Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, 1669,
Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London.

# Self-Portraits

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*Abstract*: This paper originates in the primal experience of *being seen* that may occur while standing in front of a late self-portrait by Rembrandt. A close analysis of the last fifteen minutes of Frederick Wiseman's documentary film, *National Gallery*, which concludes with an image of Rembrandt's next-to-last self-portrait from 1669, leads to an exploration of the very nature of vision itself. What is visibility and where does it come from? In the world of things, who is seeing whom? Themes of looking, seeing and being seen, as well as the transgressive and therefore punishable gaze, are taken up in the contexts of Western art and Greek mythology in the attempt to determine the boundaries, borders and limits of vision itself. The author suggests that vision is a streaming function of the objective psyche in its individuating aspect, and that nature and matter are continuously seeing *us* in order that *we* may fulfill *their* deeper strivings towards wholeness.

*Key words*: art, mythology, vision, the invisible, nature, matter, being seen.

In the final scene of the documentary film, *National Gallery*, there is a contemporary dance performance staged in a room of the museum where the exhibit, *Metamorphosis: Titian*, is on display. It is 2012. After a silent pas de deux prelude, baroque music by the sixteenth century composer William Byrd begins to play.

From the opening shot of the sequence, the performer, at first a single young female, shortly joined by a male dancer who gracefully circles her for a duet, stands perfectly straight in profile in the center of the screen, hieratic and supple. She is

flanked by two renditions of the myth of Diana and Actaeon painted by Tiziano Vecellio, called Titian. On the left hangs the earlier *Diana and Actaeon*, painted between 1556 and 1559, which depicts the tragically-doomed, handsome young hunter as he unwittingly comes upon the magnificent virgin goddess Diana at her bathing pool attended by several of her handmaidens. In the painting, a startled Actaeon is parting a slight red curtain to reveal the pale golden flesh of the grand huntress goddess. She casts him a sharp, penetrating glance while partially obscuring her own face protectively with her arms.

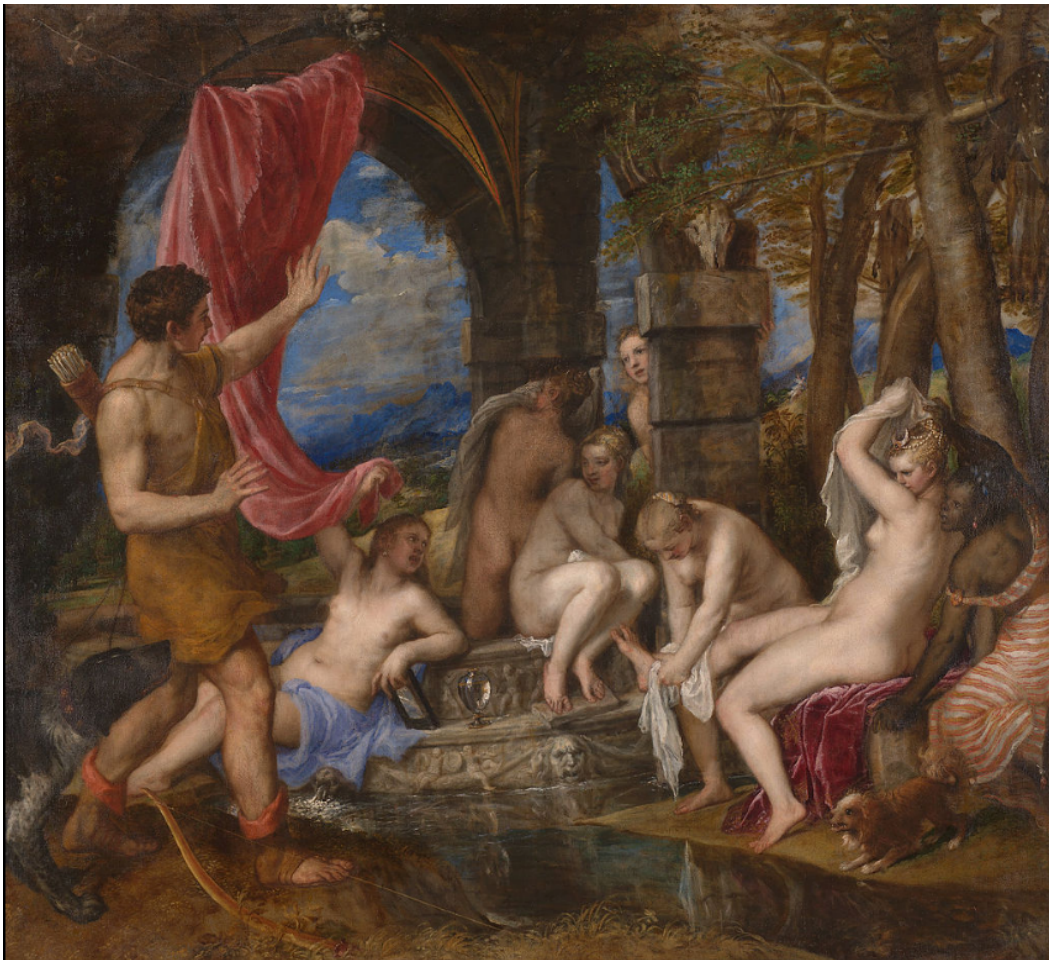

**Figure 1** Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556-9, Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London.

On the other side of the gallery, framing the ballet performance, is Titian's *The Death of Actaeon*, painted between 1559 and 1575, and found in his studio only after his death. While considered by some to be actually unfinished, it clearly presents his very late style of loose brushwork and the urgent strokes and daubs which create a fleeting, impressionistic movement where contours and figures merge and hazily mix in a dream of dissolving forms.

