

Stijn Bussels

# Discussions on Naturalism in the Dutch Golden Age

Junius and Vondel

## Realism, Apparent Realism & Naturalism

In *Les Maîtres d'autrefois* of 1876 the French painter and art historian Eugène Fromentin writes:

“Which reason does a Dutch painter have to make a painting? No reason at all; and to be clear, one never asks him. A farmer with a red wine nose looks at you with tears in his eyes and laughs to you with open mouth, while he lifts a can of wine; if the subject is well painted, it has its value.”<sup>1</sup>

Statements like this make a sharp contrast between Dutch artists and their colleagues in Italy and the Southern Netherlands. Fromentin and many of his colleagues saw the Dutch artists as working purely realistically in the sense that they merely copied what they saw in their environment. They painted whatever came before their eyes without any artistic motive or thought.

The emphasis on the ‘realism’ of the Dutch Golden Age was thoroughly contradicted in the twentieth century and certainly with the introduction of iconography in the 1976 exposition “Tot leering en vermaak” or “To Teach and Delight” at the Rijksmuseum as a benchmark.<sup>2</sup> The exposition pointed to the fact that, as realistically as the subjects depicted might appear, these objects go far beyond mere copy. Starting from the logic of iconology, art historians as Eddy de Jongh put forward that seventeenth-century Dutch artists and viewers alike primarily gave an interpretation of an image by relating it to other images

\* Thanks to the editors and Boudewijn Bakker for their careful reading.

1 Eugène Fromentin: *Les maîtres d'autrefois*, Paris 1876, p. 204f: “Quelle raison un peintre hollandais a-t-il de faire un tableau? Aucune; et remarquez qu'on la lui demande jamais. Un paysan au nez aviné vous regarde avec son gros œil et vous rit à pleines dents en levant un broc: si la chose est bien peinte, elle a son prix.” (my translation)

2 Eddy de Jongh (ed.): *Tot leering en vermaak. Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevorstellungen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, exh. (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam), Amsterdam 1976.

and then attributing it specific meaning. The iconological view of the function of art in the seventeenth century had special interest for emblem books, thus the reconstruction of a moralistic visual culture was put at the centre of attention. So from this point of view, Dutch seventeenth-century painting was anything but a straightforward depiction of reality. To underline this, the concept of ‘apparent realism’ was put to the fore.

The introduction of iconology resulted in the fact that thinking about art in the Dutch Golden Age became for a large part hijacked by oscillations between, on the one hand, seeing the painting as pure realism – they were nothing more than direct copies of the artist’s environment – and on the other hand, interpreting the image in a search for a deeper meaning, therefore iconology approaches the image in a similar way as a written text. The objects within a painting had to be deciphered as standing for something different – often a moralistic lesson – than a mere object.

At the start of the twenty-first century, art historians tried to get out of this deadlock by going back to art theory written in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and changing the attention from the subjects depicted to the production and effect of the art work, e.g. the study of the expression ‘naer het leven’ or ‘after life’.<sup>3</sup> In a recent essay, Robert Felfe clarified how the expression emphasises the subject being depicted realistically in the sense of authentically and genuinely, and points to the artistic production and the effect of the image on the viewer as well.<sup>4</sup> Felfe begins with Karel van Mander’s distinction between ‘naer het leven’ and ‘uyt den geest’ or ‘from the mind’ to discuss how the creativity and memory of the artist was introduced in art theory, and also how the label of straight observation gave the work of art epistemological value.

Thanks to this and similar discussions the attention shifted from what we now call realism to naturalism. Realism and naturalism are not synonyms.<sup>5</sup> The former focuses on the ‘realistic’ or ‘apparently realistic’ subject matter, the latter on the creation and perception of the art work in such way that it was experienced as being ‘natural’. The term ‘naturalism’ then is used to name an experience evoked by a work of art, namely the belief in the living presence of the subject depicted. So in recent studies the emphasis moved from what is depicted in the painting to how that painting is created and perceived.

- 3 Boudewijn Bakker: *Nederland naar 't leven. Landschapsprenten uit de Gouden Eeuw*, Zwolle 1993 (Translated into German as Boudewijn Bakker: *Nach der Natur: Holländische Landschaftsgraphik aus dem Goldenen Jahrhundert*, Zwolle 1995. An English translation by the Historians of Netherlandish Art will be published in September 2018) and Boudewijn Bakker: *Au vif – naar 't leven – ad vivum. The Medieval Origin of a Humanist Concept*, in: Anton W.A. Boschloo et al. (ed.): *Aemulatio. Essays in Honor of Eric Jan Sluiter*, Zwolle 2011, pp. 37–52, here 47f.
- 4 Robert Felfe: *Naer het leven. Eine sprachliche Formel zwischen bildgenerierenden übertragungsvorgängen und ästhetischer Vermittlung*, in: Claudia Fritzsche, Karin Leonhard and Gregor J. M. Weber (ed.): *Ad Fontes! Niederländische Kunst der 17. Jahrhunderts in Quellen*, Petersberg 2013, pp. 164–195, here 166f.
- 5 I here use the definitions of ‘realism’ and ‘naturalism’ as discussed in David Summers: *The Judgment of Sense. Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics*, Cambridge 1987, pp. 3–9.

