Looking at Women Looking: Female Portraits in the Gender Crisis

By Renate Brosch, University of Potsdam, Germany

Abstract:
In this paper I want to look at nineteenth century image culture to show a historical trajectory which gradually favoured increased observer participation. Going back into the historical development of specific images can delineate the evolution of the conditions of perceiving and codes of depicting to ultimately throw light on how these conditions correspond to subject positions and expose power relations. Ways of seeing and their concomitant constructions of spectatorship, the gaze and the glance, practices of viewing, observation and visual pleasure are constantly being reorganized. And because questions of perception and seeing reach into the constitution of identity, investigating vision and visual representation necessitates a central focus on how issues of gender, sexuality and power are inextricably connected (Pajaczkowska 1).

1 Today's visual media have redefined the value and status of images. Cultural commentators like Nicholas Mirzoeff and W.J.T. Mitchell assign agency functions to images which they define as active players in global culture (Mitchell 10). Images have always appealed directly to emotions or to affective response, as is evident in their earlier cult or ritual status. This direct impact is part of the power images hold over us and part of the power we invest them with. At the same time, the images a culture produces are caught up in existing power relations. Visual Culture Studies have from the beginning made efforts to analyse the role of the visual in the discourses and praxes sustaining power, and more particularly the gendered distribution of power.

2 The inundation with images we are subjected to and participate in today resulted from stunning new visual technologies invented in the nineteenth century which produced radical changes in understanding and producing representations. Recent research has been much occupied with this explosion of visuality in the nineteenth century, when many new optical devices, theatrical and illusionist effects on stage, optical instruments, techniques of reproduction and experiments in representation were complemented by the visual challenges of everyday urban life, such as high speed transport. The iconographical revolution of the nineteenth century, especially the beginnings of photography and film, initiated the cultural shift that led to today's pictorial turn.

3 In this paper I want to look at nineteenth century image culture to show a historical trajectory which gradually favoured increased observer participation. Going back into the historical development of specific images can delineate the evolution of the conditions of perceiving and codes of depicting to ultimately throw light on how these conditions correspond to subject positions and expose power relations. Ways of seeing and their

concomitant constructions of spectatorship, the gaze and the glance, practices of viewing, observation and visual pleasure are constantly being reorganized. And because questions of perception and seeing reach into the constitution of identity, investigating vision and visual representation necessitates a central focus on how issues of gender, sexuality and power are inextricably connected (Pajaczkowska 1). While the central gender focus is an advantageous starting point, it has in the past created set pieces of formulaic assumptions.

4 Visual observation and a ubiquity of surveillance have been identified as dominant forms of sustaining the gendered hegemony of power in post-industrialist Western society. This common assumption results in the suspicion of the visual which derives from Foucault's thesis of a society of surveillance which replaced an earlier model in the European enlightenment. According to Foucault modernity shifted the means of exerting power towards invisible strategies of observation and containment which inscribed themselves into the individual's methods of self-control. Many feminist analyses of nineteenth century culture echo this idea of a resolutely ocularcentric power regime in modern society (Jay 3-28), deploring a panoptical observational power that would confine women within the limited space of a heavily regulated private life. Another enduring notion concerning the nineteenth century is the separation of spheres with the dominant concept of Victorian femininity geared towards the angel-in-the-house role model repressed not only in terms of sexuality but in terms of total exclusion from civic and public life.

5 In painting, the female portrait with its conventional composition, framing and objet d'art character exemplifies a restrained construction of female subjectivity within an imaginatively rationalized space oriented towards a male gaze. Following Alison Conway who called for a differentiation of the totalizing assessments mentioned above (5), I am going to examine portraits of women as well as contemporary art criticism to show how the second half of the nineteenth century increasingly placed ideas of theatricality and the aesthetics of beholding at the centre of its representations. Painting as well as theories of spectatorship increasingly foregrounded an implied spectator's gaze. Portraits of women, those representations which specifically address gender issues, most particularly emphasized the beholder's participatory agency as did theories of aesthetic experience. I argue that the period, in which narrative fiction also shifted from an omniscient eye, capable of occupying multiple visual sites, to a subjective point of view, must be seen as transitional and ambivalent. The transition from a narrative omniscience to an individual view-point has a structural analogy in portraiture's overdetermined construction of an implied observing situation and theory's excessive use of an embodied observer. This shift involves a rejection of the realist consensus

dominant in earlier Victorian times which yet remains ambivalent: It allows women to become subjects, rather than objects of the gaze but it presents itself in the guise of a profound disturbance. Thus while my discussion has profited greatly from earlier feminist diagnosis of patriarchal spectatorship, I want to point out a tendency towards counter-discourse and resistance which is often lost in generalizing evaluations.

6 In the course of the nineteenth century, the buying power of the newly rich industrials and manufacturers tipped the scales of the art market in favour of contemporary scenes while art criticism still debated the issue of their appropriateness to "high art". The contemporary and everyday was still a contested subject for painting. However, the middle class ascendancy to wealth and power caused the art market to turn away from historical painting. For patrons who wanted pictures for the walls of their homes, still-lifes and genre-scenes proved more attractive because of the smaller format and easy semantic accessibility. Historical and mythological painting adapted itself to the changing tastes by translating these topics into more contemporary iconologies, like John Everett Millais's scandalous "Christ in the House of His Parents" (1850) naturalistic carpenter's shop complete with a mother Mary who has chilblains on her feet. Later modifications in the Pre-Raffaelite efforts towards a decorative and ornamental style cleansed of emotional expression by Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti also adapted to the taste for less high-blown and heroic subject matters. A perfect combination of elaborate historical settings with Victorian genre sentiment can be observed in the paintings of the Academicians Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Frederic Leighton.

