

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Suthor, Nicola. *Rembrandt's Roughness*

Jonathan Locke Hart

Volume 42, Number 1, Winter 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064557ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064557ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hart, J. L. (2019). Review of [Suthor, Nicola. *Rembrandt's Roughness*].
Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme, 42(1), 419–421.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1064557ar>

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance, Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society, Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium and Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2019

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Suthor, Nicola.

Rembrandt's Roughness.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. 240 + 25 colour, 57 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-691-17244-6 (hardcover) US\$60.

Nicola Suthor's book, as she says from the start, is about an idiosyncratic aspect of Rembrandt van Rijn's style. Aristotle discusses style in *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, engaging with Plato, Isocrates, and other philosophers and rhetoricians. Georges-Louis Leclerc Buffon says in his address to the Academie Française in August 1753 that "Le stile est l'homme même" (The style is the man himself; my translation). To some extent, that is in essence what Suthor is seeking in the roughness of Rembrandt's painting: the roughness of the person himself. Suthor argues that rough facture in the paint and surface texture is not a sign of the unfinished quality of Rembrandt's work but signals the originality of his art and mimesis. In recent years, as Suthor says, art historians have examined mainly his "visually engaging" quality, or his phenomenological quality, through technical analyses of his paintings, giving us a better understanding of Rembrandt's hand as distinct from that of his students and followers. Suthor's interpretations do not use such a scientific approach; they explore Rembrandt's paint as medium not material, thereby seeking an understanding of the artist's mind, which, in like manner, is at work in his art. For Suthor, Rembrandt endows colour with an agency beyond the mimesis of a painter, something for which his contemporaries criticized him. Throughout the book, Suthor gives detailed analyses showing the different ways the rough structure of the medium engages the imagination of the beholder. She calls this method "thorough examination"; it assumes the phenomenological understanding that the image emerges in the process of perception. Suthor accompanies her visual evaluations with observations from others who have identified in art the phenomenological features at the foundation of her idea of roughness. The nub of this method is to provide a synthesis of her personal observations with those of others in order to "refashion" a subjective experience into a kind of intersubjectivity that involves "valid assertions" as well as descriptions that provide an "epistemic practice" (see 8–15).

Suthor tries to understand the mentality of Rembrandt by reading various anecdotes and legends about his life, which gives her an impression of an "uncouth and rebellious personality." She seeks examples in works by Arnold

Houbraken and Roger de Piles, who says that Rembrandt was reproached for his strange way of handling paint, which made his paintings rough [*raboteux*], to which he replied that he was a painter and not a dyer. According to Suthor, Samuel van Hoogstraten, Cornelis de Bie, and Eduard Kolloff provide examples to support her view of Rembrandt. She also appeals to Quintilian and Longinus—the one for figures of speech and the other for the sublime—to give value to the innovation of Rembrandt’s roughness. Suthor finds a consensus that equates Rembrandt’s person and his work. She appeals to the work of Eugène Fromentin, Jacob Burckhardt, and Georg Simmel, and cites a poem by Van Hoogstraten in which he stresses that each painter is distinct. Moreover, Suthor situates her own work in terms of the work of Benjamin Binstock and Svetlana Alpers on Rembrandt. She says that painting needs to be considered “as a complex semantic structure.” She states her aim: “My discussion is based on the idea of painting technique and coloring as materializations of artistic intent, with a full awareness that the argument presented in this book is therefore structured around the hypothetical concept of authorship” (13). This context she traces back to work done in the early twentieth century. She calls on the suggestive work of Karl Heinz Bohrer, Max Jakob Friedländer, Edgar Wind, Ernst Cassirer, Michael Bockemühl, and Christel Brückner, who provide a milieu for her work.

Suthor prefers phenomenology to poststructuralism for understanding the language of the painter and for rethinking intentionality and the mind of the “author”; that is, she tends to Spinoza on the authority of the author more than to Roland Barthes on the death of the author (29). She sees Rembrandt’s use of chiaroscuro as a way for him to articulate his “artistic intent” (35). During Rembrandt’s life, according to Suthor, others began to disparage thickly applied paint as a means of mimesis (93). Rembrandt embeds his figures “in the materiality of the paint” (125). The play of light and shadow interests Suthor, as does the question of whether a work, such as *Moses with the Tablets of the Law*, is finished. She also examines the red as a visionary space and discusses this in regard to paintings such as *Rebecca and Isaac*, the blushing of Rebecca, and the scattered red flecks and patches in the painting (159, 177). Rembrandt’s self-portraits suggest that the artist uses his own authority to decide whether a work is done: his final brush stroke, not the conditional ending that Pliny saw in the completion and incompleteness of a painting (179, 193). Rather than offer a historical or cultural context as many art historians do, Suthor

interprets images to shed light on “pictorial phenomena that seem to resist reading” and to “understand the semantic function of these phenomena within the composition” (195). She concentrates on the “anomalies of depiction,” the “language of the painter” (195). She finds Edmund Husserl helpful in explaining Rembrandt’s art and its texture and finish (when he says it is done). The mimesis may be in red, while the “empty horizon” (Husserl) in the self-portraits shows the intimacy of the illusion in the rough paint (196–97). This book opens up Rembrandt, his art, and his world.

JONATHAN LOCKE HART

Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Vintenon, Alice.

La Fantaisie philosophique à la Renaissance.

Genève : Droz, 2017. 573 p. ISBN 978-2-600-05798-1 (broché) 120 CHF.

Toute proposition critique suppose des choix et une part d’arbitraire. Dans ce livre (Prix Monseigneur Marcel de l’Académie française), cette part est peut-être excessive. Alice Vintenon indique dès l’ouverture que les « fantaisies philosophiques » « ne constituent pas un genre littéraire répertorié comme tel par les théoriciens du XVI^e siècle ou par la critique » (9). C’est là sans doute l’aspect critiquable de ce travail, au demeurant courageux, foisonnant, rempli de réflexions intéressantes. Proposer une catégorie forgée de toutes pièces permet certes au lecteur novice de comprendre que l’organisation de ce que nous appelons « littérature » n’est pas la même à notre époque qu’à la Renaissance ; mais le bénéfice est-il suffisant ?

Pour distinguer les textes qui entrent dans la catégorie qu’elle propose, celle de la « fantaisie philosophique », Alice Vintenon propose les critères suivants : « l’invraisemblance, l’exhibition de celle-ci par le narrateur ou par des indices fictionnels, le comique, et une ambition philosophique exposée avec plus ou moins de sérieux » (11). Sont retenus quelques Italiens, puis Rabelais, Ronsard et Philippe d’Alcriste, mais ni *Alector*, ni *Le Moyen de parvenir*, ni l’œuvre majeure de Cyrano, parce que « la pratique de la fantaisie [intervient] dans un contexte intellectuel trop spécifique » (14). La dénomination qui donne son titre au livre est imprécise : quelles sont les différences entre la « fantaisie