

# Paul Gauguin and the complexity of the primitivist gaze

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The *Three Tahitians*, painted by the French painter Paul Gauguin in 1899, depicts two young women positioned on either side of a young man whose back is turned. Even if I did not know the title of the painting, I would have been able to tell that these half-naked people are natives from a non-Western country, sometime in the past. The entourage is paradisiac. The young woman on the left is holding a piece of fruit in her hand. Has the apple of sin been replaced by a mango? The man whose back I see is looking away from the woman on the right, while she seems to gaze into nothingness. There is something mysteriously tranquil about the painting. A promise of a simple, carefree life. The three people are doing nothing in particular and find themselves in a natural environment of some sort, perhaps the woods or the beach. The weather appears to be fair. In this painting Gauguin reveals the truth and beauty of primitive, Polynesian life. At least, this is a common interpretation of Gauguin's work, often read or heard. In what follows, however, I will argue that such an interpretation of Gauguin's painting is far too simplistic, and, consequently, false. We might even wonder whether 'primitivism' to Gauguin was not so much a colonialist style of making art, but rather a way of deconstructing it. I will elaborate on this question by drawing the problem of primitivism on a broader canvas of colonialist and anti-colonialist mentalities.

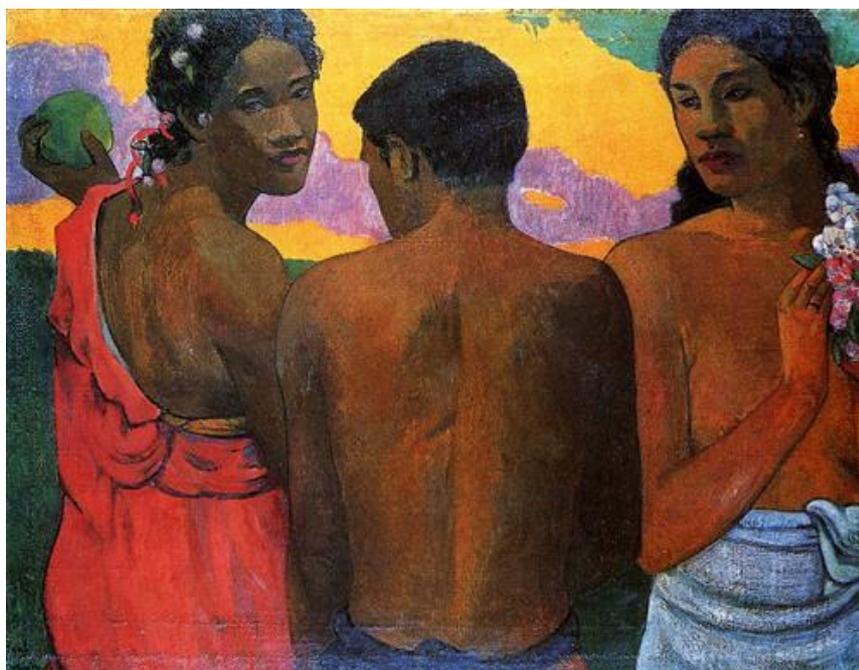


Figure 1 Paul Gauguin, *Three Tahitians*, 1899.

## The primitivist gaze

In 1891, Paul Gauguin sailed to Tahiti in the hope of finding the paradise he had been dreaming of for so long. He went back to France in 1893, only to return to Tahiti in 1895, where he stayed until 1897. He died in another part of French Polynesia in 1903, where he ended up after his many wanderings: the island Hiva Oa in the Marquesas. The women in *Three Tahitians* also appear in some of the other paintings that Gauguin made in French Polynesia. Upon his return in 1895 to France, Gauguin was asked by a French journalist why he had gone to Tahiti. The painter answered: 'I was captivated by that virgin land and its primitive and simple race; I went back there, and I'm going to go there again. In order to produce something new, you have to return to the original source, to the childhood of mankind.'<sup>1</sup> This quote is intriguing. What exactly was Gauguin looking for? Was he searching for the geographical place of Tahiti, with its enchanting characteristics waiting to be discovered and depicted in a painting? Or can we say that Gauguin was following his personal dreams of an 'authentic' and 'primitive' life? Then again, what does he mean when he talks about 'childhood of mankind' and 'original source'?