7 In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the most prominent systems ordering society, namely class and gender, were threatened by "the Woman Question." Caricatures in *Punch* and other magazines showed the New Woman as a threat to the institutions of marriage and the family because of her "masculine" behaviour. The women's movement, the shifting labour market and reform legislation challenged traditional institutions like marriage and the role of women in the family. Discourses of provocation and radical reform intersected with those which rearticulated ideas of gender difference in order to police deviant behaviour. In the context of the economic difficulties and political and moral panic which dominated the second half of the century, the codification of domestic femininity as a part of the dominant position of the bourgeoisie became an obsessive topic of representation. Narrative and genre painting contributed to these containment strategies against threats perceived in interventionist reforms, women's paid employment, feminists speaking out against masculine sexuality and marriage, nationalist struggles and the rise of socialism (Cherry 122). The

pictorial depiction of the domestic terrain in genre painting mapped feminine social spaces.

8 Contemporary scenes of life were particularly apt for the pictorial mapping of the domestic terrain, such as the drawing room, morning room, conservatory, and garden, as the appropriate spaces of respectable femininity, could construct femininity as a part of the dominant oppositional gender model. The *Art Journal* which promoted itself as the authoritative cultural magazine acclaimed the increasing number of domestic subjects:

> England, happy in her homes, and joyous in her hearty cheer, and peaceful in her snug firesides, is equally fortunate in a school of Art sacred to the hallowed relations of domestic life. From prince to peasant, from palace to cottage [...] the same sentiments [...] have found earnest and literal expression through domestic pictures [...] The public at large naturally bring such compositions to the test of their own experience [...] for the works of this class are successful just as they awaken a dormant sympathy. (Doane 178)

The patriotic rhetoric invoking national humanity as transcending social differences of "prince to pauper" appeals to a sentimental unity based on bourgeois nationalism (Cherry 122). However, the critic's democratic invitation to readers to test "pictorial transcripts" against their own personal experience and to judge success in art according to their feelings of sympathy is a new tone taken. In the wake of growing popular interest in pictorial art, it is this respect paid to subjective response which gains more weight in the course of the century, in visual art as well as in theoretical discussions.

9 A debate carried on in *The Times* in 1885 concerned the propriety of the naked body in paintings. The critic John Horsley denounced contemporary nudes as improper even in mythological subjects.[1] Evoking conventional Victorian convictions, he called an appeal to the animal passions contrary to the moral and aesthetic duty of art, which should be "a manifest appeal to the love of beauty, and not to appetite, an ideal presentation not a literal transcript of individual fact, observance of special artistic conventions" (Weikert 266). The fact that the female body, especially the naked body, was no longer a natural attraction for the public gaze may be seen as not just another instance of Victorian prudery but as a growing awareness of the problematical relationship of spectators to objects. The habit of presenting women as objects to be looked at was coming to be questioned.

10 The female nude had a long tradition depicting the naked female body turned towards an implied male spectator outside the frame, displaying the Venus pudica position which suggests chastity and draws the gaze towards the genitals and posited so that the eyes are accorded no power of returning the look. According to Nanette Salomon, this type of picture

[1] He had in mind a picture by Wiedemann Browning of Jeanne d'Arc bathing ("Joan of Arc and the Kingfisher"). Robert Browning defended his son's picture claiming that it showed a historical incident. It was exhibited at the Grosvernor Gallery in 1886, cf. Weickert 269-270.

legitimized male desire among a community of hierarchically differentiated men opposite an essentialized "universal" womanhood (99). In France Edouard Manet secularized the nude by showing unidentified prostitutes instead of Venuses and Ledas (e.g. "Olympia"). This intrusion of eroticism in the shape of authentic, lower class bodies into the realm of high art was a scandal to contemporary audiences. On the whole, however, photography, rather than painting, quickly became the medium for pornographic images. Its impersonal technique of automatic documentary registration favoured a voyeuristic gaze, suggesting a complete, merely apparatus-dependent intimacy between viewer and image. The *Times*-controversy is evidence for a confrontation between Victorian ideals of femininity and newer concepts of female corporeality due to these innovations (Betterton 3). On the one hand, the educated rhetoric of titles pointing out mythological or biblical references seem to have lost some of their legitimizing effect as Victorian art audience were no longer able to decode all the traditional iconographies for which they needed Ruskin's explanatory Academy Notes. On the other, artists' experiments like Manet's refusal to idealize the nude disturbed expectations of gratification by the female body as a passive possession for the male gaze. In spite of its overt conservatism the *Times*-debate exemplifies this double break with tradition.