Starting with this shift from research into realism and apparent realism to that of naturalism, I will deal with naturalism as discussed in theories from the Dutch Golden Age regarding the effect of painting and sculpture, as well as the theatre. These theories present the belief in the living presence of a subject as the summit of the painter's, sculptor's or theatre maker's abilities. They look at the viewers as well. Thanks to the viewers' imagination the illusion of living presence could be raised and thus passions enforced. However, the viewers' imagination was restricted by certain limits so that they did not lose themselves completely in naturalism.

## De pictura veterum

The magnum opus of the Anglo-Dutch humanist Franciscus Junius, *De pictura veterum*, was first published in Latin in 1637, a year later translated into English and in 1641 into Dutch, both translations were made by the author himself. Although the book was written in England under the patronage of Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, Thijs Weststeijn recently clarified that it can be closely related to the Dutch Republic as well.<sup>6</sup> Junius gives much attention to the concept of *enargeia* which has close affinities with the modern concept of naturalism as it names the crucial premise of perspicuity to evoke living presence responses. Junius relates *enargeia* to *phantasia* (the mental faculty of imagination) and *phantasiai* (the mental images created by that faculty). Thus he appropriates three concepts from the ancient handbooks of rhetoric to clarify how naturalism and imagination are closely related.<sup>7</sup> To put it in a nutshell: Starting with clear images that artists create in their mind, they make works of art that depict their subject vividly eventually leading to strong responses of the viewers elicited by the fact that they imagine to see the subject in living presence.

- 6 Thijs Weststeijn: *Art and Antiquity in the Netherlands and Britain. The Vernacular Arcadia of Franciscus Junius (1591–1677)*, Leiden 2015. For further research on Junius, see the rich work of Colette Nativel. Her latest publication on Junius with an extended bibliography is: *Lecture du "Traité du sublime" par Franciscus Junius F. F.*, in: Stijn Bussels, Bram Van Oostveldt and Wieneke Jansen (ed.): *Lias. Special Issue. The Sublime in Early Modern Theories of Art and Architecture* 43 (2016), pp. 263–279.
- 7 For the role of the rhetorical concepts of *enargeia*, *phantasia* and *phantasiai* in ancient theories on naturalism, see Stijn Bussels: *The Animated Image. Roman Theory on Naturalism, Vividness and Divine Power*, Berlin 2012, here ch. 2 and 3. For the use of these concepts by Junius, see Thijs Weststeijn: *The Sublime and the "Beholder's Share"*. Junius, Rubens, Rembrandt, in: Stijn Bussels and Bram Van Oostveldt (eds.): *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art, Special Issue. The Sublime and Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Art* 8 (2016), DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2016.8.22; Colette Nativel: *La Théorie de l'enargeia dans la De pictura ueterum de Franciscus Junius. Sources antiques et développements modernes*, in: René Demoris (ed.): *Hommage à Elisabeth Sophie Chéron. Texte et peinture à l'âge classique*, Paris 1990, pp. 73–85 and idem: *Le Triomphe de l'idée de la peinture. La phantasia chez Junius et Bellori*, in: Michele-Caroline Heck (ed.): *Théorie des arts et creation artistique dans l'Europe du Nord du XVIe au début du XVIIIe siècle*, Lille 2002, pp. 219–231.

To clarify that these mental images are more than mere neutral imprints of the objects observed in the natural environment, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian refers to daydreaming as a clear example of how mental images are created that do not come from direct observation. Following Quintilian's emphasis on mental creativity, Junius translates *phantasia* as "lively and active Imagination" (1.3.5).<sup>8</sup> Artists reveal their talent in the way they ingeniously deal with their observations, in other words how they mentally process them. So for Junius naturalism is far more than only copying the natural environment and the artists' *phantasia* is essential to surpass a mere copy.

Besides the artists, Junius sees a crucial role for the viewers as well. *De pictura veterum* was one of the first art theories to pay considerable attention to their responsibility which concentrates on instigating a mental process of bringing the scenes depicted alive with the help of their imagination. So the most important job for the viewers is to imagine, once again in a similar way as daydreaming, that they are not looking at a work of art, but that they are witnessing the event depicted as if in living presence. The viewers need to use their "lively and active Imagination" to start a mental process:

"we should not only goe with our eyes over the severall figures represented in the worke, but we should likewise suffer our mind to enter into a lively consideration of what we see expressed; not otherwise then if wee were present, and saw not the counterfeited image but the reall (sic!) performance of the thing" (3.7.5).<sup>9</sup>

Junius further clarifies that the viewers have to think to witness an event which is not restricted to that one moment depicted in the work of art. Therefore, Junius takes the observation of a hunting scene as example: "When a table of huntings is represented to the sense, the mind also will suddenly enter into a most serious consideration of hunting affaires, and by a lively and active Imagination represent to it selfe all the painefull pleasures of that manly pastime" (3.7.7).<sup>10</sup> Starting from the observation of the depiction of one moment in time – Junius does not bother to give details of which precise moment actually is depicted in the hunting scene – the viewers must mentally reconstruct the entire hunt, from the moment when the dogs scent their prey till the moment the hunters cut the dead animal into pieces. Thus the painting figures as a first step in a mental process that leads to an experience of the whole event, from the very start to the very end.

8 I am using following edition of Junius' own English translation: *The Painting of the Ancients*, ed. by Keith Aldrich, Philipp Fehl and Raina Fehl, Berkeley et al. 1991, here p. 34.

