

**Zeitschrift:** Georges-Bloch-Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Instituts der Universität Zürich  
**Herausgeber:** Kunsthistorisches Institut der Universität Zürich  
**Band:** 7 (2000)

**Artikel:** Questions of irony in Pieter Breugel's "Magpie on the Gallows"  
**Autor:** Budnick, Barbara  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-720044>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 18.04.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**



Fig. 1: Pieter Bruegel, "Magpie on the Gallows", 1568, 45,9 x 50,8 cm, Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum.

## Questions of Irony in Pieter Bruegel's "Magpie on the Gallows"

Offering a detached perspective, Pieter Bruegel's "Magpie on the Gallows" (fig. 1) places the viewer high above an expansive panoramic vista, its far horizon conveys an impression of the curvature of the earth.<sup>1</sup> This sense of a totalizing world view, however, encompasses not only a physical topography, but also man's experiential journey within that terrain. Suggesting processes involved in human history, the transformation of the land into communities and cultivated fields creates nuances of value and order.<sup>2</sup> Just as the physical dimensions of the landscape are structured in terms of nearness and distance, Bruegel organizes experience in "Magpie on the Gallows" as a series of oppositional concepts that question changing aspects of understanding and knowledge.

In the center of the foreground, raised upon a rocky mound and looming over the landscape, stand the wooden gallows. While the vertical timbers appear to be erected in right angles to the bottom of the picture plane, the top of the gallows twists at an oblique angle, leading the eye to the meandering river that flows between the two mountain ranges in the middle ground and slowly winds through a broad valley to the sea beyond. As a curiously skewed sign of civil order, the gallows form an introduction to man's habitation within the vast natural expanse. From this commanding position high on a forested hill, we pick out villages and farms peopled with tiny figures going about the mundane concerns of their daily lives. As a contrasting movement to the angle of the gallows, a compositional diagonal links the mill on a grassy clearing at the right to the sun-drenched Flemish village on the left. Overlooking the village, a

castle seems forged from the same bluish gray stone as that of the cliff on which it stands. Across the broad plain of the valley below, dwellings cluster in the bends of the river, boats travel towards the sea and peasants work the land partitioned into tidy geometric plots.

Two figures on the left direct our gaze toward the unfolding scene.<sup>3</sup> It is unclear however, whether the gesturing figure steers the attention of his companion to the gallows, the panorama or to three dancing peasants nearby. Competing elements therefore draw consideration to different frames of reference, establishing a series of juxtapositions that alert us to the ironical nature of Bruegel's representation.<sup>4</sup> The festive figures at the foot of the gallows suggest contradictory associations concerning the role of this imposing symbol of civic authority. On the one hand the gallows allude to laws constraining and regulating behavior and belief, while on the other, the peasants' spontaneous merriment serves as a possible reminder that executions were also an entertaining public spectacle.<sup>5</sup> Paired with the gallows, the cross further down the mountain offers an additional set of opposing relationships, one speaking to mortal controls and the other to spiritual aspirations. Ironically, a pile of bricks surrounds the cross, whereas a large stone base firmly anchors the gallows.

In a similar pairing, while our elegant guide gestures toward the panorama, a small figure defecating in the lower left-hand corner grounds the painting in the more material aspects of daily life. Bruegel's introduction of the lower bodily processes checks and mocks any tendency toward philosophical speculation occasioned by the elevated world view, undermining the formal

presentation of the imposing vista grandly framed by towering trees. Conflicting signs therefore present points of tension, contrasting the order, majesty and rationality of the divinely created natural world with the often problematic residue of human habitation.

Bruegel's construction of oppositional relationships, particularly the antithetical coupling of the profane and the grandiose, signals the Renaissance understanding of *ironia* as an expression of meaning that is contradictory to the intended meaning. Most Renaissance authors wrote about irony in a vein similar to that of Lorenzo Guglielmo Traversagni (1425–1503), who explained: "Irony is a figurative expression suggesting through its contrary what it intends to mean."<sup>6</sup> While *ironia* was commonly defined as a trope or figure dependent on the opposition of a statement and its negation, it entailed problems of interpretation that were not as consistently identified.<sup>7</sup> In "The Arte of Rhetorique" Thomas Wilson defines the intention of the author as an element of irony in his discussion of "dissimulatio": "When we iest closely, and with dissemblyng meanes, grigge [annoy] our felowe, when in wordes wee speak one thyng, and meane in hart another thyng, declaryng either by our countenance, or by utteraunce, or by some other waie, what our whole meanyng is."<sup>8</sup> Although the presence of *ironia* was thought to be propositional, signaled by context, intonation or gesture, the concealment of meaning in irony lead to interpretations that were neither clear nor consistent.<sup>9</sup> The inherent contradiction between an ironic tone or inflection and its immediate context was sometimes lost on the reader, leading to a misunderstanding or uncertainty about an author's implied meaning.

Irony as a rhetorical strategy therefore forces interpretation on the viewer by removing meaning from a literal level and placing shared assumptions in question through the opposition of the literal with an implied criticism. In effect, doubt is inserted between the unstated and the stated meaning, removing the ironic statement from a familiar matrix of logical exposition. Instead of a tangible representation of the natural world that clearly and directly references that world, the reader must deal directly with his own interpretation of the text. In the sixteenth century this self-referential effect of irony was recognized and alluded to by the humanist Thomas Chaloner who wrote in the preface of the first English translation of Erasmus's "Moriae Encomium", published in 1549, that the reader, "maie chauce to see his own image more lively described than in any peincted table."<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Bruegel's handling of oppositions continually forces the viewer to position himself in relation to the painting. Moving between antithetical structures – the world view and the defecating peasant, the cross and the gallows – there appears neither a certain nor stable outlook. The very nature of meaning, based on provisional relationships, becomes indefinite and variable, resisting any reduction toward a unifying synthesis.

Instead, knowledge of the world and its religious and secular structures is articulated through the image's relationship to self-experience, requiring a negotiation between the world presented in the image and that of the viewer. This inquiry, however, is more readily accessible in paintings that deal with traditional subject matter and well-known narratives. Instances that contain both a connection with convention and a divergence from it provide a structure and therefore a means of examining ironic devices. To consider the operations within these structures of irony, I will first turn to oppositional strategies found in several other paintings by Bruegel that deal with familiar themes before returning to "Magpie on the Gallows".