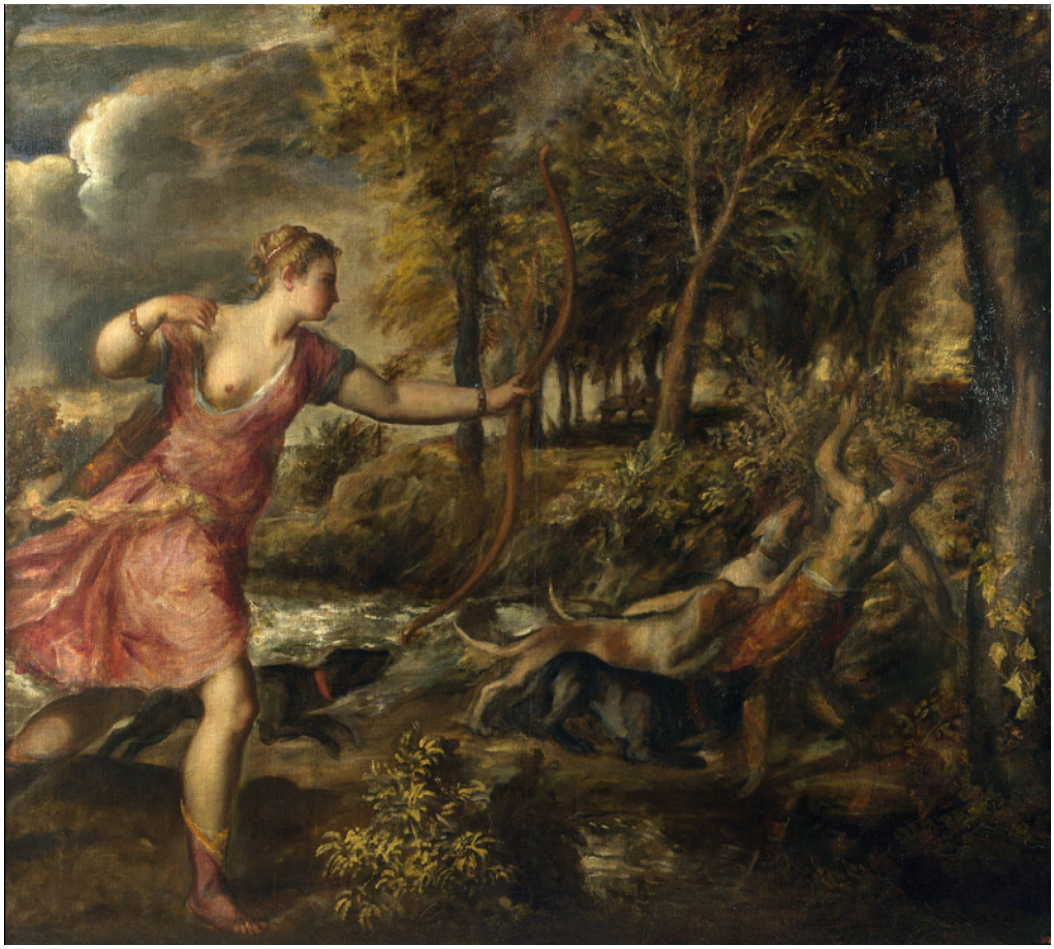

**Figure 2** Titian, *The Death of Actaeon*, 1559-75,
Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London.

Perhaps his very last painting, it stands in stark contrast to his earlier version of the myth where all the figures are crisply defined in boldly outlined colors. Here, instead, the scene reveals itself in dark, earthy shades, with forms merely suggested

by illusionistic streaks and speedily applied brush sweeps. Diana, in striding motion, is exacting her inexorable retribution for having been seen, that is, glimpsed, merely momentarily looked at, by the youthful Actaeon, an ordinary, unfortunate mortal, who had unintentionally stumbled upon her in her watery glen. He is already mostly metamorphosed into a muddy brown stag, shaggy torso and antlered head, brutally beset upon by his own swarm of hunting hounds who nip, rip and tear at his flesh. The goddess, larger than life, golden-haired and clad in a short, rusty-red tunic, takes a long step towards him with her fatal bow drawn, poised for the coup de grâce.

As the dance performance finishes in the movie and the balletic couple recede into a dark apex at the center of the screen, the film segues back into the quiet, lofty halls of the museum. Then, abruptly, we switch to viewing a series of quick, close-up details of Rembrandt van Rijn portraits from the National Gallery's permanent collection of his paintings.

Included in this final segment are two self-portraits. In the first to appear on the screen, a painting from 1640, the artist is richly-attired in fur cap and cloak, and appears quizzical yet confident, perhaps even with a touch of good humor enlivening his lips. He evinces a subtle blush of pride as he poses at the then unbeknownst height of his worldly success. A number of different portrait faces from other works also painted by Rembrandt flash by after in rapid succession. And then the film comes to its end, starkly and powerfully, its final image fixed into place, burned on the retina: a second Rembrandt self-portrait, also from the permanent collection, this one his next-to-last, painted in 1669, the year of his death. His face is weary and resigned, gentle in demeanor, deeply lined and furrowed by age and experience, and his clothes are in soft browns with touches of russet on his cap, collar and cuffs. His

gaze, however, is as always, unsparing, unflinching, and intense, direct and penetrating. His face, like a beacon, radiates outwardly with a burnished, golden-silvery, but subdued, illuminating light. Within this halo of his face, his eyes burn. His eyes, concentrated, seeking, look out. He is locked into a remorseless stare-down with his whole long textured life, with painting, with his extremely precarious mortality, and with the clearly-felt imminence of his own death, hovering nearby, very close at hand.

**Figure 3** Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, 1669,
Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London.

When Frederick Wiseman's documentary film ends and the credits have long since rolled, the theatre emptied and the lights turned out, it is Rembrandt's eyes that continue looking. In the National Gallery in London, even if it is closed for the night and dark, for as long as we are still breathing, *seeing* is alive and well and flows forth from this self-portrait. Rembrandt's vision challenges and persists. A vital gaze emanates from the painting and fills the space well beyond either the cinema's movie screen and theatre, or even the London museum's own rooms, halls and walls.

Stretching and bending over the past three and a half centuries, Rembrandt's eyes continuously 'seeing out' from the canvas still permeate our world, the world of the visible. His sheer 'just-looking' endures. The painting itself is a testament to that fact. His indomitable gaze is in itself a witness to the long-lived powers of art's capacity to capture, hold, and seamlessly further the thread of pure seeing, projecting the very act of an extremely alive and alert *seeing* itself into the unimaginable and distant future.

What *is* Rembrandt looking at? *Who* is he looking at? What is he seeing? What does *he* see in the reflection of his studio's mirror during his last winter and spring in 1669?

What are *we* seeing when we view his self-portraits? Can we see what he was seeing? Did he not portray *everything* through his consummate command with and in this painting? Who and what are *we* looking at and trying to find in the rugged lineaments of his fleshly face, in his hands and eyes, in the painted topography and landscape of his clothes, accessories and backgrounds?

These are some of the questions we are going to take up in this inquiry into the nature of self-portraits, the multiply proliferating worlds and levels of vision,

looking, seeing and being seen that Wiseman's documentary, *National Gallery*, opens up before us. Wandering in a vast hall of mirrors, we will need to find our own way through a labyrinth of shifting, ambiguous, and suddenly moving and darting reflections, shadows and images in order to proceed on *our own* designated path, to get where we need to go, and to hopefully arrive at our own desired destination. We will also have to be very patient, and quietly, carefully attend to what at this early stage we cannot yet even begin to name which awaits us, at the end, at the goal, though we know that this nameless something does indeed await us. For now, we can only go as far and as quickly as the furthest beams of our analytical headlights will allow, as we have embarked upon a meditation concerning the very nature of looking, seeing, and vision itself. As we probe and gently palpate the soulful languages of looking and painting, we find that our gaze continues to gradually recede and deepen before us, extending into and entangling us with the worlds of matter, nature and the 'non-human' environments we inhabit.

So first, let us return to where we began, during the final scenes of the film, with a dance performance held in the midst of a 2012 exhibition of Titian's paintings at The National Gallery in London, a collection of works that he based on Ovid's first century C.E. book, *Metamorphoses*, or 'Stories of Changing Forms'. The Venetian Titian, the most famous European artist of his time, took a great and obvious pleasure in both reading and depicting different contemporary versions of the Roman poet's wildly imaginative tales of transformations wrought by the gods upon heroes and mortals, and himself considered Ovid "a painter with words", as he himself was called "a poet with paint". Besides the two paintings we touched upon, both portraying scenes from the story of Diana and Actaeon, there is a third painting

of Titian's that figures in the same actual gallery space of the film's final sequence that also has as its central dominant personage, the ancient Graeco-Roman goddess Artemis, or Diana, as the Romans and later, the Renaissance, referred to her. This painting, *Diana and Callisto*, like the *Diana and Actaeon* piece, also being painted at the exact same time between 1556 and 1559 as pendants to each other, was, along with five other mythologically-based works, part of an ensemble of paintings commissioned by Titian's foremost and grandest patron at the time, King Philip II of Habsburg Spain.

The suite of six mythological paintings all based upon themes from Ovid were collectively referred to from their inception as the *poesie*. They are all pictorially dramatic narrative poems which explore the entire range of complex human experience in interaction with the classical gods and goddesses of antiquity. Seen as a whole, they are a breathtaking panorama of the vividly erotic and sensuously lush depths of the soul's emotional journeys as it is forced into a confrontation with the otherness of divinity's naked power. The painting, *The Death of Actaeon*, though originally part of Titian's whole plan for the complete *poesie*, was never included among the final cycle of six paintings which were sent to Philip over several years in different locations where he resided throughout Habsburg Europe and were finally assembled for the first time as an ensemble in Spain sometime in the 1560s.

In *Diana and Callisto*, the fourth painting in this series, the virgin goddess is pointing her condemnatory finger at the nymph Callisto, crouched and being literally exposed by three other nymphs at the scene to the blazing fury of Diana's harsh gaze in seeing her obviously pregnant belly. Callisto's bared navel in the painting is a disfiguring horizontal gash which mimics both a vaginal opening, as well as an

attribute and emblem of the goddess' dark side, an inversely blackened, recumbent crescent moon—a black moon rising on Callisto's pillowy white belly.