Gauguin travelled to French Polynesia in order to escape the 'perverted' European culture of his time. In his dreams, Polynesia was a paradise, situated far from decadent life in Europe with its cold-blooded intellectual peoples who, according to the painter, had lost touch with truth and life as it should be. Gauguin wanted to meet the Polynesian others *as* others. He longed to abandon his European identity and become like the Polynesians. Did he succeed or did he, through his paintings, merely provide colonialism with a new strategy? Did he save Tahiti by revealing its 'childhood of mankind,' or did he inadvertently contribute, thanks to his fabulous imagination, to the Western collective mystification of Tahiti, reflected in its status today as a tourist resort?<sup>2</sup>

These questions lead us to the heart of 'primitivism,' a word that originates from the old French word *primitif*, meaning 'very first, original,' which, in turn, derives from the Latin word *primitivus*, meaning 'first or earliest of its kind'. It is often said about Gauguin that he is a 'primitivist artist'.<sup>3</sup> Primitivism in the arts, according to a simple definition, is a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western art movement that is inspired by non-Western peoples and their art forms. It became influential in the twentieth century and gave rise to various new forms of art expression (e.g. see the paintings of Pablo Picasso or Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Le sacre du printemps*). It is not difficult to see that there is a deep ambiguity in the concept of 'primitivism' as an art term. On the one hand, primitivism seems to denote an unspoiled view of authentic humanity, while, on the other, it is a denigrating label for peoples and cultures that failed to reach the Western standard of humanity, even if 'primitive culture' is celebrated. Furthermore, there is always

<sup>1</sup> Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1997, 201.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Staszak elaborates on this question in 'The artist and the tourist: Gauguin in Tahiti', in: Rakic T. and Lester J.O. (eds.), *Travel, Tourism and Art*, London: Ashgate, 2013, 191-206.

<sup>3</sup> See also Frances S. Connelly's contribution to the above volume 'John Ruskin and the Savage Gothic'.

the danger that the 'other' (i.e. the local) is simply a production of our precarious imagination. The harder we try to deny this, the more tenacious this logic becomes. The popular label of 'primitivism' is loaded with such ambiguities. No self-respecting world citizen today would talk about 'the other' and his or her cultures and arts as being 'primitive'. But for the colonial ethnographers and tourists at the end of the nineteenth century, it was understood as a compliment, something to aspire to, as did Gauguin. Primitivism was understood as a search for purity and fairness and as such a turn away from 'sophisticated' Western culture. It was inspired by the opinion that non-Western cultures were more pure, more authentic, and thus morally closer to what humanity should be. It rejected Western standards of religion, science, industrialization or capitalism and was therefore implicitly critical of European culture. However, this criticism was possible only because it was a product of that very same European culture. It is therefore no coincidence that the most important inspirations for primitivism were found in the colonies.

Thus, primitivism is not a characteristic of peoples or cultures. The primitivism of Gauguin, as I will argue, cannot simply be reduced to a mere representation of 'overseas' cultures. Nor is it a topic strictly reserved for anthropology or ethnography. Rather, I will describe primitivism as a certain way of looking, which I will refer to as the 'primitivist gaze'. Rather than being a geographically and historically oriented movement, primitivism is a gaze that is loaded with an intentionality obsessed with a criticism of its own Western standards. In fact, it cannot be understood without this criticism. Words such as 'pure,' 'authentic' or 'primitive' are always used in a context that considers them to be lost virtues. They are used by 'the other side' and never describe identities as such. To Western primitivist artists like Gauguin, identity has to be reinvented, firstly in terms of the negation of its own Western, colonialist tradition, and secondly as an identification with the 'primitive', or the 'local,' 'original,' 'native' or even 'Aborigine'. Thus, primitivism is always a relational term – a term mentioned by 'the other side,' not by 'us' but by 'them' – rather than an already existing object waiting to be discovered and disclosed by a traveler. This implies that it is 'the other' who proves that primitive, authentic life, lost by 'us,' is possible and that it can be regained. In any case the primitivist gaze only exists because there is a difference and distance it cultivates between an 'us' and a 'them'.<sup>4</sup> It is not the 'other' as such that makes him primitive, but the gaze that captures him. In order to understand primitivism, therefore, we have to start with European, imperialist culture itself.

