

Mollenhauer's hermeneutics: tempting and risky

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Introduction

When I re-read my own review of Mollenhauer's 1983 book *Vergessene Zusammenhänge* (Levering 1987), written on the occasion of the publication of the Dutch translation of the book in 1986, it was quite clear what fascinated me most at the time. It was his new approach, his use of products of art that resulted in a new view of the history of education in Europe. Neither the pictures nor the literary quotes were new; the clarifying effects of these devices had been previously discovered. But, they had been used as illustrations; as commentary to material that finds its conceptualization in different sources. In this new book, Mollenhauer did not illustrate – he used the products of art as sources of research as such. In my view, it was not Mollenhauer's main enterprise to find out how it really has been in the past. His main enterprise was to try and find up-to-date answers to old pedagogical questions, by taking detours via the past.

In *Forgotten Connections* he is quite brief about his new methodology but three years later in 1986 in his collection of essays *Umwege. Über Bildung, Kunst und Interaktion* (*Detours. On Education, Art and Interaction*) he delivers several elaborations. The full meaning of Mollenhauer's 'detour approach' is shown in the last chapter of *Forgotten Connections* where he tries to find a solution of a new pedagogical problem: the problem of identity. Up till the eighties of the twentieth century 'identity' had not been recognized as a pedagogical theme, but the postmodern disorder made the quest for identity an urgent question with serious pedagogical consequences. Mollenhauer, confronted with the problems with identity, simply diagnoses the problems as too difficult to solve them as such, decides to take a dive into history to see if that can shed light on the problem. Let us take a look at his use of paintings in that fifth and concluding chapter of *Forgotten Connections* entitled 'Difficulties with identity'.

Mollenhauer's Interpretations of Painted Self-portraits

Mollenhauer analyses self-portraits of painters from different historical periods in order to expound on the development of personal identity (Mollenhauer 1983, Ch. 5). Indeed, the self-portrait appears to provide special access to the problem of personal identity. The critical point is this: the painter, who looks out from the canvas not only looks at us, the viewers of the painting, but also at him- or herself. Therefore, in the self-portrait the idea of personal identity is problematized as the relation that the painter maintains with self.

What such paintings demonstrate is quite fascinating. When, for example, we regard the self-portrait by Albrecht Dürer from the year 1500, we see him portrayed as Christ in a fur coat. We could study the special blessing gesture Dürer's



Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait in a Fur Collared Robe*, 1500
(Wikimedia Commons)

hand seems to express, the kind of dress worn by a well-placed citizen in his society; but, especially interesting is the manner in which Dürer looks at himself. Mollenhauer describes the look as penetrating, inquisitive, but also lightly skeptical. The point is, Dürer's face does not quite fuse with the role that he seems to play as a member of his social class. In other words, Dürer does not take himself completely seriously, in a "modern" (for us, comprehensible) manner.

This distance from the self is even more markedly visible in the self-portrait by the young Rembrandt of 1629. There is no social role identification or hiding behind a social image – all we see is Rembrandt himself, so to speak. In many of his other paintings Rembrandt does portray himself in certain roles, such as a biblical figure, but it is curious that, beside this "social role series", there exists also a "self-series" of Rembrandt portrait paintings. Now, what may strike us in the portrait of 1629 is the questioning glance of the 23-year old painter. His eyes are partially covered by shade, which emphasizes the separation between the private and the public sphere. This self-portrait acts as evidence that the human face conceals a secret. Why? Because Rembrandt seems to look at us from the deepest sanctuary of his inner self.



Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait as a Young Man*, 1629 (Wikimedia Commons).

When we compare these paintings with those prior to approximately 1500, it seems that this psychological doubling into an outer self and inner self is largely absent. In earlier paintings, the portrait tends to show a person who is simply there, looking at the viewer with an unselfconscious, straight face (whether this face expresses haughtiness, religiosity, nobility, or sympathetic warmth).

The portraits of painters since around 1900, for instance, Van Gogh and Beckmann, are striking in a different sense. In Beckmann's 1901 self-portrait, the eyes almost become detached from the face. The glance of the painter has become the eyes of the viewer of the canvas. There seems to be a complete separation of self from the portrayed person. In the works of these painters, we witness the portrayal of a postmodern form of identity, which has often been related to the schizophrenic personality. The self, with all its problems (such as, the madness in Van Gogh), lies now completely on the surface of the face. We gain the impression that postmodern identity expresses itself in surface features, in a kind of outwardness or superficiality.



Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin*, 1888 (Wikimedia Commons).



Max Beckmann, *Self-Portrait*, 1901 (Courtesy of Dr. Renzo Dionigi).

Van den Berg's Interpretation of Portrait Photography

In 1963, the Dutch psychiatrist Jan Hendrik van den Berg had published a book with the literal Dutch title *Life in Plural Forms* (*Leven in meervoud*). In English, it was published under the title *Divided Existence and Complex Society* (van den Berg 1974). The book criticized the breakdown in each of the twenty previous years. Even Mollenhauer's original key to the entrance of the complex relation between culture and identity appears to be used before. Rather than self-portraits, Van den Berg employed photographs to examine the modality of personal existence in the more modern period from the 1850's to the 1950's. Of course, photographs seem to offer us the most objective view of human reality as it was experienced at that time. But, do photographs show us as we really are? What notion of self-identity inheres in Van den Berg's study?

