

GIVING VOICE
TO THE INTERRUPTED

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Abstract

It strikes me that often (if not almost always) from Botticelli (and earlier) to Liechtenstein (and later), women who are portrayed in art look as if they are interrupted.

As if they are arrested in their normal life by being portrayed in a painting or a picture and thus can't become who they want to be anymore. They are stopped when the picture is formed.

To give these women a voice again we need to do more and better than personalize them (give them a name). We need to try and empathize with them, identify with them, be and feel with them.

That is why, literally, this thesis ends with giving voice to ten famously portrayed (and interrupted) women.

Johannes Vermeer in the Rijksmuseum

It is Friday.

It is a Friday and it is almost spring. I go home immediately after school. I dress up and choose to wear a purple coat today.

I never wear color. I always wear black, but for tonight purple seems precisely colorful enough. I go downstairs and try to greet my neighbor. Hello. Hello? He never manages to say hello back to me. I greet him and he gives me a sharply pointed glance. He looks at me as a stirring witness, up and down, and then goes inside.

Nothing has changed today. It is all the same.

It is March 2023 and I am in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

A Friday night, late and still cold for March. I am with my family and we are all dressed up. My father wears a long, leather coat and my mother wears her business outfit. My sister is in full colors, as always. I am in purple. All purple, ton sur ton. We are among the lucky ones to get tickets to this once-in-a-lifetime exhibition. The largest Vermeer exhibition ever, featuring all his paintings.

People from all over the world have come to Amsterdam to see this unique event. “An unmissable feast,” wrote The Guardian. “One of the most thrilling exhibitions ever conceived”, “A show more precious than pearls,” raved The New York Times. “There will never be another Vermeer show as big as this one,” concluded The Washington Post.

Pffew.

And we will be part of this! Excited, thrilled, nervous, we enter the large line of people waiting. Trying to manage our expectations. What will we be gazing at?

What will it be like to see some of the most famous and revered-portraits, city views, and domestic scenes ever painted? To see what Vermeer saw and to experience how he saw it.

Peek-a-boo.

Once inside, I abandon my parents and my sister. I go left where they go right. I feel that I see things better when I am anonymous.

The rooms in the museum are filled with tons of people, but I don't know them, and they don't know me. The feeling of being able to look at art as a neutral character, as a non-person, makes me feel free. As if I am at the same time there and not there. I look, I gaze, but nobody cares what I see. I am alone.

No one will ask me what I see and why I see it that way. This is my perspective, my own, unique view. I am here, I am not nowhere, I am here, this is my me-where.

Mewhere.

Looking at Vermeer's Interrupted Girls

The museum is filled with art lovers. The Vermeer exhibition is somewhere in the back of the museum, some minutes from the main entrance. We all walk, walk slowly, through elaborate hallways, endless corridors, following the signs. Vermeer. Vermeer. Walking slowly, like a group of ants on a mission, sheep on their way to a barn, walking, waiting for the big reveal. Rooms full of Vermeer and rooms full with people looking, gazing, seeing, experiencing, feeling, judging, evaluating. Everyone looking, in awe. Looking as if they had never seen anything like it. We feel special.

This is huge.

I look at the paintings. I look at myself. What I am looking at? My focus seems to drift. I am fascinated by all these people looking at the paintings. I feel young. These old people and paintings make me feel young. I am a young woman, a young girl, and I am lost between all these old paintings and all these old people.

I feel young and unsettled.

But I am not the only one.

I see other young women, looking up, looking in,

looking out,
trying to focus, trying
to make sense, trying to
look back, trying to live
their lives, to do their
thing, and be cool about it.
They look like me.
They are my age and they
seem to be feeling the
same as I do.

They are looked at and
they try to look back.

All these girls, they aren't real. They are similar to me, but they are painted, painted by Vermeer. They are his girls and referred to as his girls. They aren't real. Or are they real? I look at them and they are looking back at me.

They look disturbed, stopped, halted, ceased. Interrupted. That's it. These girls are living their lives, doing their thing, being cool about it, and then, suddenly, they are arrested. Interrupted.

*Yes, like that, tilt your head, fold your hand, shoulders down.
Yes, like that. Hold it.*

Stopped. From girl to model. Their white and yellow dresses seem staged. Frozen in time. Stopped. Forever. Jailed. Why are their bodies turned towards us? It all looks artificial. Vogue. Elle. Harper's Bazaar. They have a certain look in their eyes, doubtful, amazed, surprised, annoyed, afraid?

I am not sure.

We look at them. Like Vermeer did. And with our looking, our gazing, we are interrupting them. Like Vermeer did.

Girls interrupted. We are interrupting them in their daily routine, in their daily living. Feeling, thinking, doing. By looking at them, we are interrupting them in their reading, their drinking, their living and breathing. We are interrupting them in their being. Freezing them in time, occupying, annexing their living space. From here to everywhere. There is no personal space when you are looked at.

