Introspection and Intimacy:

The Borrowed Visual Language of Dutch Baroque Paintings in 1960s Art Cinema

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Introduction

In 1959, a ticket to see *Ben Hur* would run you $3.00, more than triple the price of a regular movie. The three hour epic was the biggest movie ever made, with a fifteen million dollar budget (and an additional fourteen million for marketing), 200 camels, 10,000 extras, and an action-packed nine minute horse race.

Large-scale productions like *Ben Hur* were becoming the norm in the late fifties, as studios struggled to regain the audience they had lost to America's far more convenient pastime, television. As a mode of defense, movies became increasingly spectacular, guaranteed to bring people to the theatres in spades. Commercial success became a priority in the 1950s, moving film away from its artistic origins. By 1959, Hollywood was becoming a parody of itself, continuously opting for more extravagant and action-packed productions.

This was seemingly the least opportune time for black and white foreign films with little-to-no plot to enter the market. And yet, films like Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and Jean Luc Goddard's *Breathless* were able to break into Hollywood just enough where by the end of the decade American art films like Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* would outsell golden-age Hollywood pictures.

Art cinema, by pure definition, is any film made where artistic expression is prioritized over commercial success. Far too broad a definition to encapsulate the more identifiable genre, art cinema can be thought of as any film that consistently offers unconventional methods of communication that detach it from the reality of human perception, whether it be through delivery of narrative, camera work, or any other unique choice outside of the common cannon.

The art films that arose in the 60's– arguably a revival of 1920s arthouse cinema, but commonly thought of as the origin of the genre, tend to be thematically connected, employing

more identifiable production techniques that defined the medium. Leading voices in the art cinema revolution included Jean Luc Goddard, Ingmar Bergman, and Federico Fellini who paved the way for directors like Stanley Kubrick, Mike Nichols and Roman Polanski to achieve commercial success in Hollywood.

These specific directors were united in their focus on the individual. Shying away from large, plotty films, they explored internal and existential conflicts often centered around domestic tension or issues of identity.

Similar themes arise in Dutch paintings from the baroque era, a genre of art which emerged out of an artistic era that mirrored the commercialized Hollywood of the 1950s. Baroque painting, the favored style of painting in the seventeenth century, is characterized by its drama. High contrast lighting was used to highlight biblical stories and military triumphs, which were displayed in tableaus as though the canvas was a stage.

European baroque style remained mostly consistent across the continent with the exception of the Netherlands. Dutch baroque painters cut through a norm of grandiosity by offering depictions of average people doing average things. Dutch artists reinvented the drama of baroque painting by bringing it inward, portraying normal yet intimate scenes. This small movement expanded European art, which at this point had portrayed mostly christianity, war, and royalty. Dutch Baroque art gave the commoner something to connect with. The dramatic severed perspective was traded for situated views, and depictions of glory dissolved.

Shared Visual Languages

Both art cinema and Dutch Baroque painting emerged in similar art scenes and offered a similarly refreshing take. This shared history adds a rich layer to the intentional relationship between both forms. 1960s directors used or mimicked qualities of Dutch paintings in order to

foster the intimacy which they share. Looking specifically at the work of Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch, one can trace the visual and emotional themes of the Dutch baroque movement to the art cinema movement. Evidence of borrowing from Vermeer and de Hooch emerges in art films like Ingmar Bergman's Persona but also in far more commercial art films of the late 1960s, like Mike Nichols's The Graduate. The idea of painting serving as inspiration for film is a widely accepted theory. It is only natural for a visual medium to turn to historical visual mediums as a guiding light. French film critic James Aumont communicates this shared visual language, saying "Modern cinema repeatedly returns to the pictorial strategies of early modern painting—especially the use of shadow, stillness, and interior space to convey psychological depth."[1]

Applying this idea to the specific subsections in question, the presence of such a specific canon of baroque art in such a specific niche of art cinema reveals not only a borrowed visual language, but a similar psychological message derived from such typologies.

