Balthus at the MET

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1 Girls as Cats

A friend and colleague, Alexia Raynal, a woman who has been doing some interesting reading and thinking about how children are viewed, and about how views of children are used by adults, has shared my interest in this show: "Balthus: Cats and Girls—Paintings and Provocations." But her favorite of the paintings is quite different from mine. Alexia's favorite is *La partie de cartes* (the card game; only the female player is shown above), and she liked, too, the curator's observation: "The confident look on this girl's face indicates that she is winning—or thinks she is." For me, leaving aside the room of extraordinary drawings Balthus did when he was 11 years old, the show was dominated by *Thérèse rêvant* (Thérèse dreaming), featuring Balthus's leading model Thérèse Blanchard, then 12 or 13 years old, with one leg up, underpants showing.

There is a sense in *Thérèse rêvant* that is completely absent from the card player: a sense that a model is holding a pose, doing what a painter has told her to do. Even the underpants, to say nothing of the cat, may not be her own. Many have noted that the folds of Thérèse's underpants are not unlike vaginal lips. Given that the painter painted these, too, one could say that even Thérèse's lips are not her own.

But is there not also something else in Thérèse's face and arms, in her holding the pose, miming dreaming, and in her strong jaw, her slightly downturned lip, in the red and red-brown patches, almost like bruises, coming down from her eye and on the side of her face. For me there is a sense not only that Thérèse has been forced, prevailed upon if not

paid, but also of defiance. Her mind, heart and soul she is keeping for herself. She is likely not in fact dreaming, but if she is, we will not be learning about what.

In this painting, and in *La partie de cartes* too, we understand the linking of girls and cats, or one of the connections between the two that was being made, perhaps subconsciously, by Balthus (pictured at left) and consciously by the show's curator, Sabine Rewald (below). Cats are our pets, not far from our toys, and yet they are haughty and independent. They simultaneously play the role assigned to them, lap up whatever milk we may give them, and make their own choices, go their own ways. A lesson Balthus himself apparently painfully learned at age 11 when a stray cat wandered into his life and heart and then, just as abruptly, disappeared. In his paintings it is clear that both the card player and Thérèse Blanchard are going to be independent women (and we have a sense, too, that the card player's life is going to be more fun).

2 Tension

I went to the show not with Alexia but with an ex-girlfriend, and this woman preferred, and found the most erotic, a painting of a young woman lying on her back, abandoned to sleep, a nipple peeking out from under her camisole. My friend's explanation of her preference: this model was clearly not underage. Thus a viewer might feel freer to appreciate her sexuality.

For me tension has seemed the key quality of Balthus's best works. Approaching *la Dormeuse* (the sleeping woman), one may feel wonderful opportunity—to be able to enjoy the exposure of a woman, the sumptuousness of her face and body and of Balthus's painting—without being put off by the young woman having the least idea of your gaze. And yet—the

drugging of young women by date rapists comes to mind—there is a sense of taking advantage of a vulnerable and unknowing other person. This is what makes the painting not only beautiful but erotic. The tension, we might say, is in the abandon—the girl or young woman is abandoned not only to the painter but to we viewers too. But clearly the tension is also in our subconsciousnesses, in our super-egos, in our ever-present compulsion to control

ourselves, even to control what we look at—the nipple, the breasts, her face, the dark triangle *de son ventre* (the triangle opening below her sweater)?

3 Voyeurs

Balthus's interest in girls and cats notwithstanding, his work is uneven and, let's say, more outcroppings than stream. Many of the paintings, *La dormouse* included, seem to be first and foremost an art-historian's son's homage to the Renaissance masters and other great artists (e.g. Matisse) of whom he was clearly a devoted and gifted student. Nonetheless, it can be said that in one grouping of his paintings, his models, his girls, have their heads turned, their eyes diverted or closed, so that a viewer of these paintings may feel that the girl and the work has been abandoned to him or her, and thus feel the grip of his own super-ego.

