

Re-Embodying the Spectacle: Erica Pedretti and Ferdinand Hodler

Gisela Ecker

In my article I intend to discuss a specific aesthetic strategy that can be found in many works by women today, that is, the re-insertion of the female body into a field from which it had been driven away. By this I do not mean the well-known concept of 'writing the body' but something more historically tangible and textually precise.

To illustrate this, I would like to discuss a novel by Erica Pedretti, a Swiss author. It was published in 1986. Before publication, in 1984, Pedretti won the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize for a reading of one of its chapters. The title is *Valerie oder Das unerzogene Auge* (Valerie or The Uneducated Eye)¹. Its narrative can hardly be summarized as it consists of many different levels that are not neatly separated from each other. The plot is built around Franz, a painter, and Valerie, his model, muse, mistress, and mother of their child. It is presented alternately in the first-person voice of Valerie and by an impersonal narrator. Valerie learns that she has fallen ill with cancer and cannot go on the journey she had planned. Instead, she goes on an inner journey, haunted by "free-floating thoughts that can hardly be caught in their flight" (108), her "head a rattling, overheated machine out of control" (10), a journey through memories and phantasies. In view of her death, she ventures a gaze of her own, a gaze on her decaying body and on her surroundings. I suppose you will sigh now and say, "Oh, I've read that already", that is, versions of the one typical narration of female illness that underlies so many contemporary women's novels. But this one is different.

Franz goes on painting Valerie until her impending death, recording the stages of her disintegration. His ultimate professional ideal is the Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918) who painted several of his lovers in sickness and on their deathbeds. His principle subject was Valentine Godé-Darel – she is captured in 50 oil-paintings, 130 drawings and 200 sketches. Franz quotes Hodler continually, specifically referring to his theory of colour and proportion in painting. Although the novel raises many other questions of equal interest, I want to focus on its intertextual relation to a historical pretext and discuss the ways in which this pretext is called upon.

The Coded Gaze

Only once in this novel are Hodler's pictures referred to explicitly, but they serve as a foil (well-known especially to Swiss readers) throughout the novel. The explicit link is established through Franz quoting Hodler. As, for example, in a scene from the book which is called 'Serene Under Clear Sky' (15), Valerie, who for a brief moment holds on to the illusion that she and Franz can enjoy a beautiful summer day, is summoned back: "Oh, you should see yourself now! Because of the laughing play of coloured shadows, writes Hodler, says Franz" (13) and instead of being grey, he says, they are "in fact saturated with blue and purple with orange reflections in the middle" (13). Valerie feels reduced to "a question of patches of colour which are difficult to reproduce, of reflected light, of the drawing of lines" (12). Similarly she feels reduced by Franz' ideas of proportion which, again, he takes from Hodler: "The totally uneducated eye is unable to perceive the colour and form of objects like the eye of the practiced person... writes Hodler" (24), says Franz, and, "to grasp the proportions of an object which rises from a flat surface is impossible for an unprepared eye, quotes Franz" (25). Thus he questions her own right to see. Like Hodler, and like his fellow artists since the Renaissance, Franz uses the 'Dürerscheibe'² between himself and the model, "as if it were urgently necessary to separate" (19), thinks Valerie. And towards the end the narrator mentions Franz' "pleasure in every successful stroke, a pleasure in the most cruel representation, if only it is correct, if it reproduces the impression, this satisfaction and proof of mastery" (149).

What we get here is a critique of the dominant codes of painterly vision, the dominant "scopic regime" (Jay 1988) of Western painting, with its ordering towards a single and unblinking eye and a central perspective. This critique is given voice from the perspective of the usually silent object of this vision. It is a gendered position because of the fact that throughout history within that paradigmatic constellation the positions have been distributed almost invariably along gender lines, with a male artist and a female model. "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger 1972:47). Many of the traditional features of paintings of the female nude can be found in Hodler's pictures, such as for example the lack of reciprocity (the nude is frequently presented as being unaware of an observer; Valentine in the pictures can no longer look back because she is in the final stages of her illness) and the asymmetry of the relationship that is represented. If the observer is generally and almost automatically male, and the observed female, gender stereotypes enter unconsciously into the very codes that govern pictorial representation and are reproduced equally unconsciously. Rather than speaking of intrinsic qualities of 'the male gaze' as is frequently done prematurely, we should distinguish between positionalities, the consequent power relations and the effects these have on the discourses around art.