11 Many female authors also achieved a disruption of received notions by rewriting descriptions of art works from a different point of view. Charlotte Bronte used a painting of an Orientalized nude of Cleopatra in *Villette* (1853) as an occasion for a deliberate misapprehension.[2] The confrontation of her heroine Lucy is staged as an encounter which gives its viewer qualms about her female identity. It results in her comment: "If I am not she, Cleopatra, who is this 'I' which I believe to be?" This is not just part of a psychological maturing process, the scene in the museum where Lucy looks at the painting is carefully dramatized to produce a conflicting encounter with aesthetic, ethical and gendered aspects of the gaze in the protagonist and by extension in a female reader. Lucy is facing the nude in the painting but also herself as the object of a male gaze (by Monsieur Paul) and aware of the spectacle of the painted female nude for all the others looking at it (Ender 89). Significantly, there are no women in Bronte's imaginary museum except for those framed on the walls but there is a crowd of male spectators with eyeglasses "exceedingly taken with this dusk and portly Venus of the Nile" (Bronte 209). Lucy who has chosen to look at this picture is told by Monsieur Paul that it is not proper for her. He tries to take her away and make her understand that she should be looking at other paintings "more like her" and he positions her in front of genre sequence showing the stages of ideal womanhood entitled "La vie d'une femme." Lucy

[2] The painting has been identified as Eduard de Biefve, "Une Almée," which Bronte had seen at the triennial Salon de Bruxelles 1843. Cf. Onslow 450-473.

dislikes the "vapid," "bloodless," "brainless" representations of decorous femininity and resists his interdiction of the nude, but she also resists the traditional reading of the nude in favour of a personal ironical misreading:

> She was indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat - to say nothing of bread, vegetables and liquids - must she have consumed to attain that [...] wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments [...] out of the abundance of material - seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery - she managed to make insufficient raiment. (Bronte 203)

12 The female protagonist here lays claim to the "innocent eye" later called for by the art critic John Ruskin, pretending to be unable to explain the disarray of the exotic boudoir, the reclining pose and the near-nakedness of the figure. She directs naive exhortations at the subject of the painting to get up and tidy up the mess. Interpreting the exotic nude determinedly within categories of European domestic genre painting as a household mismanaged by an indolent woman, she ridicules the current taste for Orientalist nudes, which showed slave-markets or harems and gratified male voyeurism while at the same time exploiting sentiments of imperial superiority. The satirical passage pointedly lays bare the sexist commodifications in academy painting and in the politics of official exhibitions. The passage makes clear that the unstable borderline between the naked and the nude is a distinction in ways of seeing, where nakedness is the experience of a real and vulnerably exposed body and nudity is a prerequisite of art and therefore an aesthetic experience (Clark 4). The scene of Lucy's misreading is contemporary with Manet's analogous experiment in translation the nude into nakedness in his "Olympia." Both unsettle the established male-centred conventions of viewing the female form (Ender 96). Both contribute to the contemporary negotiations of female representation and female spectatorship, while Bronte specifically empowers a female act of spectatorship to draw attention to ways of seeing and their ideologies.

13 At the end of the century, when anxieties about gender became omnipresent, a host of different images was produced. As female submission was called into question by emancipist discourses and practices, domestic scenes in painting (Johnson 256, 83, 86) and in literature tended to depict more problematic relationships. At the end of the century, gender concepts were in flux in intellectual and artistic discourses. Abandoning moralising didacticism, fiction concentrated increasingly on observable phenomena. Images of containment of women were not the only reaction to the changing state of affairs, unconventional female behaviour came

to be seen in a more sympathetic light. Behaviour patterns constructed as feminine could take on exaggerated forms which endangered normative assumptions about woman's roles in society. Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, George Meredith's *Lord Ormond and his Aminta*, to say nothing of Oscar Wilde's and G. B. Shaw's plays showed non-conforming women as victims of the hypocrisy of respectable society. In texts by Robert Browning, Meredith, Thomas Hardy, George Gissing, and others who took part in the creation of the New Woman-ideal males were guilty of egoism and insensitivity and indirectly responsible for the ruin of female fates. Patriarchal authority was increasingly represented as a stifling and often blighting influence on the lives of its dependent wives and children. Thus the development of fiction and drama from moral tale to psychological realism contained an increasing scepticism towards the value of the imposed system of gender difference.

14 Not surprisingly, the period of gender crisis was also one of redefinition of urban spaces. On the upper end of the social scale public spaces previously reserved for men, whose aggressive, competitive abilities fitted them for public life, were opened up for women as consumers. Women "in the street" had been an anomaly, not in terms of numbers but in terms of categories of respectable womanhood. Ladies were not supposed to be seen walking the streets, so as not to be confused with those professionals who were considered criminal offenders and a danger to the moral fabric of society. However, as the topography of cities altered, women increasingly conquered public territory (Wolff 71). The establishment of large department stores for instance turned shopping into a leisure-time activity for women and redefined the gender constructions of public activity (Friedberg 61). By the 1870s an active consuming public, increasingly and deliberately addressed as female by the advertising world, thronged through boulevards, department stores and exhibitions. The resulting uncertainties in social structure are depicted in cartoon of ladies being mistaken for "non-ladies" while waiting for the bus. This increased presence of women in the city boulevards created new options for female gazes within the developing consumer society and gradually led to a shift in the distribution of spectatorial roles.

15 Even within the home the private individual was not free from consistent exposure to a cross-class gaze, a gaze that often produced irritation if not downright antagonism. Robert Kerr contended in his 1864 book *The Gentleman's House, or how to plan English Residences from the Parsonage to the Palace* that the most essential division in the design of a residence was to preclude observation by the servants (Beard 240). The provision of back-stairs ensured that the wealthy house consisted of one structure for the family, horizontal and open in its

plan, and one for the servants, vertical and confined from attic to basement (Tristram 38). Kerr's remarks point to the considerable anxiety felt by the well to do about cross-class surveillance. In a mass society, freedom from observation had become a class as well as a gender privilege.

