Inroads to Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Painting

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Dutch landscapes of the seventeenth century are a veritable phenomenon in the history of Western painting: to paint landscape at all as a subject in its own right was almost unprecedented, and the proliferation of this genre and the unforgettable quality of the pieces produced have arrested the attention of viewers for generations. Yet much of past scholarship substitutes extensive formal analysis for serious inquiries into the meaning and function of these works. I propose to explore the issue of meaning more critically through an appeal to semiotic analysis, in the mode of anthropologist Clifford Geertz.¹

In his groundbreaking article 'Art as a Cultural System', Geertz argues that the traditional formal analysis of Western aesthetics altogether misses the apprehension of meaning, which draws instead on the whole cultural context from which any particular art has sprung: ḏ The means of an art and the feeling for life that animates it are inseparable...’ ² Instead Geertz advocates semiotics, 'a science which can determine the meaning of things for the life which surrounds them'. He conceives of semiotics in broadly anthropological terms as a 'natural history of signs and symbols', an 'ethnography of the vehicles of meaning'...

'Such signs and symbols, such vehicles of meaning, play a role in the life of a society, or some part of a society, and it is that which in fact gives them their life... Here, too, meaning is use, or more carefully, arises from use, and it is by tracing out such uses... that we are going to be able to find out anything general about them.'³

This study focuses upon a common element of seventeenth-century Dutch landscapes upon which formal analysts have always fixated: the road which typically recedes into the space of the landscape, as if from the very feet of the viewer. A reexamination of this strikingly pervasive feature with Geertz's more broadly cultural approach – tracing out the uses of roads and their role in the life of Dutch society of the time – reveals rich and unexpected meanings in this very element which traditional studies had treated only as a formal characteristic.

In Rosenberg and Slive's formal analyses of the stylistic progression of Dutch landscapes through Mannerist, Tonalist and Classicist phases, roads function