9 Junius 1991 (see n. 8), p. 300.

10 Junius 1991 (see n. 8), p. 303.

## Horrible Pictures

The complexities of naturalism – seen as a result of active mental processes – come most clearly to the fore when Junius discusses representations of horrific scenes. Here, he writes that the *phantasia* of the artist is needed more than ever, since such events are seldom observable and very volatile in our natural environment:

“Artificers are often to expresse such things as can be seldome, and that onely for a little while be seene: as namely, the burning of a Citie, of a village, or else of a company of scattered cottages; the miserable confusion of them that run their ship against a rock; the bloody skirmish of a drunken mercilesse crew, dying in a most horrid urlie burlie on heaps. It is most certain that we doe but seldome meet with such spectacles, neither doe they stay our leisure to let us take a full view of them; all is but a flurt, and away. It is left therefore that our Imagination should lay up carefully what she hath seen, still increasing her store with Images of things unseen, as farre forth as it is possible to conceive them by a relation of what we sometimes beheld” (1.2.3).<sup>11</sup>

Precisely for the same reason, the representation of horrific events can have a most powerful, perhaps too powerful, impact on the viewers of art. Junius presents this as the key motivation to explain how paintings of horrific events present the problems of naturalism most urgently. We just saw that Junius discusses how art has to raise the belief in the living presence of the subject with the help of perspicuity and imagination. However, following the art theoretician, eventually art urges reflection. So another factor needs to be taken into consideration to evaluate naturalism as well. For Junius everything has to be put at stake to prevent viewers from *merely* losing themselves in this kind of daydreaming. They have to preserve their sense of reality and thus avoid believing *unconditionally* that they directly look at the subject represented.

To explain this, Junius presents two phases in the mental processing of the observation of an art work. He refers to Seneca who wrote that the “horrible picture of the sad event of just punishments” does more than only evoking horror in the viewers of the work of art, it has to bring them first into a state of perplexity to let them afterwards all the more profoundly consider the necessity of the use of violence for the benefit of society (1.4.4 quoting Seneca’s *De ira* 2.2.4).<sup>12</sup> Further on, Junius clarifies in more general terms that the strength of (what he calls) “lively” depictions of horror lies in the fact that they overpower completely and thus are impossible to resist. However, this is only a first step in the process of dealing with the art work, since after the first gulf of overwhelming passions reflection is a second step (at least as indispensable as the first step) to come to terms with powerful and certainly horrible images by taking the emotions they evoke into consideration.

11 Junius 1991 (see n. 8), p. 26.

12 Junius 1991 (see n. 8), p. 53.

So viewers have to regain very fast emotional control. Therefore, they may not get totally stupefied when confronted with horrible pictures. The ancient ideal of the moderation of the passions – such as the Stoic *apatheia* and Aristotelian *metriopatheia* – has to be attained.<sup>13</sup> However, specific goals that serve this emotional restraint are not mentioned. Junius stays close to the ancient handbooks of rhetoric by not going into detail how precisely representations are of social benefit. He restricts himself by explaining which conditions need to be followed to bring the viewers to a thorough understanding.

In order to enable the viewer to make the step from the first moment of shock raised by naturalistic depictions to a fruitful reflection, Junius gives artists clear restrictions in what they are allowed to imagine and to depict. For this he quotes the anonymous treatise *Peri hupsous* (in Junius' period incorrectly attributed to Longinus):

“Yet must not the Artificers here give too much scope to their own wittes, but make with *Dionysius Longinus* some difference between the Imaginations of Poets that doe intend only “an astonished admiration,” and of Painters that have no other end but “Perspectuities” (1.5.6 quoting *Peri hupsous* 15.2).<sup>14</sup>

Junius differentiates in how far poets and in how far painters can go in their imagination by restricting painters to (what I just called) realism or to depicting that what can be observed in the natural environment. Junius explains this by writing that poetry is allowed to surpass what he calls the “truth” with a “fabulous excellencie” because the impact of words is less overwhelming than the impact of images. Words “doe more faintly stirre our minde” than pictures which “are drunke in by the eyes” and therefore have a “hidden force to move and compell our minds” (1.4.4).<sup>15</sup> If images bring total astonishment because the artist puts something before the eyes that differs too strongly from what we can see in our surroundings, then the crucial step the viewer has to make towards reflection on the subject observed is seriously obstructed.

Herein, Junius does not only discuss responsibilities for the artist, but for the viewers as well. However, in his explanation of these responsibilities Junius shifts the finality of the reflection from a deeper insight in the subject represented to the aesthetic evaluation. Junius relies on several texts of Cicero that make a clear distinction between the *elegantes*

13 Richard Sorabji: *Emotion and Peace of Mind. From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation*, Oxford 2002. For the moderation of passions in the Dutch Golden Age and the influence of concepts as *apatheia* and *metriopatheia*, see Jan Konst: *Woedende wraakghierigheid en vruchteloos weeklachten. De hartstochten in de Nederlandse tragedie van de zeventiende eeuw*, Assen 1993, esp. Ch. 1.

14 Junius 1991 (see n. 8), pp. 57f. Actually ps.-Longinus does not make a difference between the poet and the painter, but between the poet and the writer of prose. Junius, however, appropriates in a (for him) unproblematic way this statement by leaving out the writer of prose and simply replacing him by the painter.