6 The nineteenth century had to teach people to come to terms with mass society and the resulting visual encroachment on private space. People were forced into greater reserve and the idea that one can be nowhere as lonely as in a crowd quickly took hold of the collective imagination. On the other hand, crowds could also provide effective hiding places where one could seek refuge in anonymity. Urbanism liberates identities, this experience is simultaneously one of disturbing loss and one of exhilarating opportunity. Edgar Allan Poe had expressed this feeling in his short story "The Man of the Crowd," in which a man walking the streets attracts a shadow existence, somebody who follows him and imitates his irregular perambulation. Poe's short story is often called the first description of the flaneur in literature. The flaneur was the epitome of the new spectatorial attitude to city life (Benjamin 567). The provocatively aesthetic attitude to the urban scene was a favourite pastime of gentlemen and indeed a male prerogative.

17 Art historians have presented considerable evidence to suggest that Impressionism "was a defence against the threat of rapid urbanization and rapid industrialization" (Chadwick 232). The changing face of cities and their instable social relations were presented in impressionist painting as a modern culture of increased leisure and consumption (Herbert 305). The impressionist style with its blurred representation of reality significantly changed the pictorial appearance of familiar social relations. Whether the artists were aware of it or not, the impressionist style produced an ephemeral impression that imbued the social relations depicted with a precarious volatility and transience. Thus many paintings by impressionists like Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassat must be seen in the context of the restructuring of public and private spheres. Although women's role as spectacle continued to dominate the period's visual culture, the increasing participation of women in public life challenged notions of female passivity and restraint.

18 As cultural changes, such as urban crowds, crime detection, and photography, brought the power of observation into general consciousness, art and aesthetic theory started to invite reflections on the process of viewing. Paintings by these impressionists made viewers adapt to a dramatically changed concept of realism opposed to the conventional idea that the message or subject of a painting is paramount. Broken brushstrokes called attention to the surface, distracting from the things represented. Sometimes the latter could only be identified at a

certain distance from the canvas, a distance quite unusual for the contemporary visitor to the crowded Salon or the Royal Academy. This technique demanded participatory activity of the spectator or at least foregrounded the act of viewing. The most prominent feature of impressionist painterly experiments could be called a reorganization of the visual relationship between picture and beholder, a reorganization which disrupted the gaze of conventional pictorialism which had been completely devoted to the content. The unprecedented inaccessibility of surface, now covered in pastuse patches of paint, shocked viewers who were accustomed to fine "finish" as a manifestation of artistic technique. The particularity of impressionist technique provoked a creative response of the viewer who is invited to consciously reflect his or her own process of viewing to an unprecedented degree.

19 The second half of the nineteenth century was a time when the arts responded assertively to the challenge of the revolution in visuality that had taken place. Photography especially, which had rapidly disseminated into all major cultural areas, significantly altered ways of seeing and representing. Because it was thought of as an automatic self-revelation which could record reality more faithfully, photography may have played a liberating role for the arts, freeing painters from the duty of mimetic representation. In painting, the fleeting, transitory moment already captured by photography became more important in impressionist records of the play of outdoor daylight. Subjects in all the media became more contemporary and every-day. In literature, narrative techniques tended to reject the homogenizing panoramic vision of classic Victorian novels in favour of a single subjective perception. The subjective personal focus emerging in literary fictions of the late nineteenth century must clearly be seen in the larger context of a cultural re-conceptualisation of visuality. Foregrounding *point-of-view* in fictional narratives, such as Henry James's significantly titled *The Portrait of Lady*, shifted the centre of interest from action and plot towards the individual perception and consciousness of heroine. It is no coincidence that at the centre of the reorganization of the gaze in painting and fiction were female figures. The discussions of the "woman question" and the feminist movement had created a destabilization of strategies of the gaze and its attendant anxieties and desires.

20 Some painters responded to this situation by not only adopting the new broken style, but also by challenging traditional viewing expectations in terms of subjects. Prevented from asking men from outside the family or "dubious" models to pose, and limited in their access to the public life of bars and cafes, women artists often concentrated on the home. The social meanings produced by Mary Cassat's and Berthe Morisot's canvases, e.g. "Mother and Sister of the Artists" (1870) and "A Cup of Tea" (1880), transform informal interiors into a public

statement. Through their compressions and juxtapositions of the pictorial spatial system they created an atmosphere of uncomfortably encroaching boundaries of feminine space, a mood somewhat at odds with prevalent notions of haven and retreat. Even more interesting is their depiction of a female venture into new territories, which Griselda Pollock has analysed. She demonstrated how impressionist women artists devised new options for the female gaze within the developing consumer society. Although women's role as spectacle continued to dominate the period's visual culture, the increasing participation of women in consumer culture challenged notions of the relegation of women to completely private sphere. Female spectatorship, becoming a social reality as female shoppers usurped the leisurely stroll of the previously exclusively masculine flaneur, also became a subject of female painting (Chadwick 242). Female artists like Mary Cassat and Berthe Morrisot explicitly pointed to hierarchies of the gaze in metropolitan public life which were by extension the same hierarchies produced in front of their canvases. Mary Cassat's "Woman in Black at the Opera" (1880) is an ironic response to male scopic power over the female body as an object of observation and evaluation. Many other painters were critical of notions of one-way rights of looking in anonymous metropolitan surroundings (Nochlin 23).