The primitivist gaze is inseparably connected with a longing for paradise (which is, without a doubt, always a longing for something that is lost) and therefore it is based on a theory, an intuition at least, of *alienation*. We are alienated, says this intuition, from our 'original source' and as a result we despise so-called cultural progress and long for a new start. This, of course, is impossible because we already start looking from our European culturally-informed viewpoints. In many ways, primitivism is a gaze that is produced by colonialism – be it positive or

<sup>4</sup> As Susan Sontag aptly states, traveling always implies a strong definition of 'us' and 'them'. Susan Sontag, 'Questions of Travel' (1984) in *Where the Stress Falls*, New York: Picador, 2001, 274-284.

negative – and that (intentionally or not), attacks colonialism as a system. It might be apt to use here the terminology employed by Mary Louise Pratt, who spoke about an ‘anti-conquest’ that was only possible by the gaze of ‘imperial eyes’.<sup>5</sup> This terminology clearly shows us the intention of the primitivist gaze: a reversal of colonial values. Yet Pratt’s approach is not a phenomenological one – a philosophical viewpoint I now wish to elaborate on.

We are talking here about phenomenological rather than historical or anthropological ‘facts’. One gazes at the other, at another’s culture, another’s history. But what does this imply? Phenomenology teaches us that perception is never neutral or passive. To the founding father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, conscience is always already consciousness of something, in the same way that looking is always looking *at* something. This characteristic of consciousness – to be conscious of something – is called intentionality. Intentionality, Husserl argues, is always already characterized by pre-informed expectations. Seeing and looking are activities rather than ‘neutral,’ ‘passive’ impressions.<sup>6</sup> Looking is an activity of a subject, loaded with strategies of how to look. Even looking ‘without judgement’ is such a strategy. Art is an active way of looking. It paints not only what it sees, but it rearranges reality in order to make it visible. Painting, more than any other human activity shows us what perception is.<sup>7</sup> This becomes particularly clear in the artistic movement known as Impressionism. The Impressionists, such as Monet and Cézanne, did not seek to paint objectively what they saw, but they endeavoured to paint their own subjective, changeable and volatile impressions. Yet, the visual artist is always trying to break through this logic, something Gauguin succeeded in doing, as will be seen. It is his primitivist gaze that desires and projects just as it is his art that simultaneously looks and draws, designs and projects. The visual arts are a way of looking, a cultivation of the gaze. The late nineteenth century turn to

<sup>5</sup> In her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt uses the concept of what she calls ‘imperial eyes’. This intriguing title implies a phenomenology, a way of looking. A male way of looking seeks to possess and is inscribed in the global play of imperialism. She uses the term ‘anti-conquest’ to refer to ‘The strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony’. Compare with: ‘The main protagonist of the anti-conquest is a figure I sometimes call the ‘seeing-man’, an admittedly unfriendly label for the European male subject of European landscape discourse – he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess’. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Abingdon, Oxford: Taylor & Francis 2003, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, The Hague: Kluwer, 1983, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s elaboration of the concept of intentionality in *The Imaginary*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty was the first to elaborate on impressionism in a phenomenological way. Cézanne was for the French phenomenologist the painter *par excellence*. Writing on Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty says: ‘Impressionism was attempting to reproduce in painting the effect objects have as they strike the eye or attack the senses. It represents them in the atmosphere where we perceive them instantaneously with absolute shape bound to each other by light and air.’ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Le doute de Cézanne’ in *Sens et non-sens*, Paris: Nagel, 1948, 15.

impressionism cultivated not just a way of depicting the objective world, but rather of painting the subjective impressions of this world.