15 Junius 1991 (see n. 8), p. 52.

(well-educated listeners) and the *idiotae* (inexperienced listeners) (1.5.3).<sup>16</sup> Appropriated within the context of the visual arts, Junius states that in order to correctly deal with the observation of a work of art viewers need an *intelligens judicium* (intelligent judgement) and *eruditos oculos* (learned eyes) look at the “delicacy of rare works” that prevents them from losing themselves in the overwhelming passions that a work of art can raise.

So Junius pays special attention to representations of horror to clarify that naturalism has a most overwhelming effect on the viewers. Paradoxically, the overwhelming effect eventually has to bring them to reflection, which is a reflection on the subject represented and/or on the representational aspect of the work of art. Thus Junius sees a delicate balance between *movere* and *docere*. To urge for reflection the passions are needed, but may not totally stupefy the viewer. Therefore, Junius limits the subjects of painting. Artists have to restrict themselves to representing their environment. Moreover, Junius urges the viewers to become experienced in looking at art. Thus distance can be preserved avoiding losing oneself entirely in the illusion of the living presence of the subject represented.

## Horror in the Tribunal

We already saw Junius referring to the “horrible picture of the sad event of just punishments” to clarify his view on the correct and layered response to naturalism. It is precisely in the context of representing severe jurisdiction that in the milieu around Junius these ideas echoed. In these echoes there are no explicit references to Junius’ theory, we can only speak of shared views. However, the two Dutch authors I am going to discuss have a link with the art theoretician. I will deal with the tragedy of *Brothers* (1640) by Joost van den Vondel since the celebrated poet discusses and uses the overwhelming effect of representing horrible, but just punishment in such a way that there are close affinities with Junius’ discussion. Vondel’s acquaintance with Junius resulted in among others his laudatory poem on the art theoretician published in the preface to the Dutch translation of *De pictura veterum*.

But first I focus on the overwhelming effect of sculpture evoking severe jurisdiction in the Amsterdam Town Hall as discussed in a laudation on the Town Hall by the eccentric squire Everard Meyster published in 1655, the year of the Town Hall’s inauguration.<sup>17</sup> The laudatory poem is entitled *Heavenly Pastoral Play*, as the action is set in Meyster’s own country house in Amersfoort where the Olympian gods gather to discuss the splendour of the Town Hall. They command the most famous artists and theoreticians of art, such as

16 Junius 1991 (see n. 8), p. 65.

17 E.M. [Everard Meyster]: *Hemelsch Land-Spel, Of Goden Kout, Der Amersfoortsche Landdouwen. Bevattende den buytensten Opstal van ’t Nieuwe Stad-Huys, Amsterdam 1655*. For life and work of Everard Meyster, see Dianne Hamer and Wim Meulenkamp: *De dolle Jonker. Leven en werken van Everard Meyster, Amersfoort 1987*.



- 1 Artus Quellinus: *Central wall of the Tribunal*, 1650s; Amsterdam, Town Hall (in the middle: The Biblical judgement of Solomon; on the right: the Roman consul Brutus, who ordered the execution of his own sons for plotting against the republic)

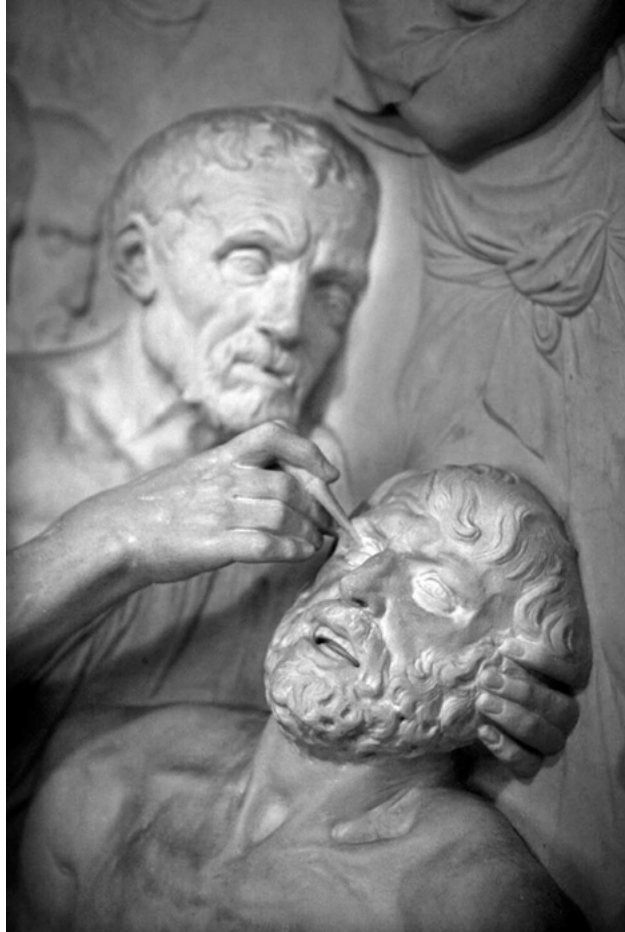
Vitruvius, Apelles, and Michelangelo, to rise from their graves to assist them. The explicit and close link to mid-seventeenth-century Amersfoort is interesting for us, as Alethea Howard, widow of Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, lived in the small city for several years during this period and had many visitors wanting to see her famous collection of paintings. Junius, her librarian, visited her often as well, which makes it very plausible that he must have met Meyster on several occasions.