Using Vermeer, de Hooch, Bergman, and Nichols as case studies,the impact of seventeenth-century Dutch Baroque art can be traced to 1960s art cinema, evidenced by their shared typologies. The Dutch painters' innovations in choreographed interior space, directed gaze, and controlled light were borrowed, reinterpreted, and echoed by filmmakers grappling with modern alienation. The techniques introduced by Dutch painters created a sense of intimacy that effectively communicated the internal conflicts depicted in both Dutch Baroque painting and 1960's art cinema.

Johannes Vermeer

Johannes Vermeer's painting career began in 1653 and continued until his death in 1675. Although he was active during the Dutch Republic's Golden Age, an artistic era that is now

[1] Jacques Aumont, *The Image* (London: British Film Institute, 1997).

mostly remembered through his work, he had little notoriety in his lifetime. His body of work was incredibly small and his unconventional uses of light were not considered as revolutionary as they are today.

Vermeer specialized in quiet interior scenes depicting domestic life. Such scenes were growing as a staple of Dutch painting, although the rest of Europe was still painting dramatic scenes of biblical tales. Vermeer further revolutionized this dutch specialty, using his mastery of light as a tool to enhance the emotional feeling of his work. As art historian Walter Liedtke notes, "Light in Vermeer's paintings does not merely illuminate objects; it structures the entire image and determines its emotional tone."[2] Vermeer's ability to accurately recreate the behavior of light allows an intense feeling of reality, creating an intimate relationship between the subject and the viewer.

When Vermeer was rediscovered in the 19th century, his work became an ideal for artists practicing realism to strive for. Outside of the field of painting, his use of framing, light, and subject matter changed the art world as he was the first to capture such emotional intensity through such mundane images. He showed people how to subtly yet effectively create a humanistic understanding of the individual through detached and introspective depictions.

Pieter de Hooch

Like Johannes Vermeer, Pieter de Hooch was a Dutch painter active in the mid 1600s. De Hooch depicted mundane, domestic scenes, as was common in this era of Dutch art. His distinguishing talent was his ability to create intimate settings in his paintings. He was skilled at rendering in perspective, as is visible in his many paintings featuring rooms with extending corridors or courtyards.

[2] Walter Liedtke, Vermeer and the Delft School (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001).

De Hooch often set his subjects further into his paintings, often letting the setting shine. He was a master of the interior. The quiet intensity of his paintings emerges from his "[preoccupation] with the relation of light to different surfaces".[3] enclosure and liminality were repeated motifs in de Hooch's work, informing the feeling of trappedness he related to domesticity.

Working at the same time as Vermeer, de Hooch was far more notable during his lifetime, but has since been shadowed by Vermeer's decidedly more impressive use of light. However he is still a vital figure in the development of the Dutch baroque cannon. The haunting and isolating rooms and houses he painted created a visual code that defined how space can reveal psyche. The themes of domestic resentment in his work set a standard of tone echoed by Bergman, Nichols, and art filmmakers as a whole.

Ingmar Bergman

Ingmar Bergman became a leading voice of arthouse cinema because of his visually stunning and highly conceptual films. Bergman's films were artistic– not simply as pieces of work– his films are endlessly referential, often alluding to art to convey emotional subtext. Although Bergman referenced art across mediums and centuries, he had a fondness for the work of Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch, as is evident in his compositional recreations of their work.

Bergman is perhaps the most vital figure in comparing the Dutch baroque movement and the 1960s art cinema movement. His 1966 film, Persona, is considered to be the most discussed film in the canon.[4] It is often alluded to as the creative foundation of all films which came after

[3] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Leisure Time in an Elegant Setting, Pieter de Hooch (object record),"
[4] Thomas Elsaesser, New German Cinema: A History (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

it. Specifically directors who aim to create art with their films, such as Mike Nichols, look to Bergman's boundary pushing work.

