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Original Research Article

Deconstruction of the Tower of Babel Reading the Painting of the Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel through the Lens of Derrida

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Abstract

Problem statement: There is a consensus in the history of art that Peter Bruegel's works are allegorical reflecting contradictory semantic implications. Bruegel's the Tower of Babel, while being a visual representation of the mythological-religious narrative of the painting, has multiple and contradictory readings. Jacques Derrida, one of the poststructuralist theorists, has analyzed this narrative using a deconstructive approach and in contrast with the philosophical tradition of the originality and unity of meaning.

Research method: Using Derrida's poststructuralist approach, this study attempts to examine the different aspects of the Tower of Babel Bruegel in its historical context. To this purpose, we analyzed and interpreted the existing documents and sources using structural analysis.

Research objective: This study aims to provide a polyphonic and fluid interpretation in line with the developments of contemporary criticism and aesthetics. By rejecting the definite meaning of the work, this research seeks to answer these questions: What is the relationship between the painting structure of the Tower of Babel and extra-textual factors? What semantic aspects do emerge in the deconstructive critique of the work? How does the interpretive reading of the work relate to the orientation of contemporary criticism?

Conclusion: By revealing multiple contradictions and layers of meaning, deconstructive critique of the work shows that painting is at the same time a metaphorical image of the failure, inability, and decline of the political power of the contemporary government in the time of the painter in the historical context. At the same time, it reflects a positive embodiment of the construction of a utopia developed by human activity and effort aligned with the cultural and social context of the work. By rejecting holistic and absolute interpretations, the polyphonic interpretation can be considered as a manifestation of the pluralistic nature of contemporary critical action in the field of art.

Keywords: *Tower of Babel, Bruegel, Derrida, Deconstruction, Power Decline, Utopia, Introduction.*

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Introduction

The works of Peter Bruegel the Elder have been analyzed and interpreted from different perspectives. Available analyses have been based on traditional criticism approaches, which focus on the meaning and intention of the artist. Less research has examined his works from a contemporary critical perspective. According to contemporary and poststructuralist scholars, each work of art is a text through which concepts are transformed and different voices interact, and this allows its critic and audience to have various interpretations. The present study employs this approach and emphasizes the allegorical and contradictory aspects of the painting of the Tower of Babel Bruegel in its context. The hypothesis is that the formal structure and theme of the work reflect implications that are in line with the contemporary historical context of Bruegel. The structural contradictions of the work in the deconstruction process, using Derrida's interpretation, reveals the semantic, fluid, multiple, and contradictory aspects of the work's content. Deconstruction proposes a new approach by stating the impossibility of preserving the meaning of the original text in the process of interpretation. It also emphasizes the diversity and multiplicity in reading works of art in accordance with the contemporary audience's state of mind and their desire for active participation in the process.

In this regard, the current study seeks to answer the following questions: What is the relationship between the painting structure of the Tower of Babel and the historical context? In the process of deconstructive critique, what semantic aspects emerge as the results of the differences and contradictions between the work (text) and its context? How does the interpretive interpretation of the work relate to the orientation of contemporary criticism?

These questions outline the main points of the research problem. To answer, the first part, entitled "Bruegel and the Flemish Society", the researcher will review the personality and intellectual

tendencies of the artist in biographical and historical sources, which also shed light on his contemporary situation. This information introduces the description and analysis of the painting and contributes to the subject and narration of the work (the narration of the Tower of Babel). This is done in the "Narration of Babel" section by referring to the narration of the Bible. For the first reading and interpretation of the signs in the structure of the work, the researcher will analyze the historical conditions of the 16th century Netherlands, in the section "Decline of Power". In the "Utopia" section, the researcher will present new and contradictory implications based on the utopia's idea, and through Derrida's deconstructive approach in contrast with the first interpretation. These antithetical implications in contrast with traditional criticism emphasize structural and conceptual contradictions of the text.

Literature review

Derrida has had a profound impact on contemporary art criticism by criticizing and deconstructing the history of Western thought from various aspects and in various fields. For the first time in his book "Of Grammatology", he introduced the basic concepts of deconstruction through linguistics and constructivist semiotics criticism. One of the topics that Derrida discusses in this book is the issue of translation and transmission of concepts. According to Derrida, translation is something beyond conveying the meaning from the original to the target language. He considers translation as an active interpretation of the original text, during which the writing undergoes changes and generates new ideas and meanings. In this regard, we can refer to the article "Des Tours de Babel" (1985), in which Derrida highlights the concepts of translation, plurality, and the impossibility of preserving the originality of the text in translation and interpretation. This idea constitutes the main part of the theoretical foundations of the current study. Derrida also reviewed the most important currents and opinions of twentieth-century scholars in a series of essays, "Writing and

Difference”, published in 1967. In these essays, Derrida views criticism as a kind of deconstruction and uses it to reproduce the text. This study also draws on Thomas Moore’s “Utopia” (1516) to interpret Bruegel’s painting. Utopia consists of two parts. The first part is a critical analysis of the social and economic situation of Europe in the late Renaissance and the second part is a description of the ideal political and social situation. In this book, for the first time, Moore introduced the word “utopia” in its political sense.