Interrupted. Invaded.

I look at Vermeer's interrupted girls and I feel weary and confused. Here I am in this once-in-a-lifetime show in De Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and I am lost. What am I looking at? In my purple jacket I am leaning in with thirty other Vermeer-lovers to get a better look at *Girl Interrupted at Her Music, 1659–61*, a painting painted in Vermeer's typical sober-baroque style, using oil on canvas. In this painting, Vermeer depicts a young woman at her music with an older gentleman. They wear lush, elitist, expensive clothes. And ... while the man is looking at the paper with music, focused, undisturbed, minding his business, the girl turns away from her music, is interrupted at her music, looks at the painter. Annoyed? Surprised?

You were asking?
Can't you see I am busy?

I look at her and she looks back at me with her glazed eyes. Is she stuck? She looks as if she could never escape from this frozen moment, forever locked in time. Never to be moving, living, laughing, crying again.

She keeps looking at me.

Is she asking for my help?

Is her gazing back at me a cry for help?

Help me to escape from this frozen gaze.

I am leaning in a little more. I am center front now, staring.

What is she thinking? What does she feel? How does it feel to be painted to be captured, to be frozen in time and then to be looked at.

What if I could join her, sit next to her, and ask her? What if I could be like her, identify with her.

Stepping into, stepping out of the painting.

I Am Interrupted

Am I like her? Is she like me? Girl interrupted.

Am I like them? Are they like me? I feel for them. I think I recognize this feeling of interruption. Feeling interrupted, looked at, stopped, frozen in time. For me, for her, for them, for us, it is not exactly an unfamiliar feeling. It is frustratingly common, nauseatingly normal, and annoyingly natural.

Being a young woman. I am also looked at and gazed at. Interrupted minding my own business, doing what I like to do and being cool about it. Men whistle when I walk down the street. All the time. They talk to me in ways that feel dehumanizing and unnecessary. I don't want to go into details. It should be clear enough.

Really, I don't want to go there.

There is a man next to me in the train who can't stop looking at my legs. I am high on adrenaline and cannot stop thinking: I hope he doesn't do anything, I hope he doesn't touch me, I hope he gets out on the next stop.

We are in a seminar room and I am judged and evaluated. I have presented my work, *White Walls* (Stapel, 2022).

Against interpretation, for experience, but I am told later (by my old, male teacher) that it is quite ambitious for wanting to make art that once was influential, powerful, expressive, modernist, made by big, boastful, brilliant American men decades ago. Do I really want to do this? Shouldn't I try something else?

Maartje, are you sure about this?

Shouldn't I be more like myself?

(A sedate, modest, promising, young girl.)

Don't try to be somebody (a man) I am not. Don't try to be somebody (a man) you are not. Seriously? Maartje, is this really what you want to make? Is this really what you want to say? Really? A young European woman trying to hook up with famous, old, modernist, American men. Yes, exactly. That is the point. I want to belong. I want to claim my position. The white cube is also my white cube. Don't you get it? I listen, I interpret, I process, I am disappointed. I am shocked. I am told not to go where I want to go. I am stopped. I am interrupted. I am not allowed to make what I want to make.

Interrupted by old white men.

I am on my way home late in the night. I am on my electric Van Moof bike. Fancy, but that doesn't help. I feel like I have to keep looking over my shoulder. A man has been biking closely behind me for the past 20 minutes. I call my roommate. On the phone I loudly address her as dad. "Hi Dad, yes I am almost home." Entering the street before my house the man takes a right turn. I take a left.

In my favorite bar the same drunk guy always touches my shoulder when he passes. He smells bad and is very old.

In a conversation with my teacher I am afraid to tell him what I really think and feel. Because I might cry.

And when I cry he stops listening.

The drunk guy in the supermarket.

The instructor at the gym.

Waiting at the traffic light.

Walking.

Trying to explain something and being ignored.

These acts of interruption. These comments, these looks. They result in me stopping with what I am doing. In the streets, in bars, in my thoughts, in my feelings and in my me-where.

What to do? I wake up, I get dressed, I go to school and I have to immerse myself in what my teachers and advisers say and mean. I have to think with them, I have to listen to what they say and try to understand what they mean and then make clear that I understand what they mean. I need to assure them even though I am not assured. I need to assure myself to be able to survive. *But*, with that, I'm getting further away from my own work, my own ideas, my own vision of the world. *Yes, but* I need to hold back, I need to go with their interpretation, even though I never asked for their interpretations, their analyses. I need to take them seriously in order for them to take me seriously.

They interrupt me, they objectify me, they lift me from my practice and bring me further away from my goal.

Being a woman, I am always watched. Scanned.

I am always being evaluated.

Hi darling, how are you doing?

