

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

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The Object Looks Back: Paraesthetic Vision in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* and *Optic Nerve*

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Abstract Focusing on Céline Sciamma's film, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), and Maria Gaínza's novel, *Optic Nerve* (2014), I turn to two texts interested in the structure of vision to interrogate gendered dynamics of power. By formalizing alternate relations between subjects and objects, the portrait offers a space to negotiate the unidirectional and subordinating logic of the seeing subject. Focusing on interventions that interrupt and collapse the positions of the viewer and the viewed, both texts employ paraesthetic articulations of the gaze to redress the imbalance inherent in our conception of vision.

Keywords Visual culture. New Formalism. Crossmapping. Gaze. Paraesthetics. Auto-theory. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. *Optic Nerve*.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Disaligned Gaze. – 3 The Chiastic Eye. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

A veritable boom of films and novels plunging into the world of contemporary and historical painting characterizes the early 2000s. While Mark Doty's *Still Life with Oysters and Lemons* (2003), Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* (2003), or Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999) fall on the early end of this spectrum, they seem to herald a revival of classical painting in the literary arts. Followed by Donna Tartt's *Goldfinch* (2013), Ali Smith's more experimental *How to Be Both* (2014), Maggie O'Farrell's *The Marriage Portrait* (2022), and Katy

Hessel's historiographic *The Story of Art Without Men* (2022), the question at the centre of these texts remains the same. With so many other avenues open to the image in the digital age, wherein lies the textual interest in a medium long considered a rival art? Although the literary resurgence certainly mirrors our cultural turn towards images, most of these works specify their interest by considering it in relation to gender. It is through this lens that these contemporary works come to rewrite the chronically unrecorded position coded as female in the production of images. Where any artistic interest in self-imaging has long since been considered "narcissistic" and "uncritical" in the past (Fournier 2021, 6), this current turn to female-aligned perspectives relocates the issue outside the field of theoretical abstraction. Moving towards the self, works in the vein of Lauren Fournier's *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021) come to dissect the critical potential inherent in turning towards the self and the performative as a mode of enquiry. In reading the self-portraits and mirrors as tools of producing the self as subject, I turn towards artistic examples that bring together gender, the practice of image-making, and the operation of power through the gaze.

In her 2006 book, *Vision and Difference*, art historian Griselda Pollock engages with the topic through the relationship between visual culture and the representation of difference. The feminine-encoded position she examines is ultimately not interested in the empirical notion of woman, but rather signifies the structurally opposing position of what she terms a "Eurocentric masculinist conception of art and artist" (2006, XX). Thus, any interrogation of visual culture enables readers to interrogate images of the world that legitimize the "relations of domination and subordination" implicit to the organizing paradigms of culture (2006, 28). Focusing on the structure of seeing opens the visual as an arena to mediate discussions on power and its operation within the gaze. While feminist criticism has long since taken up the cause of women in art history, the interest in visuality and power has not yet been satisfactorily laid to rest (cf. Felski 1989; 2000; Pollock 1999; 2006; Bal 2004). In her earlier work, *Differencing the Canon*, Griselda Pollock discusses ways out of the oppositional position femininity is forced into and theorizes alternative ways to work through their exclusions from canonicity (1999, 25). Citing Susan Hardy Aiken, she asks for the breaking open of the narrative of art history, pushing for a "polylogue: 'the interplay of many voices, a kind of creative 'barbarism'" in the vein of Virginia Woolf or Adrienne Rich's work, famous for their multistranded and nonconventional experimentation in form (1999, 25).¹

¹ I would be remiss not to mention Mieke Bal's concept of hysterics as a feminist intervention that attends to the rhetoric of the image, reading the narratives of art history