Much research has examined the works of Bruegel using different approaches. However, only a handful of analyses have been on the work of the Tower of Babel. Available literature has examined Bruegel’s work through the lens of mythology and has focused on its stylistic qualities. Newer methodological studies have specifically focused on ambiguous, contradictory, and allegorical aspects of Bruegel’s art and examined the historical and social contexts - an approach that is also part of the present study. An example of this can be found in the article “Pieter Bruegel’s Towers of Babel” written by Mansbach (1982). Mansbach’s approach to analysis and interpretation of the work is based on comparing the two versions of the Tower of Babel painted by Bruegel (Vienna and Rotterdam versions). Mansbach has benefited from adapting their semantic structures and meanings to the historical and social context of the work. Morra also analyzes two versions of the Tower of Babel painting based on Walter Benjamin’s views on the “ruins” in his article “utopia lost: allegory, ruins and Pieter Bruegel’s towers of babel “ (2007). Morra placed this interpretation as a philosophical allegory next to Mansbach’s historical interpretation and confirmed the existence of the dialectical relations between the two works of Bruegel. Such comparative analysis, while providing some of the more general methodological contexts in the studies of Bruegel’s works, is specifically concerned with maintaining a definite and uniform meaning in artworks that is more in line with traditional trends in art criticism.

In the present study, however, the process of critical analysis focuses on only one version of Bruegel’s painting (Vienna version). Preliminary studies of historical facts in these articles and other historical sources show similarities in terms of data and historical events. Available studies have analyzed the structure of the painting and interpreted the work by employing a different approach. However, this research attempts to come to polyphonic and fluid interpretations rather than a definitive interpretation. In this regard, the visual components and forms, configuration, point of view, focus point, background, and in general, the composition of the painting have been thoroughly described and analyzed. However, in the mentioned articles, structural analysis has been ignored, has not been examined in-depth or its analysis has been carried out through an iconological approach. The structural analysis in the present study is based on Derrida’s deconstructive approach. This study attempts to examine if the contradictions in form and details of the work are in line with the context (ignoring the absolute and holistic interpretation). It also seeks new interpretive possibilities in adaptation with contemporary discourses in the field of art criticism, which focuses on pluralism and the affirmation of differences. In this way, the function and generalizability of contemporary theoretical approaches should be emphasized in the field of critique of visual art criticisms.

Theoretical foundations

Poststructuralism: The study of the artwork as a text goes back to the field of structuralism. From this perspective, the text has an identity independent from that of its author, and the meaning of the text is the concern of post-structuralist researchers. Structuralism, which is related to modern linguistics (semiotics), is an approach used for the analysis of artworks. The assumption is that artworks, like any texts, have their own rules of reception (a set of signs) which offer an approach to poststructuralism. Poststructuralists such as Barthes, Lacan, Foucault,

Kristeva, and Derrida with different approaches use structuralist semiotics and their terms but they come into a conflict with semiotic rules. If in the structuralist approach, the meaning refers to a transcendent signified out of the text, the point of convergence of poststructuralist scholars opens a new perspective in the analysis and critique of texts. This perspective challenges fixed meanings and readings of artworks (and all sign systems). Poststructuralism rejects the possibility of drawing on a fixed meaning for understanding the text, and from this perspective, the meaning of the text is constantly generating. This results in multiple interpretations of the text emphasizing audience-centric rather than author-centric reading. According to this belief, social interaction is considered as a text and unlike traditional linguistic, extra-textual factors (cultural, political, social, economic, etc.) are in the spotlight. In this regard, Kristeva and Barthes hold a new attitude towards the text arguing each text has inter-textual relations. Intertextuality theory contends that each text is influenced by others. In this perspective, intertextual relations create the new text (Williams, 2018). Accordingly, challenging the traditional concepts of signification and meaning by poststructuralist theories has brought up big changes in contemporary art criticism. Uncertainty of meaning and its fluidity open the possibility for the process of interpreting sign systems, including works of art, in the form of free and non-dogmatic activity with regard to extra-textual factors. According to the contemporary critic, any artwork is a text that is not created by a single author. This allows the critic to have different interpretations of it. The current research seeks new interpretations by drawing on Derrida's reading of the Babylonian narrative and examining it in relation to the contextual factors and the historical text of the work.

Jacques Derrida is one of the poststructuralist theorists who played a key role in creating a contemporary understanding of the nature of language and text in the second half of the twentieth century. This section focuses on Derrida's theory of

deconstruction, his views on translation, and then introduces the narrative of the Tower of Babel as a theoretical framework of research.

Derrida's name is more closely associated with the term deconstruction (English), *déconstruction* (French). This term has been translated into Persian as *Sakht Shekani*, *Sakht Zodayei*, *Shaloode Shekani*, *Bonian Afkani*, and *Vasazi*. In the current study, we use the term *Vasazi*. Today, *Vasazi* or deconstruction is one of the contemporary and applied theories in the fields of literary criticism and art criticism.

Deconstruction challenges fixed principles and dominant ideas in various disciplines. According to Derrida, deconstruction deals with the study, analysis, and reinterpretation of certain and dogmatic principles in any field. It means dismantling and reconstructing absolute mechanisms and discourses. By rejecting any totalitarianism, deconstruction challenges the author's interpretation and intention, and by decentralizing monophonic and dominant interpretations, it draws attention to what has been marginalized and ignored.