21 Male artists, by contrast, very often portrayed women in such a manner as to question the naturalized power structures of the gaze. Women look out of the paintings at the observer in a vulnerable, or provocative or otherwise disturbing manner, promoting feelings of discomfort and denying an easy comfortable voyeuristic pleasure. Manet, who was a target for numerous jibes and ridicule by the press because of break with good taste in "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe" was an artist whose figurative painting is full of problematic and irritating gazes. His pubescent prostitute "Olympia" returns the gaze in a calculated exchange reflecting the nexus of desire and commodity, and other solitary women avert their eyes in way which emphasizes the intrusion of a male onlooker. The complicated viewing situation depicted between a bar maid and a male customer in the mirror in "La bar aux Folies Bergères" has puzzled generations of art critics. A disrupted visual communication is most obvious in Manet's portraits of couples, all of which present a moment of alienation between male and female. Manet set the example for later painters' deliberate reflection on the representation of women in revised power structures of viewing (Armstrong 225).

22 A gaze returned from the *objet d'art* became a disturbing feature used by advanced artists to signify an asymmetry in the relation between observer and perceived subject and to draw attention to a new order of participation of the recipient in the construction of meaning of a piece of visual representation. In 1856 already Samuel Carter-Hall's *Art Journal*, the very

voice of the conservative Victorian art establishment, had called Millais's "Autumn Leaves" "a significant vulgarism" because "the principle figure looks out of the picture at the spectator" (18:1856, 17, Landow). The gaze from the painted girl was perhaps interpreted as unnecessarily assured and unsuitably reminiscent of either an aristocratic tradition or of a courtesan impertinence. However much these women are safely confined within the picture frame as well as within a traditional portrait iconology, the representation of their gaze beyond the frame and at the beholder directed undue attention outside their assigned domestic and private sphere and hinted at a transgression of a prescribed modesty of behaviour.

23 The most well-known and important artistic mediators of impressionist techniques in England were the Americans James MacNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and John Singer Sargent (1856-1925). Whistler was by far the more controversial personality. As a reaction to John Ruskin's statement that one of his pictures was "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" he took the famous art sage to court for libel. Whistler used the courtroom as a platform to make provocative and witty pronouncements in favour of his *l'art pour l'art* ideas, and achieved considerable notoriety through his aphorisms and witticisms. The painting which had incited Ruskin's scorn, "The Falling Rocket," showed a cascade of fireworks against a velvet night sky in motley daubs and patches. Its dissolution of conventional pictorial space into a confusion of scattered fragments seemed lacking in referentiality. Whistler gave his portraits of people, e.g. his mother, confusing titles like "symphony" and "harmony" to emphasize the formal compositional features, their rhythmical affinity to music, instead of content. His naming of portraits, even if these depicted close relatives, thus denied the mimesis and foregrounded formal aspects.

24 Like Whistler, John Sargent was a successful artist at the *fin de siècle*, a period called "the second consumer revolution," in which an increased emphasis on feminine refinement and upper class purchasing power and penchant for luxury overlapped (Lubar 11). Middle-class self-representation was an obsessive goal of conspicuous consumption; especially wives and daughters in domestic and society settings were a favourite of art commissions. Sargent willingly supplied these images of femininity gaining a reputation for beautifully executed and psychologically perceptive portraiture with a certain surplus of daring *frisson*. He is now generally held to have remained committed to upper class, conservative values, flattering the nouveaux riches with glossy pictures of their attractive wives. At the same time, he achieved something like a theatrical redefinition of female self-fashioning. Sargent shared a popular fascination with the theatre at this period, which had inspired his famous painting of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth. But the influence of the theatre extended beyond his portraits of

actors. The bright lights which make ordinary figures stand out from a dark background hint at the footlights of a stage. The persons portrayed are offered as a spectacle of ostentatious display to the viewer, not only because of their affected poses and dramatic illumination but primarily because they are surrounded by slightly distorted and impenetrable spaces.

25 This lack of equilibrium in his portraits was noted by many contemporary critics and was the subject of disparaging caricature. In the beginning of his career his odd angles and abrupt foreshortenings were held to be his particular failing (Hills 170). But around the turn of the century the often precarious poses came to be seen as excitingly apt, "these creatures vibrate with the nervous tension of the age" (Hills 171). Unsettled pictorial spaces were increasingly interpreted as a successful expression of fleeting moments of heightened psychological significance (Kilmurray/ Ormond 36). The idea that life can be improved by seeking as many hedonistic moments of elevated experience as possible, "getting as many pulsations as possible" (237) would have been familiar from Walter Pater's famous conclusion to *The Renaissance*.

26 Sargent's assimilation into high society as an American prodigy who gave people the glossy effigies they demanded should not detract from his more modern achievements. He managed to capture visually the undercurrents of anxiety that affected London society at the end of the century. One of the main anxieties was the break-up of the social fabric through destabilization of gender roles. To express these prevalent insecurities in his fashionable portraits, he employed three main strategies: Obscure and unstable spatial organization, theatricality of pose, and a response-provoking structure of gazes.