"Procession to Calvary" (fig. 2), from 1564, offers one example of a popular subject in sixteenth-century northern painting in which Bruegel follows a traditional structure and sequence of events. Based on crucifixion scenes by Jan van Eyck, and similar to those developed by Lucas van Leyden and Albrecht Dürer at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Bruegel's "Procession to Calvary" adapts a format employed extensively by Cornelis Massys, Jan van Amstel, Herri met de Bles and Pieter Aertsen.<sup>11</sup> Set in a panoramic landscape, the story of Christ's bearing the cross to Golgotha depicts the movement of a long procession composed of soldiers, officials and a contemporary crowd of onlookers interested in the spectacle and the diversion of a public execution. By removing the biblical scene from the foreground to the middle ground and situating it within a vast landscape, secular life and the profusion of worldly detail obscures the transcendental nature of the narrative. The multiple and intricate figure groupings that separate Christ from the viewer not only disrupt the viewer's expectations, but also serve to involve him in the narrative action. Unraveling the biblical story, we must wind our way through the crowd, engaging each group of figures that separate us from Christ. This milling collection of spectators places the narrative in a temporal and secular realm, inverting the sacred story and fixing the central event deep within the structure of its profane setting. Denied immediate access to the divine presence and to religious truth, we construct meaning from the relationship between the groups of figures that people the landscape and the main event. Rather than with an authoritative image foregrounding the sacred, we are confronted with an unstable setting that invokes multiple responses, rendering the process of interpretation less direct. Instead of developing from sequential action, meaning evolves from contingent connections.

Bruegel's procession forms the shape of a wide arc beginning in the middle ground at the left and sweeping toward the waiting circle of spectators on the distant hill at the right. Dotted among the crowd, the red coats of soldiers on horseback provide momentum for the busy scene, driving the procession toward the execution field. Swinging around an improbably tall and craggy rock, a windmill balanced at its apex, Bruegel's procession is fixed in the contemporary life of the Lowlands. Although he



Fig. 2: Pieter Bruegel, "Procession to Calvary", 1564, 124 x 170 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

adopts the inverted compositional format of his predecessors, the exaggerated size of the secular world alters the focus and meaning of his version of the "Procession to Calvary". Departing from tradition, Bruegel completely subsumes Christ in the activity of the profane world. His bluish robe repeats the hues of the grassy plain, while the rigid diagonal of the crucifix and its crossbar firmly anchor him to the earth. Fallen beneath the cross, Christ grasps it as a means of support, thereby transforming his burden into a protective structure.

The crowd's attention, however, gravitates to more colorful and amusing events. A group of the curious gathers around the wagon carrying the two thieves to the right of Christ, while to the lower left a fight breaks out as soldiers seize Simon of Cyrene to help bear the cross. In both depictions questions concerning church ritual are foregrounded. Clutching crucifixes, the two thieves rest their last hopes for salvation on representatives of the clergy, intermediaries between this life and the next. White-faced and gape-mouthed, the terrified thief at the front of the cart confesses his sins to an ominous figure sitting before him, crouched, still and completely enveloped in the robe's black folds. While Christ is ignored, ritual purgation of sin takes the place of true redemption. Similarly, as Simon of Cyrene resists the soldiers, his wife, a rosary dangling from her belt, aggressively supports him in his uncharitable refusal. Bruegel points to the representation of the rosary as an outward symbol of belief, perhaps a mere talisman that has little connection with the actual word of God.

The Virgin, St. John, Mary Magdalen and another holy woman, isolated on a rocky outcrop in the foreground, comprise Bruegel's greatest departure from precedent. While reminiscent of the figure types and poses in Jan van Eyck's "Crucifixion" panel and Roger van der Weyden's "Descent from the Cross", they are removed from the everyday aspect of the narrative and the movement of the crowd.<sup>12</sup> Elegantly dressed in delicate silks and pastel hues, these biblical figures present an abrupt contrast to the active rabble of humanity behind them. The incongruity between the biblical figures and the solitary traveler, watching the event from his perch to the left, points to their curious representation in this contemporary scene. Pale, elongated and finely drawn, they wear archaic costumes that fall in flat, schematically patterned folds, presenting a further connection to figural types found in fifteenth-century devotional paintings. Unlike the contemporary figures, they form a static, contained and fixed tableau, casting no shadows, offering no point of contact with the complex and chaotic scene behind them.

Facing the viewer, the members of the Marian group provide models of compassion and grief in the face of Christ's impending crucifixion. It is to the plight of these figures that several members of the crowd respond, rather than to the small figure of Christ lost in the distance. Those to the right and left of the Virgin clasp their hands in prayer and look to her, some in

reverence and others in anguish. They therefore mimic the actions of the holy women on each side of the Virgin, who direct the spectators' response and provide a channel from the secular to the sacred. Bruegel perhaps demonstrates the power inherent in images and their role in manipulating the emotions of the viewer. The swooning figure of the Virgin acts as a mediator, becoming the object of devotion and taking the place of Christ himself.<sup>13</sup> The efficacy of this traditional representation of the holy figures, once viewed as appropriate models of devotion and as aids in transporting the spiritual into the secular world, is questioned here by Bruegel. The crowd responds not to a living representation of the holy figures, but to an archaic image removed from the experience of contemporary life. Like a painting within a painting, this depiction of devotion presents the object of worship at one remove. Pointing to Christ's obscure presence in the middle ground, a man and a child at the far right attempt to redirect the attention of a weeping woman away from this artificial tableau.

In representing instances of false piety, the emptiness of church ritual and the intermediary character of sacred images, Bruegel engages in the contemporary debate on religious practice. He not only comments on the role of the artist in directing the response of the viewer to devotional images, but also alludes to the role of the church as an intercessor between man and God. These practices, he seems to suggest, lead to a type of religious ritual exemplified by Simon's wife, in which the outward trappings of faith predominate over personal spiritual experience. Bruegel's "Procession to Calvary", paradoxically, uses the cultural force of artistic landmarks to examine contemporary behavior, querying the appropriateness and foregrounding the limitations of belief directed by intermediary agents. Much of its impact depends on the use of irony in questioning contemporary religious customs and the practices of artistic representation. The effect of the "Procession to Calvary" is much like that of a reformed song of 1566 that reworks the Ten Commandments to satirize the abuses of the church:

Make images with hope,  
Of Gold, Silver and Stone:  
Show honor, go on pilgrimages,  
Do not pray to God alone.<sup>14</sup>

Bruegel similarly adopts and reconstructs familiar religious imagery from earlier periods to satirize problematic or ineffective aspects of religious practice associated with contemporary devotion. Reformulating the story of Christ, he imagines how that story actually happened and how it fits into the viewer's own life.

Bruegel seems to suggest that if the biblical event happened today this is how it would appear, distinguished not by great

instances of folly or cruelty, but by self-interest and nonchalance. Children vault over puddles, families make their way to the market, and bystanders watch the proceedings with wry amusement. Incidental human gestures and the slight details of daily life assume as much importance as one of Christianity's most significant occasions: a girl lifts her skirt daintily while crossing a pool, a man chases his falling hat, a child strides along with a toddler perched comfortably on her back. Christ, buried within this hubbub, is but a casual diversion among the mundane rhythms of existence. Bruegel presents a general image of habitual activity on the one hand and on the other an ironical representation of the biblical narrative. In effect he offers the viewer a glimpse of mankind's distance from Christ that perhaps finds its most prevalent form not in larger liturgical or devotional issues, but rather in an indifference to the divine presence in daily life.