Responding to the concept of the polylogue, Rita Felski pushes Pollock's position further and specifies the feminist parameters of art as containing grains of the "self-transgressive", that is, formal elements in a work that question "assumptions about the reality, coherence, and separateness of male and female identity" and thus consist of contradictory readings (2000, 182). The broader term she borrows for this aesthetic mode stems from David Carroll's *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (1987), in which he defines his key term as "an aesthetics turned against itself, pushed beyond or beside itself, a faulty, irregular, disordered improper aesthetic" (2000, 181). Where Carroll examines the value of art in poststructuralist theory, Felski adapts the concept for the field of feminist visual studies, focusing on the manner in which formal elements of a work of art resist total mastery, abstraction, and coherence (Felski 2000, 181). Her privileging of the paraesthetic over the polyvocal strikes me as persuasive, as she argues this position includes all discourse, including male-defined conceptions of femininity, which ultimately do not cover up an authentic version of femininity, but are part of any discussion attempting to detangle the discourse (2000, 183). In focusing on paraesthetic practices that read for incoherence and disalignment, this article focuses on the gendered constellation of power as negotiated in contemporary cultural texts. By focusing on this nexus, these recent texts can be seen to rethink dominant paradigms that organize vision by theorizing alternative aesthetic relations between viewing subjects and viewed objects in the recurring motif of the portrait. In that way, these works both respond to the art historical concern of exclusionary canonicity, while simultaneously positing alternate aesthetic structures to mediate the act of looking in contemporary works.

In order to give shape to this alternate visuality, I take a new formalist approach in the vein of Caroline Levine's 'travelling concepts' from *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2017). Levine's approach considers concepts to function as flexible aesthetic formalizations that both give structure to and travel across different contexts, ranging from the medial to the socio-political. The move to forms beyond paintings takes place to grant this alternate gaze a *Denkraum*, a thinking space, to reformulate itself before travelling back into the realms of the image. In the vein of Elisabeth Bronfen's concept of 'crossmapping', such comparative readings focus on the process of (dis-)figurement inherent in any remediation and what can be gained in the act of translation. As she posits that the crossing of

against the grain. As Pollock outlines, her counterstrategy "exposes the implicit and misogynist violence within representation that canonical readings condone and naturalise" (1999, 16).

two medial formats is productive in tracing “those shapings that exceed or gall outside the aesthetic formulas” (2019, 134), bringing together an aesthetic structure across textual and filmic environments focuses on the dialogue both works enter over a shared concern. In following Levine’s conceptions of flexible concepts and Bronfen’s crossmappings, I look to trace how aesthetic formalization of the gaze renegotiates the dynamics of vision that organize medial, as well as cultural relations of power. This paraesthetic gaze thus functions as an intermedial travelling concept, seeking self-transgressive, disjunctive moments as a way out of the hierarchical conception of the subject and object of vision. Tracing this constellation allows me to trace the interrelations of the traditionally exclusionary gaze of art history into the contemporary context in which the gaze is reformulated in alternate medial products.

In seeking out the paraesthetic responses to the canon Felski proposes, I turn towards two works which think through the subject-object dynamics inherent in the act of looking. While the filmic example allows an interrogation of the perceptual facet of vision in representing the very act of looking, the narrative expansion in the literary text makes the spatial and temporal stasis of the image fluid. Emerging as part of this trend, Maria Gaínza’s recently translated novel *Optic Nerve* (2019) uses descriptions of paintings as windows into the past and different perceptions of the image. Working in the mode of autofiction, the novel offers insight into the act of seeing through the remediation of the image. In this way, Gaínza’s novel uses the image as a plane for reflecting both the image and the narrator, thus constituting the subject through the paintings in the novel. While there are many instances of classical ekphrases, Gaínza’s approach to the image moves beyond the common conception of the rhetoric device as art description, weaving together the personal and the social, the past and present, in her textual self-portrait. The second example I would like to consider is the narrative of the painter who constructs a portrait out of a fragmented perspective. Céline Sciamma’s acclaimed *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* treats the topic of female painters in eighteenth-century France, thus doubly engaging with the excluded position of the female in the trajectory of image making, while also articulating alternative medial parameters for engaging with the subject-object dynamic. Where *Optic Nerve* examines the narrativization of images in text, *Portrait* focuses on the act of perception inherent in the construction of vision, and thus, reality. Spinning a narrative from the perspective of the eighteenth-century painter, Marianne, who has been called to paint a wedding portrait of Héloïse on a secluded island, the film has been variously hailed as performing the female gaze, the queer gaze, in an attempt to pin down its position within the larger discussion of vision and power. The argument I aim to put forth is that both works think through a

paraesthetic conception of the gaze which rearticulates the relationship between the viewer and the viewed, modelling an alternative structuring of the act of vision.