From this perspective, deconstruction enhances the power of critical thinking by exposing the internal contradictions in thought systems, opposing essentialism, and questioning the essential relationship between language and reality. According to Derrida, deconstruction is not a method that means a set of rules that are applied to special cases, but it is a state that is created within the text being read and it is inseparable from it. According to Derrida, the root of all conventional views which have developed consciously or unconsciously on interpretation lies in the philosophical tradition of presentation and representation. This means trying to obtain the unattainable origin of meaning.

By re-reading and deconstructing Western thought, Derrida shows the constant desire for pure presentation and calls it the metaphysics of presence, which is one of the main concepts of deconstruction. According to Derrida, the metaphysics of presence in the history of Western thought presents the hierarchical structure of presence and absence

in the form of binary concepts, one of which is always superior to the other, while the other is in the minority and marginalized. In other words, in this binary opposition discourse, the value and credibility of one pole are greater than the other. In his book *Of Grammatology*, he makes this point particularly evident by using the term phonocentrism. In this regard, the advantage of the word and its connection with the speech and the obvious immediacy of the meaning, which is in opposition to the written text, always shows the distance, multiplicity, and uncertainty of the meaning. This is what Derrida refers to using the innovative and new word of *Différance* (Cahoone, 2013, 346).

From this perspective, Derrida takes the first steps to deconstruct this discourse by focusing on the phonocentric critique in the historical course of linguistics. For this purpose, he uses Saussure's concept of "difference" and with this word he refers to the only possible meaning of language, which is always deferred. According to him, in the course of thought, meaning is always deferred and never reaches the final signified, and the process of reading the text is a movement from one signifier to another. Accordingly, it is impossible to obtain the meaning of the original text, and if the translation stabilizes the meaning of the text, then the text is destroyed. From this point of view, in the present study, Derrida's reading of the narrative of the Tower of Babel - the subject of Bruegel's work - is significant. The reason is that he has stated issues related to Bruegel's painting.

According to Derrida, the narrative of the Tower of Babel is not a marginal one presented along with other narratives, but it is a meta-narrative serving as the origin of other narratives. The discussion is also based on the understanding of translation and language. Derrida interprets this narrative as the origin of the multiplicity of mother tongues, the emergence of multiple languages and diverse generations, and highlights the necessity of translation and its inadequacy. According to him, before the demolition and "deconstruction" of the

tower, the Semitic people tried to form and maintain their empire, preserve their identity and domination. In doing so, they wanted to expand their language in the world. In the description of 'Des Tours de Babel', Derrida raises the question, "Why does God punish Semitic people?" (Derrida, 1985) (See the Theoretical Foundations section). This could be because they want to gain the position of God by building a tower. However, for Derrida, divine punishment is for another reason; "They want to have a name for themselves, they want to give themselves a name (and identity) by themselves, so that they unite and no longer disperse" (ibid, 178).

According to Derrida, the bible story begins with the human desire to build a city, a tower, and give themselves a name so that they can claim an identity and genealogy, laws, and government but of course, this will not happen because they are punished. Derrida employs a phonocentric approach to describe it; the destruction program ends with the word "Babel." It is important to note that according to Derrida, the word Babel in the ancient languages (Sumerian and Akkadian) is a compound noun in which "ba" meaning father and "bel" [syn] synonymous with God. Derrida argues that Babel in these languages refers to both "God the Father" and "City of God", and adds that the name was given to capitals in ancient civilizations. Based on this, he concludes that the city narrated in the Bible before the confusion was called Babel, and in fact, the word Babel refers to chaos and confusion due to the linguistic differences and confusion of its creators. From this point of view, Babel is polysemous and it is not possible to figure out exactly whether it is a specific or general name. Derrida states that this word is untranslatable and this causes cognitive-linguistic problems, contradictions, multiplicity, and chaos in the language (ibid, 190-200).

Derrida goes on to emphasize that despite the failure of translation, man is doomed to communicate through translation. Accordingly, translation implies both a kind of deficiency, responsibility and necessity and has no negative meaning. According

to Derrida, since the original version (text) needs to be translated, this is a sign of its shortcomings, and any new translation confirms this. In other words, for Derrida, translation is the incomplete and uninterrupted process of changing and deferring the meaning of the original text, which in itself reveals the shortcomings of the text. In this regard, the narrative shows how there is always a gap between man and his ideal for achieving power, unity, and identity. With the destruction of the tower, human genealogy is dispersed. Thus, according to Derrida, the demolition and deconstruction of the tower is the origin of linguistic diversity and pluralism that forms the need for translation. Derrida believes that the construction of the Tower of Babel by Semitic people is an attempt to impose their language and meaning and maintains that God, by disturbing their language, imposes pluralism and multilingualism on them and condemns them to a translation from which they can never escape. Though the translation is necessary, it seems impossible. From this perspective, considering Derrida's interpretation, the narrative of the Tower of Babel reflects the challenges arising from the confrontation of pluralism against singularity and unity. As will be discussed in the following section, the structure of Bruegel's painting highlights many of the issues that Derrida also points out. Among these topics are contradiction, plurality, translation and its imperfection, and fluidity of meanings. These concepts refer to the main position of the poststructuralist approach, which emphasizes avoiding essential interpretations. During the process of critique and interpretation, the meaning of the original text is transformed, expanded, and accompanied by new ideas, which are in line with the mental horizon of the audience. Such an approach can be considered as the contemporary critique of authoritarianism from the author's notion.

Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method that is an effective way to understand various approaches associated with the thought and

experimental processes. The researcher selected the work of Bruegel Tower of Babel as a case study and examined it in Derrida's philosophical and deconstructive frame of the Tower of Babel narrative. The whole painting of the Tower of Babel as a text was analyzed and deconstructed from different aspects. By analyzing the structural and formal features of this artwork within its social and cultural context, the researcher extracted multiple interpretations and meanings based on Derrida's approach for narration and interpretation of texts. In doing so, the researcher identified the internal contradictions of the text (work) and the necessity of a polyphonic and fluid reading of the work. Documentary and bibliographical methods were used for data collection.

Discussion

• Bruegel and the Flemish society

Peter Bruegel the Elder (1569-1525) is the most famous Dutch painter of the sixteenth century, a period in which the Renaissance had already begun in northern Europe, just like the southern regions (Italy). Bruegel was given a title to be distinguished from his other family painters, including his two children, Pieter Bruegel the Younger and Jan Bruegel. He is also known as Peasant Brugel (rural). This title was given to him because of his daily, native themes and portraying rural landscapes and scenes. Even in those of Bruegel's works that deal with mythological and religious themes, space and formal elements are native and the characters are Flemish. Bruegel was one of the first Northern European artists who influenced the development of Dutch Golden Age painting and the painting style of daily life (genre); (Gibson, 1981).

There is little confirmed evidence of Bruegel's life, education, and intellectual inclinations. According to Fritzgrasman, an art historian, Bruegel's mental inclinations to be as contradictory as his art (both in style and in the multiplicity of genres): description and recognition of Bruegel as a man and an artist is very confusing. The man, who is not known to be

a peasant or a Townsman, an orthodox Catholic, an unruly libertarian, or a humanist. He can even be considered a cheerful man or a pessimistic philosopher. [In the field of art] he seems to be a follower of Hieronymus Bosch, a follower of the Flemish art tradition and the last person of a generation of veteran painters, or a follower of the Italian mannerism¹. He is both an illustrator and a painter of everyday life, as well as a landscape painter and a realist painter. He is a painter who consciously adapts reality to its ideals (Grossmann, 1996, 195).

Some scholars have also referred to Bruegel's humanist tendencies. According to them, Bruegel is a reformer and intellectual who is in agreement with his contemporary cultural currents. There is a brief biography of him in Karel van Mander's² book, which confirms Bruegel's connection to people such as Nicolaes Jonghelinck (Bruegel's patron), who was associated with the intellectual and humanist communities at the time. What is clear from historical documents is that Bruegel has been influenced by his trip to Italy (Rome), his acquaintance with the eminent Illuminator, Giulio Clovio, as well as his apprentice under his supervision. After returning from Italy, Bruegel went to Antwerp, which at that time was the most important art center reflecting Renaissance in Northern Europe in various fields. It is necessary to mention that the Antwerp school of painting included a group of prominent artists (including Bruegel and Rubens) during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This school is often considered as the link between the late Renaissance style and the Baroque style in the Flemish Lowlands. Many of Bruegel's innovations took place in the fertile artistic scene of Antwerp. Bruegel became a member of the Antwerp Painters' Association and created many works, including the Tower of Babel. Regarding the contemporary cultural context of Bruegel, many scholars have highlighted the secular tendencies in the country of Flanders in the sixteenth century. In fact, under the influence of Erasmus³, who managed to gather a group of Intellectual critics of the Roman Catholic Church,

the spread of Lutheran Protestant and Reformed ideas in these areas occurred very rapidly. These secular tendencies are also reflected in the literary and dramatic societies of the time under the name of Rederijkers⁴. The activities of these circles, which historically date back to the Middle Ages, were an arena for political criticism and served as a means of promoting religious and anti-government ideas, and while representing the mindset and spirit of the middle class and it also included recreation and education (Gibson, 1981, 431). As mentioned before, Bruegel's patrons were also intellectuals and familiar with current affairs. Based on all these issues, it is not hard to imagine that Bruegel's relationship with these individuals and communities has introduced him to the secular values of this stratum (importance to the productivity and dynamism of society and individual interests).

An analysis of historical sources also reveals the political, religious, and economic conditions of Bruegel's time. Historical evidence suggests that the Flemish were politically dominated by Spain at this time. From the early 1560s, the reign of Philip II, king of Spain, over Flanders, including Antwerp, was coincided with his alliance with the Catholic Church and his position as the absolute representative of the executor of divine law. Based on this, his policy was based on purging the empire of apostates, creating religious unity against the protests and riots created by the spread of Protestantism in the Flemish region. The protests took the form of the Flemish nobility uniting with the common people and appeared in the form of preachings outside the church among the people, secret societies, iconoclasm associations, as well as the founding of Calvinist⁵ societies by reformist preachers.

Despite this religious crisis, urban culture and bourgeois influence were on the rise in the area of Flanders, which, along with Florence, was Europe's most economically prosperous region. By the beginning of the 16th century, the population of Antwerp, the city where Bruegel lived at that time, had steadily reached 100,000, and economic

prosperity had turned it into one of the leading multicultural metropolises in Europe. As mentioned in historical sources, this led to the reluctance of the city council to take actions that threatened trade. Because of tolerance in the strict religious policies of the Catholic Church and the nationwide repression of apostates (reformists), Antwerp turned into a haven for refugees and asylum seekers suffering from repression. From this point of view, the complete linguistic chaos that has ruled the city is conceivable. This is almost the same situation as Lodovico Guicciardini describes in his book "Description of All the Low Countries" (1567), "It is indeed amazing to see such a mass of men of so many different temperaments and kinds. And more wonderful still to find such a variety of languages, differing so much from one another Without leaving one town you can

see, and even imitate exactly, the manner of living and habits of many distant nations" (Morra, 2007, 202).