The irony between religious observance and spiritual belief is further developed by the opposition of the cross and the wheel-topped pole. While the cross is buried in the midst of the narrative action, the pole looms over the entire scene. Paired with the tree on the left, it acts as a framing device and presents a strange metamorphosis of natural structures and their man-made counterparts. Analogously, trees dot the landscape on the left, while a series of poles and gallows surround the barren plain on the right. In a similar inversion the human skull beneath the cross, signifying Golgotha, is replaced here by an animal skull aligned with the foot of the pole to the viewer's right. The wheel at the top of the pole is similarly paired with the circle of awaiting spectators on Calvary hill, providing an analogy between the character of the crowd in the background and the carrion crow awaiting his next meal in the foreground.<sup>15</sup> The towering pole and inconsequential cross tend to invert the hierarchical order of the spiritual and temporal, emphasizing humanity's mortal and physical attributes.

Combining an inverted compositional formula and visual quotations from fifteenth-century devotional images, Bruegel sets up contradictory codes that render his meaning unstable. Rather than a single source of meaning based on a direct one-to-one relationship between a symbol and its significance, he reworks and combines visual conventions from previous paintings to change the manner in which meaning is produced. In effect Bruegel presents the viewer with two different codes, the first containing the original meaning and the second consisting of the reformulation of the image in a different context. The new image, because it comprises two codes and therefore two meanings, becomes ambivalent, engendering in the viewer both an affinity with and a distance from it.<sup>16</sup> Containing a disparity between the two meanings, the image defamiliarizes, making use of its semantic capacity to revitalize and reconfigure.

The combination of disparate conventions, however, also negates the possibility of establishing a fixed and unified meaning. While stressing the effect of reality by subsuming Christ in

the activity of the contemporary crowd, Bruegel also counters that everyday naturalism by framing the procession between the fantastic windmill-topped rock in the background and the fifteenth-century mourners in the foreground. Rather than structuring the narrative on a series of successive episodes from the historical past, he encourages us to compare the relationships of various elements in the painting with our own experience. Because the mourners are out of time and place and the rock departs from the naturalness of the landscape, the continuity and rationality of temporal and sequential actions are disrupted. The break with traditional logic forces us to discover other structures in the painting through which meaning can be determined. Further, the displacement of the conventional framework moves us away from the actual story and thematizes interpretation.

The ironic juxtaposition between spiritual ideals and actual behavior provides a mechanism for moving from the religious significance of the biblical story to the moral dimension of religion in everyday life. The incongruities between belief and action in "Procession to Calvary" establish a means of attaining critical distance for us, allowing us to judge the behavior in the painting and then measure this judgement against our own actions. Because Bruegel's image represents the human nature of Christ, the character of the crowd's humanity is heightened in comparison. While on the one hand the fallen state of man necessitated the sacrifice of Christ, on the other this sacrifice has not brought man any closer to spiritual awareness or moral action. Irony functions to direct the viewer to this reality behind the story of the crucifixion, grounding the narrative in the temporal world and focusing attention on the predicament of mankind rather than on the otherworldly aspect of Christian redemption. Operating as evasions and negations rather than assertions, Bruegel's ironic constructions work as instruments of analysis. He positions us here as subjective and active interpreters, requiring us to rigorously scrutinize religious meaning in contemporary life.

While art historical quotations in the "Procession to Calvary" signal the play of irony and guide the viewer in interpreting the narrative, many of Bruegel's secular paintings are without such interpretive markers. Bruegel, however, introduces other visual constructions to alert the viewer to a painting's possible meaning. In "Peasant Wedding" (fig. 3), for example, the distinction between the peasants and the aristocratic visitor at the far right holds the potential for an ironic interpretation. He sits at the end of a group of several people who are distinguished from the general merrymakers by their demeanor, their placement and their dress. Next to the bride, framed by a green cloth of honor, two guests sit whose careful Sunday dress designates them as either hosts or honorees. The aristocratic guest, however, is further separated from the gathering by the mendicant, who at the time would have been the victim of a large degree of anticlerical sentiment.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 3: Pieter Bruegel, "Peasant Wedding", ca. 1568, 114 x 164 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

The generic portrayal of the peasants becomes apparent through their contrast with this courtly visitor.<sup>18</sup> A long, finely groomed beard, elegant coat with narrow lace ruffle and individualistic features separate him from the crowd. With a sword hanging at his side and his hunting dog waiting patiently at his feet, this guest enjoys a more spacious accommodation than the crowded peasants who, packed shoulder to shoulder, line each side of the table. Margaret Sullivan points out a pentimento in which Bruegel changed the shape of the gentleman's nose, straightening it and therefore further distinguishing him from the many snub-nosed guests.<sup>19</sup> While Bruegel carefully differentiates the physiognomy of the aristocrat, the rural types bear a close resemblance to their meal. Flat wide bowls of bland looking pudding repeat the round, smooth, dough-like faces of the bride and several of her guests.

Demeanor, too, distinguishes the aristocratic visitor from the villagers. Listening intently to the words of his dinner companion, he sits with folded hands resting on the table. The peasants, conversely, engage in serving and consuming their feast. The man in the foreground at the far left works on filling an immense basket of jugs while the two servers on the right deliver puddings to a continuous line of guests. The oblique angle of the table ends in a group of peasants clustered at the far wall of the room, while more crowd through the open door. Repeated instances of eating and drinking establish the peasants as part of a natural process of production that alludes to the cycles of nature and aligns them with the material body. Just as the wheat sheaf affixed to the wall of hay refers to a successful harvest, the smiling bride appears as the fruit of the wedding season. As part of the natural regenerative process the peasants' resemblance to the natural world evokes a degree of humor as well as a sense of well-being.<sup>20</sup> They merge with their physical environment, assuming the attributes and characteristics of their surroundings. Stocky bodies are matched by the wide utilitarian architecture of the barn and by the rough-hewn tables and benches. The sturdy servers easily support the weight of the heavy plank door seeing double duty as a serving tray. Like their surroundings they appear to be practical, functional and efficient, their identity determined by the part they play in the cyclical process of material existence.

Much of the organic unity in the painting originates from the way the barn, normally a working space, has metamorphosed into a social space. The peasant celebration represents a collective way of life in which eating, drinking and feasting are interwoven with the process of work in the natural world. In this sense Bruegel's merry-makers share a warm kinship that is particularly at odds with their reserved and self-contained guest. The general rather than the individual defines the community here. Opposed to the peasant body with its connotations of the multiple and generic, Bruegel aligns the visitor with the discrete and individual.<sup>21</sup> He conveys an impression of intellectual life; hooded eyes

communicate an internal focus detached from the material and visual world. Similarly, a closed and self-contained bearing plays against the unbounded and open behavior of the peasants. Visually divided from the peasantry by the server at the right, the visitor seems an outsider in this congregation of simple humanity. Seated at the periphery of the feast, he is removed from the momentum of the celebration, cut off from this congenial and homogeneous community. The visitor's identity is therefore determined not only by his appearance and comportment, but also by his marginal position in this gathering and his distance from the rustic festivities and fellowship. Thus, if the peasants are bound by their communal activities, the visitor here is marked by difference. This difference, however, paradoxically differentiates the visitor from the positive as well as the negative qualities of the peasants.<sup>22</sup> If they are identified with food as a celebration of natural processes and physical pleasures then conversely the aristocrat, by his position and bearing, seems excluded from the full enjoyment of these delights. While ironic humor is found in the resemblance of the peasants to their surroundings, it also lies in the difference between the peasants and the visitor. Irony therefore acts as a rhetorical device, addressing the formation of boundaries that constitute and shape identity.