As a groundbreaking and often-iterated filmmaker, Ingmar Bergman's explicit references to Dutch Baroque art proves art films adapted visual language. Bergman was a very visual director, focusing mostly on the subtext of a story, rather than the narrative itself. He writes in his biography, "I have always imagined my scenes as paintings, not as illustrations of a script."[5] This not only clarifies the significance of compositional communication in art film, it creates a direct correlation to the art of painting. Brigitta Steene takes this argument a step further in her book *Ingmar Bergman: a reference guide.* She writes, "The influence of Vermeer on Bergman's interior scenes has often been noted, particularly in the use of lateral light, enclosure, and figures absorbed in silence."[6] A champion of lighting, Bergman is guided by another master of light. Both leaders in their fields, Vermeer and Bergman create a visual code that defines their respective genres.

Mike Nichols

Mike Nichols, who came to the United States from Germany as a child, had a comedy career where he helped to create the art of improv far before he even started directing. His directorial debut was the monolith, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Due to his film career starting with such a massive production, he did not gain access to the title of art filmmaker until his second and most famous film, *The Graduate.*

Mike Nichols is a fascinating director to compare to the endlessly conceptual Ingmar Bergman because Nichols always had the Hollywood studio behind him. He fought tooth and nail with network executives to push his creative vision, and usually succeeded. But despite that,

[5] Ingmar Bergman, Images: My Life in Film, trans. Marianne Ruuth (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994).
[6] Birgitta Steene, Ingmar Bergman: A Reference Guide (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).

Nichols's films are far more recognizable as Hollywood films than Bergman's are. Nichols is a slightly watered down, commercialized, and americanized colleague to Ingmar Bergman, offering insight into the evolution of Dutch Baroque typologies from painterly origins to their absorption into Hollywood's more palatable art films.

Despite his network backing, Nichols was a strong opponent of needlessly grand blockbusters. As film historian Thomas Elsaesser writes, "Nichols's visual style rejects spectacle in favor of enclosure— faces framed, spaces compressed, light selectively assigned."[7] Following the tradition of Vermeer, de Hooch, and Bergman; Nichols captures an emotional intimacy with his subjects, letting the viewer in on their thoughts and fears by using seemingly mundane yet meticulously crafted framing and light.

Interior and Framing

Interior, private spaces were not traditional settings for baroque paintings. Not only would a home be an uninteresting location, but it would reveal the lack of glamour in normalcy. A defined interior distracts from the subject or narrative of a picture, as is evidenced in Artemisia Gentileschi's "Judith Beheading Holofernes"[8]

[7] Thomas Elsaesser, New German Cinema: A History (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
[8] Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith Beheading Holofernes, c. 1612–13, oil on canvas, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples.

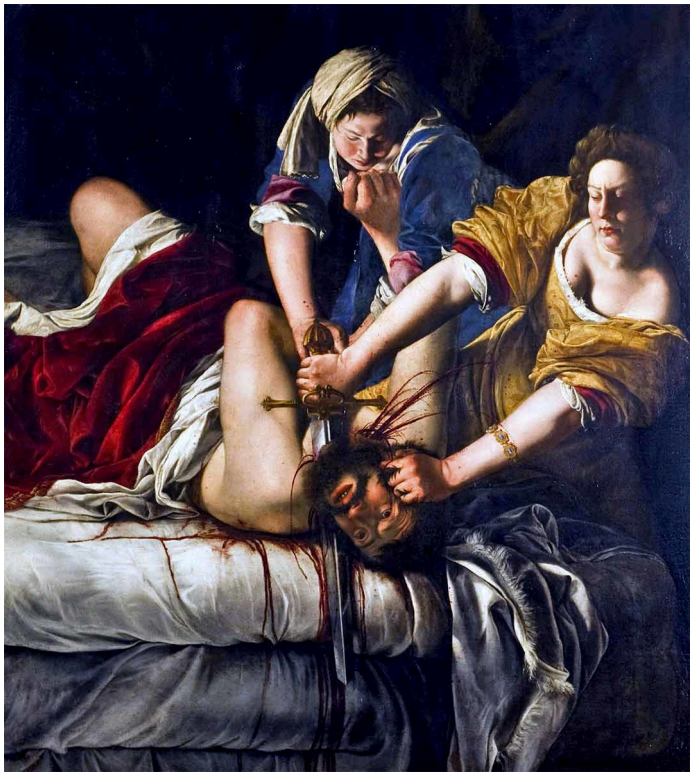

Figure 1: Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith Beheading Holofernes, c. 1612–13, oil on canvas, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples.