We follow Van den Berg starting in the 1950's back through time. He sees the plurality of human existence reflected in the faces of five "Shining Young Broadway Stars" depicted on the cover photo of an issue of *Time Life Magazine* in 1955. Five young women's faces look at us from behind a balustrade. How do they look at us? No doubt that they expressly present themselves. But, in a way, they look less at us than at themselves: "Every face is defined by eyes which observe themselves through the lens. Every one of the girls is *there* as well as *here*." By "here" Van den Berg means where the photographer was and where we are, as viewers, when we are looking at the picture. "Every one of the stars looks at herself through our eyes. As a result, everyone is present twofold. *In manifold*. For the 'here' is a manifold *here*" (Van den Berg 1974, p. 236).



Shining Young Broadway Stars (1955). Cover image from *Time Life Magazine* 39(21).



Johan van der Keuken, *We are Seventeen* (1955).

Another photograph of the same period shows what Van den Berg calls 'mild plurality'. A girl's face from a picture series of the Dutch photographer Johan van der Keuken entitled 'We are seventeen', which underlines the self-consciousness. The face is less overdone – less unbearable, as Van den Berg says – than the faces of the Broadway stars. The face is even kind, sensible and agreeable. But, that this face knows it is being looked at is undeniable. The spectators direct the plural face, says Van den Berg.

The English author Virginia Woolf is not even looking at us at all on the picture made shortly before she died in 1941, and still she shows a plural face. The photograph is made in profile, but the spectators direct all the features of the face. Not she, but we keep her mouth open a little bit, the eyebrows lifted and the cigarette balanced.

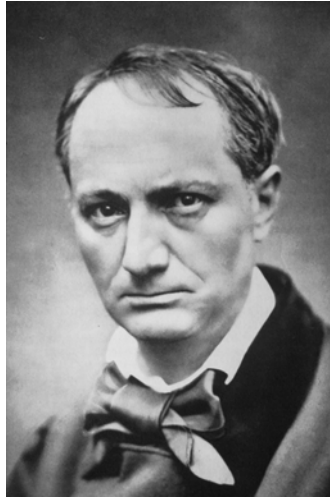
Van den Berg finds the oldest plural face on a picture of the French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire, dated 1866. The look speaks of suspicion. Van den Berg suggests that suspicion probably is a characteristic of all plural faces. Baudelaire, too, tries to direct his own face via our eyes. (The way Baudelaire looks resembles the way Dürer looked at us in his 1500 self-portrait, although Dürer showed irony rather than suspicion).

On the portrait of the slave liberator John Brown from Osawatomie of 1856 we find, according to Van den Berg, a non-plural face. In a way it looks like John Brown is

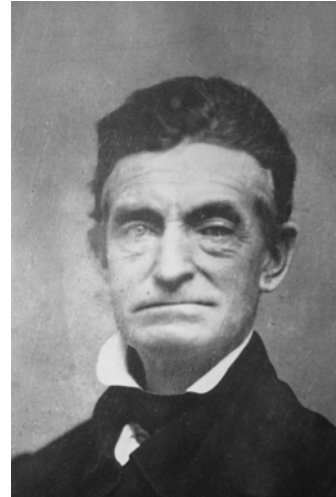
photographed for the very first time in his life. The face is in no way posed; it is absolutely unpolished.



Virginia Woolf, 1941.



Charles Baudelaire, 1863 by
Étienne Carjat (Wikimedia
Commons).



John Brown, 1856.

Mollenhauer's New Approach Evaluated

Van den Berg is far more explicit about his methodology than Mollenhauer. Van den Berg carefully developed a method that he named *metabletics* (theory of changes). In the subtitle of the first edition of his 1956 book, in Dutch, *Metabetica* (published in the same year in English as *The changing nature of man*) he speaks of *historical phenomenology*. The basis of the approach is quite simple. Like the phenomenologist, who tries to find meaning in the relation between the phenomena (at the level of the phenomena), not in the relation between the phenomena and a “real” world behind the phenomena, the historical phenomenologist tries to find meaning in the relation between different historical phenomena at the same moment, not in the development of one phenomenon through time. The customary focus of the historian is diachronic (on the development through time), the focus of *metableticus* is synchronic (on different events at the same time) in the first place.

There is no need to go into the details of Van den Berg's method to be able to see that Mollenhauer could have benefited from Van den Berg's work. His approach is comparable. (In a footnote in *Divided Existence* Van den Berg considers the possibility of a monograph on the plural face paying attention to painted self-portraits that show a little bit of plurality. Among the paintings he mentions is Albrecht Dürer's from 1500 and Taddeo Bartoli's from around 1400). A comparison of the outcomes of the research of Mollenhauer and van den Berg shows striking similarities next to confusing differences. One of the problems is that the two scholars position comparable processes in different historical periods. The self-portrait that imaged the modern self-conscious self was painted in 1500, the postmodern self-portraits of Van Gogh and Beckmann were painted in 1889 and 1901. The first plural face was photographed in 1866 and the plurality of today's pictures seems to be without limits. The young, shining Broadway stars that shocked Van den Berg, look extremely innocent compared to the faces shown on today's magazine covers. Today people are not photographed; they take selfies to show the world how they want to be seen. When a boy takes a photograph of his girlfriend, she will definitely pose like a movie star.