Involving an equally complex interaction with the viewer, Bruegel's series of the "Months", painted for the wealthy Antwerp merchant Nicolaes Jongelinck, provides a reformulation of a structure traditionally associated with aristocratic patronage. Appointed to a lucrative post as receiver of the toll of Zeeland by Philip II, Jongelinck enjoyed an ostentatious lifestyle, including an extensive art collection and a large suburban manor.<sup>23</sup> Jongelinck's estate, located in a newly developed area just outside Antwerp's city limits, provided a retreat from the pollution, noise and over-crowding of the rapidly expanding city. The population of Antwerp almost doubled, from about 55,000 inhabitants in 1526 to over 104,000 in 1568, changing the city's physical appearance as well as its social and economic structure.<sup>24</sup> The rapid economic growth was accompanied by social polarization in which commercial businessmen like Jongelinck were afforded expanded opportunities for monetary enrichment and social advancement.

Bruegel's series of the "Months" places Jongelinck within an established social structure, fashioning for him an identity aligned with the historical nobility. The paintings take as their point of departure calendar illustrations depicting the traditional labors of the months from "Books of Hours". As such the series references personal meditations of the private patron and elite associations of private patronage. Bruegel's cycle was most likely divided into six paintings portraying the unfolding year, and may have formed part of the decorative program for a single room.<sup>25</sup> Like their predecessors, Bruegel's "Months" envision the prosperity and nobility of a large estate as an orderly image of peasants toiling on the land and gathering its bounty. Bruegel, however,



Fig. 4: Pieter Bruegel, "The Harvesters", 1565, 118 x 160,7 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

transforms the miniature monthly labors into monumental landscapes. On the one hand Jongelinck's commercial empire is imagined in terms of seigneurial land holdings in the tradition of the old nobility, while on the other, the scale and frieze-like character of the "Months" create the impression of an all-encompassing natural world.

Bruegel naturalizes his peasants by establishing a link that binds man to nature. The peasants seem to merge with the landscape to the extent that parts of their bodies are replaced by agricultural produce, while nature's bounty in turn begins to resemble the peasant body.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in "The Harvesters" (fig. 4) the golden crop that dominates the landscape slowly becomes interchangeable with the peasants working the land. The two workers carrying sheaves of wheat in the middle ground on the left appear to have exchanged their heads for bundles of grain. Similarly, the stacks of bound wheat on the right assume the erect

stance and triangular form of the two men working at the left. Even the overloaded hay wagon in the distance resembles the thatch-roofed houses further down the lane. Natural abundance here is articulated by the ability of nature to slip over the discrete boundaries that customarily keep the man-made and the natural world in their proper places. Human industry and natural productivity merge in the image of the peasant sprawled under a tree, exhausted by his labors. His pitch fork leans against the trunk, a sheath stands at his side, and his heavy, spent body seems rooted to the ground. As part of a communal effort, Bruegel connects the peasant to both his labor and to his companions, who sit gratefully refreshing themselves nearby.

The slow drawn-out pace of "The Harvesters", evoking the long, hot summer day, is absent from the labor in "Return of the Herd" (fig. 5). Here the peasants lean into the cold, their taut bodies disclosing the urgency of their task. Matching their pace to the



Fig. 5: Pieter Bruegel, "Return of the Herd", 1565, 117 x 159 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

quicken river, these well-muscled drovers drive the herd toward the safety of shelter before the onslaught of the gathering storm. Black clouds amass above the hills on the right, darkening the fields on the far side of the river and providing an opposing movement to that of the drovers. Bruegel therefore articulates the coming of winter through the power of nature's physical might, suggesting thereby the seriousness of the late autumn work. Just as "The Harvesters" posits a similarity between the peasants and natural production, "Return of the Herd" delineates the threat of winter in terms of a resemblance between the forces of man and nature. Active and dynamic, the drovers lean into the wind, conveying the impression of a steady forward movement, a movement which duplicates that of the approaching storm.

In "The Harvesters" and "Return of the Herd", Bruegel excludes the traditional depiction of aristocratic pastimes and pleasures found in earlier labors of the month. Also missing is

the castle or manor house, the heart of the estate which typically formed a backdrop to the work of the peasants and the leisure activities of the nobility. The twelve months in the "Très Riches Heures de Jean de Berry", for example, contain allusions to Jean de Berry, his castles and his domain, while sixteenth-century calendar illustrations portray noblemen hawking, boating and courting.<sup>27</sup> In Bruegel's series of the "Months", the implied owner of these holdings is conspicuous by his absence. The viewer doubles for the landowner, and the room the paintings decorate becomes the heart of the estate. While the viewer is variable and subject to change, the peasants, conversely, assume their identity through their relationship to nature and their coherence as a group. Communal labor and rural community impart a collective identity based not on social fortune and political favor, but on similar ways of organizing experience and relating to the world.

The boundaries formed by shared custom and occupation order and pattern the landscape, partitioning it into field, farm and village. Here, laws of nature and laws of government seem to be a reflection of divine laws. Godliness not only constitutes orderliness, but also formulates an indigenous national identity that has seemingly evolved naturally, growing out of accumulated experience and custom. Small figures in large landscapes point to northern precedents rather than Italian canons. Repetition makes the peasants and their movements familiar and ordinary. Recurring gestures, body types and facial characteristics connect the peasants through anonymity and sameness. Their livelihood is linked to the changing seasons; their celebrations are tied to occasions that mark both Christian and secular life. Bruegel portrays peasant identity as stable, natural and secure, part of a community defined both by place and by the cyclical process of creation, a community in which economic well-being is likened to social stability and cohesiveness.

However, in omitting Jongelinck's fixed role as master of the manor, Bruegel changes a convention of the genre that describes an expected or customary relationship to the world. He therefore breaks with a tradition that situated the patron in a recognizable and stable structure. Moreover, in excluding any direct reference to the landowner, Bruegel also extends the range of possible interpretations. Jongelinck's identity therefore may be largely self-determined. While his role is less certain, it is at the same time more fluid. Jongelinck, surrounded by Bruegel's "Labors of the Months", may see his commercial empire transformed into a large feudal estate, the orderliness and the prosperity of the land reflecting of his own capabilities. He may also see in himself qualities and opportunities that are in opposition to those that define the peasants. While the peasants are relegated to the confines of material and natural existence, Jongelinck may determine his own position in the world and manipulate conventions to shape his own identity. What Bruegel provides for his patron therefore is an innovative image conveying the freedom and possibility of an unbounded self. Yet in contrast to the familiar and constrained lives of the peasants, this freedom has elements of isolation, indeterminacy and risk about it.