2 Disaligned Gaze

Céline Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* announces its interest in the creation and mediation of images in the very first stills of the film. The opening sequence follows a series of disembodied hands sketching on blank canvases, which are interspersed with the title of the film. The act of creating portraits comes into metonymic relation with the film's title, and thus, its larger project. As we hear a teacher's instructions from the off, the film cuts to a panoply of female students, all gazing towards the same object as they attempt to apprehend what they see in their individual sketches. This project of image making sets up the cinematic interest in the gaze underlying the creation of paintings (Sciamma 00:00'30"). Posing the question at the heart of the film as the relation between subjects and objects of painting, *Portrait* introduces its audience to the didactic project at the heart of the narrative – what structures of sight underlie the images we produce? The recurring interest in the visual moves beyond straightforward representation, instead announcing a reflective interest in the parameters that inform the creation of images.

Moving from the frame narrative to the portraits at the heart of the film, the first painting that looms over the film is the central betrothal portrait. When the painter Marianne arrives on the island, the Countess who employs her explains the task at hand – painting a clandestine portrait of her daughter Héloïse, while posing as her companion. During this discussion, the film gestures at the cyclical-ity of the betrothal portrait, introducing its predecessor in shape of the Countess' own portrait which hangs above her during this scene. "Quand je suis rentrée dans cette pièce pour la première fois, je me suis retrouvée face à mon image accrochée au mur. Elle m'attendait" she tells Marianne, describing her own encounter with the painting that negotiated her marriage (Sciamma 00:16'13").² As she discusses her daughter's portrait with Marianne, the Countess' portrait functions as a visual double for the flesh and blood woman beneath it. Imagined for the husband-to-be, the implied viewer is coded as male, his implied presence looming over the dimly lit sitting room at the beginning of the film. In that sense, the image concretizes the role intended for both Héloïse and the Countess before her,

² "When I entered the room for the first time, I found myself opposite my own image hanging on the wall. She was expecting me".

inflected with the future-orientated function of the portrait, namely transforming the daughter into a wife. Moreover, this role awaits both women, transforming their future subjectivity as wife into an image of the present. As the fact that Héloïse will be taking on her sister's place in this situation highlights, the second aspect at work here seems to be the interchangeability underlying this type of image. Comparing the failed portraits of Héloïse with the mother's successful painting, the similarities in the portrait begin with the pose of the figure. Captured in the same stance, facing the same direction, the portraits highlight the inherent conventionality, and to a certain degree, interchangeability of the two visual depictions of the women, not to mention the serial nature of the portraits. Héloïse's portrait features a smudged-out face, highlighting the conventionality that underpins this vein of image making. It is only in the painting of the face, the determining of the body's identity that the position of the wife becomes fixed. Thus, it is not their likeness that is being encoded in the image, but the act of painting that turns their subjectivity into exchangeable currency. In following the conventions of the betrothal portrait, the female object comes into being as inherently substitutable (as Héloïse stands in her for sister), passive in the way the visual logic of painting that implies the active male viewer, which culminates in her interpellation into the position of wife, implicit in the cultural logic that demands a betrothal portrait for the implied future viewer/husband. The film, through this first introduction of portraiture, points towards the underlying logic of domination and subjecthood that is negotiated over the betrothal portrait, specifically the interpellation of the female subject into social structures that are reified in their translation into image.

This way of seeing underlies the first betrothal portrait Marianne attempts to paint of Héloïse, mirroring the visual conventions of the portrait style. However, unlike her mother, the intended object of the painting refuses to comply. Resisting the painter's eye, as well as the camera's lens, Héloïse escapes from any attempt at being made image in the first half of the film. Invoking the dynamic of the active viewer and the passive object-muse, Héloïse's elusive presence implicitly responds to our demand for her visual presence by simultaneously invoking and refusing our desire to see her. These contradictory dynamics of absence and presence, vision and invisibility, interweave warring viewing positions in a paraesthetic whole. The camera eye simultaneously brings together multiple positions that are at odds with one another and refuses to offer a conclusive resolution. This is introduced in their first encounter: Héloïse is wrapped in shawls as she hurries out of the frame, careful not to reveal her face to the various viewers at large. In short, she resists the gaze that attempts to pin her down, moving across the screen as a gap, consisting of fragments of features occasionally revealed to us. As Marianne follows

her to the cliffs and the sea, the camera trails behind them both, allowing us to only see Héloïse from the back, making clear that our gaze not permitted access to her. In frustrating the visual contract set up for us, outlining her function as the visual object of the portrait, as well as the film, this late revelation of her face, expresses the underlying renegotiation of the visual politics of the film. In resisting our, and Marianne's gaze, Héloïse finds recourse in refusals and gaps as the mode of articulating resistance to the position of passive object. These contending lines of vision operate in the vein of the paraesthetic, in the sense that conventional positions of the viewer and viewed are invoked, but remain suspended and frustrated, resisting the conventions of scopic pleasure encoded in film.