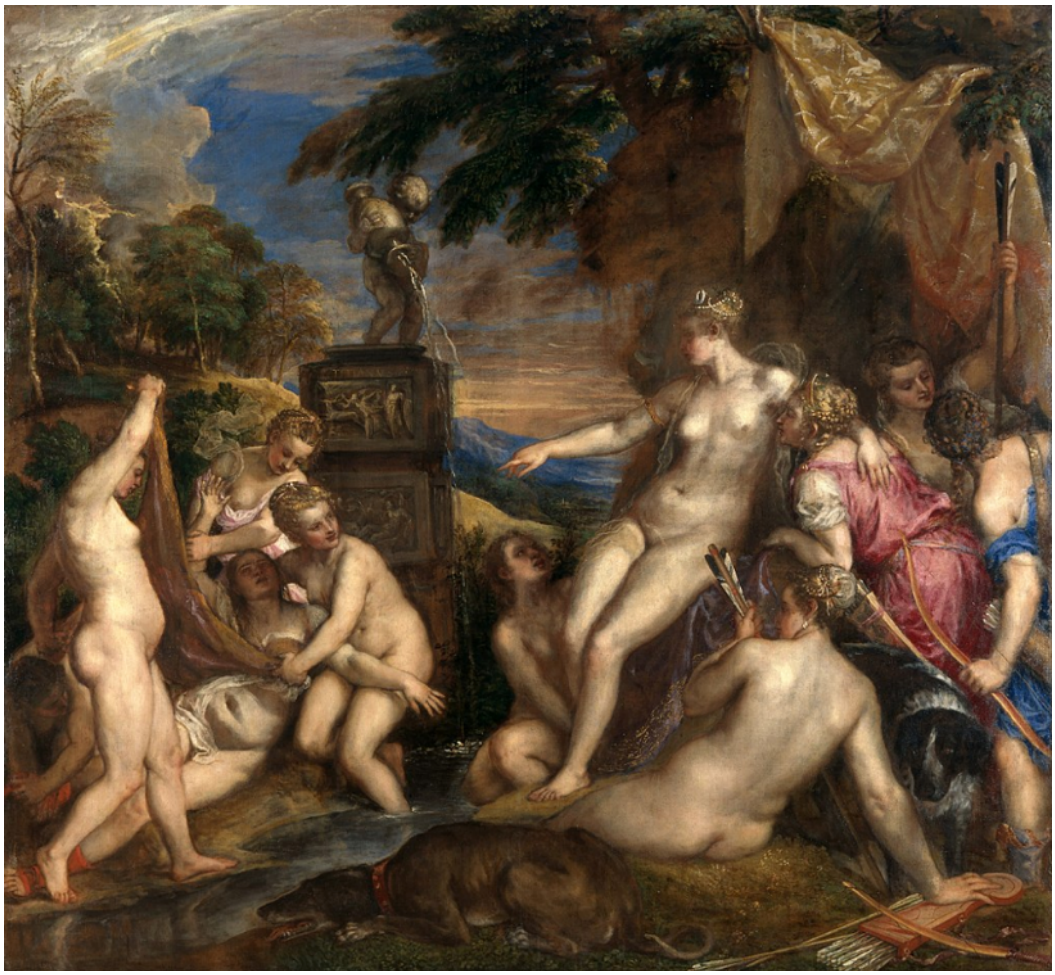

**Figure 4** Titian, *Diana and Callisto*, 1556-9,
Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London.

Once again in this scene, Diana's wrath reigns supreme and electrically crackles as the overriding theme of the painting, her righteous indignation and retaliation for having the sanctity of her own virgin sphere sullied and violated by one of her own votaries. Diana, Artemis, the great goddess, is, as we know from the most ancient proto-Grecian times, *parthenos*, 'untouched', 'the untouched one', untouchable, a

virgin, a chaste divinity who chose early on in her own birth story to retain her maidenhood, and who throughout her mythologem abjures overt sexuality in any form. (We find her primary attribute and epithet of *parthenos* attached to the famous temple of Athena, the eponymously named Parthenon, on top of the Acropolis in Athens, since Athena, that city's patron goddess, is also a virgin deity).

Callisto, as one of Diana's attendant nymphs and companions, essentially having the role of a young priestess in her order, was also sworn to maintain a state of purity, unclaimed by the male touch. The name Callisto, which in Greek, *Kalliste*, means 'the most beautiful', 'the fairest', is also ironically an epithet of Artemis herself, and in antiquity the two figures were often considered to be one and the same.

In the ancient stories, however, it is told that the nymph Callisto was said to have been seduced and raped by Zeus in his theriomorphic form of a bear, also a primary aspect of the goddess Artemis. In one comic version of this tale, Zeus turned himself into the female figure of Artemis, and in that guise, took advantage of Callisto, for who could refuse the erotic overtures of a god or a goddess no matter in what overpowering form they may choose to appear?

Upon discovering her devotee's pregnant state, Artemis transforms Callisto into a bear. In another variation of the myth from the Roman writer Pausanius, Hera, the wife of Zeus, out of typically vindictive jealousy at yet another one of her husband's infidelities, herself turns Callisto into a she-bear and then incites an angry Artemis to shoot her with one of her fatal arrows. Throughout the various twists and turns of this mutating tragic story, however, Callisto does deliver a son to Zeus, Arkas, the ancestor of the inhabitants of Arkadia (Arcadia), and whose name is also connected

to *arktos*, or 'bear' in Greek. Zeus, in order to somewhat redeem himself, his lover Callisto, and their joint offspring, places her in the heavens as the constellation, The Great Bear, and their son Arkas becomes the star cluster, Ursus Minor, The Small Bear, or Arctophylax.

The connections of Artemis/Diana with her most distant paleohominian past as the Mistress of the Wild Animals, or the Lady of the Beasts, are never far away in the tales surrounding her, and, like her, remain inviolate throughout her many myths and legends right up into the Christian era and until she eventually becomes radically domesticated and assimilated to some parts and aspects of the Virgin Mary with whom she ends up cohabiting in the ancient city of Ephesus, where Mary, the mother of Jesus, was reputed to have gone with the apostle John and said to have died. The grand Ionic temple of Artemis, also in Ephesus, was one of the original seven wonders of the ancient world. For millennia even before then, however, Artemis continues in all her innumerable stories, appearances and manifestations to be a protectress of untamed animals, as well as of all their untouched, virgin wilderness habitats. To transgress upon any of the numerous and far-flung domains or preserves of her pure and deeply feminine nature, is to elicit swift and catastrophic consequences. She is the guardian of *both* inner and outer female nature in its most profound and shrouded form.

We can see then, as with this tale of Callisto, the portrayals of Actaeon in his entanglement with the great goddess Diana in the two versions painted by Titian, also contain particularly cruel and harsh admonishments about the destructive effects of a certain 'kind' of *seeing*, a looking at what is not allowed or permissible to be seen, visually touched or penetrated. These three Titian paintings in Wiseman's

film taken together, are all extremely dire allegories about the perils inherent in the possessive male gaze. They present and dramatically demarcate the very definite boundaries and limits that exist and govern the relations between gods and mortals, males and females, the effects of their intercourse both actual and metaphoric or visual, and the results incurred with the transgression of the specific borders that circumscribe looking, touching and seeing. The magical transformations of people into animals like we find in Graeco-Roman mythology, and particularly in Ovid, indicate symbolically, a psychological regression along the phylogenetic spectrum back to a basic, instinctual, pre-human level prior to the advent of consciousness. At the great crises and climaxes of human events, particularly in the culmination of tragic occurrences, what goes missing, and may be the most human attribute of them all differentiating us from other animal species, is reflection, the capacity to, once again, *look* inwards, psychically-speaking, before acting, rather than just acting outwardly, impulsively. Seeing differs from looking in that our human perceptions bounce off the mercury-based backing of the mind's *inner* mirror, that is, the soul, the psyche, and become images, thoughts and feelings available for conscious consideration before we instinctually re-act to situations. Behavioral action *without* consciousness or reflection returns us dangerously near to our own animalistic origins. Thought must have its own important place in the repertoire of human behaviors, especially when dealing with the gods or archetypal powers which requires an additional measure of necessary precaution. These are mythical stories that exist in every culture and are designed and passed on to help the human species along the very slow evolutionary path of gaining consciousness, individuating, and

learning collectively how to find right actions and right relationships with the gods, with nature and with the world we live in.