While Bruegel's series of the "Months" refer a tradition of calendar imagery that allows his innovations to be regarded in respect to his predecessors, "Magpie on the Gallows" contains few similar historical or traditional references.<sup>28</sup> The relationships within the painting, the cross in close proximity to the gallows and the defecating peasant behind the dramatically gesturing figure, are presented as units in a narrative structure, but resist adequate resolution. The incongruity of these oppositional elements is exaggerated by their placement in a panoramic landscape that tempts the eye with the invention of deep space and entices the imagination with detailed vignettes found throughout its expanse. For our enjoyment Bruegel lays out a familiar and

comfortable image of the natural world that gives the additional satisfaction of being observable as a whole, as well as reducible to its component parts. The eye picks out minute details that form chimneys, steeples and towers outlined against hill and sky. Neat fields dividing the distant river valley and tiny figures filling the street of the small village confer an impression of full community life.

Like the peasants in "Peasant Wedding" and "The Harvesters", those in "Magpie on the Gallows" communicate a sense of the orderliness that results from cooperation, understanding and purpose.<sup>29</sup> Their communities introduce geometric patterning into the organic configuration of the land; their recreation arises from the fabric of communal existence and as a component of life's seasonal duties and ritual celebrations. Those winding their way up the hill cluster in small groups while the three dancers make a companionable trio. Bruegel transforms a mountainous terrain into an ideological space in which the vernacular finds expression in local customs and shared activities, uniting the peasant community and organizing the landscape in terms of a web of national culture.<sup>30</sup>

However, separated from this carefully structured terrain Bruegel positions the viewer as the odd man out. According to the Stoic moral philosophy popular among many of his humanist patrons, man was to withdraw from the world to contemplate it rationally and dispassionately from afar.<sup>31</sup> But in "Magpie on the Gallows", the defecating figure counters the expansive gesture of our guide and the meditative possibilities offered by the panorama. The gesturing figure's self-confident pose, with one arm akimbo, has in fact rather ambiguous connotations in sixteenth-century visual representations, carrying both positive and negative associations. In secular images it depicts the military stance of the standard-bearer who, hand on hip and weight on one leg, displays the company banner.<sup>32</sup> To this extent the grand gesture of our guide evokes associations of authority, linking his self-possession to the breadth and extent of the landscape. The ability to command the vista, increasing our range of vision and knowledge of the world, would therefore be connected to our guide's self-assurance as an embodiment of authoritative standing. However, Erasmus, in "De civilitate morum puerilium", warns of the negative nature of this gesture, cautioning that although some find it confers an elegant and soldierly bearing, it also holds dishonest associations.<sup>33</sup>

This commanding gesture is also used in devotional images to direct the gaze of the beholder to the central event.<sup>34</sup> In the mid-1560s the sweeping gesture of the arm is prevalent in many of Joachim Beuckelaer's market scenes with *Ecce Homo*, where it serves to both unite the biblical narrative in the background with the secular representation in the foreground and to emphasize the larger thematic significance.<sup>35</sup> Linking the values of one economy with those of the other, gesturing figures point out analogies and oppositions between material and spiritual exchanges.

Beuckelaer's guides serve to foreground ethical, moral and religious considerations in a period of social and economic change and political instability. Questions of value therefore are posited in terms of antitheses that reveal similarities as much as differences.

Although Bruegel adopts the mediating posture of the gesturing figure, his role is compromised by the elegant costume and rather arrogant stance of his companion on the one hand, and by the shadowy presence of the defecating figure on the other. With both arms akimbo the exaggerated pose of our guide's companion points to the negative implications of this overly demonstrative gesture. The unduly artful use of gesture therefore signals a corruption of its rhetorical value. Similarly, the defecating figure relays associations of its most prevalent function in visual images from popular culture as a sign of deception.<sup>36</sup> In the sixteenth century defecation commonly appears in Reformation polemic prints signaling both the deceitful nature of the papacy and papal corruption of the Kingdom of Christ.<sup>37</sup> The inversion of high and low marks the spurious nature of papal power, demonstrating its inefficacy and lack of any godly connection. Similarly, the reversal of hierarchical precedent strips the authoritative figure of his trappings, revealing his base motivations and eroding his credibility. During the Reformation, this type of inversion in polemic prints performed an important function in reducing the awe and fear that accompanied the exercise of power.

Bruegel's defecating figure carries its connotations as a sign of deception as well as its associations with the medium of prints. It not only signals the affectations of the elegant rhetorical gestures assumed by the two guiding figures, but also places the image within popular culture. In this respect it combines genres, alluding to both the elegance of a rhetorical tradition and the profane expression of low humor. Because genres provide a common frame of reference and a system of forms or types that transmit traditional values and organize experience, the merging of genres disrupts the conventional function of representation and the expectations of the viewer.<sup>38</sup> In effect, Bruegel confuses the codes that allow access to the image and guide us in our encounter with the painting. While a type of image customarily calls for a type of viewing, "Magpie on the Gallows" confronts us with conflicting forms of representation, mixing generic conventions and confusing the image's relationship with the world to which it refers.

Rather than assimilating us into the world of the painting, Bruegel emphatically separates us from the panorama. Bridging the boundary between the painting and the viewer, the defecating figure directly links the space of the one with that of the other. Representation therefore no longer acts solely as mimesis, a likeness or imitation of the real world, but as a questioning of the constructed nature of representation itself. Whereas mimesis subsumes the difference between the imitation and the model within sameness, Bruegel focuses attention on the normative

position of the traditional spectator.<sup>39</sup> The dissimilarity between the elegant guide and the defecating figure calls into play their resistance to direct correspondences and alters the conventional contract between the central position of the viewer and the image meticulously laid out before him. Moreover, the juxtaposition of incongruous elements stresses an inherent irony that probes this carefully constructed naturalness and prevents an untroubled absorption into the expansive panorama.<sup>40</sup> Cut off from direct access to the vista, Bruegel encourages the viewer to assume a critical stance. The means of construction therefore becomes an agent of inquiry and a critical dimension is created by foregrounding the act of construction and directing attention toward the devices through which experience is organized and given meaning.

The position of the viewer here follows a more Erasmian idea of reception in which the open nature of the text allows the reader a larger degree of individual interpretation.<sup>41</sup> In "Adagia", for example, Erasmus traces the history of proverbs from author to author, recording inflections and changes in usage and meaning.<sup>42</sup> The fragmentary structure of the text allows for individual choice and interpretation, while attempting to identify an especially dense meaning from within the tradition of proverbs. Although Bruegel allows his viewer a similar freedom of interpretation, he neglects to follow a similar lineage that would coherently reinstitute and reshape meaning. In combining images from various genres, Bruegel provides little guidance for the identification of any prescribed meaning. While a familiar story or allegory traditionally offers conventions for interpretation, "Magpie on the Gallows", in omitting patterns of ordered reception, undermines a sole or certain meaning by presenting a variety of obliquely related references.