Needless to say, the primitivist gaze is anything but primitive itself. It is a gaze that does not passively perceive, but that is actively fostered by self-criticism and projection. Primitivism, to be sure, is a Western gaze. It is precisely this gaze that, in all its complexity, is present in the later works of Gauguin, painted in French Polynesia (i.e. Tahiti and the Marquesas islands). Complexity is not unique to either a Western or a non-Western gaze. In the case of Gauguin, painting is inspired simultaneously by impressionism and anti-colonialism. His gaze is produced by 'imperial eyes'. In order to be primitive, something must be 'pure,' 'simple,' as if never polluted by Western touch. Primitivism is a gaze, but in order to fulfil its promise of 'authentic' life, it has to deny itself as being a 'way of looking'. The primitivist gaze effaces itself as a gaze in order to find objects and peoples that are 'pure'. But then again, the primitive is only 'primitive' through the eyes of Western colonialism.

The origin of Gauguin's primitivist gaze can be traced back to his earlier periods in France, particularly those spent in Brittany and Pont-Aven, where he was fascinated by the simple country lifestyle. Often, when the word 'primitivism' is used to label Gauguin (regardless of whether this is right or wrong), it implies that Gauguin, thanks to the rise of impressionism, is painting in a much more 'simple' manner than his romantic predecessors. Secondly, it implies that Gauguin was constantly in search of the primitive life, meaning the life of 'others' – the Tahitians – in order to become like them.<sup>8</sup> He is in search of primitive life and not just for primitive objects or people to depict. His intention is to reinvent an authentic way of life, as if going back to an age before Western culture spoiled everything. Nevertheless, it is still a gaze. And since this gaze concerns literally everything, there is no way of finding the reinvented life at home. Home is the colonizer, Polynesia is the colonized. This immediately implies, however, that Gauguin is captured in this dialectic. Gauguin gazes at Tahiti and what he paints is exactly this gaze. It would be a misunderstanding to regard Gauguin's Polynesia as the 'real' Polynesia. Gauguin's task is immense: he not only has to reinvent a way of life, but he has to build an imaginary Polynesia. A paradise that is reshaped in a reversed Christian image: Eve, a constant figure in his paintings, is now a sensual Tahitian woman.<sup>9</sup> There is no way that Gauguin's Tahiti is a representation of any real island, or that his Christian symbolism can be deciphered according to the symbolism of earlier artistic periods. In order to reinvent a new life, an authentic life, Gauguin has to invert every value of the colonizer, including representation itself. This implies a new way of dealing with colors, landscapes, people, light, sound, morals, religion

<sup>8</sup> The biography of Gauguin fascinated diverse authors, from Victor Ségalen (*Hommage à Gauguin, Gauguin dans son dernier décor, La Marche du feu*, in: *Essai sur l'exotisme*, Paris: Fata Morgana, 1978) to W. Somerset Maughan (*The Moon and Sixpence*, New York: George H. Doran, 1919) or Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Way to Paradise* (New York: Faber 2003). By my knowledge, at least two opera's are based on Gauguin's life (*Gauguin (a synthetic life)* by Michael Smetanin (2000) and *Bonjour M. Gauguin* by Fabrizio Carlone (2014).

<sup>9</sup> For the role of Eve in Gauguin, see Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001.

and, not least, sexuality. Art covers everything for precisely this reason: the power of art becomes the power of colonialism itself.

### Imaginary Tahiti

Gauguin's Polynesian wanderlust can be construed as simply the product of ideas shared in the cultural circles in which he moved – dreams of finding primitive cultures somewhere in the middle of immense oceans. It is not a coincidence that he, being a French citizen, travelled to French Polynesia. In the end, there is nothing revolutionary about the late nineteenth-century revolt against European culture, the Western imperialistic mind-set, and capitalism. By sailing to Polynesia, Gauguin was simply the next in line. Tahiti was discovered by the West in 1767 and the first missionary expeditions were organized only thirty years later. It became a French protectorate in 1842 and by the time of its annexation in 1880, all local traditions and beliefs had been banned. Gauguin was not just longing for a paradise that would fulfil the promise of Van Gogh's 'l'atelier des Tropiques' in Arles, he was longing for a long gone Polynesia.<sup>10</sup>