• Painting of the Tower of Babel

Between 1553 and 1568, Bruegel created three paintings of the Tower of Babel. The first miniature was a painting on ivory. This work was created in Rome and during an Apprenticeship at the Art studio of Julio Clavio. It was later disappeared, and the only reference to it is the name of this work in the list of the studio. The second edition is also known as the Vienna Painting (now in the Vienna City Museum), which has been the focus of the present study and is 144 x 155 cm (the largest version). It is the only one signed and dated by the painter (1563); (Fig. 1). The third work, 74 x 60 cm, the Rotterdam Tower of Babel painting (current location:



Fig 1. The Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel, 1563, 114 cm × 155 cm, Vienna. Source: <https://jhna.org>.

Rotterdam City Museum), has no signature or date and it is thought to have been created between 1563 and 1568 (Fig. 2). The Vienna version has a more detailed and dense composition than the Rotterdam version. Comparatively speaking, in the Vienna version, the location of the horizon is higher and is different from the Rotterdam version in terms of more representation of activity, mobility, and the presence of human characters.

Many scholars argue that this painting has been inspired by the narrative of Genesis. The narrative represented is a biblical story. In sections 11:1- 9 of the Bible is written, “They spoke the same language all over the earth with the same vocabulary] ... [They said to one another, ‘Let

us build for ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens] [So God became aware of what they were doing] and said: ‘So they are all a single people with a single language’. ‘This is only the start of their undertakings. Now nothing they plan to do will be beyond them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language there so that they cannot understand one another (Catholic Online World’s Catholic Library, n.d). So God sent down to them the word of Babel. This is the story of Nimrod, king of Babel, and his people, who lived in the land of Shinar and spoke the same language. They began to build a city and a tall tower to reach the place of God through which they could achieve a single identity. Therefore,



Fig. 2. The Tower of Babel by Bruegel Pieter, 1563 – 1568, 60 cm × 74.5 cm, Rotterdam. Source: <https://jhna.org>.

God revealed the word Babel to them, because of which their spoken language became chaotic and multiplied, and this caused them to scatter and migrate to other regions.

In the time of Bruegel, besides the biblical narrative, there were other narratives of the Tower of Babel. The Greek historian Herodotus has reported on a huge tower in Babylon. St. Augustine⁶ has also mentioned the connection of the Tower of Babel with the ancient city of Babel in his treatise. For Augustine, like Rome, the City of God, Babel is a city devoted to materialism immersed in sin and rebellion. People like Martin Luther⁷ and John Calvin⁸, the leaders of the Church Reformation movement in the sixteenth century, also used the resemblance between Babel and Rome to refer to the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. However, during Bruegel's time in Antwerp, in line with humanist and reformist tendencies, there was a growing interest in old manuscripts.

• Artwork description and structure analysis

This painting is a representation of a landscape, the main part of which is dedicated to a tower-like structure under construction. The painting portrays workers building and transforming a huge rock into a tower. On the left side of the foreground of the work, a hill-like surface that represents The height of the viewer's eyes. In the same part, there is a king with the signs of sovereignty (crown, staff, and cloak) accompanied by his retainers, while a worker is kneeling in front of him and other workers are busy working and ignoring his presence (Fig. 3). The king and his retainers are among the craved pieces and cube-like stones that are being cut and moved by the efforts of the workers. Bruegel also puts the date of his painting and signature to one of the stones on which three chisels and a hammer are depicted (Fig. 4). On either side of the tower, on the right, there is a port. On the left, there is a crowded view of the city and houses; the house forms depict an overview of a Flemish city in the sixteenth century, which can be seen in other works by Bruegel. Structurally

speaking, the less detail and density of elements of the port façade are portrayed to counterbalance the crowded and detailed façade of the city. In the background, behind the city walls, the painter has portrayed a quiet farm and a view of the forest that stretches up to the horizon. The ziggurat-like shape of the tower, with its vertical symmetry axis in its middle, as well as its ascent and extension between



Fig. 3. Detail of the painting (King and retainers). Source: <https://jhna.org>.

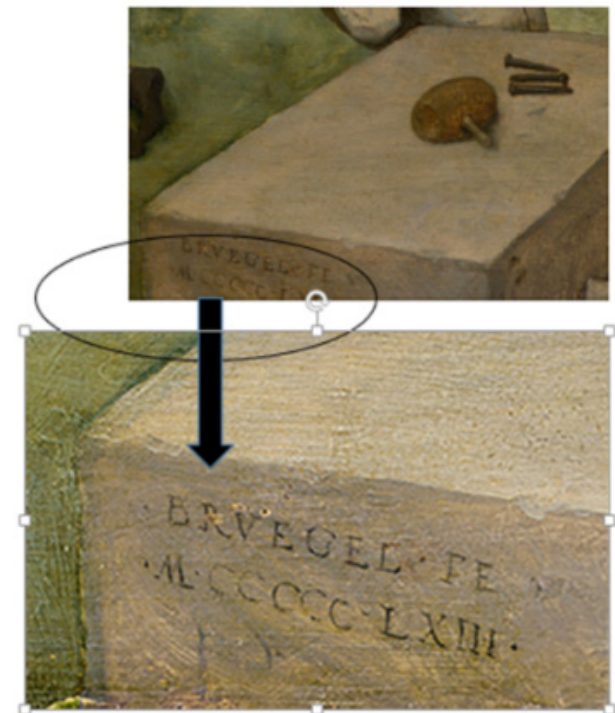


Fig. 4. Detail of the painting (Bruegel's signature). Source: <https://jhna.org>.