Actaeon, as the tragic victim of his own unwary vision, is importantly and closely related to two other major figures in classical Greek mythology who appear in tales wherein seeing and looking take catastrophic turns. Most prominently, Actaeon, the mortal prince, is the first cousin of the great god of wine, women and wilderness, Dionysos, whom the Romans called Bacchus. In the Olympian mainstream tradition of his birth, life and times, Dionysos is the son of almighty Zeus and the mortal daughter of King Cadmus of Thebes, the princess Semele. Semele's sister, Autonoe, married to the bee-keeper Aristaeus, is the mother of Actaeon.

The hunter Actaeon, fated to die young, is also the first cousin of Pentheus, whose name, spoiler alert, means, 'the man of sorrows'. The mother of Pentheus, Agaue (Agave), is yet another sister in the very same royal household of Thebes to both Autonoe and Semele. These familial tales become tragically intertwined, knotted and ultimately released in that canonical testament to the advent of Dionysiac religion into the region of Hellas, the *Bacchae*, the still starkly-chilling fifth century B.C.E. play by Euripides.

As the play begins, Pentheus is the reigning king of Thebes, when Dionysos, along with his entire retinue of maenads, satyrs and ecstatic followers, returns to his native birthplace in order to establish his new and revolutionary sacred rites of worship there. Pentheus, both incapable and unwilling to recognize, honor, or respect the divine nature of this newly-arrived foreigner in his city, or even worse, failing to offer the ordinary, acceptable hospitality one would expect from a host to the alien Dionysos and to his troupe, instead attempts to persecute and forcibly

contain the uncanny stranger and his followers who have appeared in the midst of his ordered life and urban kingdom. Dionysos, unbounded and furious at this scornful rejection and denial of his godhead, and at the height of his powers, unleashes his retaliatory wrath upon his short-sighted cousin, and subtly and gradually, though progressively, drives him stark raving mad. Reduced to a completely deluded, hallucinatory state, Pentheus is persuasively instructed by the mysterious stranger to spy upon the womenfolk of his own kingdom of Thebes whom Dionysos has also transformed into a quasi-bestial maenadic band of raving women, completely gone out of their normal minds. Driven and stung by the god, they have en masse fled the city for the outlying wilderness, where rumor has it, they are performing their lascivious *orgia*, their unbridled female erotic, mystic rituals in nature.

Disguising himself somewhat haphazardly as a woman, in a dress, a female wig askew on his head, smeared make-up on his face, Pentheus is first paraded and led down the main street of his own Thebes by the god who now appears to him in his altered condition as a bull, and is then sent by Dionysos out into the countryside where he climbs a tall fir tree, the better to pursue his voyeuristic designs. The crazed women, spotting him in their own psychotically deranged state, see him as an animal prey and sacrificial victim of their hunt, as a mountain lion, and tumble him down with their superhumanly bare hands from his arboreal perch. Then, led by his own mother and aunts, they rush upon him bodily, gleefully tearing and ripping him apart limb from limb, his mother the first to plant her foot on his chest and yank out his arm.

Afterwards, only once back in the city, covered with blood and gore, proudly displaying Pentheus' hoarily dripping head as a trophy of their chase, do these women of Thebes slowly and horrifyingly come back into their ordinary senses, and then, only to realize the unspeakable enormity of what they have done. Dionysos, the vengeful god, performs through this tragedy his terrible and holy agon for the assembled citizens of Thebes, and by implication and extension, for all of Greece, in order that they may witness and experience first-hand the truth of his epiphany, the full sociopolitical, spiritual and psychologically awesome reality of his being, terrible as it is. This play, the *Bacchae*, still performs the same function perhaps even more strongly today for us than it did at its premiere in 407 B.C.E., and unequivocally continues to hold out its powerful message and foreboding warning regarding the absolute necessity of honoring divinity and recognizing the hierophanies of the gods and their superhuman powers where, when and however they may appear in the world.

Now we turn to perhaps the most famously celebrated and frequently re-told myth of them all deriving from classical Greek and Roman times which apotheosizes a climactic scene of forbidden 'looking', in this case, a 'looking-back', the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. It is an ancient tale related in many different versions from a great variety of sources by poets, tragedians, philosophers, musicians, priests and prophets, though invariably with the core story of the lovers' doomed romance remaining essentially the same throughout its shifting incarnations. Titian painted a version of this myth early on in his career which he also found retold in great detail by Ovid. The legends tell us that on the eve of her wedding to Orpheus, the beautiful Eurydice, trying to escape the amorous pursuit of Actaeon's father, Aristaeus(!), is

bitten by a poisonous snake. She is then swiftly and decisively taken off to Hades, the land of deceased souls which is the fate and ultimate destination of all mortals in ancient Greece, with no exceptions. Orpheus is totally bereft. Beside himself and left inconsolably on his own, he chooses to harrow hell and descend to the underworld in the attempt to win back his young bride, solely with the gift of his lyre-playing and the power of his spell-binding song. Against all odds, he actually succeeds. He convincingly entrances the lord and mistress of the shades, as well as all of the other denizens in Hades who have been consigned for eternity to these nether realms of depth and death. Charon, the ferryman, follows him to hear his renowned song; Cerberus, the three-headed guard dog, is enchanted and stops his barking to listen; the Erinyes are struck motionless with awe; Sisyphus, beguiled, ceases his endless rolling of a boulder uphill and back again; the daughters of Danaus quit their fruitless task of attempting to fill a huge amphora pierced by holes with their hopefully replenishing cups of water. All the underworld is rapt, transfixed by his passion. Pluto and Persephone grant him his paramount wish to bring back his beloved Eurydice to the land of the living, on the sole condition that he not look back at her until they have once again, together, safely, regained the daylight world of mortal beings.

On the winding trail through the dread and dark gloom back into life, Orpheus, despite everything at stake, cannot restrain himself. And whether out of fear, anxiety, insecurity, doubt, or his own overwhelming desire to see his beloved Eurydice once more, just as they are about to reach the upper daylight world of the living, he turns around, and sure enough, he loses her. She becomes wraith-like and evanesces back

into the eternal darkness. She disappears from him, now for the second time, and now this time, for ever.

Rainer Maria Rilke, the Orphic poet laureate par excellence, in his magnificent poem, 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes', from 1904, pierces with unerring aim to the fatal heart of the lover's trespass with his profound understanding of Eurydice's 'otherness' to Orpheus, and describes in this brief excerpt that follows, how she is wrapped in the newly virginal experience and shock of her own "vast" death. Rilke based his exquisitely moving poem on an equally beautiful Hellenistic bas relief sculpture by Callimachos from the third century B.C.E. of the three poignantly standing figures which he saw in the archaeological museum of Naples. Orpheus is ahead, paused and turning back on the unwinding path from dark Hades ascending into life and the human world in order to see his bride Eurydice, and he is lifting her veil. Eurydice, in her grave clothes, stunned, quietly follows him. And the escort messenger god of souls, Hermes, guides her gently with his hand from behind.