Really, seriously, do you really want to be the next Mark Rothko or Donald Judd? How funny!

Because those who watch me have influence, have power.
The power to fail me, the power to make me feel
irrelevant that makes hold back. The power of submission.
I am stopped and I lose joy in painting, creating, and being.

I can't ignore them

They look at me with their
powerful eyes,
they gaze at me.

They interrupt me.
I am stuck.
I can't free myself.

I am a young woman. They are old men.

They watch me and assess me, evaluate me, judge me.

That is how it is. Still. Always.

My role, their role. Men are (still) more powerful, (still) have more important positions and because of that they are automatically assessing, evaluating, and judging more than women.

Vermeer and his girls.

Man and his women.

The male gaze.

Looking at John Berger's Male Gaze

The male gaze. What does it do? That is my question.

What does it mean to be looked at? How does it feel? What does it do to you? How does the male gaze (being looked at, assessed, evaluated, constantly, automatically, by men, Man) affect the gazed-at. How does it feel to be the gazed-at?

What is it? The gazed-at experience?

What is it like to be the girl interrupted in her music?

The male gaze? Men act, women appear? Men move, women sit silently. The idea that too often in artworks, men are the movers, while women represent the non-moving, has been elaborately discussed by the English art critic John Berger (1972). Berger uses the idea of “men act, women appear” in the tv show and book *Ways of seeing* where he analyses the representation of women as *passive objects* (silent, stopped, interrupted models) rather than *active subjects* (engaged, moving, changing, growing humans) in films, advertising and paintings and sculptures. Berger (1972) discusses how the female body is typically interpreted by the male eye, and how women are automatically objectified and dehumanized in a way that makes them appear simply as objects for men to enjoy for their own benefit and lust. As if the main function of being a woman is being an object of desire for men.

This “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975) changes women from unpredictable, moving, human subjects into predictable, unmoving, stand still objects. Specifically, Berger (1972) says that both in images and in society at large, men and women are represented

differently: men have agency, whereas women are mostly busy with the way they present themselves. How do I look? Vogue. Strike the pose. Berger summarizes this by writing, famously that indeed:

“men act while women appear.”

(Berger, 1972, p. 47)

Or, in other words, whereas men are supposed to keep moving, women are at their best when they are interrupted.

Berger argues that this relationship (between moving men and unmoving women) is especially visible in European oil paintings that show nude female figures. The women in these paintings aren't typically nude because it makes sense for the story or adds to the concept. In these paintings, female nudity is not functional. It is purposeless and senseless. No, says Berger (1972, pp. 46-48), in most of these paintings, nudity is there for the male spectator to enjoy. It is pornographic nudity: the naked woman is there for men to look at. For men to be excited about. She is not there because she creates a great importance for the story line. She is there to portray desire, sex, submissiveness, control, you name it. Thus the entire system of gender relations in classic art depictions of (nude) women is typically quite hypocritical because it implicitly presumes that the (male) spectator is a subjective individual (just like the male fabricator), whereas the depicted woman is denied any individuality. Humanity even.

While the male is always human, the female is always an object, concludes Berger in his famous television show and essay.

Looking at Vermeer and his girls with Berger's way of seeing, with his gaze, looking at Vermeer with Berger's eyes, we are inclined to ask why these girls are 'there'.

What is Vermeer's motivation behind putting these girls in the paintings? Why are these girls even present? Are they solely there for the male spectator to enjoy?

Possibly. Probably. Definitely, Berger would say.

They are there because a male painter (Vermeer) put them there. Vermeer is in charge. The girls are there for his 'pleasure'. Vermeer's girls are there because Vermeer so desired them to be. Before he painted them, they were busy doing their daily chores, minding their business. And then he stepped in, he stopped them and he painted them. Most of the men Vermeer paints are pictured as moving, busy, acting, doing. Most of the women Vermeer paints are pictured as interrupted, as 'discontinued'. Often they look up "to the painter", arrested. Just a few minutes ago they were busy doing their thing, absorbed in their work, and now, now the painter has arrived with his intruding gaze, they are stopped and silenced.

In fact, I would argue, that even when Vermeer's girl objects don't look up (to the painter), they know, they feel that they are being watched (see for example, Vermeer's painting *The lace-maker: working on her lace*, but also clearly being peeked at watched, intruded in her doing).

And as such, by being interrupted, Vermeer's girls lose their agency and are no longer individuals. By being painted and

framed and hence fixed to be looked at constantly, they have lost their individuality and are frozen in time to become an object for the pleasure of the male's eye.

Girls interrupted: no more individuality.
Just an object for the male's eye.

Looking at Laura Mulvey's Gaze

But that's not all. British film theorist and filmmaker Laura Mulvey added something to Berger's analysis of the male gaze that made it extra influential. She made it angry, Marxist, and Freudian. So, we move from Vermeer's to Berger's to Mulvey's gaze by arguing that:

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female...In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be- looked-at-ness.”

