VERMEER’S ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERIORS



Gorgeous. The movie. “Girl with a pearl earring”.

At the heart – the simulacrum – the exact copy of an original that never existed.

The PR and website for the movie are all about a delicate understated relationship, implicit in a finely crafted painting, a love story (the publicity stills show the main characters staring wistfully). I think, I hope, the director had more in mind. At least, we found so much more last night when we saw it at the Guild in Menlo Park.

Delft in the mid seventeenth century. Johannes Vermeer is painting a commission. The subject is a servant girl in the household. His subject, his wife, daughter, and mother-in-law, all have emotional investments in his work. And all revolve around relationships with goods. His perception and representation of people and items in interiors. The mother-in-law’s concern with the financial security of the household. The daughter’s competition for attention. The wife’s affection for fine things. The girl’s sympathy, intelligence and understanding of his work.



We follow all this through a series of beautiful mis en scènes – cinematographic compositions that attend to the material textures of everyday life – meat, clothing, silverware, jewelery, pigment, candlelight … . And in spite of the superficial richness, the story is all about what is going on underneath.

Cinematography is here entirely appropriate for the subject – the lusciousness of film; the resolution on the big screen; the (digital) manipulation of focus, color, lighting (of course, the side-lit interiors). Foregrounded, in this very self conscious way, are relations with things and their setting, an attention to surface and the way things present themselves to us.

Vermeer's wife is obsessed with owning, fingering, examining, and wearing the pearl earrings; her proprietorial attention is appropriately photographic. When she finds that the servant girl has worn them in a portrait sitting, she is furious. As in photography, the excess of attention to detail confirms the materiality of the world and the faithfulness of the representation. In seeing and so knowing the detail, our ownership is confirmed. The photographic can mark ownership – as in the insurance inventory, the holiday postcard laying claim to a piece, however fleeting, of the place visited.

But painting is not photography, of course. Vermeer in one scene has the girl slowly open and close her mouth several times. He wants to see just the right expression, pose, look, as in many of the long sittings. The irony is simple – the painting, with its months of observation and working paint upon surface, is not a photographic instant, though it may look photographic, capturing the sparkle in a glass of wine, the folds of a silk dress. Painting may not be photography, but both

here share a similar mode of engagement with people and things. And the tension is revealing.



It is a forensic obsession – any slight detail can make the difference. Just as at the scene of crime, anything could be relevant. The portrait needed the pearl earring; the mouth needed to be open just the right amount, to convey insight into the nature of things.

This forensic attention to surface (and implied reading of allegorical depth) is an archaeological one. The archaeologist articulates surfaces and depths, sifting through the past to find the material fragments, the few remaining details that reveal its character.

I dealt with this connection between archaeology and photography in a couple of essays in the mid 90s – one was for a fascinating seminar in Paris organized by Laurent Olivier and Alain Schnapp on the archaeology of the contemporary past.

A connection with Bill Viola's current exhibition The Passions. He has similarly attempted to reveal (emotional) depth in a sublime attention to expression (and similarly he based his work on painting). Viola used slow motion high definition

video. Here we have film and a narrative setting in early capitalist Delft. More effective I think.

Peter Greenway’s Draughtsman’s Contract. Scenario – an architect commissioned to draw a house and its landscaped garden in the seventeenth century. A similar obsessive attention to the look of things, here landscape, the household in its setting. And its representation. The draughtsman frames and arranges beautifully, but constructs a series of mis en scènes that seem to record a crime unfolding. But in this mirrored world of simulacra, we don’t know which details are important, to which perpetrator they point.

