
REMBRANDT: THE DENIAL OF PETER

How an artistic composition reveals the essence of an axiomatic moment of truth

By Pierre Beaudry, 9/23/16



Figure 1 Rembrandt (1606-1669), *The Denial of Peter*, (1660) Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

INTRODUCTION: A PRAYER ON CANVAS

All four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have reported on the prediction that Jesus made during the Last Supper, stating that Peter would disown him three times before the night was over, and all four mentioned the event of that denial in one form or another. If ever there was a religious subject that was made popular for painters in the Netherlands during the first half of the seventeenth century, it was the denial of Peter. More than twenty European artists of that period, most of them were Dutch, chose to depict the famous biblical scene, but none of them touched on the subject in the profound axiomatic manner that Rembrandt did.

Rembrandt chose to go against the public opinion view of Peter's denial and addressed the fundamental issue of the axiomatic change that takes place in the mind of an individual at the moment when he is confronted with the truth of having to risk his own life for the benefit of another. This report has three sections:

1. THE STORY OF THE NIGHT WHEN PETER'S LIFE WAS CHANGED
2. THE TURBULENT SENSUAL NOISE BEHIND THE DIFFERENT POPULAR PAINTINGS OF PETER'S DENIAL
3. THE REMBRANT AXIOMATIC SETTING FOR THE DENIAL OF PETER

1. THE STORY OF THE NIGHT WHEN PETER'S LIFE WAS CHANGED

A multitude of artists have depicted the emotional turmoil surrounding Peter's denial of Jesus after the Last Supper. In fact, the denial and the later repentance of Peter has been the subject of a great number of works of art throughout history. However, most of those artists missed the point of the axiomatic change that took place that historical night.

Many artists have depicted the scene according to Luke 22: 54-57, which stated:

“Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. Peter followed at a distance and when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.”

Several others depicted the same subject in accordance with the Gospel of Matthew 26: 73-75, which said:

“... “Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.” Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, “I don't know the man!” Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: “Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.”

Then, still more artists painted the subject in accordance with the account of John 18: 13-27, which said:

“Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in. "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." As Simon Peter stood warming himself, he was asked, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it, saying, "I am not." One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?" Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.”

However, only one artist, Rembrandt, painted the scene according the axiomatic conditions reflected in Luke 22: 59-62 which said:

“About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're

talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly."

Why did Rembrandt choose this rendition of the Bible and not the others? What is so unique about this depiction of the denial of Peter which does not appear in the other accounts?

The point I want to make here, is that during the entire three year period when Jesus spent most of his time gathering and educating his disciples, the politically powerful people considered his teachings as heretical and were harassing his supporters in public, as well as accusing him of having some ulterior political motivation. This is the climate of psychological warfare under which Jesus was arrested, at the height of a campaign of popular antipathy for his new movement of which Peter was the leader. The humiliation of Peter, therefore, was aimed at forcing him to deny his affiliation with Jesus, publically, and renounce his principles in front of everyone, including Jesus.

This is the truth of Gethsemane: "Why me?" This is probably the most famous case in history of testing the strength of a leadership whose commitment is to confront public opinion and recruit people for the purpose of accomplishing the general good for mankind. However, if the leader were to fail, would the disciples follow? In other words, the story doesn't say how Peter was set up for the fall, but as it is suggested by the forecasting of Jesus, he was ripe for it. Jesus knew what was going to happen that night, and it is not difficult to imagine how any intelligence service could make use of such a human weakness for the purpose of counter-intelligence warfare. The epistemological significance of such a psychological warfare reality was never reflected in any artistic composition before Rembrandt, and has not been replicated since. This is what I would call a unique stroke of genius.

In fact, during the process of an axiomatic transformation, such a *Gethsemane moment* is the most important moment expressing the power of increasing the energy flux-density of the human species. It is not a religious

moment, as such; it is an epistemological moment that transforms the human mind for the better and for all time. This is one of those rare moments in someone's life when one is given the change to increase the freedom of the species by acting on behalf of the immortality of mankind. If you miss such a timely opportunity (*kairos*), it may not come a second time.

2. THE TURBULENT SENSUAL NOISE BEHIND THE DIFFERENT POPULAR PAINTINGS OF PETER'S DENIAL



Figure 2 Caravaggio, *The Denial of Peter*, (1610) Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Compare the following series of popular paintings of this subject with the one of Rembrandt and ask yourself: “What is it that makes the Rembrandt painting unique?”