(Mulvey, 1989, p. 19)

Mulvey's postmodernist Marxist-Freudian-Bergerian essay helped to popularize and propagandize the term 'male gaze'. It is because of this essay that the 'male gaze' is now more than common jargon in artsy and postmodernist circles across the globe. The male gaze? That is how men, all men, see the world. And they can't unsee it. They are trapped in this frame.

What once was their playground is now their prison. Male, privileged, sexist, barren, wrong. Mulvey based her re-analysis of Berger's male gaze on her study of film art, her main fascination. Mulvey distinguishes two types of content when it concerns the cinematic experience: (1) the content of what is presented on the screen; (2) the content of the interpretation of the viewers who are watching.

Mulvey says that both the screen/picture and the viewers are extensions of our social order.

And, according to Mulvey (1975, 1989), that order is undoubtedly a patriarchal one. What happens on screen (1) and the act of viewing (2) are both extended representations of our patriarchal social order. What we see on screen and how we relate to what we see is guided by how things are shaped and ordered in our social lives: men are in power, women are not. Why is that? There are probably multiple causes, but Mulvey (1975, 1989) uses the famous Viennese psychiatrist Sigmund Freud to argue her case. What motivates men, according to Freud? A fear of castration. Men are afraid to lose their main weapon, their manhood. In women, they see this fear materialized because women don't have a penis. "Oh, something has happened to women (castration) that we need to make sure that doesn't happen to us." Because of this fear, men want to control and dominate women. It is power born out of fear. They want to control women in order to make sure they don't get castrated themselves. However, this is not always easy.

How I prefer to read Mulvey's analysis is as follows: Men have a hard time understanding women because they are so very different in the most essential way. They are two types of human beings. Women are women, like other women; men are men, like other men. A very effective (and simple) way to 'understand' women (from a male point of view) is to objectify them. Women become powerless and meaningless when you turn them into an object of desire. Look at them, dominate them, desire them, and you put them at a distance, you nullify them and you 'model' them, make them the object of your gaze, your painting. To want the other is to objectify the other. That is the trick of desire obsession: it turns the other into a piece, an item, an entity, a body, a something (to desire). By desiring and thus objectifying

women, they are no longer an active participant of meaning, but simply and only a passive recipient of meaning.

That is, I think Mulvey's (1975, 1989) rendition of Berger's (1972) gaze.

Girl interrupted,
girl desired,
girl objectified,
modelled, pacified.



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl interrupted at Her Music* c. 1658–1661

Time go back to where it all started.

Let's have another look at Vermeer's *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*. A Berger look, a Mulvey look. What do we see? Vermeer painted this painting in his famous baroque style, probably between the years 1658 and 1659, using oil on canvas. In this painting, Vermeer depicts a woman studying or looking at her music with a gentleman beside her. This painting shows the typical courtship during the 17th century in Europe. Music-making, a recurring subject in Vermeer's interior scenes, was associated in the seventeenth century with courtship. Although there is also a man present in this picture, the focus or main subject is the young girl. She is also mentioned in the title, while the man is not. The girl looks at us. 'She looks at the camera' and thus she breaks the scene, she steps out of the 'fourth wall' of this theatrical set up and thus addresses us, the on-lookers, the audience. The girl is looking at us, thus looking at the ones who interrupt her, who stop her. She was busy - she is interrupted - she stops

what she was doing - she looks up - and that is how we see her: stopped / looking up. The look in her face is lively. Perfectly painted as if what is painted is a short moment, a quick look over her shoulder. But this quick look is frozen. The girl is pacified, stopped. She is not an active force in this setting. She doesn't act or move or "do". She is stopped, like her music, like the wall, like the other objects in the room. She sits, she reads, she listens. Constantly, without change. "*Men act while women appear.*" (Berger, 1972, p. 47)

The girl sits, looking at us, in a static position, on a chair. The man in this painting is active. He goes about his business. He acts undisturbed. He is busy. Standing and leaning in an active stance, as if he could at any moment start doing something else, start moving. He is in control. He 'does', while she mainly 'is'.

In Mulvey's words: "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, (...) so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19). The way Vermeer set up the scene in this painting invites us to look at the girl, not at the man. The man is painted as someone who does not have to be looked at. Don't interrupt him, do not annoy him: he is busy, he is strong, he is in the background. The girl is the object of attention. She is put in the main focus, in the light, looking back at us. She is portrayed in a way that is visually very strong and tricks the viewer into looking at her. She is created, positioned to be looked at. Because of our male-dominated gaze, Berger (1972) says. For our patriarchal, capitalist, misogynistic, Freudian, erotic pleasure, Mulvey (1975, 1989) says.

Sure.

Fine.

Of course.

But.