In working on this text I found myself reminded of Sartre's remark that a Peeping Tom feels no shame until he feels that someone else may have seen him peeping. I next realized, however, and through returning to work of Norbert Elias, that Sartre's observation is incorrect, at least for we moderns, Jean-Paul Sartre likely included. For us, as Elias writes in *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (*The Civilizing Process*):

> The feeling of shame is a specific excitation, a kind of anxiety which is automatically reproduced in the individual on certain occasions by force of habit. Considered superficially, it is fear of social degradation . . . [However, t]he conflict expressed in shame-fear is not merely a conflict of the individual with prevalent social opinion; the individual's behavior has brought him into conflict with the part of himself that represents this social opinion. It is a conflict within his own personality; . . .

In another passage, of which twenty-first century life often reminds me, Elias observed (75 years ago):

> It would have meant social ostracism in the nineteenth century for a woman to wear in public one of the bathing costumes commonplace today. But this change, and with it the whole spread of sports for men and woman, presupposes a very high standard of drive control. Only in a society in which

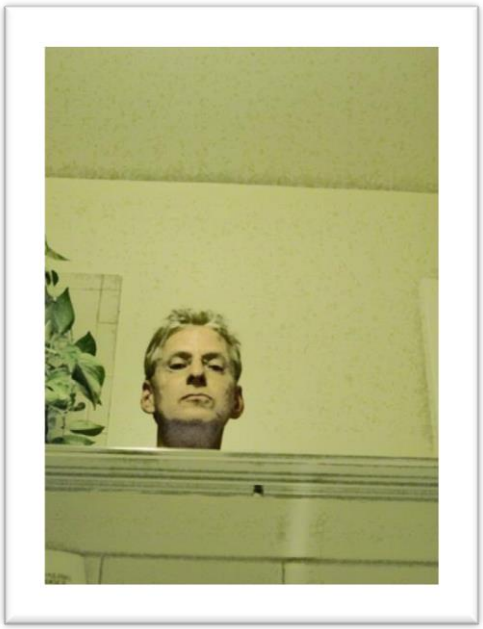
> a high degree of restraint is taken for granted, and in which women are, like men, absolutely sure that each individual is curbed by self-control and a strict code of etiquette, can bathing and sporting customs having this relative degree of freedom develop. It is a relaxation which remains within the framework of a particular "civilized" standard of behavior involving a very high degree of automatic constraint and affect transformation, conditioned to become a habit.

The man walking on a topless, but hardly super-ego-less beach may not even look at the women's beautiful breasts—or at the beauty of breasted womanhood—because he is ashamed not only to be caught looking but also to be the kind of person who looks. (The present subject is erotica, but we are now overexposed to much more than just erotica. Advertising comes quickly to mind, and how in trying to prey on our desires, libidinous and

otherwise, . . . The questions might be these: In all our seeing is there a hope of seeing "The Light"? The uterine fundus? And with all our buying do we keep hoping to fill a bottomless pit?)

It is also the case that in a museum gallery there is rarely a moment when one feels free to look without being seen. Most always you are surrounded by people who might see you lingering in front of a certain painting, leaning forward to study a certain detail (perhaps admiring *le chat* when what you'd really like to be looking at is *la chatte* —Thérèse's crotch.)

This is to say that Balthus's work can quickly put us in touch both with the voyeuristic aspect of looking at "real" girls or women, or boys and men, and with the voyeuristic aspect of museum-going. And I (pictured in my bathroom in the self-portrait at left) would stress, and in a museum there are guards and alarms to stress this: as voyeurs we



can and do look, at times long and hard, and our looking may resonate with the potentially looked at trying to look their best—but we do not touch.

