

## **The Picture Within and Beyond the Frame: Limits and Limitlessness in Visual Representation (on the Example of Pre-Raphaelite Art)**

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### **Abstract**

My paper discusses the concept of the frame as a physical but also a purely conceptual boundary of a painting. The argument descends from the very question of the *existence* or the *obliteration* of the frame. On the one hand, framing physically delimits and consequently reduces the perception of a work of art; on the other hand, it is also possible to consider painterly representation with an approach that neglects the existence of the frame: the conceptual lack of the frame, or at least its “perforation,” opens an equally resourceful research field. Therefore, my argument, jocularly departing from Chesterton’s sarcastic statement: “Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame,” oscillates around theories focusing on any kind of visual perception that reaches “beyond the frame,” or else, treats frames as arbitrary/conventional devices, which approach corresponds to Derrida’s paradoxical assertion: “*There is a frame, but the frame does not exist.*”

The analysis of the frame presented in the paper inscribes itself into the context of the relationships between the verbal and the visual arts - a more extensive research project in which I am involved. Therefore, the frame is also viewed here as, for example, a “narrative tool/gesture” and a device enabling the existence of “embedded narratives” in visual representation. Apart from that, the frame is analysed in the paper as an apparatus facilitating visual self-reflexivity and as a more general issue in the analysis of the act of looking.

**Key Words:** Pre-Raphaelitism, framing, visuality, representation, semiotics, intertextuality, self-reflexivity.

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To claim that a proper analysis of a painting should start with a scrutiny of its frame seems peculiar, yet not absurd; it is enough to quote a jocular observation by Gilbert K. Chesterton: “Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.” Borys Uspienski uses Chesterton’s thought in his deliberations on the significance of setting the

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boundaries to paintings. The Russian semiotician claims that in order to see the world as a world of signs, it is necessary (although sometimes not sufficient) to set the boundaries at the outset as those specific boundaries create a picture.<sup>1</sup> Structurally speaking, limits allow the viewer to distinguish between internal and external points of view and to perceive an image as a certain whole, as a unit of artistic expression. In other words, frames mark the setting of a painted scene or view: what lies outside the frame does not belong to the scenery. Frames also set the beginning and the end of a narrative.<sup>2</sup> The frame can serve as a “narrative gesture”<sup>3</sup> in the same way as the expressions “once upon a time” and “and lived happily ever after” establish the narrative borders of fairy-tales. Taking into consideration the frames of a painting, the viewer finds it easy to locate the main figure, recognizes the background and the foreground and appreciates the elements that are only ornaments or minor adjuncts to the main focal point. It seems that the border is indispensable, for it is the frame that conditions the very existence of a work of art: “it *gives rise* to the work,” as Derrida announces in his discussion of frame as *parergon*.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, “the discourse on the frame”<sup>5</sup> is similarly indispensable; it fulfils the requirement to distinguish between the internal and the external (the circumstance) and to describe the boundary that separates them:

No “theory,” no “practice,” no “theoretical practice” can intervene effectively in this field if it does not weigh up and bear on the frame, which is the decisive structure of what is at stake, at the invisible limit to (between) the interiority of meaning (put under shelter by the whole hermeneuticist, semioticist, phenomenologist, and formalist tradition) *and* (to) all the empiricism of the extrinsic which, incapable of either seeing or reading, miss the question completely.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, the leading quality and the peculiarity of the *parergonal* frame consists in its oscillation between the two spheres that it divides; it “stands out against two grounds, but with respect to each of those two grounds, it merges into the other.”<sup>7</sup>

Derrida’s insistence on the existence of the frame/boundary does not mean that he accepts the definite wholeness and detachment of the work of art. On the contrary, with the assistance of the border, the French philosopher defies the text’s homogeneity and its immunity to outside-the-frame influences; he needs “an edge” to subsequently deconstruct it and prove the intercourse of the inside and the outside of the text.<sup>8</sup> The interaction is conditioned by the frame which, in the process, “labours” and, consequently,

like wood, “creaks and cracks, breaks down and dislocates.”<sup>9</sup> Neither painterly nor literary texts can be seen as isolated, unified entities that are framed with the hardwood of finality; no literary narrative can be treated as a homogenous, unified and limited sphere in which time and space are fixed. Clearly, the frame is to be seen as perforated, eaten into by the woodworms of intertextuality and referentiality, but, nonetheless, it has to *be there*, or rather, it has to *be talked about*: “*There is a frame, but the frame does not exist,*”<sup>10</sup> as Derrida asserts.