But, what bothers me is that these high-brow academic analyses of the objectification of women in a way amplify this objectification. In Berger's and Mulvey's analyses women are extra-objectified, because they are 'objects' of analysis. In Berger's and Mulvey's gaze, the girl interrupted at her music is an object-of-study. Not a subject.

I don't like that.

I would like to know what she is thinking.

Please (Don't) Evaluate Me

What I find surprising is that in the literature and research on the male gaze the experience of the one who is illustrated, the object remains unknown. We talk a lot about the male gaze, how it came to exist and where you can find it and how it is used. It is quite an important term in writings about art and interpretation, but there seems to be something missing.

It is cold, rationalistic, objective:

I keep thinking (feeling): “what about the feelings, emotions and thought of these objectified women?”

Ironically, in analyses of the male gaze, there seems to be a double male gaze and a double objectification. In Berger's and Mulvey's writings, the objectified women remain very much objects. They are referred to as Vermeer girls or only talked in relation to the painting. They are not free, they don't talk back, get to use their voice. They are mute.

What is their side of the story? What is their view, their vision? What do they think about, who do they love, and who do they wish to be? Typically, these questions get a bit lost in the high-brow, academic, theoretical, overly complicated, post-Freudian, anti- capitalist analyses of the male gaze. Sure, such analyses want to reveal the illnesses of our patriarchal world, they want to lay bare the differential power dynamic and the toxicity of our male-dominated world, but by doing so, we seem to forget to show what makes the portrayed woman human. As if again we can only see and talk about them in the context of the male gaze. Who are they? What do they feel? What is their take on all this? What do they have to say about all this?

Scream, yell, shout. Tell me how you feel.

Isn't this a part of being seen, becoming free and becoming relevant: to be given a voice? Giving your side of the story, being able to take back control and say: stop thinking for me and talking about me, let me first tell you who I am and how I feel. Objects don't talk, but humans do. I think we can try to empower girls and women, from objects that are looked-at to active voices with their own story.

How Does It Feel To Be Looked At?

What does she feel?

Do you change when you are looked at?

Yes, says Nickolas Cottrell in his *Evaluation Apprehension Theory* (1968). Social psychologist Cottrell argues that when we think we are being evaluated and looked at, this has a distorting influence on how we present ourselves in the moment of evaluation. We act and present ourselves differently when we think we are looked at, monitored or or evaluated because we want to do well and we are afraid for a negative evaluation. For some of us, the idea of being evaluated strengthens our motivation and *facilitates* our performance, making us more successful than when no one is looking. For most of us, the idea of being evaluated, *inhibits* our performance because it makes us nervous and increases stress. Social Psychologist Robert Zajonc (1965), who is known for his work on a wide range of basic psychological processes, found that *social facilitation* is likely to occur when tasks are easy. When doing easy tasks, being ‘watched’ may increase the stakes and thus motivation. However, for difficult tasks that need a lot of focus and attention, the presence of onlookers is likely to inhibit performance because they are likely to distract and divert.

So when you undergoing a difficult task, being monitored or looked at, changes your focus. Instead of focusing on what you want to do, you now wonder whether you are doing well.

Am I performing okay? Will I succeed?

Is this what they want me to do? This creates stress and anxiety. And unfortunately this stress doesn’t benefit your final work.

Please, look this way. Am I doing okay?

The fact of knowing that you are being watched or monitored deviates you from the task that you are supposed to do. You start altering your ideas in order to hopefully please your on-lookers.

It stops you in what you are doing and makes it harder to stay on your own track. You stray away from your initial ideas and are stopped in your original plan. You start doing things the way you think others want you to do it. You focus on effectiveness and pleasing-others more than on being your own, true self.

Bye bye authenticity.

You are getting stressed from the fact that you have to perform and be good. Be pretty! Smile! Turn this way, look that way! Lower your head! Take off your dress! There goes your internal motivation, your originality, your development, your authentic self.

Girl interrupted, girl diverted.

I would like to know what she is thinking.

Naming the Objectified

Fortunately, in recent literature and exhibitions, theorists and curators have repeatedly tried to de-objectify women portrayed in art in attempts to deconstruct the patriarchal power dynamics and make the portrayed women more important, more relevant, more human, and more individualized.

Typically, this is being done by giving the portrayed ‘a name’. Who is she? What is her name? Where did she live? What family did she come from? How old was she? What was her profession? A famous example of this practice is how we have come to identify ‘the black maid’ in the painting *Olympia* by Manet (1863). In the past years, researchers worked very hard to find out more about non- individualized, objectified black people in famous paintings (The New York Times 2023). The maid in Manet’s famous *Olympia* has recently been identified as Laure. Her name is Laure.