the clouds and the upper part of the frame, has a pervasive influence on the entire painting space. The small details in the painting are mainly related to the landscape and the construction process of the tower. Sources of art history highlight Bruegel's knowledge and familiarity with construction techniques. Drawings belonging to Bruegel are related to the process of building the Antwerp canal to Brussels, and this is reflected in the display and accuracy of the details of the painting. As can be seen, materials are being pulled up by pulleys and hoists. On the right of the tower-like structure, there is a huge elevator. Workers are laying boulders on it, which are sent from the lower floors to the higher levels. Some workers are climbing up a ladder to reach a place that has evolved from a rock to an organized architectural structure (Fig. 5). On the left, the front of the building is rather complete. A woman is entering one of the gates and a little bit far away, the group members of workers are working on the roof (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Detail of the painting (details of tower construction technology). Source: <https://jhna.org>.

But by analyzing the details in the represented structure of the tower, contradictory signs are also identified; The tower is being built at the same time and is deteriorating; It seems that it is being carved from a mountain or a rock, which is also a source of materials. The architectural styles of the tower are also contradictory and it is possible to distinguish a combination of ziggurat architectural styles such as Mesopotamia, Roman, and Romanesque arches and columns (see Fig. 6); completed surfaces with the utmost detail are placed against sections that are in the early stages, or show a state of ruin (Fig. 7).

Houses at the bottom of the tower that seems to act as a buttressing to the tower structure are also weak and unstable. Thus, by deconstructing the seemingly homogeneous whole of the tower structure into its details and components, the structural contradictions of the work (text) are revealed. These are analyzed in relation to extra-textual factors.

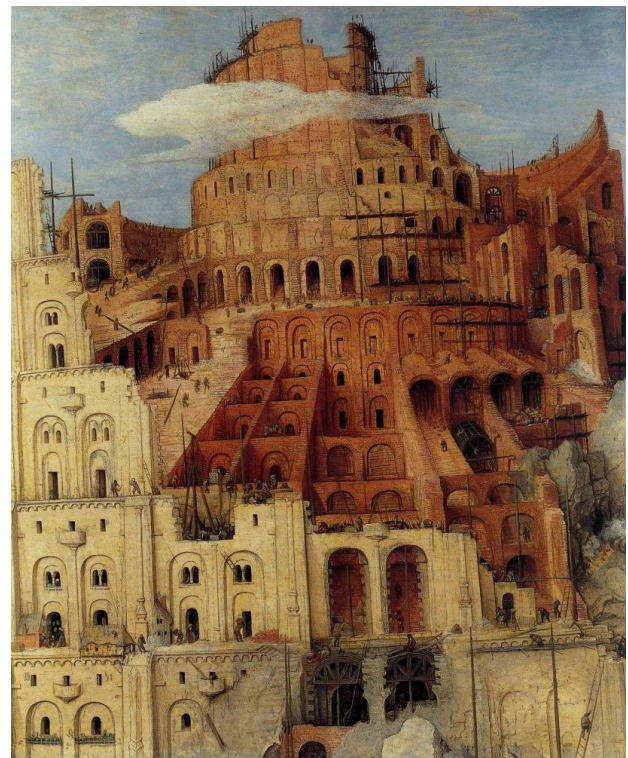


Fig. 6. Detail of the painting (the contrast between different styles of tower architecture). Source: <https://jhna.org>.

• Reading of the work

- Decline in power

In Bruegel's painting, although the architectural style of the tower structure reflects a contradictory combination of styles, its similarity to the Colosseum is noticeable. This issue has been mentioned in most art history sources. From a semiotic point of view, it can also mirror its connection with the power and heredity of the Roman Empire as well as its fall and decline. What is historically significant is that in 1563 when Bruegel painted the Tower of Babel, one of the first major challenges to the Flemish region arose with Philip II. In March 1563, the nobles of these regions sent a letter to Philip, criticizing his policies and threatening him with resignation from their government posts (Morra, 2007, 208). These challenges eventually led to the Eighty Years' War, which resulted in the formation of Catholic Belgium in the south and Protestant Netherlands in the north. Thus, it can be said that Philip's belief in himself as a representative of god's authority, which was at the same time an executive guarantee for the suppression of apostates in his empire, led to a loss of control over the Flemish territories and left his plan incomplete.