Similarly, Bruegel refers to the intricate connections between the viewer and the structures that formulate and distribute power. The cross, as a representation of both suffering and salvation is overpowered here by the gallows and their allusion to punishment, repression and control. Unlike the minute execution field carefully integrated into the landscape on the far side of the river in "Return of the Herd", the dominance of the gallows in "Magpie on the Gallows" colors the entire panorama, disrupting the expectation of a commanding and consistent world view.<sup>43</sup> The abrupt intervention of the gallows and the obscure figure defecating in the shadows restrict our unimpeded enjoyment of this phenomenal vista, eroding the conventional mechanisms that produce sense and meaning, offering in their stead processes that resist concrete resolution, but give the production of meaning itself a particular potency and fullness.

Frequently cited literature

Gregory 1996

Gregory, Joseph F., *Toward the Conceptualization of Pieter Bruegel's "Procession to Calvary": Constructing the Beholder within the Eyckian Tradition*, in: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47, 1996, pp. 207–221.

Jacobs-McClusker 1992

Jacobs-McClusker, Lisa, *Natural and Social Order in the Art of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley 1992.

Kavaler 1999

Kavaler, Ethan Matt., *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise*, Cambridge 1999.

Knox 1989

Knox, Dilwyn, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony*, Leiden 1989.

Marnef 1996

Marnef, Guido, *Antwerp in the Age of the Reformation: Underground Protestantism in a Commercial Metropolis, 1550–1577*, trans. J. C. Grayson, Baltimore/London 1996.

Meadow 1996

Meadow, Mark, *Bruegel's "Procession to Calvary", Aemulatio and the Space of Vernacular Style*, in: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47, 1996, pp. 181–205.

I would like to thank Wendy Ruppel, in whose seminar this article originated, for her guidance, and Christine Göttler for her help with many revisions and with Latin translations. Thanks are also due to Patricia Failing and Marek Wieczorek for their seminars on methodology.

- 1 As is customarily recognized, "Magpie on the Gallows" was probably the painting to which Karel van Mander referred, reporting that it was bequeathed by Bruegel to his widow. Van Mander, Karel, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, vol. 1, trans. Hessel Miedema, Doornspijk 1994, p. 194. Kavaler offers a comprehensive discussion on this painting, covering both context and iconography. Although my paper was completed before the publication of his book, I have benefited from his study. See Kavaler 1999. Simonson also discusses the context and iconography of "Magpie on the Gallows", relating it to a newly developing emblem genre and its audience in the 1560s and 1570s in the Low Countries. See Simonson, Anne, *Pieter Bruegel's "Magpie on the Gallows"*, in: *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 67, 1998, pp. 71–92.
- 2 Walter Melion discusses Bruegel's landscape in the context of descriptions by Karel van Mander and Abraham Ortelius. See Melion, Walter S., *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel van Mander's "Schilder-Boeck"*, Chicago/London 1991, pp. 173–184.
- 3 Ethan Kavaler views these two figures as mediators between the space of the viewer and that of the picture. See Kavaler 1999, pp. 222–223.
- 4 Irony has been variously defined in terms of the difference between the literal meaning and an intended meaning. Linda Hutcheon describes this as the relationship between "the said and the unsaid" in which irony "undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of 'one signifier: one signified' and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational and differential nature of ironic meaning-making." She argues that "irony happens as part of a communicative process; it is not a static rhetorical tool to be deployed, but itself comes into being in the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances and sometimes, between intentions and interpretations." See Hutcheon, Linda, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London/New York 1994, pp. 10–15. C. Jan Swearingen locates the tradition of irony in the history of rhetoric and literary theory and argues that it makes up an aspect of the deceptive nature of language: "Residing within the ever more complex rhetorical taxonomies, irony shaped and came to be shaped by burgeoning conceptualizations of allegory, enigma, paradox, and other figural tropes, because of the discrepancy between its surface and its substance, and its related conceptual resemblance to those schemes of thought that stressed oppositeness, contradiction, surface-content disjunction, and the opposition or contrariety of ideas." See Swearingen, C. Jan, *Rhetoric and Irony: Western Literacy and Western Lies*, New York/Oxford 1991, pp. 224–225.
- 5 For a discussion of the calvary image as a narrative in which it became a public spectacle entailing a complex relationship in the experience of penance, suffering and salvation, see Merback, Mitchell B., *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, Chicago/London 1998.
- 6 "Hyronia est sermo tropicus per contrarium innuens quod conatur ostendere." Traversagni, Lorenzo Guglielmo, *Margarita eloquentiae castigatae*, ed. Giovanni Farris, Savona 1987, p. 204.
- 7 Both Erasmus and Melanchthon, for example, mention irony as one of the difficulties in reading Plato's dialogues. Erasmus complains of the time it took to decipher the works of Plato: "However, how few people are granted so much leisure to unwind in Plato the mazes and labyrinths of Socratic subtleties, ironies and preambles?" (Sed quotocunque vel privato tantum est oclii ut apud Platonem Socraticarum argutationum, ironiarum et isagogarum ambages ac labyrinthos evolueri vacet?) Desiderius Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Rotterodami*, IX, ed. H. M. Allen and H. W. Garrod, London 1936, p. 126. Similarly, Melanchthon states that instead of an orderly exposition of ideas, Plato's dialogues are strewn with disjointed parts: "By this diligence he conquered Plato who, although he touches all parts of philosophy, transmits them neither in order nor whole, but scatters lacerated members throughout his dialogues, and plays with ironies: And doesn't always clearly show what he most proves." (Hac diligentia superavit Platonem, qui etsi omnes philosophiae partes attingit, tamen nec ordine, nec integras tradidit, sed passim in dialogis dilacerata membra sparsit, et ludit ironiis: nec semper quid ipse probet maxime, satis aperte ostendit.) *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl*, vol. III, ed. Robert Stupperich, Gütersloh 1951, p. 126. While Renaissance scholars often found it difficult to identify irony in ancient texts, they also found it convenient to dismiss objectionable ideas of Greek and Roman philosophers on the basis of a presumed ironic intention. Discussing *ironia socratica* as a means of disguising true opinion, Knox quotes both Erasmus and Melanchthon in his survey of the meaning of irony in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. See Knox 1989, pp. 106–109.