Although we still don’t know as much about this figure as we do about the lead figure in this painting (Victorine), thanks to the research of curator Denise Murrell (2014), Laure is no longer an anonymous black person. In her dissertation *Race and Modernity from Manet’s Olympia to Matisse, Bearden and Beyond* (2014) Murrell (2014) tries to put more attention on Laure.

Researchers as Denise Murrell are helping to unveil some of stories behind the famous artworks and their overlooked objectified, female characters. The maid, the slave, the girl, the prostitute, the daughter, the passer-by. Understanding these hidden stories helps us gain a richer understanding of who the portrayed women are. It is a start. Learning the names and background and life stories of Laure and Victorine changed the way we look at

Olympia. By knowing the names of these women, they become more human.

However.

Given portrayed women a name doesn't really restore the power imbalance. It doesn't really empower the interrupted. Giving women a name (Laure, Lisa, Mathilde, Chantal, Monique, Elisabeth) hardly makes them equals with the painter. It doesn't restore the balance. Okay, they have a name, a family, a birthplace, a profession, but this doesn't really bring them to life, it doesn't re-subjectify them. Does it?

In September 2021, I went to the exhibition *Kirchner and Nolde: Expressionism Colonialism* in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam about the work of the German painters Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) and Emil Nolde (1867-1956)

In the art of Kirchner and Nolde, people of color are often depicted sensually and colorfully. Typically, in older interpretations of this work, the expressive power of color and shape is seen as more important than a detailed representation of people or objects. Who or what is shown in the works of art has not been investigated for a very long time. In the exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum, the curators tried to tell both the art historical story and that of the people and objects portrayed. It wasn't the goal of exhibition makers, Dorthe Agesen and Beatrice von Bormann, to make the exhibition about historical completeness but more to critically examine the artworks and time.

In the German colonial Empire (1871-1918), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) and Emil Nolde (1867-1956) encounter people and objects from other parts of the world in many places, for example in ethnographic museums, at colonial exhibitions

and in the entertainment industry, where many performers of color worked.

The exhibition looks at the works of both artists against the background of the cultural-historical context in which they were created. Both painters portrayed numerous native, maids, enslaved people. Interesting. Important.

The exhibition's main theme tells stories about the appropriation of other people's visual language, stereotyping in art, skewed power relations. Although this is important to know, since it gives a new platform to these stories, and puts the artworks in a different light, it doesn't necessarily empower the people depicted by Kirchner and Nolde. The Amsterdam exhibition gave them a name, but is that what makes them human? A name?

So, with the above examples of the 'personalization' of Olympia and Kirchner and Nolde we may conclude the same thing: given the portrayed a name or a family or a background is important, but this doesn't necessarily re-subjectify the portrayed.

My real question is: how does it feel?

We are unable to go back in time and ask them.

We don't know the feelings and experiences of those who were pictured. They stay mute, frozen in time. Forever. Forever?

Empathizing With The Objectified: Brené Brown

I think it is important to restore balance by adding to the story of the objectified, the interrupted. What did they feel? What did they do? Who did they want to be?

But how?

Not by giving them a name, an age, a family, a background, but by giving them a voice, by having them speak, by giving them text, words.

I will try to crawl into these pictures and I will try to sit next to the one pictured and have a look around. Try to describe what I see and feel. Try to describe the experience of the one who is pictured and give her a voice.

Not by specifying their identity, who cares what her name is.

No, by fictionalizing I will try to (re)create the experience of the portrayed.

How?

I will try to empathize with them. Experience how they were feeling. Try to identify with the portrayed. Identifying with the interrupted.

How?

I will do this by applying a set of rules, characteristics of empathy (how to empathize) as described by Brené Brown (2010, see also Brown, 2012).

Brené Brown is an American psychologist.

She is mostly known for her writings on shame, vulnerability, and leadership, and for her famous TEDX talk about *the power of vulnerability* in 2010 (Brown, 2010). In a widely viewed YouTube video about the difference between sympathy and empathy, Brown explains the basics of empathy.

What is empathy? Brown says: empathy is connecting with people so we know we're not alone when we're in struggle. Empathy is a way to connect to the emotion another person is experiencing; it doesn't require that we have experienced the same situation they are going through. People often confuse sympathy with empathy. Sympathy is I feel bad FOR you. Empathy is I feel WITH you. Sympathy can make us feel more alone. Empathy helps us feel connected. According to Brown, empathy has four characteristics: perspective taking, staying out of judgment, recognizing emotions, and communicating. (Brown 2010, 2012).

For Brown perspective taking is about wanting to be able to see and feel the world through the eyes of the other. For this it is important to put away your own emotions and opinions to understand what they are going through. We should do this by disregarding our judgements about the situation of the other and being open to how the other sees and describes his or her own feelings. Negative comments and judgements about their experience can feel invalidating. Therefore, it is important to recognize the emotion of the other.

How does it feel to be sad, disappointed?