In addition to being perforated by intertextuality and referentiality, the painterly text’s frames are also punctured in other ways: for instance, by the self-reflexivity of images. This phenomenon manifests itself, for example, in the employment of such devices as a mirror within the frame of a painted scene; one of the most famous examples is Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*, a work which has been discussed in the context of artistic self-reflexivity by, for instance, Michael Foucault in *The Order of Things*.<sup>11</sup> Owing to the use of internal reflection within the frames, artists let the viewer see what the depicted figures see, creating in such a way a second narrative level or showing a view external to the frame. Within the Pre-Raphaelite painting *Take Your Son, Sir* by Ford Madox Brown is a perfect illustration of this practice: in the halo-like mirror behind the woman’s figure, the viewer can actually see the man she is addressing. William Holman Hunt used the device in *Il Dolce far Niente*; in this picture, a seemingly meaningless image receives a hint of mystery through the reflection of the inside of the room with the fireplace and a barely noticeable human figure. The question that arises is whether those reflections actually *belong* to the space of the canvas. If so, what is achieved here is an embedded narration contained in the frame of the mirror within the frame of the painting. An example of the crucial role of the frame-within-the-frame narrative is Rossetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia*, in which work the mirror intercepts the leading narrative line; the reflection reveals the essence of the foreground figure’s, Lucrezia Borgia’s, actions: she is washing her hands after poisoning her husband, duke Alfonso of Bisceglia, who, together with Pope Alexander VI, is reflected in the mirror behind her.<sup>12</sup> The whole story is disclosed only owing to the use of the second ground, the reflection; but for that, the painting would be devoid of an important part of its message.

A different way to communicate a self-referential message - also present in the famous example of self-referentiality in painting, *Las Meninas* - can be observed in Brown’s *The Hayfield*; the method consists in the inclusion of the figure of the artist within the space of the picture. Alongside the workers who are the subject of the painting, Brown places a painter who, as they are, is resting after his work; the result is a comparison of the farmers’ and artists’ work and a visual remark on the very act of painting. Rossetti’s picture *Bottles* shows images of a few of the painter’s tools (among them

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bottles with pigments) and an image of a half-ready painting (also enframed!) of a sleeping woman. It is quite clear that this painting-within-a-painting technique refers to the job of an artist as such; hence, it may rather be called a painting *about* painting. The above examples demonstrate that self-reflexivity, firstly, is not a modern invention and, secondly, it is not a phenomenon reserved for literature exclusively. In fact, self-reflexivity is an element uniting the arts, which W.J.T. Mitchell tries to prove in his analysis of the so-called “metapictures”;<sup>13</sup> yet his argument is founded on a study of modern art. The Pre-Raphaelite works discussed above show that it is possible to apply this declaration of unity to 19<sup>th</sup>-century painting as well.

Frequently, artists reflect on the act of painting with a reference to the act of viewing; this can be discerned, for instance, in two works by Ford Madox Brown. The oval, eye-like shape of *An English Autumn Afternoon* implies the “authenticity” of the boundaries of human vision.<sup>14</sup> The viewer of the painting is being deceived into thinking that he actually perceives the landscape through the eyes of the couple located in the foreground. The artist’s other “optical experiment,” *The Last of England*, owing to its circular shape, focalises the view on a pair of figures, disregarding the rest of the company. This camera-eye technique suggests that the viewer’s attention should be concentrated on this particular part of the scene. Considering the milieu, it is noticeable that the shape of the work simulates a telescope view, or, from a different perspective, it refers to the nature of human vision in another way: it is scientifically proved that the human eye can focus only on the centre of the visual field, leaving the peripheral regions unfocused.

The annulment of textual boundaries in painting can also be deduced from any outside-the-frame visual reference; i.e. in the case when an element of the interior of the framed space explicitly reaches outside the frame like, for example, in a situation when a figure’s look reaches beyond the space visible to the viewer (this excludes cases where such a figure “looks back” at the viewer, which is a matter of a separate discussion). In Rossetti’s *The Bower Meadow*, the two women in the foreground direct their looks diagonally to the areas outside the frame and beyond the viewer’s sight. This gesture suggests the complete absence of any limit to the scenery surrounding the figures. Likewise, in *A Girl at a Lattice*, one can freely speculate as to what the girl is looking at, but one thing is clear: the target is situated outside the viewer’s vision. Artists use such deceptive devices to make representation seemingly unbounded and to assure the viewer of an already obvious truth: that there *is* space outside the represented area. Still, the same truth makes the viewer realise another fact which is not so palpable: that the frames are transient or even superfluous. To return to Derrida’s thought: borders *do not exist* but they *are there* because what is dealt with here is representation, not

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imitation, and this mode of artistic expression requires the establishment of a borderline between the represented and the not-represented in order to, paradoxically, prove the lack of any border.