Although there are indications of a location here, like the bed, there is no definable space in the painting. The subjects in the painting exist in a vacuum, fulfilling their narrative duty without indication of who they are beyond this particular scene. The biblical context of the painting fills in the gaps of what is not communicated directly. By carefully depicting the interior in a painting, the viewer is given a fuller and more intimate portrait of the subject.

There is tension in seeing a subject in their lived-in space. The viewer feels as though they are intruding. This is only enhanced by the awkward framing visible in art film and Dutch baroque art. As art historian Svetlana Alpers says in her book, The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century, “The architectural framing of Dutch interior painting serves to

isolate figures within their own worlds, sustaining the condition of absorption."[9] A defined space creates a boundary. It promotes distance and separation, which ironically lets the viewer connect with the subject. The isolation and loneliness pictured promotes a similar self reflection and existentialism in the viewer as is seen in the frame. In his painting "Girl Asleep," the awkward framing creates a feeling of intrusion, as though the viewer is watching a private moment. The chair in the foreground, the open door, and the table continuing out of frame create a cramped enclosure. The tightness and discomfort of the picture is heightened by the girl sitting off center, only half in light.



Figure 2: Vermeer, Johannes. Girl Asleep. ca. 1656–1657. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

[9] Svetlana Alpers, The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

The liminality or expansion of a space created another psychic prison for the viewer. As Peter Sutton explains, "De Hooch's interiors are structured through a sequence of frames—doors, passageways, and courtyards that guide the eye while reinforcing enclosure."[10] The segmentation of a frame creates tension for the viewer. Harsh lines and bisecting planes creating a further feeling of being trapped, something one can project onto the subject's pensive gaze. In de Hooch's painting, "Woman with a Bucket in a Courtyard," the bisecting lines of the fence, the gate, and the home converge at a central point: the woman. The lines draw the eye inward towards the woman, and that inward draw highlights the liminality of the space and the boundaries of her movement.



Figure 3: De Hooch, Pieter. Woman with a Bucket in a Courtyard. ca. 1658. Oil on canvas. National Gallery, London.

[10] Peter C. Sutton, Pieter de Hooch (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980).

In visual media which prioritizes emotional communication over narrative, space, specifically the lack of it, can evoke a panic in the viewer. Bergman and Nichols use this to their advantage. Film critic Robin Woods says of Bergman, "Bergman repeatedly frames his characters within confined interiors, using walls, doorways, and furniture to visualize psychic imprisonment."[11] In this shot, a figure stands silhouetted in a doorway. Domestic images: a lamp, furniture, are in the foreground. The pool of light she stands creates a distinct separation between the two while also limiting the frame of the subject even further.



Figure 4: Persona, Bergman, Ingmar, dir. Persona. 1966. Film still. Svensk Filmindustri.

New York Times Journalist Robert Kolker shares a similar sentiment about Nichols, saying "Nichols's films repeatedly situate characters within domestic interiors that function as

[11] Robin Wood, Ingmar Bergman, new ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013).

sites of emotional confinement rather than comfort."[12] In this shot, a leg is used to further cramp the frame, projecting the crushing weight of his domestic issues.



Figure 5: The Graduate, Nichols, Mike, dir. The Graduate. 1967. Film still. Embassy Pictures.

This trapped feeling likely emerged independently in art film, partially in response to the return to domesticity after World War II. But the visual strategies utilized by both Bergman and Nichols allude to the architecture of Vermeer and de Hooch. Windows and doors create mazes of vacant space that is restrained by walls, floors, and other structures in the foreground. The feeling of claustrophobia evoked by these strategies heighten the emotional stakes for the viewer.

