

CSSH NOTES

Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*. Alan Scott and Helmut Staubmann, trans. and eds. New York and London: Routledge and Taylor, 2005, 177 pp.

DOI: 10.1017/S0010417507000576

Simmel's book-length essay on Rembrandt first appeared in 1916, two years prior to his death. The work is difficult to read, and one must ponder through the language which Simmel and others utilized at the time. But it is readily clear that Simmel, as a cultural philosopher, was writing on the idea of how a philosophy of art might be developed and visualized. The idea of an essence of art as a philosophy is expressed through two modes of enquiry. On one side, the object, namely its meaning and its significance, is given priority over the historical context, psychological states or motivations, the creator's intentions, the material conditions in the production of art, and the role of patronage and the question of reception. In contrast, the philosophy of art reconstructs the totality of art by intellectual means through which we can penetrate the work of art *per se*, and also its actual inner meanings.

Thus, for Simmel, creativity must deal with two facets or concerns. One is the expression and understanding of art as philosophy that must deal with the communication of the inner life. The second is *Lebensphilosophie*, namely, the philosophy that not only underwrites art, but *is* art. To use our contemporary language based on Simmel's construct, creativity is captured in and through art and possibly a few other forms of human action. This is evident in that we think of creativity as an individualized phenomenon, in terms of the use of genius, etcetera. On the other side, Simmel is developing an understanding of how creativity is expressed and manifest on the cultural level. Here it is the dominance of philosophy that underwrites cultural creativity. Simmel is very clear on where philosophy fits by stating, "What has always seemed to me to be the essential task of philosophy—to lower a plumb line through the immediate singular, the simply given, into the depths of ultimate intellectual meanings—will now be attempted on the phenomenon of Rembrandt" (p. 3). By developing the philosophical essence of Rembrandt's work, Simmel is specifically arguing against mechanistic, rationalistic, instrumental, and essentialist conceptions and interpretations of life and art.

This theme has always been central to Simmel's writings on money, the metropolis, distanciation, and urban space. In this sense, we have a prime example of the dominant form of argumentation in Germanic philosophical

thought, namely, how elective affinity from Goethe onwards is contrasted against any form of causality and causal thinking. Thus through the pages on Rembrandt we must understand how art as philosophy is comprehended within itself and thus cannot be reduced to anything else. In various chapters on the inner life, individualization and the general, and religious art, Simmel establishes the philosophical text(s) which are the essence of beauty, perfection, piety, and artistic creation.

It goes without saying that art historians, especially those who venerate the art, would not find comfort in what Simmel has brilliantly and skillfully developed. And yet Simmel's insights and reflections on Caravaggio and Rembrandt (141–42) would be most welcome now as we enter 400 years of exhibitionary comparison starting with the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*.

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Laada Bilaniuk, *Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005, 256 pp.

DOI: 10.1017/S0010417507000588

During the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the western press offered a vision of a sharply divided country—the “Ukrainian” west pitted against the “Russian” east. Ethnic identity and language use, and even religion became conflated in this rhetoric of a bifurcated country, a simplistic portrait with which many regional experts took issue. Although language politics have long played a key role in Ukraine's development as a nation-state, an in-depth, multi-dimensional academic study of language and its social meaning in contemporary Ukraine has not been available until now. In *Contested Tongues*, Laada Bilaniuk has chosen language as the pivot point for her study of Ukrainian identity politics. She combines historical, sociolinguistic, and ethnographic research to create a complex picture of how everyday language practices have contributed to conflicts and compromises in ideologies of linguistic, political, regional, and regional identities.

Throughout the book Bilaniuk explores how ideological battles over Ukrainian language have contributed to broader struggles for Ukrainian independence since the emergence of the modern nationalist movement in the nineteenth century. Offering historical perspectives on the shifting status of Ukrainian, seen by some as a variety of Russian, and by others as the hallmark of independent nationhood, the author discusses imperial bans on the use of Ukrainian in written materials. This was followed by the uncertainty of the Soviet period, when official attitudes toward Ukrainian language vacillated between tolerance, oppression, and promotion of a modified standard that