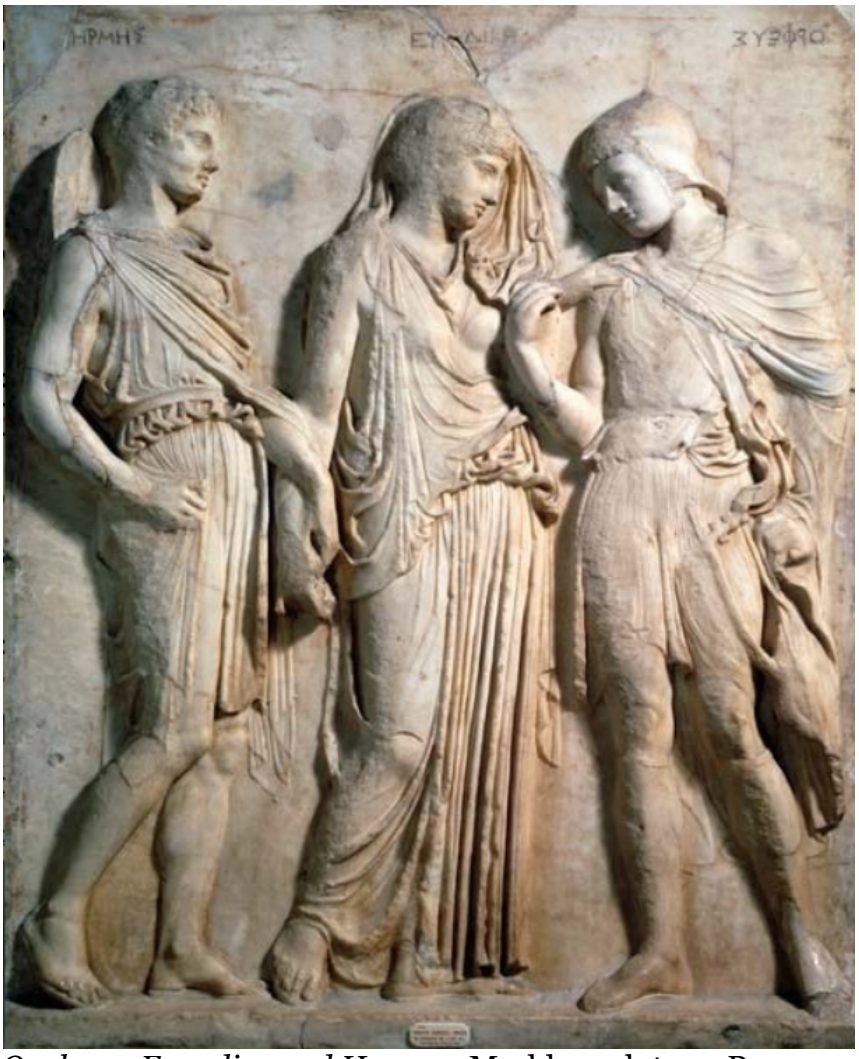


**Figure 5** *Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes*, Marble sculpture, Roman copy of 420 B.C.E. Greek original by Callimachos, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

She was deep within herself, like a woman heavy

with child, and did not see the man in front

or the path ascending steeply into life.

Deep within herself. Being dead

filled her beyond fulfillment. Like a fruit

suffused with its own mystery and sweetness,

she was filled with her own vast death, which was so new,

she could not understand that it had happened.

She had come into a new virginity
and was untouchable; her sex had closed
like a young flower at nightfall, and her hands
had grown so unused to marriage that the god's
infinitely gentle touch of guidance
hurt her, like an undesired kiss.
…
She was already loosened like long hair,
poured out like fallen rain,
shared like a limitless supply.

She was already root.

(Rilke 1984, pp. 51-3)

With the mellifluous phrasings of this passage, Rilke returns us with Eurydice to the deeper realms of nature, to root, rock and the silence of ores within the earth. The *topos* of this poem, its place and space, is the world of *non-being*, a waiting in limbo, invisible conception and fathomless darkness. From deep within this unclear, ambiguous terrain, however, a new kind of birth is coming forth. An entirely different and perhaps terrible beauty is striving to be born. We are with Eurydice in a time-space without borders or edges, without beginnings or endings, and like her, we are obliged to feel "uncertain, gentle, and without impatience" (ibid.).

Her death is actually a completion and a wholeness that fills her, and one that her lover Orpheus does not at all understand. She has no need to be retrieved from the underworld, like a prize, nor to be rescued or saved. She does not feel lack, loss, or less than, and there is nothing to be resolved, repaired, replaced or fixed. Closed up within herself, she has returned to the inviolability and solitude of a primordial maidenhood.

In her double death, Eurydice has been enfolded within the Artemisian world of eternal nature as it takes place deep within the earth, in chthonic depths, in shady, untrammeled forests, on bare, windswept mountain tops, among animals, plants and minerals, and hidden in the slow and quiet stirrings of nascently growing life forms, in molecules and strands of DNA. This is the archaic world of creation's mystery, the invisible beating heart of life's origins, buried as they are, way down within the womb of the visible.

Actaeon, Pentheus, and Orpheus, each in their own way, violate this invisible world with their literalizing gazes. In their desires, they overstep and overlook the pulsating secret of the invisible right there before them, with their own needs to control and possess nature, to grasp what they can only see concretely before their eyes, to claim it as proof of their own tenuous and uncertain existences. The homeland and natural wilderness world of both the gods, Artemis and Dionysos, however, requires and demands an implicit acknowledgement, recognition, respect, and honoring of its own intrinsic 'otherness'. It can only be approached with a pre-rational and non-discursive relational reverence, a bodily knowing and opened connection with this beyond, with this huge silence and absence, which is also inherent to us and in us. It is our legacy as human beings and we are born into it,

exist only by its 'grace', and as a species, remain entirely dependent upon it. This immeasurable depth and space of emptiness is integrally contained within *both* nature and matter itself, *and* within the human soul or psyche, from the beginning.

Echoing Eurydice's psychic state in the newly-found virginity of her death, Rilke, writing nearly two decades later in his unparalleled *Sonnets to Orpheus*, proclaims our still compellingly current and imperative task of embracing, integrating and wholly accepting these deeply feminine mysteries of nature, earth and the world:

> Be - and at the same time know the condition
> of not-being, the infinite ground of your deep vibration,
> that you may fully fulfill it this single time.
>
> (Rilke 1942, p. 95)

Rilke speaks to the contemporary necessity that in our own way we 're-do' Orpheus' journey, his *katabasis* and descent to the underworld, to the deep feminine and to death, that we retrace his steps all the way downwards in order to try to bring Eurydice back—"this single time", that we learn how to *fall* and how to *be* in this darkness, and that we work towards returning soul to the world, but all the while and most importantly, honoring in all humility its autonomy, separateness and 'otherness' to us. Orphic acolytes everywhere must learn how to renounce the desire to look back, to resist looking literally and only outside, attempting to grasp with the hand and mind; and instead, keeping one's gaze fixed inwardly, on the inside, to look within, to take the leap, and to be willing to go deeper and deeper into *un-knowing*, not-knowing and not-doing, into in-visibility, silence, absence and loss.

Like Orpheus' descent to the depths within, Frederick Wiseman's film, *National Gallery*, opens up a kaleidoscopic series of levels and worlds of vision and seeing in which we are all constantly enmeshed and deeply implicated, for the most part, without knowing it. Like fish in water, we swim, live, and move in these liquid mediums of visibility in and around us. It is the space of human being-in-the-visible-world in which we are all totally immersed. We, in our daily lives, completely and unconsciously assume it, of course, and take it for granted as it is, like the air we breathe. We accept that this is our world and our mode of being in it. We see; we look; we are looked back at by the world. *We are born into visibility*, enveloped by it. From our very beginnings and from the initial day and moments of our lives, we are first and foremost *seen* beings. We truly come into existence only when we are granted visibility and birthed, literally, and thus acknowledged in the present and *seen* in the light of the others around us.