Gaze

There is a very specific gaze that appears regularly throughout the work of Vermeer and de Hooch. Subjects look towards the viewer, seemingly seeing right past them or through them. The subject has a nearly expressionless face, but there is a depth and reflection to their face. You can see the subject's awareness of their existence and some sort of internal conflict without being

[12] Robert Kolker, A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

to place exactly the emotion. This particular gaze was Vermeer's creation. As Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., The National Gallery of Art's former curator of baroque paintings puts it, "The averted gaze in Vermeer's work creates a psychological distance that paradoxically intensifies intimacy."[13]



Figure 6: Vermeer, Johannes. Girl Interrupted at Her Music. ca. 1658–1659. Oil on canvas. The Frick Collection, New York.

This detached gaze revolutionized art that focuses on emotion or state of being rather than narrative. No longer are artists trying to recount stories from the bible, they are trying to capture a moment. Similar sentiments have been made not only about de Hooch, but also about Bergman and Nichols. Mariet Westermann wrote "The gaze in de Hooch's paintings rarely confronts the spectator; instead it links figures to their domestic environment."[14]

[13] Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., Johannes Vermeer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
[14] Mariët Westermann, A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585–1718 (New York: Abrams, 1996).



Figure 7: De Hooch, Pieter. Man Playing Cards. ca. 1658. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

In both of the above paintings, there is an eerie feeling derived from the feeling of being looked at without making eye contact with the subject. The detachment felt by looking at a Vermeer or de Hooch painting is mimicked heavily by art filmmakers. The distant, faraway look conveys a detachment or disenchantment. In all four of these images, the viewer feels almost seen by the subject. With the subject's face or body directed forward, there is a discomfort in noticing their gaze look seemingly straight through the camera. This phenomenon is especially present in Ingmar Bergman's films. As Birgitta Steene writes in her book *Ingmar Bergman: A Reference Guide,* "The still gaze in Bergman's films often replaces dialogue, functioning as a

visual articulation of inner conflict."[15] Bergman asks the viewer to understand his characters through visuals alone, emulating the presentation of a painting.



Figure 8: Persona, Bergman, Ingmar, dir. Persona. 1966. Film still. Svensk Filmindustri.

The final shot of *The Graduate* signals a revelation. But not an "a-ha!" moment– rather a revelation of continuation. There is a dread in the man's thousand yard stare. Without narrative context, this faraway gaze creates a feeling of awareness in the subject. As the viewer, you are keenly aware of processing and feeling occurring in the subject's mind.

[15] Birgitta Steene, Ingmar Bergman: A Reference Guide (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).



Figure 9: The Graduate, Nichols, Mike, dir. The Graduate. 1967. Film still. Embassy Pictures.

Light and Shadow

Lighting is arguably the most important part of visual mediums such as film or painting. Lighting shows what the artist chose or did not choose to depict. Vermeer is often described as the master of light despite framing many of his subjects in uneven light or complete darkness. He was brilliant at depicting the behavior of light, making his paintings feel real and immediate.

Vermeer used an Italian technique– chiaroscuro, which literally translates to light dark. Chiaroscuro was used for its dramatic effect specifically in Italian baroque paintings. In Italian baroque paintings, the light rarely came from a justified light source. The artist illuminated what he wanted and shrouded the rest in darkness. Vermeer's mastery of light is due to his ability to properly indicate how light would land from a justified source. As Svetlana Alpers says, "Vermeer does not illuminate space evenly. Light enters from a single source, leaving parts of the room and figure in shadow, thereby producing a heightened sense of presence."[16] Although he still gets to choose what is lit by way of composition and framing, it almost seems he doesn't, as the light in his paintings may highlight only parts of a subject, but a large section of a wall or unoccupied space. In that sense the subject becomes part of the space they inhabit, losing some

[16] Svetlana Alpers, The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

individuality. As Alpers mentions however, Vermeer's lighting, in its unevenness, creates a feeling of immediacy, drawing the viewer into the singular moment captured.



