

Shut your Eyes and See –the Female Self-Portrait Through Lacan's Gaze Theory

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Abstract: The genre of self-portraiture was adopted by women artists early on, and has since transformed from the figurative self-portrait, faithfully painted from the mirror, to abstract forms of representation in search of the unconscious. In dialogue with psychoanalytic theories from Freud and Lacan to Winnicott, key categories like the ego, the self, creativity, the gaze, and subject formation – in the field of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real – are examined. This reveals how artistic creativity becomes a way of articulating inner experiences within the symbolic order.

Key words: Self-portrait, identity, mirror stage, object of the transference, creativity, gaze.

To ask, “who am I?” is to enquire about identity, about one's own personality, about what we generally call: *the self*. In psychoanalysis, as in painting, we find paths in search of the self that intersect and mutually enrich one another. The genre of the female self-portrait, with its centuries-long history, is particularly well suited to making this path visible to us. Beginning in the Middle Ages – with precise portraits painted straight from the mirror image, so called ego-portraits (“*Ich-Porträts*”) – through to modern abstract representations of the self, the act of artistic creation gives rise to a psychic transformation. This transformation affects the individual's identity and can bring the unconscious to visual representation. Psychological changes always unfold within a cultural context *and* alongside personal transformations.

The path to modern abstraction moves from the representational function of female ego-portraits to an abstract self-representation that no longer seeks to portray, but instead to express emotional states at the threshold of the unconscious.

The terms “I” and “Self”

Art history and psychoanalytic literature often use the term “I” to mean “self”, as demonstrated by the following examples. Ich! Selbstbildnisse der Moderne von Vincent van Gogh bis Marina Abramović (I! Self-portraits of modernism from Vincent van Gogh to Marina Abramović) is the title of the art historian Uwe Schnede’s book, published in 2022 (1). Similarly, the title of the 2016 show at the Frankfurter Schirn: Ich. Ausstellung zum zeitgenössischen Selbstporträt (I. Exhibition on the contemporary self-portrait.) Furthermore, the difference between ego and self in psychoanalytic literature is not always evident.

Sigmund Freud’s concept of “das Ich”, commonly translated in English as “the ego”, but which directly translates as “the I”, encompasses the functional domain of mental thought, feeling and action. Moreover, the “Ich” is regarded as the sum of identifications, that one can think of as layered like an onion. Additionally, the “Ich” serves to differentiate the inner world from the outer, the self from the other. For Freud, the ego mediates between the id (“Es-ich”) and the superego (“Über-ich”). It has the difficult task of channelling the drives - experienced as physical stimuli such as hunger or sexual urges - and adapting them to the cultural realities of the world we live in. The drive is located on the boundary between the physical and the mental and can be expressed through language. The phrase attributed to Jacques Lacan, that the unconscious is structured like a language, aims to highlight the way that the unconscious becomes accessible within brief windows of temporal possibility. (2) For Lacan, the ego is the site of deception. He speaks of the “subject” who is subordinate to the unconscious. According to the famous lines of Arthur Rimbaud, “I is another”, our “I” (ego) is never that which is reflected in our reality, as it is determined by the Other. (3) Even before we are born we are all already embedded in a web of thoughts, linguistic expressions, and fantasies, of which we do not know and that govern our lives in ways to which we are unconscious.

The **Self** is generally described as the core of the personality, as the overall structure, as that which makes a person an individual. For Sigmund Freud, the concept of the self was significant in the context of self-analysis – a provisional version of the psychoanalytic method, an important early tool, though one that should ideally be replaced by proper analysis – and also in relation to the drive for

self-preservation such as the drive for nourishment. The concept of the drive describes the translation of the bodily into the psychic.

A significant contribution to the understanding of the self, and above all, to the understanding of creativity, was made by Donald W. Winnicott. The search for the self can only be gained through the fundamental ability to play in an area of unformed things. For this, safety, reliability and a grounding environment are required in the surroundings,. A person can only and singularly discover themselves in creative development.

To be creative requires the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. To this end, the transitional object, a special item, has a particular role for the child and can be of lifelong significance for the child. The first use of the transitional object takes place between 4 months and 12 months of age. The important item, be it a cushion, a stuffed toy, or a cuddly blanket, remains incredibly important and is loved as much as it is hated. It must survive this libidinal love, and yet still give off warmth. For the child, the item is assigned neither to the inner nor the outer world. Over time, it loses its importance and is neither forgotten. Through the illusory relationship to the forgotten transitional object, the child arrives at symbolic formation and the capacity to develop cultural interests, thereby developing the ability for creative expression.