While the film enacts multiple discordant perspectives in its visual language, Maria Gaínza's autofictive novel examines the issue of visual positions through the perspective of an art critic, describing clashing logics of vision in her textual ekphrases of paintings. Interweaving personal with historical anecdotes, *Optic Nerve* approaches its interrogation of visuality through eleven chapters. Guided by our narrator, the objects recreated for us cannot escape their pinning down in the same way Héloïse is able to. Instead, the text moves fluidly between past and present, the narrator and the artist, the painter and the painted, attempting to balance a way of translating the image into text. While the ekphratic dimension of the text is interested in the staging of the gaze, it also opens the image to discuss the art and the artist's role. As she moves to discuss El Greco, Gaínza discusses this very clash of ideologies within the battlefield of the image in more detail. At the beginning of his artist career, the narrator situates El Greco as conventional for the time, which all changes when "one winter's night, an icy wind began to blow through his paintings. The space inside them grew constricted, and his figures, as if to adapt to these new hollow climes, hollowed themselves out and lengthened upward" (Gaínza 2020, 168-9). Unfreezing the still images, suddenly El Greco's art becomes a space of movement, infused with winds, and highlighting the processes of adaptation and change. The processual lengthening and hollowing the narrator highlights unfixes the image from the stillness regularly associated with it, opening the space for alternative perspectives. The struggle that Gaínza focuses on is the ideological clash one experiences in later works:

I went in on my own, which was a relief, but as soon as I set foot inside, I was reminded what a struggle El Greco is—a struggle with oneself. He's the kind of artist we fall for as teenagers, before we have taken the measure of painting as a whole, and while we're still at leisure to dive fully into our own private imaginarium. As we become more informed and, hence, cynical, we become less convinced. El Greco's unwavering dogmatism exasperates us, but

so does his sensuality. We have difficulty accepting their coexistence in a single image; the mutual exclusivity of flesh and spirit has been drummed into us by now. (Gáinza 2020, 171-2)

As with Héloïse's encounter with the artwork, El Greco's portrait becomes a space that portrays the disjunctive perspectives that operate within it. Reflecting back one's identity, as the core of the image, becomes the pressure point for Gáinza's introduction to the image, who describes it as "a struggle with oneself" (171-2). Within the logic of his images, the cynicism and sensuality clash, as seemingly oppositional binaries in our cultural landscape. In combining these two things within the image, Gáinza sees the visual as a space to question mutual exclusivity and binarisms that organize our thinking. Moreover, her way out of the clash is to run counter to the institutionalized ways of looking at Greco. Instead, she suggests that

[t]he correct way to look at it [...] would be while doing a handstand; forget about the figuration and simply appreciate the scandalous sensuality of the brushstrokes strewing the oils this way and that across the canvas. (172)

In that sense, the narrator's function mirrors the film's perspective on the images in both works. Both modes of reading seem to suggest moving outside of the realm of the conventionally fixed. It also suggests the active potential underlying the passivity associated with the visual object, indicated through her the grammatical shift to the present and continuous tense, thus offering an alternative mode of viewing to the reader.

The filmic counterpart to Gáinza's disaligned gaze works through the creation and ultimate rejection of the binaries of subjectivity and objectivity in vision. Through the establishment of multiple warring perspectives within the same frame, the camera eye performs the disalignment usually afforded to narrative texts, and as *Optic Nerve* textualizes in its staging of El Greco's painting. While conventions are brought up and figured as potential frameworks of decoding the images in both works, they are resisted and refused in both cases, with an alternative logic of disunity governing the act of looking. The disalignment articulated in both texts interested in the interrelation of femininity and art does not fall into the traps outlined by Pollock or Felski in insisting on a unified field for women's art, but instead, engages with varying perspectives that inform the discourse on the matter. Rather than succumbing to alternative parameters, or essentialist frameworks, both works posit a position of refusal and disjunction as a response to the dominant balance of vision. However, in carving out their own proposals for seeing, they both move one step beyond disalignment and articulate an alternative gaze through the narrator's eye.