Ferdinand Hodler. 'Die kranke Valentine Godé-Darel' (29.12.1914). Drawing. Kunsthhaus Zürich.



Ferdinand Hodler. 'Die sterbende Valentine Godé-Darel' (24.1.1915). Oil on canvas. Kunstsammlung Basel.



Ferdinand Hodler. 'Die tote Valentine Godé-Darel' (26.1.1915). Oil on paper. Kunstsammlung Basel.

Corpo-Reality

Although Valerie is determined to see for herself, despite the restrictions of her uneducated eye, this cannot be put into practice without serious problems. Where should that gaze of her own come from? By which source could it be nourished, given the fact that the existence of the model is intricately tied to the painter who gives her meaning? There are bans on a self-determined gaze that are described in terms of sexuality and possession. But also, she has already internalised the norms that have not come from herself: "In any case, I see everything in the way you are seeing it, we have long been seeing things as if we were one, as if we were only one person: you" (26), says Valerie, and, motivated by her love for him it turns out that: "More and more she turned into his image of her. She moved and posed according to the way she was represented" (89). Thus this novel addresses questions which – in the context of feminist theorizing – we have long been acquainted with; whether there is something like 'a different voice', as Gilligan puts it, or something like an authentic female gaze or a self-determined identity. The novel denies a positive answer and instead leads us further into the dilemma.

In the middle of narrative chaos Valerie produces a few beautiful verbal images – of a train which cuts through an arrangement of colours and lights, of the view from an aeroplane, of three roses and a stethoscope on her bedside table in the clinic, and the following:

For hours it has been snowing. A Dalmatian crosses the Münsterplatz: black spots are moved across an empty white space in the rhythm of a running dog... She slips into the dappled dog's skin, the uneducated eye would not grasp all the data of the object, that rhythm of the forms which is created by movement, position and gesture, and she moves the black dots which are copied onto a white acrylic fur in her own rhythm across the snowy square. (106-108)

Is this the product of a gaze of her own? Or is her way of seeing informed by Franz' norms of artistic perception?

In their critique of the coded gaze Valerie and the narrator are far more articulate than in their description of the (female) uneducated gaze (and we must not forget that in the German language, "unerzogen" – uneducated – is very close to "ungezogen" – naughty). The gaze of the uneducated eye is presented indirectly, it is not defined but emerges through the way of writing, transposed onto a different medium. The narrative grows rampant in the respective passages in mixtures of fragments of dialogue, fantasies, quotations, scraps of memory and travelogue which are not marked off against each other by syntactic boundaries. Valerie wants to record everything: "And she carried out what she had wanted to describe, an idea, something that could hardly be told, breathlessly, without pause, until it hung there as a picture, tangibly" (137). She describes what she is doing as a process of "painfully wringing

from wilderness" (42). The style of the novel mimes such a process in linguistic form. Once, when Valerie's thoughts race wildly through her head, we read "No live feelings, no live memories, everything is diffuse and should stay bearable, diffuse like her condition" (136). Valerie cannot pursue an aesthetic of her own, and the novel, in confronting us with the impossibility of a definable feminine aesthetic and identity, does not use definable aesthetic and narrative structures either. The tumour of the protagonist is highly symbolic as well as mimetically presented in the way of writing. When Valerie wants to write about what will happen to her child after her death, language fails her and the page in the text remains empty.

The female body is no longer contained in the images that have been made of it but takes on an existence outside these images, however painful: "greenish, emaciated heads in pure white linen and so it goes on, the brownish glimmer in the eye sockets" (126); "My face, I could cry over what I do not like in it, my shattered body and a head, a brain which is helpless and unreliable, soon no longer useful, this is me" (138). In recent theory there has been much stress on the emergence of female identities in the body of *jouissance*. Here it is the body in pain.