- 8 Wilson, Thomas, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), Gainesville 1962, p. 207. Knox also discusses devices by which irony was identified. See Knox 1989, pp. 68–77.
- 9 Knox 1989, pp. 28–29.
- 10 In the sixteenth-century northern Europe, the most well-known expression of irony was Erasmus's "Moriae Encomium", a mock encomium in which only through foolishness can folly persuasively praise herself, ironically proving her praise to be true. Mocking herself, her creator and her audience, folly constantly undermines her argument, leaving interpretation to her reader. The use of reason to question reason is referential in its technique, referring to both self and language. In his "Foundations of Rhetorike" (1563), Richard Rainolde describes the "Moriae Encomium" as "a forged tale, containing in it by the color of a lie, a matter of truth." Quoted in: Kinney, Arthur F., "Sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis": Erasmus, the "Moriae Encomium", and the Poetics of Wordplay, in: Continental Humanist Poetics: Studies in Erasmus, Castiglione, Marguerite de Navarre, Rabelais, and Cervantes, Amherst 1989, p. 47. Also see Colie, Rosalie L., *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox*, Princeton 1966, pp. 15–23.
- 11 Peter Parshall finds that Lucas van Leyden's closest compositional precedents are in the work of Albrecht Dürer from about 1505. See Parshall, Peter, *Lucas van Leyden's Narrative Style*, in: Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 29, 1978, pp. 218–222. Much has been written about the "Procession to Calvary's" link with Eyckian tradition. See Gregory 1996, pp. 209–210; Meadow 1996, pp. 182–186; Jacobs-McClusker 1992, pp. 131–137. Walter Gibson discusses this theme within the tradition of the development of Netherlandish landscape painting. See Gibson, Walter S., "Mirror of the Earth": *The World Landscape in Sixteenth-Century Flemish Painting*, Princeton 1989. Müller sees precedents in Hans Memling's "St. Anne's Altar" of 1491 and Lucas van Leyden's 1509 engraving, "The Carrying of the Cross". See Müller, Jürgen, *Das Paradox als Bildform: Studien zur Ikonologie Pieter Bruegels d. Ä.*, Munich 1999, pp. 139–140. For the Eyckian tradition, see Beltling, Hans/Eichberger, Dagmar, *Jan van Eyck als Erzähler: frühe Tafelbilder im Umkreis der New York Doppeltafel*, Worms 1983.
- 12 Jacobs-McClusker addresses the precedents for the fifteenth-century figural group, the function of intercessors and the role of devotional images. See Jacobs-McClusker 1992, pp. 108–112. Mark Meadow discusses the precedents of the Marian group and their role in terms of *imatitio* in the context of the sixteenth-century. See Meadow 1996, pp. 189–201.
- 13 Von Simson, Otto G., "Compassio" and "Co-Redemptio" in Roger van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, in: *Art Bulletin* 35, 1953, pp. 14–16; Gregory 1996, pp. 208–213; Marrow, James H., *Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance*, in: *Simiolus* 16, 1986, pp. 152–158.
- 14 Quoted in Moxey, Keith P. F., *Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beuckelaer and the Rise of Secular Painting in the Context of the Reformation*, New York/London 1977, p. 195. "De Thein Geboden des Aertschen Gods", in: T. Kuiper and P. Leendertz, *Het "Geuzenliedboek" naar de oude drukken*, Zutphen 1924, 2 vols., 1, 8: Maken doet u Beelden met hoopen, Van Gout, Silver ende van Steen: Bewijst haer eer, wilt bevaert loopen, Wilt niet aenbidden Godt alleen.
- 15 Mark Meadow notes that the "Procession to Calvary" is constructed as an interlocking structure of circles and wheels forming visual relationships between individual parts, and symbolic analogies between moral and spiritual themes. See Meadow, Mark Allan, *Pieter Bruegel, Pieter Aertsen and the Practice of Rhetoric in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands*, Berkeley 1994, pp. 123–125.
- 16 Kristeva, Julia, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, New York 1980, pp. 72–73; Rose, Margaret A., *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 47–49.
- 17 The clergy were not only blamed for their practice of extracting profit from their intermediary role in salvation, but also for their often dissolute lifestyle and the belief that they bore some responsibility for the prosecution of Protestants. Marnef reports that in 1568 a anonymous letter, probably written by a cleric in Antwerp, states: "an almost universal feeling of hatred ... in the hearts of the majority of people against the clerical estate, as if we were the cause of the rigors and executions carried out for a long time for the sake of religion." See Marnef 1996, p. 52.
- 18 For an opposing point of view, see Kavalier's discussion of Bruegel's villagers as individualistically portrayed. Kavalier 1999, pp. 149–183.
- 19 Sullivan, Margaret A., *Bruegel's Peasants: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 88–89.
- 20 De Jongh points out the comical nature of a figure whose head is obscured by a basket of fruit in Pieter van der Heyden's 1570 engraving of "Summer" after a drawing by Pieter Bruegel. See de Jongh, Eddy, *Mirror of Everyday Life: Genreprints in the Netherlands, 1550–1700*, ed. Eddy de Jongh and Ger Luijten, trans. Michael Hoyle, Ghent 1997, pp. 58–60.
- 21 In Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, grotesque realism is described as a boundless energy and heteroglot language of the popular community with its material, festive and comic orientation to the world as opposed to the oppressive, official and authoritative voice of high culture. See Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington 1984, pp. 4–58. Also see Stallybass, Peter/White, Allon, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca 1986, pp. 2–5; Muir, Edward, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 90–92.
- 22 Griffin, Dustin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, Lexington 1994, pp. 52–53. This is similar to Bakhtin's idea of dialogic interpretation in comic-serious genres in which interpretation is part of a process of searching for knowledge rather than simply relaying truth. See Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Carl Emerson, Minneapolis/London 1984, pp. 108–110. Also see Booth, Wayne C., *The Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago/London 1974, pp. 240–245; Kierkegaard, Soren, *The Concept of Irony with Continual References to Socrates*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton 1989, pp. 260–284. Once irony comes into play, ambiguity allows it to evolve beyond the intention and scope of its author, expanding its critical range and bringing into question structural elements. See Griffin, Dustin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, Lexington 1994, p. 89.
- 23 Silver, Larry, *Pieter Bruegel in the Capital of Capitalism*, in: Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 47, 1996, pp. 132–133; Van de Velde, Carl, *The Labors of Hercules, a Lost Series of Paintings by Frans Floris*, in: *Burlington Magazine* 107, 1965, pp. 114–122; Buchanan, Iain, *The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelinc: II. The "Months" by Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, in: *Burlington Magazine* 132, 1990, pp. 541–550.