27 Let us consider briefly his group portrait "The three Misses Vickers" (1884), a painting which was faulted by critics for its failure to do justice to the social rank of the Misses Vickers, *The Athenaeum* called the painting an "insult to their evident high culture" (Hills 98). What made most viewers uncomfortable was again the unconventional approach to composition, the oddly angled perspective and spatial ambiguity in the mysterious darkness which fill the background. The three sisters are highlighted against the dark interior, which seems to throw the figures forward. The impression of looking at them from an unrealistically high angle is increased by the sharply cropped foreground. The resulting compression of the figures creates a tension which can be read into the mood of the sitters. There is an emphasized lack of communication among the young women in the different directions of their gazes which seems to suggest that the siblings are not at ease with each other. They seem to exemplify three types of looking: the demure submissive downcast eyes of the middle sister, on the left an abstracted inward look of dreamy abstractedness and on the right, turned

away from the others, a startling uncompromising directness of gaze at the viewer. Sargent renders three different versions of femininity as potentialities within the spectrum of respectability, but the bold outward gaze is clearly privileged in the pictorial structure. The outward gaze of the sister conveys an exciting sense of nervous expectancy. She seems intent on the conversation of an unseen companion, who must be supplied by the spectator himself (Kilmurray/ Ormond 107). A visual response is forced, the viewer is drawn into the picture via a triangle of gazes, to supply a missing mediator and make up for a lack of interior coherence. Sargent thus dissolved the boundary between viewer and viewed or at least called it into question. A suggestion of problematized relationships is here projected outside the picture frame.

28 Theatricality is the key to Sargent's representations of women. He encourages heightened attention by transforming an everyday domestic space into a performative area of display. The poignant crisis in the concept and representation of womanhood mentioned above is captured in Sargent's redefinition of the relation of spectators to images of women. The uncanny interior spaces encroaching upon the portrayed produce a specific bond between spectator and bodies represented. The theatrical poses in decidedly obscure and indefinite territory prevent a psychological or narrative reading. Instead, the spectator is condemned to regard a surface, marked as a superficial appearance on display and perhaps provoked to reflect on the female role in these conspicuous exchanges. Perhaps one may even read these pictures as demanding a compassionate response; they transform aesthetic experience into empathetic attention.[3]

29 According to Showalter, the cultural crisis perceived as attack on patriarchy was generated not only from an external feminism but also from within, by men responding to stresses and tensions in the rigid constructions of masculine roles (11). Parallel to the battle between the sexes, there was also "a battle within the sexes," an instability and change of concepts of femininity and masculinity, that produced what Showalter calls "sexual anarchy." This anarchy posed a threat to the cherished belief in the polarised spheres of the two sexes (Showalter 9). Gender blurring in aestheticist design and art by Aubrey Beardsley and the *Yellow Book* circle and in symbolist poetry and fiction represented and provoked anxieties concerning the vanishing of sexual difference. Sargent did not, like Oscar Wilde, launch an explicit attack on mainstream gender relations, but, like the French impressionists, he was concerned to redefine the relationship between viewer, space and body. He invested in the problematizing of gendered spaces that impressionist women painters had initiated. Working

[3] The ideas summarized here are presented at length in Brosch 2003.

in a society where observation had become a vital activity for pleasure and for self-protection, Sargent succeeded in making the spectator contemplate his (or her) scrutiny of the figures and in renegotiating the power structures of the gaze.

30 The painterly reorganization of the power relations between picture and beholder works through an implied observer who structures the process of viewing. The implied observer of these portraits ties in with a subjective personal focus emerging in literary fictions of the late nineteenth century, which must clearly be seen in the larger context of the cultural re-conceptualisation of visuality. Nineteenth century novels were still able to combine or compromise between individual perspective and collective/consensus vision. An idealistic faith in ulterior purposes still informed most narratives, producing a common spiritual horizon of universal truths. But the more narratives moved inward, the less this collective function could be fulfilled. The *fin de siècle* represents a unique transition in the history of narrative perspective. With the full development of internal focalization the transindividual validity of narrative is lost. At the turn of the century a fundamental uncertainty concerning observable reality produced proliferating relativist viewpoints in fiction.

31 The discovery of literary point of view was not the sole achievement of canonical authors such as Henry James and Joseph Conrad. As Talia Schaffer has recently shown, many forgotten female aestheticists anticipated highly subjective or even unreliable modes of narration. These authors' anxiety about their own femininity led them to develop self-defensive literary techniques designed to baffle the intrusively curious reader (Schaffer 4). Narrating from an interior focalization tied in with the general cultural emphasis on the role of the observer, and provided textual possibilities for the staging, exploration and reconciliation of competing models of femininity.

32 These innovations in literary narratives which generated an increasingly subjective fiction culminating in literary modernism can be related to the inventions and developments in optics and visual technologies which preceded it; both created an awareness of the unreliability of human perception (Crary). Non-fiction discourses in art criticism also relied on a more significant role of subjective observation. While the visual arts negotiated the boundary between art and spectatorship, new directions in the philosophy of art tended to consider aesthetics in terms of spectator response. The realist consensus in visual art derived from central perspective had rested on the assumption that objects represented are seen as these objects and not in an iconic duality of image-object. Now the reaction of the spectator became an indispensable element in creating the meaning of a work of art.