Figure 10: Johannes Vermeer, Woman Holding a Balance, c. 1662–1664, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

In his painting "Woman Holding a Balance," Vermeer casts a delicate light through a window, illuminating part of a woman's face.[17] The light is minimal, and shines mostly on the wall behind her. Her hands and table are left darkened. The meaning of the light comes not so much from what it illuminates and does not illuminate, so much as how the light changes the setting and triggers an emotional response for the viewer. As Walter Liedtke writes, "Vermeer's light is never merely descriptive; it structures perception, guiding the viewer inward rather than

[17] Johannes Vermeer, Woman Holding a Balance, c. 1662–1664, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

across the surface of the image."[18] The minimal lighting heightens the feeling of privacy in the painting. The focus extends beyond the subject, to the lit wall in the back, bringing the viewer into the room. The viewer feels almost as though they are intruding on this woman's actions and thoughts.



Figure 11: Annibale Carracci, Lamentation over the Dead Christ, c. 1585, oil on canvas, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna.

The Dutch baroque theory of light is essentially that if light exists as it would in reality, rather than falling consistently as it would on a stage, the inward, psychological, emotional truth of a painting is presented rather than the narrative.[19] The idea of a painting for film as a stage or theatre is key to the understanding of why Dutch Baroque paintings and art cinema were

[18] Walter Liedtke, Vermeer and the Delft School (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001).

[19] Norbert Schneider, Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period (Cologne: Taschen, 2003).

revolutionary in their depiction of the human experience. Anthropologist Peter Sutton writes on de Hooch, "[he] uses light to organize interior space not theatrically but psychologically, allowing shadow to define enclosure and intimacy."[20] A theatrical composition, like Annibale Carraci's "The Lamentation of Christ" is effective in the performance of a moment, but fails to capture psychological depth.[21] In this painting, all figures are cheated out, as though they are actors in a play. The light comes seemingly from all directions to evenly and conveniently light the foreground of the painting. The viewer is immediately aware of the emotions of each player in the scene as they wear it plainly on their face.



Figure 12: De Hooch, Pieter. The Mother. ca. 1658–1660. Oil on canvas. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

[20] Peter C. Sutton, Pieter de Hooch (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980).
[21] Annibale Carracci, Lamentation over the Dead Christ, c. 1585, oil on canvas, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna.

Contrasting this with de Hooch's "The Mother," which features a pensive woman with no immediately identifiable emotion. Instead of theatrical lighting, a soft lighting emerges from a window at the top right, while a much harsher light shines from the open door in the back. The space feels lived in because of the light, which reflects a specific time of day. The warmth of the light and the feeling of it creeping downward gives the feeling of late afternoon. The sunset feels imminent. Again, the lighting has captured a natural and spontaneous moment, where the psychological feeling of the viewer is created through the relatable feeling of the fleeting moment captured.

In a painting, "bad lighting" can always be justified because the artist had to place the light artificially. In film, bad lighting is typically assumed to be a mistake or the mark of an amateur. Art filmmakers did not necessarily correct that assumption, but they challenged it, and dramatically expanded the boundaries of what can be done with light in film.



Figure 13: Persona, Bergman, Ingmar, dir. Persona. 1966. Film still. Svensk Filmindustri.

In an interview with Birgitta Steene, Ingmar Bergman said, “When I am unsure how to light a room, I think of Vermeer.” This can be seen in this still of a character shrouded in darkness yet with a light cast upon her cheek. This is a modern example of Vermeer’s chiaroscuro because of the justified light source. An even stronger example of modern chiaroscuro appears in this still from *The Graduate.* Like de Hooch’s “The Mother,” the figure is backlit, leaving him mostly in the dark, while the space around him shines through. The half of his face that is illuminated is distressed, but not intensely so. There is an ambiguity to his emotion, but a tension created by the light around him.

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Figure 14: The Graduate, Nichols, Mike, dir. The Graduate. 1967. Film still. Embassy Pictures.

Despite being separated by 300 years, the work of Vermeer and de Hooch can be seen in the work of Bergman and Nichols. The shared context of the Dutch baroque era and the art cinema movement place a unique lens on the similarities between the two art forms. Art filmmakers turned to Dutch painters to learn the techniques and visual language required to capture that sense of introspection and intimacy.

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