According to many scholars, under the influence of such circumstances in Antwerp in the 1560s, it was common for writers to refer to the Babylonian narrative for describing the state of religious strife. Luther's proclamations and sermons all referred

to Babel as a degenerate Roman. Catholics also claimed that apostates were degenerate due to the crisis of interpretations and languages (translation and interpretation of the Bible); (ibid, 143). Thus, both Catholics and Protestants saw the Tower of Babel as a symbol of the disintegration of Christianity into hostile sects and parties, and a description of the turmoil in the New World. Based on this, it can be said that Rome has been often referred to as a symbol of arrogance of infidels and non-Christians as well as the oppression of contemporary Catholics against Flemish people. Economically speaking, as described before, the rise of the affluent and capitalist class in the Flemish region increased the concern for the influence and preservation of native identity in opposition to the domination of a foreign government. In this regard, understanding the similarity of this tendency with the desire to achieve identity in the Babel narrative is also essential.

Under these complex historical conditions, combining structural features and historical facts in the first step shows that the painting can be considered an allegory of the king's inability to maintain historical and divine power and legitimacy, and law and order. The king's position in painting is similar to that of Philip II with the growing power of the native capitalist class to preserve the identity and political, economic, and religious rights of its territories. What brings Philip II closer to the Tower of Babel narrative, as well as to Derrida's interpretation, is his lack of fluency in German and Dutch, which is mentioned in historical sources. The issue of language and translation can be considered as the shared point connecting the character of Philip II with the Babel narrative. This indicates the limitations of his linguistic connection with a large part of the areas under his control. According to historical documents, Philip II was not able to speak any foreign language other than Spanish and always needed a translator to communicate



Fig. 7. Detail of the painting (the contrast between ruined and finished parts). Source: <https://jhna.org>.

(Pettegree, 2002), and as noted, in Derrida's interpretation of the Babel narrative shows that the lack of success of the king is due to the proliferation of languages.

In the section, which the structure of the work has been described, the incompatibility between the tower structure and the work is being done on this structure has been highlighted. The contradiction between the parts under construction and the demolished parts evokes a state of inadequacy and disproportion. The way the king's character is represented and placed in the painting shows that he is visually influenced by the structure of the tower, the wide view of the landscape, and the crowded view of the port and the city. While some workers knelt before him, some openly ignored his presence. This could indicate the monarchy's inability to maintain law in the critical circumstances of the time (see Fig. 2).

The first interpretation and reading formed by adapting the structural contradictions of painting to the political and social context are as follows:

The painting represents the failure of Philip's plan and the decline of his divine power over the areas under his control. The paradoxical components of the tower indicate the inefficiency of government policy in the contemporary context of the painter. With such an interpretation, all the components of the painting, which are represented in the historical context, signify decay and destruction. However, a closer look reveals other aspects that contradict this monotonous reading of the work and shows that the process of reading the artwork (translating the text) continues.

- Utopia

By taking a closer look and expanding the deconstructive view, we can distance ourselves from the main form and the center of the painting then focus on the marginal space around the tower. In light of this perspective, more contradictions become apparent in the structure of the painting (text). The contradiction occurs between the integrity and centrality of the tower's structural

form and the multiple components of its bustling suburban city, and the technology and industry used for its building. In contrast to the unfinished and unstable form of the tower as the center of the painting, the marginal forms and elements evoke a joyful sense of human activity and collaboration and challenge the central meaning and first reading of failure. In the painting, soldiers are not represented to force the workers and to show the tyranny and authority of the king, and it seems that the work is conducted systematically. Around the tower is a complex network of activities. The activity and vibrancy that can be seen in the process of building the tower are in stark contrast to the concept of ambition and the failure of the plan in the narrative.

At this stage, drawing upon the poststructuralist approach of intertextuality, another aspect of the historical events and the context of the work can be considered in a different reading of the work. According to historical sources, Thomas Moore wrote his famous treatise, *Utopia*, in Antwerp about half a century before the painting was depicted. Moore began writing *Utopia* when he was the ambassador of Henry VIII to Antwerp (1515) and published it a year later under the editorship of Erasmus (Narusevicius, 2013, 9). Examining the influence of texts on the intertextual approach shows that in Moore's writing, there is a clear emphasis on usefulness and productivity - among other features of the ideal society - and the "virtue of work and activity" is an important part of Moore's utopia and self-government.

According to sociologist Max Weber, the Protestant Reformist approach also focuses on work and human activity. It is opposed to the Catholic spirit, in which seclusion from earthly and material activities and the pursuit of empowerment are reprehensible. Unemployment is a great sin and activity is a virtue. In other words, from the Protestant point of view, success in material and economic life is not only not a sin, but also means that one is more favored by God, and being more

active, he will be more endowed with God's blessings.

Given Derrida's interpretation of the Babel narrative and the emphasis on the "necessity of translation," the efforts of Bruegel's contemporaries, including Plantin, in interpreting, translating, and publishing sacred texts opposed by the Catholic Church can also be seen as an echo of this spirit. Such tendencies are in agreement with the aforementioned cultural tendencies of Bruegel and reflect the influence of Moore's writing. Such evidence highlights the motivating display of activity and works in painting.