Let us concentrate on the passage concerning the sculptures of the so-called Vierschaar, the tribunal of the Town Hall (Ill. 1–2).<sup>18</sup> Meyster's poem is only one of the many praising the wonderful Carrara marble, but even more the exceptional refinement of the scenes

- 18 The room was only used for the proclamation of the death penalty; the trial itself happened in another room, and the execution took place in the square in front of the town hall. The city government regarded the proclamation of the death penalty as being so important that they wanted to have a room which was used only for this purpose. See Katharine Fremantle: *The Baroque Town Hall of Amsterdam*, Utrecht 1957, esp. p. 19.



- 2 Detail of fig. 1: The Greek lawgiver Zaleucus submits to his own law against adultery. He orders the cutting out of one of his own eyes to spare one of the eyes of his adulterous son.



sculpted.<sup>19</sup> The Antwerp artist Artus Quellinus was responsible for the abundance of sculptures in the room.<sup>20</sup> Meyster does not concentrate on Quellinus' baroque style heavily influenced by Peter Paul Rubens, by contrast he focuses on defining the effect of naturalism, in other words the belief in the living presence of the sculptures. He comments on the impressive reliefs representing legendarily severe, but just punishments from Greek, Roman and Biblical Antiquity (fig. 1 and 2). Completely in line with Junius, Meyster emphasises that the naturalism of these horrific scenes overwhelms the viewers completely.

19 Stijn Bussels: *Medusa's Terror in the Amsterdam Town Hall, or How to Look at Sculptures in the Dutch Golden Age*, in: Caroline van Eck (ed.): *Idols to Museum Pieces. The Nature of Sculpture, its Historiography and Exhibition History, 1640–1880*, Berlin 2017, pp. 85–102, here p. 95.

20 See Frits Scholten: *Artus Quellinus. Sculptor of Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 2010.



3 Detail of fig. 1: Medusa (placed between the heads of the two pairs of caryatids)

Everyone is “forced to stand still, and dumb in front of them”, but eventually the sculptures give “a lesson and a learning to everyone” that sometimes horrible punishment is needed for the general benefit.<sup>21</sup>

The discussion of the tribunal reaches its climax in a dialogue between Jupiter and Michelangelo which concentrates on the dreadful heads of Medusa and Erynnis, one of the Furies (fig. 3). Michelangelo describes them as follows:

21 Meyster 1655 (see n. 17), p. 75: “en elck voor stil, en stom staen moeten blijven” and “tot eclk eens Les en Leer”.

“Decorated full of snake-hair which robs our sight since they were so clearly visible. They were carved in such a way that they stared at us as if the hellish creatures Erynnis and Medusa wanted to skin us alive, to tear us up and to crush us; We are still trembling as we remember them. I think they follow us still.”<sup>22</sup>

Meyster plays with Michelangelo’s fame as the master of *terribilità*.<sup>23</sup> However, he does not show how the Italian is a most talented artist in making terrifying images, but an excellent viewer skilful in dealing with naturalism. The ideal viewer that Michelangelo incorporates believes in the living presence of the mythological monsters and at the same time preserves self-control. By using clauses such as ‘as if’ and ‘I think’, Meyster’s characterization of Michelangelo proves to have experience in viewing horrific scenes in full perspicuity. He expresses a strong emotional involvement with the heads sculpted, but at the same time he proves able to preserve the necessary mental distance.

Just like Junius, Meyster takes the representation of a horrific scene as a point of focus to discuss the overwhelming effect of the living presence of the figures represented. Meyster does not deal with restrictions for artists as Junius does, but with actual works of art. He corresponds, however, with Junius by indicating that the horrific mythological figures have a far greater overwhelming effect than the reliefs with historical jurisdiction that correspond far closer to our direct environment.

### Vondel’s Preface to *Brothers*

We find another intriguing instance of ideas similar to those of Junius regarding naturalism in Vondel’s tragedy *Brothers* (*Gebroeders*). Once again, these ideas are expressed in the context of representing severe jurisdiction. Vondel frames them theoretically in his preface and puts them into practice in the performance of the tragedy.<sup>24</sup> *Brothers* premiered in 1641, the same year as the Dutch publication of Junius’ *De pictura veterum* (as just mentioned with Vondel’s laudatory poem).<sup>25</sup> Inspired by the second book of Samuel, the tragedy starts with Israel suffering from famine. God reveals that justice has to be done. Years before, David’s predecessor and father-in-law Saul had massacred the Gibeonites. David needs to avenge them, but runs into a moral conflict. He has to choose between his family-in-law and severe, but just punishment. After a long period of doubt, David accepts God’s will. Seven male descendants of Saul are delivered to the Gibeonites, who hang them.

22 Meyster 1655 (see n. 17), p. 78.

23 Bussels 2017 (see n. 19), p. 95.

24 Cf. Stijn Bussels: Vondel’s *Brothers* and the Power of Imagination, in: *Comparative Drama* 49 (2015), pp. 49–69.

25 For an extensive bibliography on *Brothers*, see Jan Bloemendal: Bibliography of Vondel’s Dramas (1850–2010), in: Jan Bloemendal and Frans-Willem Korsten (ed.): *Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679). Dutch Playwright in the Golden Age*, Leiden 2012, pp. 545f.