Empathy is a willingness to acknowledge and correctly recognize the feeling of the other. You can do this by clearly stating what you see and not interpreting.

Try to communicate that you understand where they are with their feelings and validate these experiences and feelings.

“It sounds like you are in a hard place now. Tell me more about it”.

So, according to Brown, if I want to re-subjectify women portrayed in artworks, I should try to give them a voice by showing, feeling, experiencing empathy with them.

That is what I should do.

I should try to use Brown’s empathy tools, experience the feelings and emotions of the portrayed --and thus re-subjectify them.

For Experience, Against Interpretation: Susan Sontag

The assignment is clear.

If I want to give a voice to the interrupted, if I want to re- subjectify the prototypically passively portrayed women in art, I should try to ‘become’ them; identify and empathize with them, try to feel what it is like to be them.

There and then, here and now. Interestingly, this call to arms (feel! be! imagine!) Susan Sontag’s famous dictum that when looking at works of art, we should ‘think’ and ‘analyze’ less and ‘be’ and ‘feel’ more: In what is probably is her most famous and best- read essay *Against Interpretation* (Sontag, 1966) argued passionately *for* experience, *against* interpretation. In her plea for the importance and relevance of the immersive act of experiencing art rather than the distant, rational, and cold act of interpreting art, Sontag devotedly rejects the need for interpretation as an attempt to create value to the raw and sensory experience of viewing works of art.

Let it be, Sontag says. View it as it is. Experience it, engage in it, relate to it. And please, don’t over-interpret and over-analyze it. Sontag wishes to treasure the primitive encounter one has when interacting with art.

Don’t critique it, don’t try adding value.

Let mother Mary speak to
you, let it be.

In Sontag's (1966) eyes, the interpretation of art has evolved into the primary and most-valued manner of relating yourself to art. Sontag argues for a way of seeing art that focuses mainly at what there is to see in art rather than finding or adding meanings in various scenes.

According to Sontag (1966), interpretation tempers with our raw experience. It hides and makes us numb to what we really feel and see, while this raw experience is so important for us. It makes us aware of ourselves, our positions (towards the artworks) our feelings (towards the artwork). It is what makes us human.

The girls interrupted.
What does it feel like to be them?

What is their experience?

That is what I need to find out. That is what I must imagine.
Imagine what it is like to be interrupted.

Giving Voice to the Interrupted

In my attempt to give voice to these interrupted girls I have decided to choose ten art works. Ten interrupted girls portrayed by men to step into, experience, and empathize with. I chose ten completely different, famous artworks. Some of these artworks I had stumbled upon while writing this thesis, others have been in my head and in my life for a long time. I grew up with them, had the postcard hanging on my fridge or saw them only once. I find these paintings, pictures and covers of movies striking.

They fascinate and haunt me with the question:
what is it like to be her?

By writing ten texts I will attempt to step into the world of these artworks and try to empathize and identify with the women they portray.

These girls are interrupted
and I want to try to give them a voice.

Conclusion

It strikes me (still) that often (if not almost always,) from Boticelli (and earlier) to Liechtenstein (and later), women who are portrayed in art look as if they are interrupted.

As if they are arrested in their normal life by being portrayed in a painting or picture and thus can't become who they want anymore. They are stopped when the picture is formed.

To give these women a voice again we need to do more and better than personalize them (by giving them a name).

We need to try and empathize with them, identify with them, be and feel with them.

That is why, literally, this thesis ends with giving voice to ten famously portrayed (and interrupted) women.



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl interrupted at Her Music* c. 1658–1661

-

I was thinking again, about that afternoon in the summer.

How I would like to go back
and walk along that river once more.

But then he came into my life
and looked at me in a certain way and it froze me in time.

Now I regret that I never walked along that river once more.



Fra Angelico, *The annunciation* 1143

-
I worry.



Roy Lichtenstein, *Blonde waiting* 1995

-

You tried. You waited and thought
maybe it will blow over and this time he would get it right

but now you are alone.
in your bed
waiting for something that will never be done and will stay unsaid

and I think it is quite daring of you that you stay there
and keep on thinking that this time he will see you differently
that this time he will bring you flowers and call you afterwards.

We both know it was a one-time thing.
he looked at you and you were the bearer
even though he barely saw you that one time that he looked
and that you are so much more than that one moment frozen in time.

It hurts, it is mean and it is annoyingly obscene

because he will never be able to see you.
Perhaps, if he tried hard enough,
he might be able to imagine

what it would be like to be you.