Although Tahiti was not the only imaginary paradise, it was – and perhaps still is – the island which appealed most to the Western imagination. Because islands are naturally enclosed by the sea or the ocean, and therefore shut off from external influences, it is the right place to expect the unspoiled. From Robinson Crusoe to contemporary tourism, islands are open spaces that inspire imagination. Notwithstanding the fact that French Polynesia was, politically speaking, French, it might be more accurate to consider Tahiti and other Polynesian islands first and foremost as imaginary paradises rather than as actual places.<sup>11</sup> Tahiti was a formulation in the the imaginations of both colonialists and anti-colonialists, and still is a phantasm for the contemporary tourist. Tahiti became a myth contained by the tourist metaphor 'paradise'.<sup>12</sup> The imagination was fostered by 'real' travel accounts provided by writers dating from De Bougainville to Herman Melville.

Louis Antoine de Bougainville published his *Voyage autour du monde* in 1771, in which he described his ten day visit to Tahiti. It marked the beginning of the myth of Tahiti as an earthly paradise where men and women lived in blissful

<sup>10</sup> Compare 'Now I, who has a presentiment of a new world, who certainly believes in the possibility of a great renaissance of art. Who believes that this new art will have the tropics for its homeland.' Letter of Vincent van Gogh to Émile Bernard (Arles, Thursday, 1 or Friday, 2 November, 1888). Source: <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let716/letter.html>

<sup>11</sup> Compare Jean-François Staszak, *Géographies de Gauguin*, Paris, Bréal, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> How strongly and sincerely Gauguin believed in the popular myth of Tahiti as an earthly paradise is best seen from the following brief summary of his personal situation and artistic aims, which he gave in an interview in the *Echo de Paris*, on February 23, 1891, some months before his departure: 'The reason why I am leaving is that I wish to live in peace and to avoid being influenced by our civilization. I only desire to create a simple art. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for me to steep myself in virgin nature, to see no one but savages, to share their life and have as my sole occupation to render, just as children would do, the images of my own brain, using exclusively the means offered by primitive art, which are the only true and valid ones.' ( <http://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/the-exotic-sources-of-gauguins-art/> retrieved October 1, 2014)

innocence, far removed from the corruption of civilization. To Gauguin, Tahiti was a place that promised a concrete context for an abstract idea: the 'noble savage', the eighteenth-century primitive man, as celebrated famously by Daniel Defoe and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Robinson Crusoe* appeared in 1719, while Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* was published in 1755. Although not explicitly mentioned in Rousseau's *Discourse*, *Robinson Crusoe* inspired a lively debate on the purity of the noble savage. It is not hard to imagine Gauguin as a late nineteenth-century Robinson Crusoe – the Westerner discovering primitive man living on an island.

Yet there is an important difference between Defoe's character and the French painter. Defoe's novel was interpreted as denoting a rebirth, a 'new beginning' through which a 'pure' idea of man could be discovered. Robinson was a solitary man, destined to make use of what nature had to offer in order to survive. He was forced by circumstances to live as a primitive, while for Gauguin, primitive life was something to be pursued. Gauguin is not entirely like Defoe's Robinson, whose arrival at an uninhabited island marked a new start for culture, its very formlessness and emptiness offering possibilities for moulding it anew. Gauguin is primarily against everything that is Western culture. Tahiti for him, therefore, is first and foremost everything that Europe is not. To him, Tahiti implies in all respects a reversal of all European values and its so-called 'civilization'. Gauguin wrote in his travelogue *Noa Noa*: 'It was Europe – the Europe which I had thought to shake off and that under the aggravating circumstances of colonial snobbism, and the imitation, grotesque even to the point of caricature, of our customs, fashions, vices, and absurdities of civilization.'<sup>13</sup> Gauguin did not go ashore of an uninhabited island; he expected to live amidst a primitive culture.