At the very start of his preface to the dramatic text, Vondel expresses his belief in the positive impact of representations of severe, but just punishment, or more particularly how the Biblical story of *Brothers* “lightens and thunders” and thus “learns how to strive after justice”.<sup>26</sup> Herein, he does not make a distinction between whether the story is rendered in a text, in paint or on the theatre stage, as long as the belief in the living presence of the subject is raised. Further in the preface, the dramatist tries to come to an understanding of the impact of the theatre play by relating it to ideas regarding the impact of naturalism in painting. Therefore, Vondel starts by quoting Virgil: “Here one weeps for earthly things/ That touch man in the heart”.<sup>27</sup> Thus he refers to Aeneas looking at a mural painting vividly depicting a dreadful battle from the Trojan War. The hero is moved to tears not so much because of the direct experience of the battle, but in first instance because the painting starts a process of imagination that eventually brings Aeneas’ dead comrades before his mental eye in full perspicuity. So with this reference to Virgil, Vondel attributes a similar importance to the imagination of the viewer of a naturalistic painting as Junius. He relates art theory to his own theatre play, but without mentioning the art theoretician or his *De pictura veterum* explicitly.

Directly afterward Vondel shifts the attention from the viewer to the painter by referring to the imagination of Peter Paul Rubens. According to Vondel it is the master’s brisk spirit (*wackere geest*) that accomplishes the strong emotional force of his paintings. To clarify this point of view, the dramatist brings in an extraordinary device. Vondel gives an elaborate ekphrasis in which he describes a non-existent painting he attributes to Rubens. The fictitious painting depicts David avenging the Gibeonites. Vondel’s verbal creation of a Rubenesque work of art begins as follows:

“Now I am willing to furnish a glorious and royal scene into a tragedy by following Rubens, the triumph of the pencils of our century. Rubens starts drawing, ordering and painting. His brisk spirit mind does not rest until his piece of work is finished.”<sup>28</sup>

So just as Junius, Vondel makes the mental process of imagination central to the creation of a painting. However, starting from the *ut pictura poesis* dictum, Vondel not only honours Rubens with this emphasis on mental creativity to create naturalism in his paintings moving the viewers deeply, but he also relates naturalistic painting to the creation of his

26 “blixemt en dondert [...] leert rechtvaardigheid betrachten.” The preface to *Brothers* is included in Joost van den Vondel: *Gebroeders*, in: Joost van den Vondel: *Treurspel*, ed. by Kare Langvik-Johannessen, Antwerpen et al. 1975, pp. 43–53, here p. 43. Quotations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text. All translations are mine.

27 Vondel 1975 (see n. 26), p. 46 (77f. quoting Aeneid 1.462): “Hier beschreit men ‘s werelds zaecken,/ Die den mensch aen ‘t harte raecten.”

28 Vondel 1975 (see n. 26), p. 46 (79–82): “Hier wordt ik belust, om door Rubens, de glory der penseelen onzer eeuw, een heerlijk en koninklijk tafereel, als een treurtooneel, te stofereen. Hy valt aen het teekenen, ordineeren, en schilderen, nocht zijn wackere geest rust eer het werkstuk voltoit zy.”

own tragedy. In order to make the theatregoers believe in the living presence of the scenes performed, Vondel himself needs to have a “brisk spirit” as well. Thus the international aura of the Antwerp master is appropriated. Thanks to Vondel’s own verbal creation of a non-existent painting by Rubens, he can present himself as a writer who uses his (what Junius calls) “lively and active Imagination” to have a strong emotional impact on his audience in just the same way as Rubens.

The close link that Vondel sees between naturalism and the role of imagination in painting and in tragedy may not surprise us. If we look at Dutch poetics of that period, we see how the ideas regarding painting are in a strikingly similar way expressed for the tragedy. Given the fact that the poetics are earlier than Junius’ and Vondel’s texts, their ideas regarding naturalism and imagination might have been inspired by the poetics. In 1611, the Dutch humanist Daniel Heinsius published his *De tragica constitutio*.<sup>29</sup> This immediately had a great influence on dramatists, both in the Netherlands and far beyond. Vondel even mentions Heinsius explicitly as his teacher in the theory of tragedy.<sup>30</sup> Following ancient texts such as Cicero’s *Orator*, Heinsius pointed out that the tragic poet has to create mental images to transport himself into the characters of his tragedy. Thus the tragic poet can present his characters in such naturalism that the audience experiences them as real men and women instead of representations.<sup>31</sup>

Further Heinsius points – once again in striking correspondence with what Junius and Vondel will later write – at the role of the imagination of the theatregoer (or the reader of the dramatic text), especially in his explanation of *catharsis*. Aristotle uses *catharsis* in his famous definition of the tragedy, but gives no further explanation of what he actually means with it. He describes the goal of tragedy as “through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions”.<sup>32</sup> Heinsius explains his view on Aristotle’s *catharsis* by means of a comparison with the experience of a military doctor.<sup>33</sup> Any layman confronted directly with all the misery of a battle would be unable to react in such a way as to be able to adequately help the wounded soldiers. An experienced doctor, on the other hand, would know what to do; although still moved by the misery of his patients, he could do his utmost to help them without completely panicking, and while maintaining a degree of professional distance which enables him to perform the actions necessary to help.

