keys, was

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<sup>33</sup> In her “Wavering Between Two Worlds” (p.19), Cole further discusses Casey’s distinction between a “non place” and “no place at all,” “the latter designating a sheer void.” See Casey, 1998, p.304.

earlier busy reading? Are these books not totally useless for understanding the “real social world” unfolding in the back room, precisely in front of a depiction of exterior reality?

Maes chooses to remain deliciously coy about the answers to any of the questions we might wish to ask about his six eavesdroppers. Here visual ambiguity can be understood as being expressed by two-sided, iconically-based words. Wolfgang Kemp goes so far as to suggest “that the woman would have to give up her eavesdropping because she is so preoccupied with us” (KEMP, 1998, p.189). Such double-edged zones of ambiguity (Bakhtin and Voloshinov refer to the Roman god Janus in order to describe it)<sup>34</sup> appear in different guises, depending on whether we are dealing with verbal language or the languages of images. As John Searle once demonstrated, a simple phrase like “the cat is on the mat” requires that any pictorial representation of this utterance make explicit a large number of parameters (size, race, colour of the cat, position of the cat on the mat, etc.) that verbal language does not need to spell out (SEARLE, 1986, pp.117-136). On the other hand, viewers of our eavesdroppers have noticed multiple occurrences of cats and felt compelled to propose interpretations (witchcraft, lecherousness, infidelity, theft), none of which the artistic image was required to spell out.

I hope that this discussion of Maes, a painter Bakhtin never refers to, will have shown that the fact of keeping Bakhtin in one’s head while reading a work of art is no less revealing about the semantic possibilities of the Russian thinker’s work than studies devoted to digging up his textual sources and checking out his literary references. Bakhtin, as we well know, was not very adept at providing straightforward answers to straightforward questions. Nor is painting exactly talented at giving unequivocal answers, despite the fact that it is supremely good at provoking interesting questions.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration 1. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper (The Listening Housewife)*, 1656. Oil on canvas. London: Wallace Collection. 84.7 x 70.6 cm.

Illustration 2. David Teniers, *The Alchemist*, mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century. Oil on wood panel. Brunswick: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum. 50.7 x 71.2 cm.

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<sup>34</sup> For example, in Bakhtin (1968, p.165). The same reference can be found twice in Voloshinov (1986, pp.23 and 144), thus revealing a deep connection between the two works.

Illustration 3. Nicolaes Maes, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, ca. 1658–1660. Oil on canvas. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum. 119.2 x 94.8 cm.

Illustration 4. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper listening in on her Scolding Mistress*, 1655. Oil on wood panel. London: Mansion House (Guildhall Art Gallery). Harold Samuel Collection. 46.7 x 72.1 cm.

Illustration 5. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, ca. 1655–56. Oil on wood panel. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts. 72.4 x 52.1 cm.

Illustration 6. Nicolaes Maes, *The Listening Housewife*, 1655. Oil on wood panel. London: Buckingham Palace (Royal Collection). 74.9 x 60.3 cm.

Illustration 7. Rembrandt, detail from *Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632. Oil on canvas. The Hague: Mauritshuis. 169.5 x 216.5

Illustration 8. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, 1657. Oil on canvas. Dordrechts Museum (on loan from the Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst of The Hague). 92.5 x 122 cm.

Illustration 9. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper on two Lovers (Allegory of the sense of Hearing)*, ca. 1656–57. Oil on canvas. London: Apsley House (Piccadilly Room). 57.5 x 66 cm.

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