3 The Chiastic Gaze

Having explored disjunction and the unconventional as strategies beyond the hierarchical logic of vision, I turn to another formalization that intervenes in the implied unidirectionality of the gaze. Returning to Gaínza's novel, the textual conception of this type of gaze theorizes the reciprocity of the gaze. In the chapter "The Enchantment of Ruins", the narrator introduces the artist Hubert Robert's aesthetics of decay, while exploring her oppositional relationship to her own mother. At the end of the chapter, she concludes that this style of mock ruin, reaching back to antiquity, is "seen as a way of establishing a lost link with antiquity [...]. With the move away from nature came an exaggerated melancholy for all that was lost, and the rich learned to delight in their sadness" (2020, 46). This appreciation, both descriptive of these figures, as well as their relationship (the narrator predicts she will obsess over her mother's heirlooms, but only after burning them down first), provides the context of the chapter. However, it is the form that is striking as an intervention. This section is written entirely in the present tense, insisting on addressing the protagonist of the story, the narrator, as 'you'. Beginning the section, this tone is already explicit in the first lines:

You spent the first half of your life rich, the second poor. Not in penury, but always needing to be careful, always forgoing possible little treats, and often being forced to borrow when unanticipated costs arose. Hence the Silver Spoon syndrome that has always marked you out: the indestructible sensation that *the money will come from somewhere*. [...] And you do always try to steer clear of another of the pathologies that attends comfortable upbringings: Poor Little Rich Girl syndrome. That, to you, is not to be entertained. (Gaínza 2020, 42-3)

The entire chapter continues in this tone - a stark contrast to the more conventional style of the previous chapters. What I would like to focus on is the grammatical structure of this section. In the 'you' of this chapter, two figures collide in the grammatical category, namely the reader, as well as the narrator's past self. Overlaying the subject and object of narration in this way proposes a chiastic structure of address that turns in on itself. This oscillation between reader and narrator, addresser and addressee, seems to be irresolvable - all the while, it highlights the reversibility that is inherent in both positions. The viewer is thus continually implied in the viewed; the narratorial position collapses, revealing in ambiguity and the reversibility between both.

Visual critic Norman Bryson offers a narratological access to the grammatical intervention that undergirds this formalization of the

gaze. Turning to his consideration of Benveniste's grammatical categories, he outlines the relationships between grammatical personal positions as a negotiation of power:

Benveniste was the first to notice that between the first and second persons taken together and the third person, there is no 'symmetrical' relation. Let us stay, for a moment, with *I* and *you*. These are inherently reversible. The *I* can only say *I* to a *you*, and the *you* thus addressed is thereby given the right to lay claim to the first person in reply. It is important to grasp that these 'persons' are, however, only artifacts of discourse, not 'human beings'; basically they are 'points of direction' given to discourse as it moves. (Bryson 2004, 16)

What is striking about this formulation is the conception of these grammatical categories as points of direction in discourse. While Benveniste acknowledges the position outside of the 'I-you' dyad in the third person, he finds that this position is "permanently and logically absent from the utterance that names them" (16). Thus, this third position simply creates a field in which pronouns stand in for persons and cements the underlying asymmetrical axes of grammar, in which one position *a priori* may speak while the other exists as perpetual object (16). However, in moving the reader outside of this third grammatical position, unable to become a subject, Gaínza's choice in adopting the 'you' addressal for her reader becomes an interesting twist on the unidirectional dynamics of address that are involved in textuality. What we find is the simultaneous cutting out of the position of the reader as a bystander, as well as their conflation with the subject of narration - we find ourselves becoming the younger version of the narrator, addressed by her older counterpart. Moving beyond the conception that these positions are reversible in their relationship, Gaínza's narrator short-circuits the relationship and collapses the distinction between 'I' and 'you'. In this ambiguous and reversible play on categories, the mirror-like equivalence drawn between both positions is formalized in the type of gaze that is imagined in her narrator's address in this chapter.

Similar to these pronouns functioning as points of direction, the filmic vocabulary of the subject and object of vision seems to imply a similar condition of reversibility. However, where the visual counter positions have not often been acknowledged as reversible, the gaze being put forth in *Portrait* certainly underlines the objective positions capacity to withhold access to seeing, as well as taking up the subject position. Where above, I discussed the gaps created through Héloïse's control over her visibility, which are mirrored in the camera's perspective on her, this is framed by a series of frustrated reveals of Héloïse in face of the audience. Continually expecting to