The Intertextual Relation

We must remember that this novel is not a 'historical novel', not a rewrite of the Hodler-Godé-Darel story, that Franz is not a fictional personification of Hodler, and Valerie not a personification of Valentine. What we have is an intertextual relation between a contemporary novel and the historical model of Hodler and Valentine Godé-Darel. Pedretti does not aim at reconstructing the historical situation but creates a new fictional one which only refers to the pre-text for specific purposes. The very ways in which this model is referred to are gendered: Franz quotes Hodler explicitly and uses his manifesto as a guide for his painting. Thus he posits himself within a male genealogy of painters and takes his place within tradition, which is usually conceptualised as tension between imitation and deviance. For Valerie, who can of course not quote Valentine because there are no documents, there is no such aesthetic genealogy, no position as a female artist she can refer to. Instead, as a fictional persona, she refers to the pre-text by repeating Valentine's fate. Whereas the male painter *quotes* the pre-text, the female model *embodies* the pre-text and turns into the model on her deathbed. Yet by daring an uneducated glance on her own dying body, Valerie pursues the traces of the historical pattern in such a way that it becomes obvious what had been repressed there. There is an insistence on the concrete, on matter, on the physical. At one stage the narrator demands: "You shall not form an image" (79), and in the end, Valerie sees her fate analogous to the stations of the cross: "the cross is a heavy cross and no metaphor" (182).

What is visible in the spectacle as aesthetic fragmentation of the body is made literal from the perspective of the object: "I listen to his pencil on the paper and under his gaze that concentrates on detail I fall apart into pieces: nose and lips and chin and forehead and ear and eye and neck and hair and hand" (175) and, "She feels as if with every stroke of the pencil he would tear off a piece of the surface, her skin, piece by piece a piece of her life" (183). In the very end the body wins a dubious victory over the spectacle by changing faster than the artist is able to record: "Without seeing the sheet of paper I know that I am changing, that my appearance moves away from his drawing hour by hour" (183).

Pedretti versus Hodler versus Art History

It would be naive, though, to just talk about Pedretti and Hodler as if the painter had not for a long time been in the possession of art historians. Their patterns of interpretation illustrate most clearly what is at stake in Pedretti's strategy of re-embodiment.

To begin with, there is the unanimous opinion that Hodler's pictures of Valentine are moving and that this is due to his precision of observation and representation; one can almost "hear her groan" (Brüschweiler 1983:160). Then, repeatedly, it is stated that this experience of death marks off a period within Hodler's work in which he finds a new and liberated use of colour (Baumann 1983:370). Then all these commentators move on to a platonic gesture of interpretation, a step from mimesis to idea: "Hodler has raised human acceptance of death into the realm of beauty" (Brüschweiler 1983:23); "In Hodler's work... the idea comes first, the abstract thought and not a visual impression... he made nature bend her will to the idea" (Koella 1983:289); "We feel less the meaningful or even tragic contents but certain timeless meanings which are contained or even extinct in the paintings, meanings like growing and wasting, coming and going, being and not-being" (Honisch 1983:452)³.

Let me state first that there is nothing surprising in these comments on Hodler's death-cycle insofar as they move within authorized conventions of art history, and it is those conventions I want to refer to. They perform a far-reaching process of de-materialization, the de-materialization of the concrete, of the body, of nature. Hodler, whose pictures tell of a dying woman and which do in fact present bodily details with empathy, is made into an artist who is determined to leave all this behind:

After first shorthand sketches of ideas followed intensive and lengthy studies of nature which served to establish the details. Yet the more he pursued these studies the more he moved away from nature. The specific, the individual, the ephemeral which he found in reality, condensed and purified with each drawing; more and more it was transformed into an abstract sign, the image of a pure and original condition. (Koella 1983:292)

From terms like "purified" and "original" we can see that abstraction and dematerialization are valued highest.