Taking up the last several sequences of the film, totaling about five minutes of the nearly three hour running time of the entire movie, we began with the two Titian paintings, visually bracketing the dancers, the two works themselves illustrating and powerfully portraying two different moments or movements in the unfolding mythological drama of Diana and Actaeon. They are both, as we have said, allegories *about* looking, and *about* seeing the unseeable. They are about what under most circumstances must *not* be looked at, namely in this particular instance, the virgin goddess of wild nature and the hunt herself, Diana/Artemis.

The two Titian paintings, thus in a sense, 'represent' and set the boundaries for what can and cannot be seen. Paradoxically, we of course, as privileged spectators of art, can lavish *our* lingering gazes with total abandon and impunity, and at length,

upon all the voluptuous female flesh of the bathing nymphs accompanying Diana in their hidden grotto of feminine sensuality. We bathe our eyes there, visually cavorting with them, while poor Actaeon becomes the scapegoat for our own perceptual and pleasurable transgressions. In all of the stories, myths, and images of forbidden looking, there is also, inexorably, a sacrificial victim; and there is always a very steep price to be paid for wanting to see, and/or actually seeing, the prohibited, the unseeable.

Back into the movie, at the conclusion of the film's balletic dance scene, our gaze drops with the camera into a muffled, echoing darkened room and corridor of the museum, with just the faintest fleshly corner of a Titian painting in the distant background gallery. At that moment, the scene is both a resting place for the eyes, a pause, *and simultaneously*, it is also a break or rupture in our vision and viewing of the film. As brief an interlude as it is, it serves as a crossways, a chiasma and crossroads of seeing. It is a *rite d'entrée*, a liminal space of transition in the film to another *kind* of seeing that we are about to embark upon, and ultimately as we shall see, are left to sail off with at the conclusion of the film.

This brief scene is like a visual birth. We are plunged into entering and traversing the birth canal passageways of the empty and darkened museum's corridors, somewhat ominous, telescoped and impersonal, winding and moving with the camera, to suddenly once again burst upon seeing. Without warning, we are flung into light. All at once there is a brightness. We are confronted by faces, human faces looking back at us, each with their own unique expressions. It is all much too quick to really take in. The effect is shocking.

It is a jarring movement between a traditional or conventional way of seeing, that is, our ordinary usual looking, or just plain watching a film, and a newer, (or perhaps very old), serialized, dispersed gaze, that anticipates, expects, and recognizes that the world is indeed looking back at us, the awareness that we are also simultaneously *always being seen*. The interval of this short scene presents both the disjunction and the connection between these two radically different modalities of apprehending both the world and ourselves in it.

Lasting only seconds, this tracking shot of the emptied museum's rooms carries us along with William Byrd's 'Miserere mei, Deus', importantly still being played over the film's sound track, and crucial, because it literally *transports* us, from the space of the dancers and the two Titian paintings of Diana and Acteon, to the series of quick, close-up portraits excerpted from nine different Rembrandt paintings in the museum's permanent collection. This concluding sequence of detailed faces includes the 1640 self-portrait as the third image in the series, and as the film hurtles to its end and comes to its resounding finale, as we now know, the movie finishes with Rembrandt's next-to-final self-portrait from 1669. All these peopled images flash by in a matter of seconds, and from the third quick shot of a face in the series onwards until the end, the music stops, and the last six remaining portraits all appear and look at us in utter, profound, and stunning silence. It is a deafening silence. Nothing else is happening cinematically to distract our attention from the purely visual sensations on the screen.

And there, finally, to end the film, is Rembrandt himself, 63 years old, in his last months of life, looking out at us. Unlike the Titian paintings, however, this searing self-portrait is not a painting *about* seeing, or *about* anything else other than itself. It

*is* seeing. It is a soulfully vivid performance and complete enactment of the actual experience of seeing itself. It is resoundingly truthful in its honesty and purity of sheer seeing. This painting embodies and challengingly portrays the very act of seeing, looking and witnessing, all wrapped up in itself, in *his* personhood and Rembrandt self-as-object; and yet it also extends way beyond the painting's frame and out into the world. Rembrandt looks piercingly at us very much in both real time, and in the same instant, way out of and beyond time. Since the painting itself both *is* and portrays the very *act of seeing*, by definition it has this existential power to confront *our* contemporary seeing by questioning what *we* are doing, now, 350 years later, in looking at this painting. 'If *it* is seeing *us*, then what are *we* seeing?' This is the fundamental question posed by his unremitting gaze that we need to take as meaningfully deconstructing our entire visual system, our visual regime, our ocular apparatus and organization, and it needs to do so and can only do so by force. It smashes our usual modalities of seeing.

Up to that point, we, the viewers of the film, have been looking for more than two and a half hours at the people and the workings of an eminent institution that is entirely dedicated to the act of looking at art. Much of the film is actually taken up for the most part with the viewer watching museum-goers of all kinds looking at paintings, listening to gallery talks, eavesdropping on discussions and meetings among varied staff people, restorers, curators, trustees, etc., and vicariously participating in numerous ways in the museum's many functions and services, all of which are consecrated to the experience of conserving, presenting and looking at art. Until the very end of the film, we have essentially been participating in a long, slow

and gentle ode, a lyrical paean or tone poem to the deep and soulful pleasures of pure vision.

After all that viewing, Wiseman leaves us at the very end, however, with something else entirely. There occurs, and rather abruptly at that—or, perhaps it is always sudden, immediate and shocking—a gap, a caesura, a brutal cut in the action. Something fairly radical happens, and we suddenly go from a quiet, relaxed and leisurely meditation on the joys of looking at wonderful art, objectively, aesthetically, and at a distance, to the instantaneous and directly experiential activity of sheer existential looking in and of itself. We are furthermore, additionally, thrown without warning into being intently *looked at*, totally confronted, being seen ourselves, interrogated in a way, seriously questioned, as to 'who is really doing the looking here': we, the viewers of the film, partaking in an ordinary cinematic experience in the comforts of the theatre or our home; Wiseman, the director, who made this documentary, composed the shots, edits, sequences and rhythmical continuity of the whole; or Rembrandt, who created these last paintings, and especially the self-portraits that now look out us and at the world, gazing into the future, perhaps for some version of eternity? The question, 'who is looking at whom', may also in the last analysis be exactly the wrong question, since the self-portrait presents the essential paradox that art and poetry truly exist only when there is a reciprocal embrace of the viewer and the viewed which itself annihilates the dissociating dualistic regime of subject and object and destroys consensually validated reality's 'I' looking *out* at a separated world, out there.

There is also in this traumatic break or rupture of our usual visual barriers, towards the end of the film, after the dance performance and beginning with the

sequence of portraits, a secret, something hidden in the lining of what we have been viewing all along throughout the entire documentary experience. There is an occluded interiority to these visible and multiple worlds of the museum we have been communing with on the screen. Embedded within the succession of mediated images and their numerous juxtapositions and criss-crossings of the *actually made-visible*, what we are literally seeing on the screen, with the inherent nature and intrinsic visibility of the world itself, as *it* is being filmed or seen, there is an entirely concurrent depth dimension of the visible pulsating and rushing through it all like a subterranean river, or a suddenly gushing fountain, or a broken or burst water main, streaming towards us, at us, at full force, all the time. Between the subject and object of perception, there is a third element which both links seer and seen together, and transcends them entirely. It is in its own sphere, yet integrally entwined with the human visual order.