Even though he was not Robinson, he still expected to meet 'noble savages' so that he might eventually become one of them. Gauguin was 'going native'.<sup>14</sup> Like many international Western tourists today, he was eager to be 'among the locals' instead of merely watching them from a distance. 'I felt that in living intimately with the natives in the wilderness I would by patience gradually gain the confidence of the Maoris and come to know them,' he wrote.<sup>15</sup> Yet still there was a 'them' seen from a 'we'-perspective. In Papeete, where he first landed, Gauguin was quickly disappointed upon learning that Tahiti's capital was completely governed by his fellow French nationals (this is why he moved on his second journey to Polynesia to *Hiva Oa*, the island at Marquesas, unjustly infamous for its cannibals, as he soon discovered). In *Noa Noa*, Gauguin is fair about his disappointments: 'Both the human beings and objects were so different from those I had desired, that I was disappointed. I was disgusted by all this European triviality.'<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, Gauguin's gaze was fully formed and educated by the myth of the 'noble savage'. 'To confess oneself in the manner of Jean Jacques Rousseau is a serious matter,'

<sup>13</sup> Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa* (1893). English version: Dover, 1985, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Going Native'. Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism' in *Art in America*, 77 (July 1989): 118-29.

<sup>15</sup> Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 9.

wrote Gauguin.<sup>17</sup> But for Gauguin, it was not Rousseau, who was too philosophical and abstract, but Jacques Antoine Moerenhout, who deeply influenced him. Moerenhout wrote one of the first ethnographic studies on Polynesia published in 1837: *Voyages aux îles du Grand océan*. Gauguin had read the book and it became an important source of information on Polynesian religion, although it was outdated by the time Gauguin arrived in Polynesia. Another influential author for Gauguin was Julien Viaud, whose pseudonym was Pierre Loti. *The Marriage of Loti* (1880) influenced other artists as well, such as Vincent van Gogh.

### **A short comparison with Melville's *Typee***

Thus Gauguin stepped into a pre-existing imaginary paradise – not ‘on earth’, as the addendum paradoxically goes, but a paradise in the arts. Gauguin probably never read the first novel of Herman Melville: *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), a book based on the author’s personal experiences of being held captive by cannibals on the island Nuku Hiva. Nevertheless, it contains all those elements that made Gauguin leave for Polynesia: the glorification of the primitive, exoticism, a deeply rooted aversion to missionary work, the excitement of being among absolute strangers (such as cannibals) and the erotic beauty of Polynesian women. If primitivism exists in literature, *Typee* is exemplary. For both Melville and Gauguin, this resulted in a crusade against missionary work. To both, the Christian missionary work was blamed for polluting the authenticity and purity of the colonised countries.<sup>18</sup> Melville’s account of French Polynesia is fairly archetypical for the development of the Western view on other cultures. Its description of the French interference leaves no room for doubt on this point: ‘The French have ever plumed themselves upon being the most humane and polished of nations,’ writes Melville; ‘A high degree of refinement, however, does not seem to subdue our wicked propensities so much after all; and were civilization itself to be estimated by some of its results, it would seem perhaps better for what we call the barbarous part of the world to remain unchanged.’<sup>19</sup>

It was exactly this French ‘barbarism’ that Gauguin was attacking furiously. In line with Melville’s opinion, it was the savage, even the cannibal, who turned out to be more humane than the Europeans. Gauguin himself wrote in his journals: ‘When you arrive in the Marquesas you say to yourself, seeing these tattooings that cover the face and the whole body: “These are terrible fellows. And they have been cannibals too.” You are altogether mistaken. The native Marquesan is by no means a terrible fellow; on the contrary, he is an intelligent man and quite incapable of plotting evil.’<sup>20</sup> When he is sitting on a bed with a Tahitian, no doubt with erotic intentions, Gauguin is shocked by her overwhelming ‘otherness’. He writes in *Noa Noa*: ‘At first I saw in her only the jaws of a cannibal, the teeth ready to rend, the

<sup>17</sup> Paul Gauguin *Intimate Journals* (with a preface by Emil Gauguin). New York: Crown Publishers, 1936, 17. Compare 242

<sup>18</sup> Paul Gauguin, ‘L’Église catholique et les temps modernes’ (1897) and ‘L’esprit moderne et le catholicisme’ (1897-1902), as published in Paul Gauguin, *Oviri. Écrits d’un sauvage*, Paris: Gallimard, 1974.