Made famous for his *chiaroscuro* method of realism and naturalism, Caravaggio became the most prominent Italian painter to influence the Netherlands from 1620 to 1640. His most influential painting was *The Denial of Peter* which had captured the attention of all of the Dutch artists. All of them, except Rembrandt, were influenced by his realistic and expressive depictions of dramatic gatherings or biblical stories that became known as the Caravaggesque genre.



Figure 3 Gerard Seghers, *The Denial of Peter* (c. 1625)

Every painting on this subject has a piece of the story, but none of them has the truth of it as an axiomatic moment. In the Caravaggio painting, (**Figure 2**), which is the most intimate depiction of them all, Peter's body language shows that

he has been caught in the act of lying. The physical reaction is there, but the state of mind is missing. As for the paintings of Gerard Seghers (**Figure 3**) and of his follower (**Figure 4**), they all reflect an overwhelming sense that everybody is shocked or surprised but the axiomatic nature of the event is not there.



Figure 4 Flemish follower of Gerard Seghers. *The Denial of Peter*, (c. 1628)

Among the most well known representatives of this genre were Gerard Seghers, Gerard van Honthorst, Dirck van Baburen, Adam de Coster, and Theodoor Rombouts, all of whom painted the celebrated scene of Peter's denial. By the time of Rembrandt, the axiomatic theme had become so badly interpreted and misunderstood that the more the newer expressionist artists tried to show their talent, the more they failed showing the truth of the subject. The first half of the

seventeenth century was so bad that it seemed impossible that anyone could ever recover the true meaning of the subject again.



Figure 5 Gerrit van Honthorst, *The Denial of Peter*, (1622-24)

In all cases, what is being painted in *The Denial of Peter* is the self-evident action of being caught lying or of denying some accusation. None of those paintings addressed the fundamental question: “What is the causal nature of an axiomatic moment of truth? What is a paradigm shift? What goes on in the soul of a person at the moment when he is being forced publically to sacrifice his own security for the sake of another?”



Figure 6 Dirck van Baburen, *The Denial of Peter*, (c.1620-24)

Artists were no longer displaying true principles of human behavior in their compositions; they were painting only banal effects with subjects such as card players, tooth pulling scenes, or musical orgies with Bacchus, etc. That's the choice Rembrandt had to make: impress the senses or impress the mind. That was Rembrandt's Gethsemane. Rembrandt rejected this entire silly genre painting and caused a complete paradigm shift in the history of artistic composition.



Figure 7 Adam de Coster, *The Denial of Peter*, (probably late 1630's)



Figure 8 Theodor Rombouts, *The Denial of Peter*.

3. THE REMBRANT AXIOMATIC SETTING FOR THE DENIAL OF PETER



Figure 9 Rembrandt, detail of *The Denial of Peter*, (1660)

For the first time, since *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, someone dared to paint the state of mind of an axiomatic change. The typical representations of this Biblical subject merely interpreted *The Denial of Peter* as a turbulent scene filled with soldiers and people who are gesticulating and debating over the truth of the question. The real subject, however, was never approached, because it is much

more difficult to represent the mental torment of being torn between an act of denial and its redemption, which is what Rembrandt chose to paint.

The setting takes place in the court of the High Priest, Caiaphas, where Jesus has been brought from having been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. A maidservant, holding a candle to the face of Peter, recognizes him as being “one of them.” Peter comes under an axiomatic shock and makes a gesture of denial with his left hand, while Christ, looking back over his shoulder, is being taken away with his hands tied in chains behind his back. That is the setting of an axiomatic transformation and the truth of what you see with your mind’s eye is precisely the opposite of what you see with your physical eyes. It is the umbra of what is almost not there which carries the maximum of light in such an event.

How did Rembrandt paint such an axiomatic change? First of all, he chose to paint that subject after he had been disgusted by the terrible joke concocted by Dirck van Baburen in 1624. **(Figure 6)** It was probably the sight of that painting that decided Rembrandt to make a polemical statement against the Caravaggio *chiaroscuro* method that most Dutch painters had taken up in their treatment of biblical subjects. Instead, Rembrandt painted the internal emotion of a paradoxical state of mind rather than the attractive external features of sensual clamor. That is, the state of mind of cowardness mixed with the state of mind of forgiveness; the passing from the lower dimensionality of sin to the higher dimensionality of repentance.