Buried within the medium of vision itself, in every *thing* that we see and in every infinitesimal *act* of seeing, there is an alternative event going on, at every instant, with its own goal or aim, having a different *telos* from ours, with its *own* purpose and meaning other than what we are imagining is actually happening. *This* seeing is occurring quite beside us, indifferently, and impersonally, and it is independent of our own acts of seeing. It is autonomous and unattached to how or what we are seeing, or think we are seeing. This is the objective psyche at work, the self, viewing the world temporarily (and temporally) through our unique, individual eyes, borrowing our eyes as it were, for a short time, and yet remaining definitely and infinitely detached from any of the personal thoughts, feelings, reactions, ideas, associations or emotions we might be having in response to what we are actually

looking at. Deeply ingrained within the tissue and fabric of human vision itself, nature and the world are expressing *their own* desires for realization and consciousness. Human beings as an expression of nature itself, as a part of the whole cosmos, are continuing this evolutionary process. The basic, vital needs of the world are continuously expressing themselves through, and to, our eyes. Vision, seeing, looking, and perhaps the entire visible world, has a wholly other intentionality which for the most part runs entirely counter to our conscious, logical and rational modalities of looking, perceiving and understanding. We must be able to conceive that the world itself could have an *other* agenda besides our own human, anthropocentric, or personalistic view of matters and how things stand with so-called 'reality'. After all, we human beings are very much the newcomers here and only the most recent species to inhabit this planet we call earth. Nearly everything around us in this world has been here considerably longer. The world, and the things in it which constitute it and make it *the world*, the plants, animals, minerals and elements, are our elders, our ancestors, and our teachers; and they are always speaking to us and looking at us.

We are now attempting to archaeologically excavate and hermeneutically discuss this secret 'behind', 'underneath', or this deeply-buried 'within' the visible world in which we commonly live, move and breathe. It is only with that final series of portraits in the film, and ultimately, and perhaps exclusively, only with that very last Rembrandt self-portrait which appears on the screen, that we can even detect a clue, hint or sign that this *other* world of seeing actually exists, that it is wrapped in and around our normal vision; even though it has been happening right along throughout the film. It is always happening. It is happening right now, in this

moment. When these extreme caesurae of the visible take place, everything else stops, changes, and breaks down. It is a traumatic rupture, an expulsion from one reality into an other—a jarring birth into alterity. We are flung out of the garden of ordinary existence and seeing for yet a second time. The moment bursts open, instantaneously. It, this *other*, the *other* of our vision, abolishes conventional seeing, and a radically different perceptual stream suddenly bubbles up and out and gushes forth in a torrent. At these times, ordinary vision is overrun, flooded, drowned in an excess of active, animated, imagistic sensorial movement.

There is a violence, too, in that moment—and perhaps there needs to be. Quotidian vision is punctured. Casual looking and seeing is slashed. The doors of perception are thrown wide open and we are permitted to see face to face. We see the world aright. It is overwhelming. As this altered vision arrives, most frequently and tragically, through trauma, it can also be terrifying and experienced as anguish, madness and horror. On the contrary, these dramatic shifts in consciousness can be felt positively as well, as a life-changing rapture and bliss, an awakening. In either case, our eyes are wiped clean, and yet our field of vision continues to brim over with a plethora of novel and stimulating *in*-sights and synesthetic sensations.

Our vision collapses at the end of the film. Our illusions are rent asunder and our ordinary comforts are torn away. We do not actually need them, however, and we can let them go. It is a choice. A wrenching disjuncture occurs nevertheless. A chasm of seeing opens up before us. We need in this instance to take Rembrandt's looking at us seriously, to assume it, to take it on and accept responsibility for the reality of that gaze looking at us so intently three and a half centuries after he applied

the last brushstroke, hand smear and finger smudge of paint to the surface of the canvas. This is not just another painting.

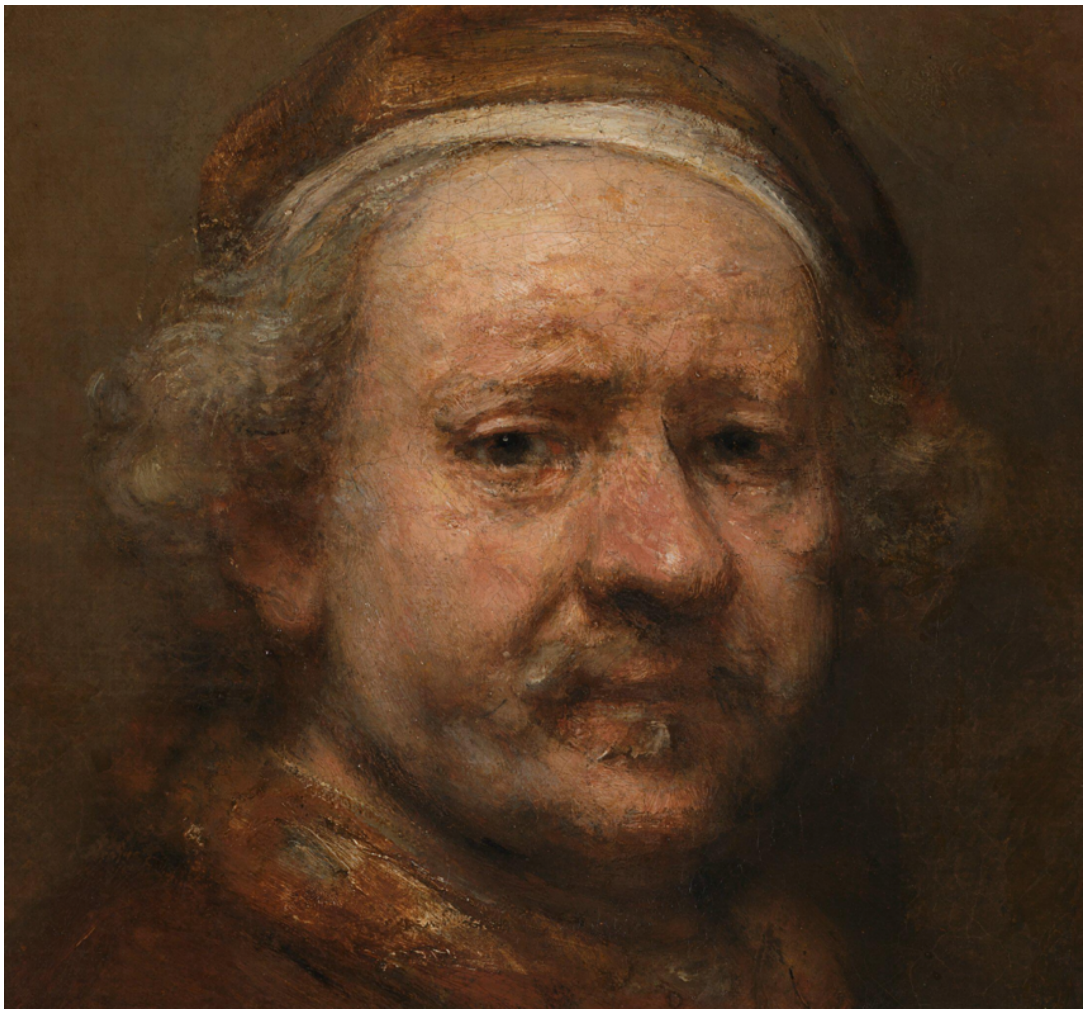

**Figure 7** Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, detail, 1669,
Oil on canvas, The National Gallery.

We are looking at Rembrandt's wearied face, body and eyes, yes, a painting, slathered with layers of pigment, oils and varnish, aged and saturated with the storied patina of generations of viewers come and gone. Yet what we are also seeing is the 'inside' of the very act of looking, the interiority of vision. We are peering, whether we are aware of it or not, into the depth dimension of the visible, and into

the infinitely streaming visibility of the world itself. We are in that moment, suddenly, given the opportunity to grasp the fact that everything is pouring forth vision. A window is flung open, or even shattered. We become aware that the eyes, our eyes, as the windows of the soul are directing us, not just to our own, or to the other's, or again in this case, to Rembrandt's, personal, individual soul or being or vision, or production, as with the painting, but rather, that we and our eyes as vehicles for the soul of the world are always being guided towards viewing the world's soul, the *anima mundi*, in order that *it* may not only show and express *itself*, but that it may, *through us*, hopefully, become *conscious* of itself, "as though the human psyche (soul) and matter were the chosen place for God's self-realization" (von Franz 1966, p. 388).