33 Walter Pater's notion of art as an experience enlarged the function of a mediating

observer or spectator figure. He rejected a purely content-oriented neglect of the sensuous element in art, which causes almost everything that is essentially artistic to become "a matter of indifference" (Stamm 98). He illustrated this argument with some memorable reinterpretations of famous art works. Pater's ekphrastic description of "La Gioconda" in *The Renaissance* (1873) is written from the point of view of an impassioned observer giving free reign to his imagination and interpreting the Mona Lisa as an embodiment of the enigmatic nature of women. Pater read the portrait as a symbolist image of a predatory femme fatale: "She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants…" (80). His interpretation was largely responsible for the aura of mystery which surrounds Leonardo's famous portrait to this day. Its Orientalist and misogynist overtones recall Bronte's rereading of Cleopatra, which was supplemented at the turn of the century by aestheticist ekphrastic writings which read famous Renaissance nudes against the grain, completely subverting the gaze of male heterosexual desire. One example is the 1892 poetry collection *Sight and Song* by "Michael Field", the pseudonym of the collaborating authors Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913). The female poets' ekphrastic verses recast the extreme objectification of the female nude in paintings like Giorgione's "The Sleeping Venus" and Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" as an extraordinary and daring independence of male desire (Field 13-14). Similarly, Vernon Lee's fantastic stories made an imaginative but more subversive use of ekphrasis than Pater's description. All stories in her collection *Hauntings* revolve around the fatal consequences of male spectators looking at female beauty. In Lee's stories, women's portraits enact a fatal revenge on their Pygmalion-like admirers. Thus at the end of the nineteenth century the tables are turned on the sinister nexus of femininity, death and eroticism which a Romantic fascination had written into the art-life dichotomy in literary texts such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (Bronfen 90).

34 Though Vernon Lee has been rediscovered by feminist literary criticism as a writer of fiction, her theory of art is still unfairly neglected. She developed this theory (originally in an article in 1897, later elaborated and published as *The Beautiful*) expanding the work of the German authors Friedrich Theodor Vischer and Theodor Lipps, who based aesthetic value judgement not just on the intrinsic qualities of the art work itself but paid increased attention to the act of observing. Lee's theory went beyond those of her precursors, because it assigned the mental and physiological experience of art a new significance. To Lee viewing art was a transfer process in which the object under scrutiny is invested with the physical and mental

dynamics of the act of viewing, "we transfer from ourselves to the object not only the physical eye muscle movement but the thought and emotion which have been accumulated in our minds to that movement" (65). The movement and rhythm of the act of perception is then attributed to the inert representation. For Lee, art can thus become a tonic experience: "[...] movement and energy, all that we feel as being life is furnished by [the perception of shapes in art] and allowed to fill our consciousness" (74).

35 For Lee the beholder of art is involved in intense, complex, and reiterative, but not necessarily conscious mental and embodied activities she called "empathy" (155), a term she introduced into the English language. Like impressionist paintings, empathy aesthetics liberated the arts from the stranglehold of what Michael Fried termed the "supreme fiction of the beholder's non-existence" (71). Lee saw empathy as chiefly responsible for value judgements and "preference in aesthetic contemplation," obviously setting up a category of compassionate appreciation against the blasé connoisseurship she thought permeated her contemporary culture. Empathy is not sufficiently explained as an emotional identificatory response, and it also encompasses more than a hermeneutic act of constituting meaning. Empathy meant that "art can do nothing without the collaboration of the beholder and this collaboration far from consisting in the passive 'being impressed with beauty' [...] is [...] a combination of higher activities, second in complexity and intensity only to that of the artist himself" (Lee 128). In Lee's theory the collaborative energies of the beholder are needed to complete the project of art itself.

36 In the course of the nineteenth century, as ways of seeing challenged active participation, increasing agency was attributed to the seeing subject. This participatory agency meant a resistance to absorption by the referential content of an art work. Instead of looking exclusively at the meanings and codes contained within visual images themselves, or exclusively at the receptive side of visual experience, an approach to the "gaze" should concentrate on issues arising from the interaction of viewer and viewed. Here Lee's definition of aesthetic experience as a process of interaction can contribute to a revision of current concepts of spectatorship. Twentieth century feminist theories of spectatorship were based on the dualism that "men act and women appear" (Berger 47). The concept of the gaze later differentiated in Griselda Pollock's and Linda Nead's analysis of Victorian images of women might be more profitably thought of not as a fixed feature, but as a range of viewing possibilities adopted temporarily by viewers in specific encounters with images. With Marcia Pointon, I think that "there is no absolute and inalienable correlation between the gender of a reader and the experience of reading [paintings]" (9). Instead, temporary viewing

communities and shifting gazes allow strategies of selective attention or resistant viewing which can be helpful in the face of today's ever increasing predominance of visual events and globalization of images.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Carol. "Degas and the Female Body." *The Female Body in Western Culture. Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Suleiman, Susan Rubin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1986. 223-242.

Beard, Geoffrey. *The English House Interior*. London : Penguin, 1990.

Benjamin, Walter. *Das Passagen-Werk*. Ed. Rolf Thiedemann. Vol. 1. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Beger, 1983 (repr. 1972).

Bernheimer, Charles. "The Uncanny Lure of Manet's Olympia." *Seduction and Theory*. Ed. Dianne Hunter. Urbana, 1989. 13-27.