There is an unquestioned harmony assumed between the detail of nature and the abstract idea; the former can be transformed into the latter without any problems. Moreover – or may there be a causal relation? – this harmony is undisturbed by sexual difference because the subject-positions and roles of the artist, of the anticipated viewer and of the interpreter meet on a level of assumed universality (which is, in fact, of male gender), and together they look at the body, the detail of nature, which is of female gender. These gender divisions provide a smooth functioning of the idealized concept of mimesis.

Valerie, the fictional persona, looks at her own decaying body and records this in chaotic narrative forms. What she produces is *not* aesthetically pleasing and does *not* follow the laws of ideal proportions as in the pictures of the painter. She drives a wedge between the platonic and the material side of representation. Her 'truth' is not beautiful as the pictures claim. Valerie's cruel recording of her own dying produces a textual body which can neither be 'purified into an idea' nor formed into an aesthetically consistent structure.

Memory and the Rewriting of Culture

The novel thus follows an aesthetic of disrupting dominant concepts by embodying what has been left out. Yet the return of the repressed does not, as might be expected, happen as a reconstruction of something original, but it bears the traces and bodily scars of its mutilated past. For the author herself this means more a process of search than a clear-cut position. "What I know, I do not write. What I write, I do not know," Pedretti (1990:118) writes in an autobiographical statement.

The novel also follows an aesthetic of remembering cultural practices from a gendered position. Renate Lachmann (1990:36) has called intertextuality "the memory of the text". By activating this memory, Pedretti makes clear that new negotiations of feminine identities cannot ignore the images and stereotypes that have been made of women in the past. In any case, identities that are constructed in this process are fragile and heterogeneous.

"Intertextuality in texts reveals the continuous rewriting of a culture... writing then means an act of calling into memory as well as a reinterpretation of culture" (Lachmann 1990:36). If we apply this to acts of revision that are necessary from the perspective of women, there are many strategies suited to such a process of rewriting – reembodyment seems to be a powerful one. It does not erase the pre-text but evokes and re-enacts it from a hitherto marginal position. "Margins and edges gain new value. The 'ex-centric' – as both off-center and de-centered – gets attention," writes Linda Hutcheon, and she calls "intertextual parody... one mode of appropriating and reformulating – with

significant change – the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Eurocentric culture. It does not reject it, for it cannot” (Hutcheon 1988:130). It must be acknowledged that the (feminine) intertextual practice we are talking about here can in any case only arrive at composite identities which contain the old images as well as try to establish something other in the critique and deconstruction of these images. This points to an overall project which, I believe, is pursued by many of us both in literary and in theoretical writing.

Notes

1. Page numbers refer to the original German version (Pedretti 1986); all translations are mine.
2. Dürerscheibe: the drawing-device which was originally used by Dürer – a screen with a grid which he put between himself and the model.
3. All translations of quotations mine.

Bibliography

- Baumann, F. (1983). Gedanken zur Farbe. In: Hodler (1983).
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Brüschweiler, J. (1983). Ferdinand Hodler. Chronologische Übersicht. In: Hodler (1983).
- Ecker, G. (1992). 'Der andere Blick?' Erica Pedrettis *Valerie oder Das unerzogene Auge*. In: S. Weigel (ed.), *Leib- und Bildraum. Lektüren nach Benjamin*. Köln: Böhlau.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hodler, F. (1909). Über die Kunst. In: *Der Morgen*. Berlin; reprinted in Hodler (1983), 13-20.
- Hodler, F. (1983). *Exhibition Catalogue*. Zürich: Kunsthaus Zürich.
- Honisch, D. (1983). Das Spätwerk. In: Hodler (1983).
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.
- Jay, M. (1988). Scopic Regimes of Modernity. In: H. Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*. Seattle: Bay Press.
- Koella, R. (1983). Zum zeichnerischen Werk. In: Hodler (1983).
- Lachmann, R. (1990). *Gedächtnis und Literatur*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.
- Pedretti, E. (1986). *Valerie oder Das unerzogene Auge*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.
- Pedretti, E. (1990). Von den flatternden Vorhängen. In: Y. Böhler (ed.), *Das gespiegelte Ich* (118-121). Zürich: Benziger.