It is that Platonic Cave range of light and shadow relationship between Peter and Jesus which is the real *chiaroscuro* matterofmind of the axiomatic change. What is written on the face of Peter is not simply his fear or his denial, but also the forgiving dark look of Jesus being reflected from behind his back. What you see in Peter’s eyes is the state of mind of Jesus mixed with his. This is the singularity which clinches the whole process of transformation. In all axiomatic change, there is one singularity among the high density of the many which locks the new manifold into a higher geometry of existence. And, in this case, it is the almost invisible forgiving glance of Jesus which comes out of the darkness and which sheds all of the necessary light for the discovery by time reversal. Here, what is the

least visible to your physical eyes must become the most visible to your mind's eye. That is the locking singularity of the axiomatic subject matter; the dark light of axiom busting. That is the reason why Rembrandt chose the Gospel of Luke to inspire his painting. As Luke said:

“About an hour later another asserted, ‘Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.’ Peter replied, ‘Man, I don't know what you're talking about!’ Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. ***The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.*** [Emphasis is mine] Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.”(*Gospel of Luke 22:59-62.*)

No other artist paid any attention to this, because the relationship between Peter and Jesus was absent from all of their minds. The key to this axiomatic change, therefore, is the connection between Peter and Jesus. That is why Peter's right hand is clenched. What is being represented in the Rembrandt *chiaroscuro* between the face of Peter and the face of Jesus is a mixture of high density of emotional singularities which pulls Peter in two opposite directions at the same time: self-sacrifice or denial; and he is going both ways at the same time. That's the drama of an axiomatic transformation of the human soul: a *mea culpa* and a denial at the same time. Similar mixed-emotions are replicated in J. S. Bach's [Saint John Passion](#). “*Ah, my soul where will you at last go, where shall I find relief?*”

Rembrandt has projected this contradictory mixture in all of these features of Peter's body with extreme scrutiny in order to replicate in the most accurate way possible, the psycho-epistemological complexity of the state of mind that takes you over when you are suddenly confronted with the truth that forces you to chose between sacrificing yourself for the sake of another or denial of the other. This is how the truth of *chiaroscuro* is projected on the dimly lit wall of Plato's Cave, expressing what takes place in the soul of a human being when such an axiomatic moment takes hold of it.

How do you know this? You know it by discovering the obscured presence of Jesus looking back at Peter, as if it were Peter's own conscience looking back at

him. Peter doesn't see Jesus looking at him; he sees himself looking back at Jesus at the very moment when the cock crows for the third time. And, suddenly, he remembers the words of Jesus. What is made visible in the most obscure part of the painting is merely Peter's memory of how the truth comes to light, at the moment when it is being denied. The presence of Jesus, there, is purely imaginary, but, paradoxically, more real than the light of day.

CONCLUSION

What Rembrandt painted in *The Denial of Peter* is the tension of the density of singularities that takes over at the crucial moment of change. Peter's swollen face breaks into a gnawing grimace of contradictory emotions; reflecting the wrangling of past lies and fears as they are being pulled into both denial and a truthful state that is about to burst into tears a moment later. Here the creative process of Rembrandt is at its highest, because this is the type of suspended moment which permits the creative mind to accomplish the impossible task of rendering with physical means one of the most profound states of mind that a human being is capable of accomplishing with his mind alone; that is, the action of transforming himself by going from a lower manifold to a higher manifold.

There is a powerful prayer by the famous sixteenth century English Bishop, Lancelot Andrewes, which confirms the truth of this sort of stressful situation and which goes as follows: "*O Lord Jesus Christ, look upon us with those eyes of thine where-with thou dost look upon Peter in the hall; that with Peter we may repent and, by the same love be forgiven; for thine mercy's sake. Amen.*" (Jonathan Aitken, [*Prayers for People Under Pressure*](#), Crossway Books, Wheaton Illinois, 2008, page 58.) Rembrandt's painting is in fact a prayer on canvas and is the essence of artistic composition that he was able to recreate in what can be considered the most unique and personal of all of his masterpieces.

That prayer on canvas is: "Lord, I pray that all true artistic compositions reveal an axiomatic moment of truth, because that is how an axiomatic moment of truth reveals itself as the essence of artistic composition."

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