“Ça me regarde” – it regards me

Even the early female ego-portrait seeks the gaze of the Other. Unlike purely seeing, the gaze conveys the feeling of being affected. The gaze reveals itself when something from the outer world looks back at us. This unspecific external gaze, that constantly surrounds us, is closely connected with our inner psychic state, and to what we project onto the external world. The specific instance of being gazed upon is predetermined by our internal world, our psychic reality. [Fig. 1].

Formations of Ego and Self emerge from the affirmation and reflection of inner experience and participation in cultural life. Women artists of the early modern period had to represent themselves publicly in order to be seen.

The first Ego-portraits served this purpose: they helped women to assert their self-determination and to gain recognition. They wanted to step out from the anonymity of the nameless female artists of the Middle Ages. With increasing conviction, the women created self-portraits that above all served the purpose of self-discovery. The first visual artworks addressing the question “Who am I?” began to emerge. Female artists sought the gaze, the reflection through the Other, and the confirmation: “This is me.” These early representations, that culminated in an artistic sense of self, manifested themselves in the Imaginary, that is, in the visual, not the verbal word. As is usually the case, there were also exceptions and gradual shifts. For example, the Flemish painter Katharina von Hemessen decisively inscribed on her self-portrait: „EGO CATERINA DE / HEMESSEN ME / PINXI 1548 / AETATIS / SVÆ / 20 – „ I, Catharina van Hemessen, painted myself in 1548 at the age of 20. [Fig. 3] Similarly, Sofonisba Anguissola in a 1556 painting, provides the viewer with the words “from the virgin Sofonisba Anguissola, of Cremona, painted with her own hand from a mirror.” (4) The writing within the image or on the frame is a singular kind of signature. It leads out of the non-linguistic Imaginary to the register of the Symbolic – the linguistic.

One of the earliest emblematic artworks that can be seen as an allegory of painting itself, comes from the Roman-born Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi. [Fig. 4] She was the first female artist to portray herself as an allegory of painting. In this powerful work – in which she goes far beyond self-representation – she stands with dramatically extended arms, dressed in a magnificent green dress painted on a dark background, embodying a female call to painting. She confidently employs a metaphor that already points towards abstraction. In the broadest sense, one could speculate that she is paving the way towards abstraction in the female self-portrait. The mode of representation changes from “This is me”, to “This is the art of painting”.

The first self-portraits by women painters served to turn the externally determined perspective on their identity into a resolute and self-assured ego-portrait. In practical terms, the women did this using a mirror. The portrait painted from a mirror marks the beginning of female self-portraiture. The mirror – or a reflective surface – was a

tool at the outset of the genre. Women needed to first identify themselves as painter and develop a necessary sense of self. The public presentation of these ego-portraits made them visible to the world in their professional role and strengthened their inner conviction.

The mirror plays a universal role in the formation of the subject. Lacan considers the moment of being viewed by one's own mirror image as a crucial point in the genesis of subjectivity. Not, however, as one might assume, as a moment of identity formation, but rather the opposite – as the recognition that we are not our mirror image.

For Lacan, the Ego is not a site of self-knowledge, rather a construct that emerges in the mirror stage through the identification with the mirror image. It is an instance of misrecognition and deception, one that we encounter again in the myth of Narcissus.

When a child recognises itself in the mirror for the first time, it rejoices in its mirror image: “That’s me!” When a caregiver confirms, “That’s you”, then much has already been done to answer the fundamental question, “Who am I?”. An initial “I”, “Ego” begins to take shape, an Imaginary image of oneself, seen and felt in a way that the child has never experienced before. Through the reflection, the child experiences a sense of bodily wholeness. It recognises itself as unified, localised, and glorified – as finally whole. It sees its outer boundaries with surprise, and is encompassed by an image that even imitates its movements. In this decisive event, the connection between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary is formed, laying the groundwork for the later capacity to distinguish between fantasy and reality.

As crucial as the ego formation may be, it also carries the risk of being deceived by narcissism. If we fall into the trap of accepting the mirrored self in self-love as the true answer to the question “who am I?”, we are thrown back into the imaginary, into the realm in which we misunderstand, and believe that we are that with which we identify. Narcissus sees himself as he sees himself in the reflection of the pond. This type of seeing is self-sufficient, it imagines itself as consciousness. The self-loving gaze is based on our own mental images. Only what we ourselves generate, filtered through our own perceptions, is seen.

Narcissus spurns the love of the nymph Echo. He remains fixated on the surface of his reflection in the pool. More than that, he falls in love with his own reflection, his beautiful likeness, and is self-sufficient. In his attempt to reach his reflection in the water, he wastes away. The path to the Other remains closed to him.