Willem De Kooning, *Woman I* 1950

-

“How long will you stay amused?”

she asks in a conversation in the car with her man

I show you little lakes
we say little prayers
I tell you little stories

It's been an amusing fantasy

but who are you to witness all these little things
that I create for you

“I think you should get out”

maybe after a mile, she thinks
I can swim by myself in a great lake
and then I don't have to pray for anything bigger
I will create my own big stories

It is an amusing fantasy
she thinks, alone and silently



Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World* 1948

-

You take your time to look at me
and when I looked back
your eyes seem to have moved on

I end up sitting alone, without you
but I know you could be behind me
looking over my shoulder
looking at me
whispering something in someone else's ear
about me

And did you ever think about saying something to me
asking me about my life, my day or my thoughts?

because
you don't know what shoes I wear and I why I wear them
you don't know that my head hurts after six pm
and that I don't know why

you don't know that this is actually not the color of the dress
but a mistake I made while washing it
and that I like it more now

you don't know that I am always cold from October till March
that I am always too warm from April till September
you don't know that Tuesday is my favorite day
because it passes much faster

and you don't know, that I mind that you don't know all these things
because you never asked

you don't know much, do you now?

you just know how you see me,
but not how I see myself



Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* 1656

-

Life

according to you

is dressing me up
making me stand tall

I am always your girl
whether I am in the corner
or right in front of your eyes
I am always your girl

Was there something else to add
maybe for me to say?
what was it that you forgot to ask me?

I would like to tell you myself
but I am always your girl
dressed up and standing tall
in the corner
or right in front of your eyes

quiet, mute
that is my life according to you



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Woman Bathing* 1656

-

Anything more
a light on me,
a life different than today's
you put a light on me,
showing my strong legs

but it is your light, not mine

I can see the smallest things today
I can see the smallest things

I can see how you roll your eyes at the baker
I can see how you bite your nails when you are cold
I can see when you are frustrated or scared

and sometimes

I can see how you wake up and fall asleep
I can see how you use certain words when you talk about love
I can see how you light a fire

how you look at my dress
how you look at my legs
how you see and show me

It is your light, not me



Sam Mendes, *American Beauty* 1999

-

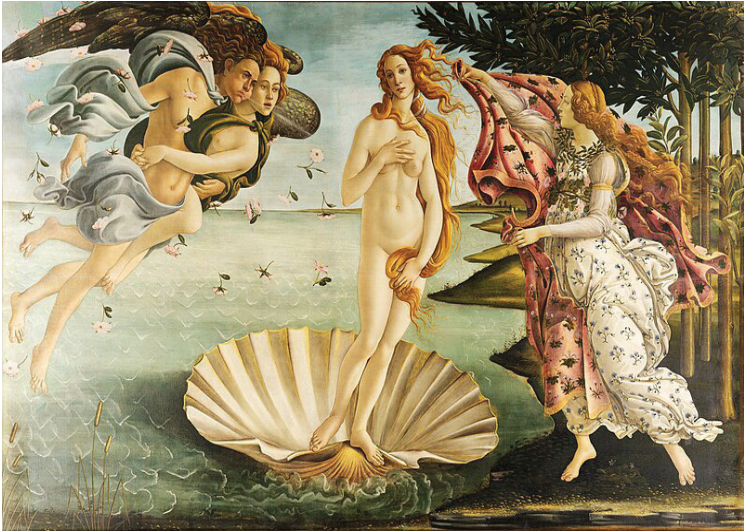
It is possible to be a bit nicer to yourself. I tell her
to sometimes make a lot of bad choices and find out that is okay.

you can also be rude to others if you want to
if you really mean it of course

you can be rude, uncharming and unadored
you can be unwaxed, smelly and sarcastic

“and radical?” she asks me

sure, radical I say



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* c. 1484–1486

-

It is as simple as breathing in and out

to stand and pose

to look a bit more modest but still utterly beautiful

to be adored

what is harder is to sit down, wide legged, hair tangled and wet
and not to be who you are doomed to be, to be loud and annoying

incautious

and then let someone love you,

she says. while posing for one hundred pairs of eyes,

I pose with her

breathing in and out

I am nervous



Ed Van der Elsen, *Twin Sisters at Nieuwmarkt* 1956

-

my sister knows almost everyone
and I know maybe four people
two of them I know very well
and she is one of them

when I walk besides her
I wonder what part of her social agenda I belong to
we converse and stop to stand in the sun
I listen to her stories
from time to time I nod and I ask her a question
making sure not to seem judgemental about her lifestyle
and to show empathy

she is shy but seems to have managed not to look so shy
I seem quiet but actually I am not so quiet
there is so much happening on the inside, for the both us
we are the same contradictions

a man passes us and looks me up and down
my sister squeezes my hand
it is painful empathy



Balthus, *Thérèse Dreaming* 1938

-

7 past 2

my body is alone in my bed

both of us are dreaming in silence
or would you still be awake?

I am dissatisfied, annoyed at myself
I am sweaty, unladylike
I would like to feel settled, centered and more calm
like a real lady

10 past 2

my body is not alone in my bed
there is the feelings of loss, sleepiness, distance and love

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