29 For a general discussion of Heinsius’ poetics, see Jan Meter: *The Literary Theories of Daniel Heinsius. A Study of the Development and Background of his Views on Literary Theory and Criticism During the Period from 1602 to 1612*, Assen 1984 and the introduction to the French translation of Heinsius’ *De constitutione tragoediae* by Anne Duprat, Genève 2001, pp. 7–98.

30 Vondel’s *Berecht op Jephtha* of 1659 (v. 144). Online on [www.dbnl.org](http://www.dbnl.org) (5.10. 2017).

31 See Meter 1984 (see n. 29), p. 84.

32 Aristotle: *Poetics*, trans. by Hamilton Fyfe, rev. by Donald A. Russell, Harvard 1995, p. 32 (1449b28).

33 Cf. Stijn Bussels and Bram Van Oostveldt: *The Massacre of the Innocents. Infanticide and solace in the seventeenth-century Low Countries*, in: Tomas Macsotay, Cornelis van der Haven and Karel Vanhaesebrouck (ed.): *The hurt(ful) body. Performing and beholding pain, 1600–1800*, Manchester 2017, pp. 49–73, here pp. 64–68.

Similarly, following Heinsius the experienced theatregoers are moved by the heart-rending violence portrayed in naturalism on the theatre stage as they are able to imagine that the characters are actual persons, but at the same time they can retain control, even if these characters are confronted with the deepest miseries possible. This control is guaranteed thanks to the perseverance of the consciousness that the tragic action on stage is not natural. The experienced theatregoers are still deeply moved by pity for the horrific misfortune of those on stage, and by fear that the same misfortune might befall them or their relatives. However, thanks to the underlying awareness of the representational nature of the performance, the experienced theatregoers are still able to reflect, and this reflection helps them to better deal with the violent world outside the theatre.

### A Tableau Vivant

Whereas later in his career—more precisely in 1654 in the preface to *Lucifer*<sup>34</sup>—Vondel would explicitly refer to poetical concepts as *catharsis*, in the preface to *Brothers* he relies on theories regarding the visual arts to explain the correct way to deal with naturalism in the theatre. This may not come as a complete surprise since the preface to *Brothers* also clarifies that Vondel, as well as most of his contemporaries, saw the theatre primarily as a visual medium.<sup>35</sup> The close connection with the visual arts can be seen in theatre practice as well, certainly in the use of a tableau vivant in an essential moment in the performance of *Brothers*. The genre of the tableau vivant was already important in dramatic performances for centuries in the Low Countries. However, where theatre makers previously used it to end a play by giving in a tableau vivant the final conclusion by presenting the moral lesson with allegories,<sup>36</sup> Vondel surprises the theatregoers by staging a naturalistic tableau vivant right in the middle of the play, thus avoiding showing the most crucial event of the story.

So Vondel was not only the dramatist of *Brothers*, he was also closely involved in the staging of the tragedy. In the seventeenth century this involvement was not rare, but it is rare to have notes on the staging survive.<sup>37</sup> Together with the dramatic text, Vondel's notes give us precious insight into the series of the first performances. Moreover, the notes show

34 Stijn Bussels and Bram Van Oostveldt: How to Find God in the Dutch Golden Age, in: *Dutch Crossing* 41 (2017), pp. 195–209.

35 E.g. Jan Vos' famous statement in the preface to his *Medea*: “Het zien gaat voor ‘t zeggen” or “Seeing goes before saying”, Jan Vos: *Alle de gedichten*, Amsterdam 1662, f. c3. Even if several dramas of Vondel were never performed in the seventeenth-century theatre and thus could only be read, the readers were urged to mentally transform themselves into theatregoers mentally staging the play. Thus, once again, the concepts of *enargeia* and *phantasia* were put to the fore.

36 Wim M. H. Hummelen: Het tableau vivant, de “toog” in de toneelspele van de rederijkers, in: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 108 (1992), pp. 193–222.

37 Ad Leerintveld: Een bijzonder exemplaar van Vondels *Gebroeders*, in: Wouter Abrahamse and Anneke Fleurkens (ed.): *Kort tijt-verdrijf. Opstellen over Nederlands toneel (vanaf ca. 1550) aan-*

how the tragedy marks a shift in the oeuvre of Vondel, making clear that he did not stage the executions of the descendants of Saul in a straightforward manner. The audience was deprived of blunt cruelties, crucial to his previous dramas as well as those of many other theatre makers of his time, such as Vondel's popular colleague Jan Vos.<sup>38</sup> In the performance of *Brothers*, Vondel seems to have taken the art theoretical and poetical ideas concerning the imagination of the audience at heart. He did not use theatrical naturalism to the fullest by staging the severe jurisdiction as straightforwardly as possible. At this crucial moment in the performance, he did not let the actors play in dialogues and actions, but came to the art of painting as closely as possible by placing the actors in a *tableau vivant*.

When the execution of the descendants of Saul is coming near, Vondel puts the full attention on Rispe, Saul's widow.<sup>39</sup> The old woman holds her sons firmly in her arms in an attempt to prevent their deaths. Her sons know that this is senseless and ask their mother to kiss them for the last time and then to reconcile with their cruel fate. This brings the widow to such despair that she is totally stupefied and starts to talk complete nonsense. Directly afterward the action on the stage stopped to reveal a *tableau vivant*.<sup>40</sup> Frozen and silent actors (or mannequins) were staged hanging at the gallows. The theatregoers came to an understanding that the story was all of a sudden brought an important step further. Vondel skips the most crucial event of the story, since he does not show the execution of the sons and grandsons of Saul and Rispe. Speediness and speedlessness were strikingly combined to fully urge the audience to activate their imagination; Vondel made a big leap and then froze the dramatic action to show a most powerful image as a painting. He omits the performance of straight cruelties. However, he emphasizes the terrifying result of these cruelties all the more.