- 24 Soly, Hugo, *Social Relations in Antwerp in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, in: Antwerp, Story of a Metropolis: 16th–17th Century, ed. Jan Van der Stock, Ghent 1993, pp. 37–47.
- 25 Buchanan suggests that Bruegel's "Months" may have been placed around Jongelinck's dining room. Cfr. note 23, p. 548. Klaus Demus explains that Bruegel's series originally consisted of six paintings that portrayed the seasonal activities of the year. The series was listed as "Seasons of the Year" in Archduke Leopold Wilhelm's inventory of 1659. See Demus, Klaus, *The Pictures of Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the Kunsthistorisches Museum*, in: Pieter Bruegel the Elder at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, ed. Wilfried Seipel, Vienna 1999, pp. 84–87.
- 26 Jacobs-McClusker 1992, pp. 62–63; de Jongh, cfr. note 20; Freedberg, David, *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, exh. cat., Tokyo 1989, pp. 178–179; Vergara, Lisa, *Rubens and the Poetics of Landscape*, New Haven/London 1982, pp. 97–98.
- 27 The month of May in "Mayer van den Bergh Breviary", for example, has representations of the nobility boating, hawking, courting and strolling through the castle garden. See Smeyers, Maurits/Van der Stock, Jan ed. *Flemish Illuminated Manuscripts, 1475–1550*, Ghent 1996, pp. 62–63. For the "Très Riches Heures", see Meiss, Millard/Longnon, Jean/Cazelles, Raymond, *The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry*, New York 1969.
- 28 On interpretation and the dislocation due to the fragmentation of signs Jonathan Culler states: "The meaning of a sentence, one might say, is not a form or an essence, present at the moment of its production and lying behind it as a truth to be recovered, but the series of developments to which it gives rise, as determined by past and future relations between words and the conventions of semiotic systems. Some texts are more 'orphaned' than others because the conventions of reading are not so firm as to provide a stepfather." See Culler, Jonathan, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, Ithaca 1975, p. 132.
- 29 Snow discusses a similar use of patterning that creates the impression of a cooperative structure. See Snow, Edward, *The Language of Contradiction in Bruegel's "Tower of Babel"*, Res 5, 1983, p. 42.
- 30 On popular or native culture aligned with ethnic and political identity in the Netherlands during the third quarter of the sixteenth century see Carroll, Margaret D., *Peasant Festivity and Political Identity in the Sixteenth Century*, Art History 10, 1987, pp. 289–314.
- 31 Joseph Koerner, Lisa Vergara and Walter Gibson quote Cicero in their descriptions of Bruegel's printed landscapes: "The horse was created to draw and to carry; the ox, to plow; the dog, to guard and to hunt; man, however was born to contemplate the world with his gaze", De republica 6, p. 15. The quotation appears on Abraham Ortelius' atlas, "Theatrum Orbis Terrarum" (2nd ed., 1579) and imagines man in a state of contemplation above a divinely ordered world. Koerner, Joseph Leo, *The Printed World*, in: The Printed World of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, exh. cat., ed. Barbara Butts and Joseph Leo Koerner, Lawrence 1995, p. 23; Vergara, Lisa, *The Printed Landscapes of Pieter Bruegel*, in: The Prints of Pieter Bruegel, exh. cat., ed. David Freedberg, Tokyo 1989, p. 85; Gibson, Walter, *Peter Bruegel the Elder and the Flemish World Landscape of the Sixteenth Century*, in: Bruegel and Netherlandish Landscape Painting from the National Gallery Prague, exh. cat., ed. Akina Kofuku and Toshiharu Nakamura, Tokyo 1990, p. 18.
- 32 Spicer discusses the development of the arm akimbo as a masculine gesture of self-assertion and control during the period of 1500 to 1650. She states that the arm akimbo is used to typically represent either the "assertion of success or defiance" of male military figures. Among her many examples, she mentions the depiction of the Paumgärtner brothers on the wings of Dürer's "Paumgärtner Altarpiece" of c. 1498 and Hans Sebald Beham's "Landsknecht" of 1526. This authoritative posture was later adapted as a sign of social standing, pride and self-assertion in portraiture. See Spicer, Joaneath, *The Renaissance Elbow*, in: A Cultural History of Gesture, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, Ithaca/New York, pp. 84–128.
- 33 Spicer quotes the 1540 English translation by Robert Whitinton which states that to "stand or sit and set [the] hand on [the] side which maner to some semeth comly like a warriour but it is not forthwith honest." Ibid., p. 95. Erasmus's *De civilitate morum puerilium*, first published in 1530, was enormously popular and translated into almost every major European language. While a German translation came out in 1536, a Dutch version appeared in 1560. Erasmus's treatise, a handbook on manners, posits outward behavior as a representation of the inner man, and further suggests that without the foundation of an interior piety, proper form is only a meaningless and empty gesture. See Sowards, J. K., ed., *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings, 3: De conscribendis epistolis, Formula, De civilitate*, vol. 25, Toronto 1985, pp. lvii–lix. Also see Des. Erasmus Rotterodamum, *De civilitate morum puerilium* [microfilm], London 1554.
- 34 Israhel van Meckenem in his "Mass of St. Gregory", for example, positions a directory figure who uses this gesture in the center of the print to guide the faithful toward St. Gregory's miraculous vision. See Göttler, Christine, *Deus ex machina*, in: Glaube Hoffnung Liebe Tod, exh. cat., ed. Christoph Geissmar-Brandi and Eleonora Louis, Klagenfurt 1995, pp. 280–283.
- 35 Honig discusses the religious market scenes of both Pieter Aertsen and his nephew, Joachim Beuckelaer, in the context of aesthetic issues, questions of identity, social and ethical considerations, as well as economic relationships. See Honig, Elizabeth Alice, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp*, New Haven/London 1998, pp. 19–99.
- 36 In the "Dentist" from about 1521, Augsburg artist Leonhard Beck represents the dubious nature of the dentist's cure by positioning a banner with the image of a defecating figure behind the scene of the dentist and his victim. See Moxey, Keith P. F., *Sebald Beham's Church Anniversary Holidays: Festive Peasants as Instruments of Repressive Humor*, Simiolus 12, 1981, pp. 119–120.

- 37 Scribner discusses the theme of excrement in Protestant propaganda prints during the Reformation. See Scribner, R. W., *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation*, Oxford 1994, pp. 81–86. While Scribner's examples are taken from Germany in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, Christine Göttler discusses Marcus Gheeraerts's satirical "Allegory of Iconoclasm" produced from about 1566 to 1568. A mountain in the form of a giant monk's head forms the setting for the corrupt practices of the Roman church. Toward the top of the mountain, close to the enthroned Pope, defecating, urinating and spewing animals reveal the nature of the papal proceedings. See Göttler, Christine, *Ikonoelasmus als Kirchenreinigung*, in: Georges-Bloch-Jahrbuch des Kunstgeschichtlichen Seminars der Universität Zürich 4, 1995, pp. 61–87.
- 38 Colie defines genres as "patterns, kinds, mental sets". For a discussion of genre theory in the Renaissance, see Colie, Rosalie L., *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski, Berkeley/London 1973, p. 30.
- 39 For a discussion of mimetic theories of literature and art in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Gebauer, Gunter/Wulf, Christoph, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1995.
- 40 Paul de Man explains that in irony "the relationship between the sign and meaning is discontinuous ... the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference." See de Man, Paul, *The Rhetoric of Temporality*, in: *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, Tallahassee 1986, p. 211.
- 41 Cave discusses the changing nature of the status of the reader from the period of Erasmus to Pascal as a move toward an open-ended practice. The Erasmian position emphasizes the shift from the universal and the authority of the original text to the interpretative capacity of the individual reader. See Cave, Terence, *The Mimesis of Reading in the Renaissance*, in: *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, ed. John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., Hanover/London 1982, pp. 149–165.
- 42 For a discussion of "Adagia", see Greene, Thomas M., *Erasmus's "Festina lents": Vulnerabilities of the Humanist Text*, in: *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, ed. John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., Hanover/London 1982, pp. 132–148.
- 43 Perhaps with the Counter-Reformation the relationship between the church and punishment held a new threat of discipline and coercion. For a discussion of the restoration of Spanish control and Catholicism in Antwerp, see Marnef 1996, pp. 109–132. For a study on Protestants executed for heresy during the Reformation in Europe, see Monter, William, *Heresy Executions in Reformation Europe, 1520–1565*, in: *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner, Cambridge 1996, pp. 48–60.