Accordingly, the representation of work and activity in painting, in the heart of a vibrant city, can once again draw our attention to the fact that the city depicted in the painting is the 16th century Antwerp. The contradiction of urban space is represented by a port with carrier ships and boats and its architectural style, which is in contrast with the historical and geographical conditions of the place of the biblical narrative of Babel (Mesopotamia). But the general resemblance of the tower to the Colosseum can be interpreted differently and symbolize ancient glorified civilizations, an allegory of the re-establishment of a lost unity, and past cultural honors sought in Renaissance humanist tendencies. The fact is that many humanist intellectuals in the sixteenth century, in addition to paying attention to ancient cultures (Greece and Rome), were also interested in linguistic issues and challenges. With the invention of the printing press, this tendency was contrasted with the use of Latin texts, which created a monopoly and monotony in the Middle Ages. With the popularity of printing, Latin language sources were replaced by any language that had a communicative function. Bruegel could have been familiar with Plantin's work while publishing the eight-volume of Polyglot Bible (Bowen & Imhof, 2008), which itself reflected the intellectuals' enthusiasm for linguistic challenges as well as the issue of ethnic identity at the time.

Against this background, the concept of national "identity" mentioned in Derrida's reading of the Babel narrative can be proposed as one of the positive consequences of this linguistic plurality. In the section on structural analysis, stylistic contradictions in the configuration of the tower were pointed out, which from the recent interpretive position can also be considered as another echo of pluralism in the work. Apart from displaying work and activity, Bruegel's signature in the painting can reflect the connection with these historical issues. The placement of the signature in relation to the chisels and the hammer, whose handle is towards the spectator, not only can reflect the audience's participation in the construction process but also evoke the artist's presence in the construction process (see Fig. 3). According to the intertextual and deconstructive approach, new implications of the work can be considered and a mutual interpretation parallel to the first interpretation of the painting can be proposed as follows:

The scene represented in the painting can be the praise of human effort in building a kind of utopia or his attempt to preserve the language and identity of the "marginal and minority" in contrast to the monopoly of the Catholic Church and the policies of Philip II. An ambitious painting tower rises to the sky, and the work and effort to translate and interpret go on.

Conclusion

Findings of the present study show that the representation of the Tower of Babel narrative can be a reflection and allegory of the political, cultural, social, and contemporary historical crises of Bruegel. The structural analysis of the painting revealed many of the issues raised in Derrida's poststructuralist and deconstructive reading of the narrative. These issues include the legitimacy of power, contradictions, translation, and deficiency, and the fluid nature of meaning and text. The reading of the painting is an allegory displaying the inability of the contemporary government of the

painter in maintaining political and religious power and authority. In parallel with reading the work under the influence of the utopian concept of effort and activity, this interpretation forms the polyphonic nature and deconstructive critique of the painting. Historical studies have shown that the Tower of Babel in the sixteenth century was a symbol of the disintegration of Christianity into hostile sects. This point of view also points to the necessity and challenging effort of the translation and interpretation of God's word by the reformers. This is entirely consistent with Derrida's reading of the multiplicity of generations that began in Babel, the need for translation, and at the same time its deficiency. Each of these readings is neither complete nor enough in the absence of the other and hardly can be used in the whole critique of the artwork. This is consistent with Derrida's deconstructive approach emphasizing there is no uniform meaning and with constant reading of the text; its impact and fertility are lost.

Analyzing and deconstructing the structure of the work by exposing the contradictions, on the one hand, reflect the cultural challenges of Antwerp's multicultural society, the futility of the government's religious policies, and on the other hand, represent an uninterrupted effort to challenge monopoly legitimacy. From this perspective, the shifting and fluidity of meanings in this interpretive approach combines negative echoes with optimistic and positive concepts and also represents the paradoxical nature of Bruegel's allegorical approach. Likewise, the deconstruction of the tower as a symbol of the authoritarian power, the source of diversity is evoked by Derrida's interpretation of the multiplicity of generations in Babel and the need for uninterrupted translation. Therefore, in the reading of the painting, a monologue is condemned and doomed to failure (just as reading the text of an artwork cannot be limited by a single meaning) and no effort and activity continue in an uninterrupted process. The expression of the painter's critical and contradictory view of his contemporary events can be found in the simultaneous fusion of the two mutual contents

of power failure and optimism resulting from the utopian atmosphere inspired by effort and activity. The adaptation of this interpretive action to the structure of the work is reflected through the visual contrast between the components of the tower as well as the whole structure of the tower with the activity and vitality of the city and its hardworking inhabitants. Just as in Derrida's thought, there is no complete translation and the original text needs to be re-translated for its survival, the post-structuralist approach of the present study of the Tower of Babel deals with the fluid nature of meaning and process instead of providing a monophonic and holistic interpretation. The reading process does not stop by analyzing the structure and context and continues. Deconstructive critique of the work, by acknowledging the differences, is determined to replace diversity and plurality with integration and homogeneity, and by emphasizing the transient, fluid, and ever-changing qualities, leads art criticism beyond dogmatic action. This is what creates new possibilities for reading the text by emphasizing active participation in receiving and interpreting the audience rather than the author.

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Endnotes

1. Mannerism refers to the 16th-century painting style.
2. Karel van Mander (1606-1548) was a Dutch poet and painter who authored the biographies of 16th-century Dutch artists.
3. Erasmus was a 15th-century Dutch philosopher.
4. *Rederijkers* (Dutch word) refers to an association whose members were active in the Netherlands during the 15th and 16th centuries in connection with the reformists in the field of drama and literature.
5. Calvinist is a branch of Protestantism that originated in the 17th century.
6. Marcus Augustine, better known as Saint Augustine, was one of the most influential thinkers of medieval Christianity.
7. Martin Luther (1546-1483) was one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation.
8. John Calvin (1564-1509) was a French religious reformer.

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