A monologue, recited when the *tableau vivant* was still visible, urged the theatregoers to respond emotionally. As we find this monologue only in Vondel's notes, the dramatist must have added it during the preparations or rehearsals of the first series of performances. It is not rendered in the printed dramatic text that predates the premiere of the play, so those theatregoers who had read the tragedy in advance would have been surprised to hear the new monologue. Thus its effect must have been all the stronger. The monologue is spoken by one of the ladies-in-waiting of old Rispe. She addresses the spectators directly as follows:

geboden aan Mieke B. Smits-Veldt, Amsterdam 1996, pp. 157–164 and Mieke B. Smits-Veldt: De aantekeningen bij Vondels 'Gebroeders' (1644), in: *Literatuur* 8 (1991), pp. 372f..

38 Cf. Bussels 2015 (see n. 24), pp. 62–64.

39 Joost van de Vondel: *Gebroeders*. Treurspel, Karel Langvik-Johannessen en Karel Porteman (ed.), Antwerpen-Amsterdam, 1975, pp. 135–147.

40 Joost van de Vondel: *De werken van Vondel*. Volledige en geïllustreerde tekstuutgave, ed. by J. F. M. Sterck et al., 11 vols., vol. 3, Amsterdam 1929, p. 902.

“Raise, raise, with bleak screaming.  
 Beholders mourn for Saul’s widow,  
 Who sees here all the royal family,  
 Most dreadfully executed.  
 Imagine how the heart of a mother,  
 Is staggered in the midst of all distress  
 That she suffers for her offspring.  
 No knife, no sting cuts sharper  
 Than this that pierces her heart.  
 The sun sets, night is falling.  
 It falls with drips and dew.  
 But this woman cannot shed a tear.  
 The mother suffers the hardest punishment.  
 Well, can you not give her your tears.”<sup>41</sup>

The lady-in-waiting uses the tableau vivant as starting point to mentally involve the theatregoers with the widow’s bad fortune. So in correspondence with what Junius prescribes, here Vondel urges the theatregoers to use their “lively and active Imagination” to go further than the mere image staged. The tableau vivant’s naturalism is not dumbfounding, but prompts the process that brings the audience to a strong feeling of pity for Rispe.

Thus they were put in the right mind set to eventually deal with similar strong dilemmas as David was confronted with. Directly after the tableau vivant and the accompanying monologue the theatregoers saw David listening to an account of the execution. David expresses himself in feeling the strongest empathy for Rispe, but at the same time knowing that he had taken a severe, but just decision answering God’s demand.

So in the end of his tragedy Vondel refrains from staging the execution of Saul’s descendants explicitly. This is not driven by a desire to diminish the impact of the performance. Vondel experiments with how he can still have a strong impact, but without stupefying the theatregoers completely and instead urging them to reflect. The lady-in-waiting does not want the onlookers not to become totally staggered, as Rispe does in the previous scene. Nevertheless, the theatregoers have to be strongly emotionally involved to totally feel the dilemma. In order to achieve this, Vondel does not use the possibilities of theatrical naturalism to the fullest by acting out the severe jurisdiction as straightfor-

41 The monologue is published in Vondel 1929 (see n. 40), Vol. 3, p. 902: “Hef op, hef op, met naar geschreeuw, / Aanschouwers treurt met Sauwels weeuw, / Die hier al ’t koninglijk geslacht / Soo deerlijk siet om hals gebracht, / Maar denkt hoe ’t moederlijke hart / Ontstelt sij midden in dees smart / Die sij om hare vruchten lijf / Geen mes noch vlim dat scherper snijf, / Als dit dat haar gemoet doorvlimt / De son daalt neer, den avond klimt, / En valt met drup’len en met douw. / Maer niet een traan ontsijgt dees vrouw, / De moeder lijdt de grootste straf. / Nu mach’ er niet een traan-tjen af.” (The translation is mine).



wardly as possible, but with the tableau vivant he comes far closer to painterly naturalism that powerfully involves the ‘active and lively Imagination’ of the viewer confronting them with David’s dilemma in the closest way possible.

## Conclusion

Thanks to a recent shift in the study of the arts in the Dutch seventeenth century, the attention on the ‘realism’ or ‘apparent realism’ of the subject of representation moved towards the ‘naturalism’ of the relation of the representation with the viewer. This essay elaborated on this interest by looking at theories on painting, sculpture and the theatre defining the evocation of living presence as the ultimate ideal in which both the imagination of the painter, sculptor or theatre maker, and of their viewers got a part. However, in the same breath, theoreticians discussed the importance to preserve a critical distance to the overwhelming belief that the subject represented was brought straight before the eyes. With the help of concepts from ancient handbooks of rhetoric and poetics – *phantasia*, *enargeia* and *catharsis* – theories on painting, sculpture and the theatre present restrictions to the overwhelming power of naturalism, certainly concerning the visualisation of horror on canvas, in marble or on the stage, so that the danger of complete self-loss could be avoided.