There is plenty of frustration here. The more I work on this piece, the more I feel there is something it has honored only in the breach: the sexiness of Thérèse's self-exposing/being exposed, of the folds of her underpants and her head turned away, and of that small dark triangle inside her right thigh. My eyes return again and again for the pleasure, and are confronted, too, with what I will call a cold wall. In *La dormouse* Balthus's art is such that we can almost feel the warmth of his model and, simultaneously, the stillness of the air of the gallery, the static quality of our lives there. This beautiful warm woman is never going to open her eyes and smile to see "me"—us—there, filling, like a potted plant, with the waters of love, as we look at this seeming other person.

Balthus's paintings may train our eyes to see, rightly or wrongly, more of the beauty, cleverness and defiance in girls and women we know. We may therefore feel we know these people better. But knowledge of this kind, instead of bringing us closer to other people, can become part of the gulf between us. People want to be looked at and admired but not really seen? A voyeur may come to know many details of the body and life of a woman watched

nightly across an airshaft in her (or his) lighted bedroom, but these details must also add to his feeling of the unbridgeable distance between "me" and her, between me and other people. Closeness is born of touching and sharing and not of seeing or knowing?

I would stress, too, that while one more readily writes such things after seeing a show of intimate portraits (and Rembrandt's portraits come quickly to mind), the gulf is no narrower when we are looking at *Guernica*, Michelangelo's *Captif* (*Dying Slave*) or *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Were the figures of these paintings and of Michelangelo's sculpture depicted more lifelessly, more coldly—think of a Warhol silkscreen—we might feel relieved; the untouchability would concern us less.

With Elias's help I would also invert this. Our ability and desire to be museum-goers is linked to centuries of development of psychic structures that "help" us repress our instincts and impulses, that help us to do the controlling of ourselves ourselves. Again from *The Civilizing Process*:

> The more the strong contrasts of individual conduct are tempered, the more the violent fluctuations of pleasure or displeasure are contained, moderated and changed by self-control, the greater becomes the sensitivity to shades or nuances of conduct, the more finely attuned people grow to minute gestures and forms, and the more complex becomes their experience of themselves and their world at levels which were previously hidden from consciousness through the veil of strong affects.

4 The Street

I understood that Balthus's painting *The Street* (on view at the Museum of Modern Art) did not fit with the theme of the MET show. Still I missed this painting and its sociological complexity. This painting brings us more directly to reflections on modern, urban life and on what sociologists have called our *Entfremdung* (or estrangement, alienation). In this world we are often on stage and often spectators, often seeable, seeing or being seen. (And, prompted by Balthus's *Street*, I would stress that one hides one's face to avoid being seen or seeing, and deliberate not-seeing is most certainly a kind of seeing.) In our modern world we bump into one another; we often almost touch; we but rarely caress one another. (This latter not being the same as copping a feel). The emotional distance between us is not unlike that between museum visitors and painted models.

When I was working on this text in a New York restaurant, to my left there was a

young woman, a tourist from South Africa, who kept looking over at me in the anthropological way tourists do—I was an interesting specimen (*Guillaume cherchant les mots devant son ordi*; William at his laptop struggling to put his fingers on what to say). When the woman's friend went to the bathroom, however, there was a slight stiffening of this voyeur's posture, a slight turning away; it was clear I was not to speak to her, not to ask how long she might be staying in New York. To my right a new customer, also a young woman, began taking off her sweater, soon enough revealing a snug-fitting black tanktop and breasts held snugly in a black bra. Continuing her conversation with a friend, this other woman did not seem to notice, let alone acknowledge my gaze.

In *The Street* the older man seems to be trying to not only cop a feel but also a smell, and yet clearly he and the girl he is molesting are on the same plane only in a visual sense. On New York City streets one may often see a girl's or young woman's underclothing, her bra in particular, and one may occasionally see a nipple or a "camel toe" well outlined by tight clothing. Such sightings may well catch a man's (or woman's) eye and quicken the blood, but ultimately they lead us to feel yet more strongly the distance between us and these sexily appearing women (or men) and between us and other people more generally. And this is but one aspect of the overstimulation of modern life, of our being so much more aroused and arousing than we are fulfilled. And certainly repeated viewings—be these of the explicit, the seductive, the beautiful or horrific—can also dull our desires, and this is one of the

reasons behind all our looking, our going to see museum shows, big cities, movies and so forth.