glimpse the perceived object of the film, the viewer is denied her appearance time and time again. As in the scene in which we see an early attempt of the dress being brought in, we recognize the garment from the previous portrait and expect the daughter of the house to appear, only to find the maid Sophie in her place. A second instance of this frustration occurs at the half an hour mark, in which we see a body seated in front of a mirror, as well as a glimpse of a semi-finished portrait of Héloïse, pieced together by Marianne. As the camera tilts down, we see that the bodice has remained completely untouched. We then follow Marianne's gaze to a mirror, headless in its framing of in the green dress (Sciamma 00:34'41"). It is then revealed to the viewer that it is in fact Marianne herself who takes the place of her object, once more delaying the appearance of Héloïse as the visual object. More than a simple tongue in cheek trick on the viewer, or a comment on the continuing exchangeability of the female object, this scene touches upon the chiasmic gaze outlined above. Where the novel conflated positions of address, the visual counterpart proposed in the film conflates the position of the viewer and the viewed. Thus the visual formalization of the reversible and ambiguous structure of vision moves away from the Cartesian eye as the centre of the look and highlights the instability of the subject and object positions. While traditionally, the art of painting implied a gendered relationship of the activity of painting and the object thereof, the film, through its visual vocabulary, as well as dialogue acknowledges that this has always been a reversible one too. We might follow the film through one of the characters eyes, but this does not mean that the object does not itself look back.

Having considered Gaínza's textual articulation of a mirrorlike gaze, *Portrait* employs the recurring motif of the mirror to map out the visual counterpart. Where the portrait seems not to match up with the identity of the object, the mirror, in picturing reality in reverse, in a placeless place, becomes a flat space that allows the renegotiation of the look. In visualizing the reversibility of the viewer and the viewed, the object thus gains subjectivity in a way that moves beyond the refusal articulated above. This is explored in an exchange between Héloïse and Marianne, once the former finally agrees to pose for her portrait.

MARIANNE Quand vous êtes émue, vous faites comme ça avec votre main.

HÉLOÏSE Vraiment?

MARIANNE Oui. Et quand vous êtes embarrassée, vous mordez vos lèvres. Et quand vous êtes agacée, vous necillez pas.

HÉLOÏSE Vous savez tout.

MARIANNE Pardonnez-moi, je n'aimerais pas être à votre place.

HÉLOÏSE Mais nous sommes à la même place, exactement à la même place. Venez ici. Venez. Approchez-vous. Regardez. Si vous me regardez, qui je regarde, moi? Quand vous ne savez pas quoi dire, vous baissez la tête et vous touchez votre front. Quand vous perdez le contrôle, vous haussez les sourcils. Et quand vous êtes troublée, vous respirez par la bouche. (Sciamma 01:03'34'')

In the scene, Marianne makes a comment about Héloïse's underlying ire which comes to express itself in the painting, too. Deciphering Héloïse's body language, she comments on how clearly each shift in her emotions is legible within certain habits of her body, ranging from biting her lip, to hand gestures. The camera supports this list in a kind of blazonic montage, highlighting each of the features Marianne points out for the viewer in close-ups. Realizing she has gone too far in highlighting the degree to which the sitter is on display, Marianne steps back, apologetic. Rather than leave this visual imbalance at that, the film finds a response in Héloïse's position. The latter highlights that they are exactly in the same place, providing her own list of Marianne's mannerisms and nervous ticks. Viewed through the mirror from Héloïse's perspective, the film highlights the bidirectionality that is always at work in any visual address. While it certainly outlines the artist's vision, the lacking reverse focalization through the mirror allows us to forget that the instrument depends on visibility from all angles. Thus, this scene further pushes the argument that the one-directional relationship between the painter and the muse has for centuries been but a fiction, coming to be exposed within the interrogation both of character perspective, as well as the structures of vision encoded within the painting. The mirror, here, serves as an intermediary device, prefiguring the alternative logic of the second portrait, as well as a place that suspends the cultural conventions and rules Marianne spoke of in the first portrait. Instead, reflecting reality, it opens the doorway for a space to renegotiate the power dynamics behind the act of looking, highlighting not only the object's ability to look back, but the inherent reversibility of the gaze, as well as the conflation of the viewer and the viewed. Neither remains in the fixed, active position saved for the male viewer that Pollock speaks of, but they both oscillate and operate within a relational logic that relies on its counterpart to exist. Thus, rather than the portrait, the mirror is the more fitting metaphor for the type of vision this film proposes, namely inexistent without the originary look which engenders both the viewer and the viewed.