We are startled by Rembrandt's look and his penetrating gaze. At one and the same time, his silent stare blows up the image of the actual Rembrandt self-portrait on the screen, or even more so when one looks at his self-portrait 'live', in its aura, as a painting, in the flesh; while his fixating gaze simultaneously spills out and translates over into all of our acts of seeing thereafter. We are forever after indelibly branded by his eyes. Engaging in a reciprocal stare with Rembrandt reminds us and allows us to see that: "every individual something, as individual as it is, functions also as a dimension" (Merleau-Ponty 1993, p. 147). Every visible thing has multiple dimensions—in depth. Everything has the inherent power to fissure and crack open into deeper realms under the pressure of our gaze, including all of our acts of looking themselves. Every *thing* consists of an abysmal number of splits, breaks and faults into which it can descend via our gaze into its *own* depths and void. The painter brings this visual intensity to bear upon the materials and subjects of art, and,

amazing to behold, hauls it up from those depths and presents it all right there, on the surface of the support for us to see.

The soul, or psyche, itself bears an unimaginably infinite energy as its legacy and birthright since time immemorial, and with it, the capacity to unleash the compressed intensities contained in both matter, in all concrete, physical materials and things, as well as in psyche, in all thoughts, images, feelings, fantasies, emotional states and moods. This process and power is psychologically tantamount to the splitting of an atom in a nuclear reactor. Tremendous energy erupts, explodes and is released. It can, and often does, blow us away.

"Transcience everywhere plunges into a deep being" (Rilke 1942, p. 132). This hidden dimension revealed by and in the persistence of Rembrandt's piercing gaze, is, in a way, the true subject of Wiseman's film. It stages an enlightenment. Vision splits and ruptures. Rembrandt's eyes have this capacity to rip off the veil of ordinary looking to reveal an other world, a world of *seeing through* appearances, beyond surfaces, to the perpetual *otherness* of the world, to "the other of all worlds, that which is always other than the world" (Blanchot 1982, p.228).

In contrast to our everyday visual experience, this 'visionary seeing' transfigures us. It is, "as if the veil of *māyā* had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity" (Nietzsche 1967, p. 37). Due precisely to Rembrandt's transfixing gaze and his unshakeably inquisitive eyes, impossible to avoid, evade, or escape, regardless of where one stands or sits looking at the painting, one's self bursts open and falls, endlessly, disseminated, dissolved and dispersed into both the worlds of the visible, and particularly into the realms of the invisible. Rembrandt's self-portraits, nearly one hundred of them, are among the

world's treasured guardians of the invisible. They stand over, safeguard, and preserve the world of the invisible for us. They are always watching and looking out. They are among the staunchest watchmen of this world, and constitute our vision's inherited birthright to this 'other' way of seeing. The self-portraits vouchsafe and endure as a testament to the fact that the invisible exists; and that it is, perhaps, only the invisible which truly subsists. The miracle of art lies in the fact that it presents this world of the invisible in its visibility. It also presents it in the only form in which it can be presented, that is, as a kind of poetry, as *poiesis*, in an act of creation, of birth, a genesis, a continuously renewable re-birthing of the experience of seeing itself. The labor of art, brought to an extremely high pitch, particularly in self-portraits, births the originating experience of vision itself. Self-portraits exist in order to deliver from out of the hidden lining of the world and of the visible, its essence of invisibility. That which is always brand-new, vulnerable, innocent, child-like, *infans*, and thus hidden, is brought forth out of concealment and non-being into the light of presence. Each and every act of true *poiesis* facilitates the birth of the divine child in all of its numinosity, radiance, and glory, again and again.

It is always a miracle. That which was entirely invisible and *of* the world of invisibility has come forth and entered into the light, and joined with the world of the visible. *And*, even more marvelous to grasp, it is made of the same flesh, blood and bone as the visible, tangible world. This *is* the palpable power of *poiesis*, to deliver meaning out of matter. *Poiesis*, that resonant word from the Greek, that gives us our poetry, poetics and poetizing, means in its original sense, simply human *doing*, producing, making, fabricating and creating. Plato writes that "any cause that brings into existence something that was not there before is *poiesis*" (Agamben 1999, p.59).

How is this 'other' of our world, the inside of our visible world, the invisible, figured, quite literally by artists in our own time? Or is it? Are we not too overwhelmed, inundated by images and information, cynical, ironic or skeptical, to even believe in the possibility or existence of the invisible, not to say its capacity to totally disrupt and transform our selves, individually *and* collectively, to overturn our basic representational subjectivities, all the ways we see, think and experience, as well as to radically change the world and *its* nature, for real, its very substances and materials, to reconfigure its *physis* and particles, to transmute it, and transubstantiate it back into the world of the invisible from whence it came? We exist alongside, contiguously, continuously, co-extensively and co-temporally with the universe of the invisible. We are the co-conspirators and midwives of the invisible. We are constantly being enjoined by the world itself to take on this radical, revolutionary and seemingly impossible mission of total transformation which is so necessary and called-for in our time.

Self-portraits offer possibilities and opportunities for the literal transfigurations of our selves. They show us how we see our selves, how we figure and con-figure our own selves, our personhoods and identities, in time, in the flow of this specific moment, in this time of life allotted to us. Self-portraits from different epochs and different periods throughout history, thus reveal how we see, think about, and view ourselves at those particular times, and in those specific social, economic, political and world-historical contexts. A future project for re-viewing the 'self' through the history of Western European art might include analyzing the self-portraits of those artists who were so clearly and deeply psychologically committed to the genre as a

practice and vehicle for their own individuation processes, e.g. Dürer, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Beckmann, Clemente, and Basquiat, just to name a few.

Representations of the 'self' are also invariably, and by definition, portraits of the invisible as it is contained within the visible. This is the singularly fascinating idiosyncrasy of the self-portrait, that it *is* such an undifferentiated conglomerate and admixture of both visible and invisible component parts. Unlike other kinds, styles, modalities, or genres of paintings, however, they reveal a highly refined and directed attention to the human subjectivity of the artist, as well as to his/her disciplined capacity for concentrated reflection on the singularity and relative uniqueness of their own subjecthood. And, through the fullest effort of the artist's means, they unabashedly present the constitution of the artist's own 'self', its most intimate and interior nature and matter. Self-portraiture, in any medium, may be the most intimate of all art forms. The self-portrait depicts and contains a dance, a hidden rhythm, like the pas de deux ballet we saw and started writing about within the film, an oscillating dance between the visible and the invisible, between what the artist is (consciously) 'doing' and creating, and what the soul desires, and is (unconsciously) 'doing', making, pro-ducing, speaking and seeing through the artist. Self-portraits stand at the intersection of linear time's flow, at the crossroads of the historical past, and the immediacy of the present moment's 'now' as it rushes into the unseeable and unnameable future which awaits us.

How do we differentiate and separate out those entwined strands and elements in self-portraits for ourselves, so that they might speak to the needed truths for *our own* present conditions and circumstances, this "time when the gods are missing, the time of absence and exile" (Blanchot 1982, p.83)? How do those same self-portraits

address the extreme crises, catastrophes, conflagrations, and cataclysms that we are currently being wrenched and roiled through? How do we discern the lasting truth values in a self-portrait if and when we ascertain and determine that it conveys this power to address this distress of our *own* time? How do we see *through* the image, the artifice and the error of the imaginary that the self-portrait manifests and presents, to "the ungraspable, forgotten truth which hides behind this error" (ibid.) How do we perceive, delineate, delimit and discuss the invisible and the unrepresentable which lurks behind and within the faces, eyes, contours, lineaments, colors and visages of the exemplary artist's self-portrait?

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The documentary film *National Gallery* by Frederick Wiseman is available free online at: www.documentarymania.com.

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