The strong point of Van den Berg's analysis of the changing nature of man is that the process he describes is initiated by a technical invention that changes the relationship between individuals and the relation between individuals and themselves: the invention of photography. The self-portraits that Mollenhauer interprets are mere expressions of personal identity at a specific moment in history. The self-portrait as phenomenon is a manifestation of personal identity as such. (Taddeo Bartoli's is often considered to be the first self-portrait ever). In his analysis of problems with identity, Mollenhauer does not restrict himself to the analysis of the self-portraits. The comparison of Plato's Socrates and Brecht's Mr. Keuner, for example, is very illuminating, because it shows so nicely the radical difference of 'identity as staying the same through time' and 'identity as change'. But, Mollenhauer's analysis of the self-portraits seems to stand at its own feet. In his review of *Vergessene Zusammenhänge* Adalbert Rang (1985) was quite dismissive about the lack of methodological underpinning of Mollenhauer's (historical) analysis in general. That critique was quite understandable, because Mollenhauer's book was published after a period of more than a decade of intensive methodological discussions in pedagogy. It is not at all sure that Mollenhauer would have been able to avoid the trap of dramatic misinterpretation if he had used the step-by-step methodology that he describes in his book *Umwege* (Mollenhauer 1986, pp. 38-67). I felt perfectly at ease with Mollenhauer's interpretation for almost thirty years and described his convincing insight to colleagues and students of universities around the world until I read a letter in *De Volkskrant* (a Dutch daily newspaper) of July 9, 2012.

Karel Buskus, contemporary painter in Groningen, wrote about the controversy if the 1615 portrait of Anthony van Dyck, hanging in the House of Rubens in Antwerp, was painted by Peter Paul Rubens or by Van Dycks himself. Buskes was convinced that it was a self-portrait indeed and his explanation was very sobering. If a painter who is looking into a mirror alternately focuses on the left and the right eye

the eyes shift from one position to another. That is the reason why many self-portraits give the impression that the painter looks squint. In the case of the portrait of Van Dyck there is no doubt at all. This is a self-portrait. So it seems that I have - enthusiastically following Mollenhauer - reported all kinds of deep meanings about what was going on in the painter's mind while being misled by the exotropic eyes of self-portraitists. Buskes insight solves the problem that Margeret Livingstone sent into the world with her 2004 article 'Was Rembrandt stereo blind?' The neurobiologist of Harvard Medicine School discovered, at the occasion of a visit to the Louvre in Paris, with four of Rembrandt's self-portraits, that the eyes of the master are shown as exotropic. Because the gaze deviation was systematic, Livingstone made a next step and concluded that Rembrandt was really looking squint. Later on, she found the same abnormality in Chagall, Picasso, Hopper and Klimt. And, she made a next step by suggesting that Rembrandt was such a good painter of landscapes because of his stereoblindness. Stereopsis is an important cue for depth perception indeed, but it can be a hindrance to an artist trying to depict a three-dimensional scene on a flat surface. Because of his



Portrait of Anthony van Dyck, attributed Johan van der Keuken.



Peter Paul Rubens, self-portrait from between 1628-1630 (Wikimedia Commons).

stereoblindness, Rembrandt did not have to close one eye to flatten his image of the world, Livingstone suggested.

Rereading Mollenhauer's *Forgotten Connections* in 2009, at the occasion of the preparation of a course at the University of Ghent, I was a bit disappointed because the text was less coherent than I thought it was. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm about the reformulation of old pedagogical questions and concepts of the first reading had not disappeared. But, the discovery that Mollenhauer's hermeneutics turned out to be far more speculative than I thought, came as a shock. The paintings of Van Gogh and Beckman show extreme extropic eyes. And the mild modern skepticism that Mollenhauer sees in the eyes of Dürer is definitely due to a feather light form of extropy. Mollenhauer's interpretation of the self-portrait of young Rembrandt in terms of the birth of the division of the private and the public must be relativized at the basis of the fact that the Rembrandt Research Project discovered four versions of the portrait and concludes that the artist simply experimented with back ground light. The question is if Mollenhauer is to blame here for these failings. I think he is not. It is always up to the reader of interpretations to go with the flow one time, and after that at least one time more with a very critical attitude. Mollenhauer must have put a spell on me when I read his book for the first time, but I regard it as my own fault that it took me almost thirty years to adopt the right critical attitude.

Rereading *Umwege (Detours)* I realized that Mollenhauer's claims went further than I thought before. He did not restrict his new approach to making detours, but used his sources as the basis of real historical knowledge indeed, his speculative interpretation of paintings included (Mollenhauer 1986).

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