The above argument implies that the artist has to make a certain choice in respect to the subject of representation or the topic of a narrative. In the case of many Pre-Raphaelite landscapes, the selection of a particular sector of the view to be painted is deceptively random. One may suspect that the artist chose that particular fragment on the basis of its appeal to the artist's eye; however, considering John Brett's *Val d'Aosta*, Brown's *An English Autumn Afternoon* and *Walton-on-the-Naze* or Millais's *A Waterfall in Glenfinlas* the choice is a conscious act of framing a view that includes particular elements such as a knitting woman or a sleeping girl; as a result, framing becomes a narrative device. Often, the presentation of a landscape is a pretext to reveal a specific detail: in Brett's *Stonebreaker*, the glamorous background is overshadowed by the figure of the boy who is breaking stones. It is his story that becomes the focus of the viewer's attention: a story about the injustice of the English social system which exposes children to hard labour.

The act of enframing a particular view resembles photography: while taking photos, one chooses "the best" or "the most interesting" view, consciously creating a narrative within a snapshot. It is usually a choice out of an infinite area, which fact is also clear to the viewer of a developed photograph. Also in this case, thus, the boundaries of the picture disappear: the onlooker can easily guess what lies just outside the frame; hence, the artificial border becomes simply futile. The spectator of a painting can act likewise. It is clear that the sea, the mountains or the rainbow in a landscape simply continue beyond the frame; therefore, the frame's disappearance is conditioned by the viewer's imagination. This does not mean that those conjectures are completely frivolous; occasionally, particular complementary visions of the frame's exterior are guided by the elements of the interior. The interpenetration of the inside and the outside only validates the assumption of the border's perforation. The upper left corner of Hunt's *Our English Coasts, 1852* reveals a spatial frontier connected with the insular character of Great Britain. The image of the sharp land's end lapsing into the seemingly limitless sea is, however, disturbed seriously: the disturbance originates in the image of a barely noticeable steamer which can signify the oncoming invasion of the isle from the side of the French who "are there," in the assumed distance across the channel.

On the one hand, framing physically delimits and consequently reduces the perception of a work of art; on the other hand, it is also possible to consider painterly representation with an approach that neglects the existence of the frame: the conceptual lack of the frame, or at least its "perforation," opens an equally resourceful research field. The frame as a

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physical, but also a purely conceptual, boundary of a painting serves as a perfect reference point in the discussions of space in painting. Yet, the significance of the concept exceeds its status of a borderline, physical or abstract, between the “interior” and the “exterior.” As it has been shown, framing can also be employed in the discourses of self-reflexivity, narration and spectatorship, i.e. notions closely connected with *literary* theory. Moreover, the idea of the conceptual frame contributes to studies of visuality, optics and photography, extending thus its application to various forms of art and science.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Borys Uspienski, 'Strukturalna wspólnota różnych rodzajów sztuki', in *Semiotyka kultury* [Semiotics of culture], E. Janus and M.R. Mayenowa (eds), PIW, Warsaw, 1977, p. 192.
- <sup>2</sup> cf. Jurij Lotman, 'O modelującym znaczeniu 'końca' I 'początku' w przekazach artystycznych (Tezy),' in *Semiotyka kultury* [Semiotics of culture], E. Janus and M.R. Mayenowa (eds), PIW, Warsaw, 1977, pp. 344-9.
- <sup>3</sup> oryg. "gest narratorski," Jerzy Ziomek, *Powinowactwa literatury* [The affinities of literature], PWN, Warsaw, 1980, pp. 60-62.
- <sup>4</sup> J. J. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p. 9.
- <sup>5</sup> Derrida, p. 45.
- <sup>6</sup> Derrida, p. 61.
- <sup>7</sup> Derrida, p. 61.
- <sup>8</sup> Wojciech Kalaga, *Nebulae of Discourse: Interpretation, Textuality and the Subject*, Peter Lang Verlag, Frankfurt, 1997, pp. 150-1.
- <sup>9</sup> Derrida, p. 75.
- <sup>10</sup> Derrida, p. 81.
- <sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, New York, 1994, pp 3-16.
- <sup>12</sup> H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of his Life and Art*, George Bell and Sons, London, 1899, p. 105.
- <sup>13</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 36.
- <sup>14</sup> Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999, p. 67.

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