The companion portrait that Marianne produces of herself offers a final discussion of the mirror's function in the structure of seeing. The camera initially focuses on the mirror, showing us a close up of Marianne's mirror image, then moving to her portrait of herself,

before moving back to her reference. In the last image, we see Héloïse posing in the same position as Marianne sketches herself in, the artist's face doubling with Héloïse's own. What strikes me here are the two translations that occur in this scene, one of them being the doubling of the bodies and their reclining postures of the traditional nude. The juxtaposition between the sketch and the mirror allows Marianne to interpose her own facial features onto a pose borrowed modelled by Héloïse. This first flip reverses the body and their subject/object relation in the translation of the image, highlighting once more the underlying chiasmic structure in vision. On the other hand, the second translation requires the flipping of her own image, mirroring back her face in the opposing direction as she draws her face. Moving back to *Optic Nerve's* collapsing of the subject and object position, it appears that the same binarism visually falls together in the film, the artist-subject merging with the muse-object in this melding together of Marianne and Héloïse. We might find a relational logic at work, one that models the mode Felski describes as partial, fragmentary, and relational in its nature. This alternate logic of subjectivity becomes encoded in the type of gaze both Marianne and the camera perform in this scene and is pinned down within the logic of the self-portrait she sketches for her lover. Not only does the scene highlight the reversibility between the two positions of viewer and viewed, but the very unstable nature of these ideological positions as encoded within our culture. The mirror functions as a visual space that outlines this relationship, highlighting the reversibility of the subject and object of the gaze. The concomitant overlaying of the binary of activity/passivity, male/female, subject/object thus is exposed for its artificiality in the discussion of art history and the image per se and pushes towards a relational framework that collapses subjectivity and activity in all positions. While this reversibility and exchangeability is highlighted through the visual realm in the film, the novel finds recourse in the same topic through the field of painting, but ultimately, considers the structure of address, rather than the structure of visual address, as the forum for advocating this type of relationality.

4 Conclusion

In the face of the binaries of the viewer and the viewer, the subject and object of vision, or in fact, the painter-muse, which have structured the image, it is clear that this division has frequently come down along gendered lines of division. This renewed interest in visibility thus points towards these dynamics and reconsiders the inherited operational logic in the realm of contemporary works. While past attempts at staking out an exclusively feminist aesthetics, or in

fact, a canon of female artist, have proved inconclusive and limiting rather than breaking free of the dominant logic in art history, I turn towards the aesthetics Felski and Pollock propose in turning towards a more disjunctive, self-reflexive, questioning mode as one that is truly able to consider alternate logics that organize and reify relations of power. Following these alternate logics of vision in the realm of the textual and the filmic, this crossing between Gainza's novel and Sciamma's film offers a dual position for tracing the aesthetic formalization of the gaze and its exploration both in its construction of the text and the positioning of its audience. What is gained by this crossmapping is the identification of larger cultural trends through the recurring formalization of similar concerns, albeit across different medial configurations and their discussion of the social roles implicit in the cultural imaginary.

In this case, the interest turns towards positions beyond the gendered, passive position of the visual object and its declensions across contemporary medial contexts. While both texts showcase strategies of the self-transgressive in the setting up and frustration of convention, the discordant aesthetic of frustrated expectations becomes one of the logics that offers a way out of the promised scopic pleasure of the image. In that vein, the insoluble knot between the inherited conventions and the simultaneous representation and refusal thereof operates in the vein of the paraesthetic Felski proposes. A second avenue comes through in the conception of the gaze as inherently reversible, as well as unstable in its conception of subject-object positions. In order to move beyond the dominant structuring logics we have inherited, it becomes necessary to destabilize and immobilize the forms of the gaze we have inherited, and instead move towards alternative logics that seek to redress the epistemological imbalance of the field. While the stakes of the field have been laid out in critical enquiry, the concrete material expressions of feminist aesthetics can only come to be articulated within contemporary works within the field. As the renewed dominance of the image has been far from surprising, the fact that its operating logics come to be expressed within alternate medial formats can be explained through the affordances of the later. In order to truly interrogate the aesthetic limits and conventions within a work, the medial constraints of incongruent arts, such as the textual and the filmic, allow the voicing of concerns that remain invisible in the realm of the image. As such, whether considering the lived perceptual structure of the gaze in film or in fact the ideological colouring expressed in the voiced construction of the image, each media format provides a forum for responding to the theoretical concerns through aesthetic formalizations that become embedded within alternate media logics.

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