Lacan wants us to recognise that we are not that with which we identify. He shifts the Cartesian Cogito, with its certainty of the “I”, towards a subject that is contoured by the gaze of the Other. (6) For him, it is through the Other (the Symbolic), through cultural phenomenon like language and art, that the human being comes to itself. The Big Other (*Autre*) has meaning – not only as another subject, but above all as the symbolic order that helps construct the Ego. In a museum, in a gallery, or in an artist-run space, we may hope that our gaze falls upon something that gives us access to ourselves, if we let it. In this way, an artwork can also take the role of an Other. We see this Other in a deeply subjective way. Most often, that gaze – which, in Lacan’s work, always comes from the outside and determines what we see - corresponds to our own mental images. The path to the subject leads through the recognition of the error that we are what we identify with.

“Shut your eyes and see” – The Path into Abstraction

What do women painters want from us, when they show us their independently created portraits? What is their desire, what do they want from us as viewers? These questions guide us from figurative art and conceptual art, through to abstraction. These questions become even more pressing when the image is no longer bound to representation or illusion.

The moment we close our eyes and are confronted with an absence, perhaps even an emptiness, or when we feel ourselves being seen when no eyes are visible, when something becomes uncanny, a gap emerges. We fall out of our familiar symbolic frameworks, an experience that is akin to castration, which, for Lacan, always signifies separation. This absence, that generates a longing, sets our desire in motion and becomes tangible for the observer. The gaze, even though it always

reaches us from the outside, turns inward in abstraction. The courage to confront the gap, the ineffable, the unrepresentable, is the result of the connection with our desire. It holds treasures that want to emerge symbolically. We reencounter it in the associative creative expression of the observers, transformed into questions, thoughts, and tangible forms, all which have surfaced from the unconscious. We have experienced something of the unconscious at work within us. These reactions are products of abstractions that express our desire, which become palpable where something is missing. “Shut your eyes and see.” (7)

“Who am I?”

This question has led us—through the mirror image and the vanishing gaze of the Other—to an encounter with our unconscious, which we access through our engagement with images, oscillating between the unsayable and the sayable, our slips of the tongue, dreams, and free associations in psychoanalysis.

The disappearance of the gaze that confronts us from the outside, provokes the desire to seek it out, to transform it, to depict it, to translate it. (See Karl-Josef Pazzini: „Über die Angst, die Waffen abzugeben“, in: Zeichen der Psyche. Psychoanalytische Perspektiven zur Kunst, Turia + Kant, 2009, p. 141). The separation from the familiar and the readily available that occurs when we look inward, stimulates our creativity and, with that, the unconscious emerges. Abstraction arises in the act of creation, spontaneously and unconsciously emerging from psychic reality. In this act, we experience that we are never entirely whole. We realise that gaps will continually open up, gaps that we cannot close. What we can do, however, is shape them creatively.

Literature/Notes

- (1) Schnede, Uwe (2022). *Ich! Selbstbildnisse der Moderne von Vincent van Gogh bis Marina Abramović*. Munich: C.H.Beck.
- (2) Lacan, Jacques (2015). *Die vier Grundbegriffe der Psychoanalyse. Das Seminar, Buch XI*. Vienna: Turia + Kant; cited p. 26. See also Lacan, Jacques (1991). *Schriften I*. Weinheim, Berlin: Quadriga; zit. S. 182. The thesis can

also be traced back to Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lacan also refers to the unconscious as the “discourse of the Other.”

- (3) Rimbaud, Arthur (2010). *Prosa über die Zukunft der Dichtung*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz; cited p. 25.
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- (7) Didi-Huberman, Georges (1999): *Was wir sehen blickt uns an. Zur Metapsychologie des Bildes*. Munich: Fink; cited p. 11. Didi-Huberman quotes from James Joyces *Ulysses*.
- (8) Pazzini, Karl-Josef (2009). *Über die Angst, die Waffen abzugeben*. In: Zeichen der Psyche. Psychoanalytische Perspektiven zur Kunst. Vienna: Turia + Kant, p. 137 – 164; cited P. 141.

Image Captions

Fig. 1 Meister der Marienkrönung (ca. 1403). Illustration from Giovanni Boccaccios *De Mulieribus Claris*, Marcia painting herself using a mirror, manuscript illumination.

Fig. 2 Catarina van Hemessen (1548). *Self-portrait*, 32 x 25 cm, tempera on oak panel.

Fig. 3 Sofonisba Anguissola (1556). *Self-portrait*, 8,3 x 6,4 cm, oil on parchment.

Fig. 4 Artemisia Gentileschi (1638). *Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*, 98,6 x 75,2 cm, oil on canvas.