5 Wanting

I have heretofore ignored all the images readily available on the Web—of girls, boys, men and women exposed and self-exposing. Thérèse's underpants and Balthus's painstaking rendering of their folds must now seem a bit *ringard, viellot*—outdated, quaint. The proverbial dirty old man does not need to come to the MET to try to catch a glimpse of "sex parts" or to fantasize about *les mauvaises pensées* (dirty thoughts) of girls. Visitors to the show might rather be looking for reassurance that some measure of innocence endures, in Balthus's models, in girlhood, and in them, the visitors, themselves.

At the end of an online posting, complete with picture, about *The Guitar Lesson*, one of the more conventionally pornographic Balthus paintings, one "nancy.thomas.370177"

commented—wonderfully—"We live in an asexual world, nobody is having sex, raise your hand if anyone here had sex with a person recently." This again inverts the discussion, here turning any search for innocence inside out. It could seem that the more we are exposed to, the more we become only voyeurs, and the more we become voyeurs, and only voyeurs, the more we are exposed to? Our putative loss of innocence renders us yet more innocent regarding what non-visual (or non-electronic) life might involve.

Like a big-city street, an art museum gives us permission to look, encourages us to look, and we are grateful, likely too grateful, for that. But when what we are seeing is the painted folds of a girl's drawers—of her not quite, never to be opened drawers?—we may be reminded that viewing falls short of our expectations. A life of seeing, and of being seen, is not all we have wanted.

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Notes & Links

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These observations are meant to be preparatory to another set, based on a show now up at the British Museum: "Shunga: sex and pleasure in Japanese art." I hope to have these done and posted on Montaigbakhtinian by next week.

The comments offered in the text above are not meant to be a full-fledged review of the MET show. That task was well accomplished by Roberta Smith writing in the *New York Times*: **Infatuations, Female and Feline**, 26 September 2013. Also recommended is "**The Met's Balthus Show Offers Meditations on Power and Sex**," by Cate Kustanczy, *The Digital Journal*, 13 October, 2013.

The Met's website for the show.

The Balthus painting above is *Salon I*.

Jill Krementz's photographs of the show and of people at the opening as published in the "New York Social Diary." Krementz's work includes two of the photographs, used, cropped, above: a portion of *La partie de cartes* and the portrait of Sabine Rewald.

Alexia Raynal, "**The 'Dark' Side of Childhood**," *Zeteo is Reading*: 3-9 November 2013.

The cartoon catwoman with the purple pussy comes from **deviantART**. The artist's name was not there revealed.

John-Paul Sartre, peeping Tom comes from *L'être et le néant* (Gallimard, 1943), 265-66.

Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (***The Civilizing Process***). Published in German in 1939, then in 1969 republished and translated into English. In two volumes, both quoted from above. I note here that the push to internalize shame has not been, or not solely, a phenomenon of the modern age. See Democritus (in Kathleen Freeman's translation): "Learn to feel shame in your own eyes much more than before others." The online posting regarding *The Guitar Lesson* was "**Saltz on the Painting the Metropolitan Museum of Art Won't Show You**," by Jerry Saltz. The article was first published in *New York Magazine*,

September 22, 2013. As suggested by the article title, this painting was not part of the MET show.

The "uterus panties" are from a fashion label called **Knickerocker.**

I cannot leave this piece without noting that the MET show's curator, Sabine Reward, is the daughter-in-law of the art scholar John Rewald whose *History of Impressionism* (Museum of Modern Art, 1946), found on my parents' bookshelves, played a large part in the development of my sense of what being an artist involves. Ms. Rewald's father-in-law thus played a large role in developing my sense of who I would be.

The End.