Betterton, Rosemary. "Feminism, Femininity and Representation." *Looking On. Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*. Ed. Rosemary Betterton. London: Pandora, 1987.

Brosch, Renate. "Insidious Interiors: John Singer Sargent's Theatrical Versions of Domestic Portraiture." *New Beginnings in Twentieth-Century Theatre and Drama. Essays in Honour of Armin Geraths*. Eds. Christiane Schlote and Peter Zenzinger. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2003. 407-432.

Bronfen, Elizabeth. *Nur über ihre Leiche. Tod, Weiblichkeit und Ästhetik*. München: dtv, 1996.

Bronte, Charlotte. *Villette*. Penguin Portable Classics. London: Penguin, 1994.

Bryson, Norman. *Vision and Painting. The Logic of the Gaze*. London: Macmillan, 1983.

Chadwick, Whitney. Women, Art, and Society. London: Thames & Hudson, 1997.

Cherry, Deborah. *Painting Women. Victorian Women Artists*. London, New York: Routledge, 1993.

Clark, Kenneth. *The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form*. London: John Murray, 1956.

Conway, Alison. *Private Interests. Women Portraiture, and the Visual Culture of the English Novel, 1709-1791*. U of Toronto P, 2001.

Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990.

Deppner, Martin Roman. "Körperräume und Leitbilder: Die Profane Erleuchtung der Kunst." *Leib- und Bildraum. Lektüren nach Benjamin*. Ed. Sigrid Weigel. Köln, Wien: Böhlau, 1992. 101-164.

Doane, Mary. *The Desire to Desire. The Woman's Film of the 1940's*. London: Macmillan, 1987.

Ender, Evelyne. "Feminist Criticism in a Double Mirror: Reading Charlotte Bronte and

Virginia Woolf." *Compar(a)ison. An International Journal of Comparative Literature* 1 (1993): 83-106.

Field, Michael. *Sight and Song*. 1892. Oxford, New York, 1993.

Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1980.

Friedberg, Anne. *Window Shopping. Cinema and the Postmodern*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.

Herbert, Robert L. *Impressionism. Art, Leisure and Parisian Society*. London: Guild Publishing, 1989.

Higonnet, Anne. "Imaging Gender." *Art Criticism and its Institutions in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ed. Michael Orwicz. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994. 146-161.

Hills, Patricia. *John Singer Sargent*. New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1986.

Jay, Martin. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." *Vision and Visuality*. Ed. Hal Forster. Seattle: Bay, 1988. 3-28.

Johnson, E.D.H. *Paintings of the British Social Scene from Hogarth to Sickert*. London: Weidenfels & Nicolson, 1986.

Kilmurray, Elaine, Ormond, Richard, eds. *John Singer Sargent*. London: Tate Gallery Publications Ltd., 1998.

Köstler, Andreas. "Das Portrait. Individuum und Image." *Bildnis und Image. Das Portrait zwischen Intention und Rezeption*. Eds. Andreas Köstler and Ernst Seidl. Köln: Böhlau, 1998. 9-15.

Landow, George P. "There Began to Be a Great Talking About the Arts." *The Mind and Art of Victorian England*. Ed. Josef P. Altholz. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1976. 124-45, cf. <www.victorianweb.org.htm>.

Lee, Vernon. *The Beautiful. An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1913.

_____. *Hauntings. Fantastic Stories*. Doylestone, Penn.: Wildside Press, 2001.

Lubar, Steven. "Men / Women / Production / Consumption." *His and Hers. Gender, Consumption, Technology*. Eds. Roger Horowitz and Arwen Mohun. Charlottesville, London: UP of Virginia, 1998. 7-39.

Mitchell, W.J.T. "The Surplus Value of Images." *Mosaic* .232 (2002): 1- 23.

Nochlin, Linda. "Women, Art and Power." *Visual Theory*. Eds. Norman Bryson et al. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. 13-47.

Onslow, Barbara. "Deceiving Images, Revealing Images. The Portrait in Victorian Women's Writing." *Victorian Poetry. Special Issue Word&Image*. Ed. Dianne Sachko Macleod. 33.3-4 (1995): 450-473.

Pajaczkowska, Claire. "Issues in Feminist Visual Culture." *Feminist Visual Culture*. Eds. Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000. 1-24.

Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance*. 1873. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford: Penguin Classics, 1990.

Pointon, Marcia. *Naked Authority. The Body in Western Painting 1830-1908*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Pollock, Griselda. *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art*. London, New York: Routledge, 1988.

Salomon, Nanette. "Die Venus Pudica: Eine Offenlegung der verborgenen Interessen und gefährlichen Genealogien der Kunstgeschichte." *Geschlechterperspektiven. Forschungen zu Frühen Neuzeit*. Eds. Heide Wunder and Gisela Engel. Königstein, 1998. 79-99.

Schaffer, Talia. *The Forgotten female Aesthetes. Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2000.

Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture at the fin de siècle*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991.

Stamm, Ulrike. *Ein Kritiker aus dem Willen der Natur. Hugo von Hoffmannsthal und das Werk Walter Paters*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1997.

Sturken, Marita and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking. An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.

Tristram, Philippa. *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Weikert, Heidrun-Edda. *Robert Brownings kunstthematische Dichtung. Ihr Epochenkontext zwischen Spätgotik und Viktorianismus*. Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989.

Wolff, Janet. "The Invisible Flaneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 2.3 (1985): 37-48.