<sup>19</sup> Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, (1846), Chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> Gauguin, *Intimate Journals*, 102.

lurking look of a cruel and cunning animal, and found her, in spite of her beautiful and noble forehead, very ugly.’<sup>21</sup> The reference to the cannibal is telling, since, as we have already seen in Melville’s case, the cannibal is the absolute other. In the colonial mind-set, it is the complete stranger that one will never fully understand and who is reshaped after the images one creates of him.<sup>22</sup>

To leave ‘the barbarous part of the world’, so far beyond the influence of so-called civilization, was, in fact exactly Gauguin’s paradoxical wish.<sup>23</sup> Melville’s ‘primitivism’ harbours these differences. Some have criticized the American writer for racism, while others have defended him by arguing that he used the Polynesian language to develop his own multicultural aesthetic. The same can be said about Gauguin. Melville’s *Typee* represents a straightforward text in the tradition of Montaigne’s *On Cannibals*, in which the French essayist defends the cannibals against Western small-mindedness and arrogance, defining the savages in terms of what they are *not*, namely Western, cultivated people.<sup>24</sup> In Melville’s second book, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), European culture is depicted as the destroyer of authentic, primitive culture. When we compare *Typee* to *Omoo*, we detect a significant change of thought: whereas Polynesia was considered to be paradise in the former, it is ‘paradise lost; in the latter, having succumbed to European influence – just as Gauguin would come to see. Like Melville, Gauguin eventually pictured the other as civilized and the European imperialist as the true cannibal. To both Melville and Gauguin, art was not a way to represent, but to recreate Polynesia.

Like Melville, Gauguin reverses the ‘imperial eyes’ of the colonialist. Gauguin’s gaze is the gaze of anti-conquest and the reversion of his own cultural values. Needless to say, of course, Melville writes and Gauguin paints. Melville’s account is a narrative, but what account does Gauguin provide? There is something

<sup>21</sup> Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> The metaphor of the cannibal is crucial in (post-) colonial literature and arts. The cannibal is the absolute other, the perfect primitive, a human being that is resisting all human values by eating other human beings. Often, the traveler or visitor fears the cannibal, but at the same time, he is fascinated by him or her. This is the case for both Melville and Gauguin as we can read in their biographies. To be captured by cannibals is the ultimate experience of otherness. Compare Roger Célestin, *From Cannibals to Radicals: Figures and Limits of Exoticism*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, and Geoffrey Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of a Postcolonial Reader*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

<sup>23</sup> As the semiologist David Scott writes: ‘Of course, throughout this enterprise, Gauguin is obscurely aware of the potential madness of his project...’. David Scott, *Semiologies of Travel: From Gautier to Baudrillard*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 85.

<sup>24</sup> Michel de Montaigne, ‘On Cannibals’, in *Essays* (Book I, Essay 31). ‘I should tell Plato that it is a nation wherein there is no manner of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name of magistrate or political superiority; no use of service, riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no dividends, no properties, no employments, but those of leisure, no respect of kindred, but common, no clothing, no agriculture, no metal, no use of corn or wine; the very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, detraction, pardon, never heard of.’

(<http://www.victorianweb.org/courses/nonfiction/montaigne/cannibals.html> retrieved October 1, 2014)

in his paintings that *works* like Melville's narrative, but what is it? We find the answer disclosed in the gaze itself.

### The counter-gaze

In art, there is always something that transcends the gaze. Commenting upon a paragraph of Paul Valéry, the philosopher Walter Benjamin writes 'The painting we look at reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill.'<sup>25</sup> How right he is. The gaze is not just unidirectional. What characterizes Gauguin's Tahitian paintings is that he is not merely painting his object or his own gaze, but something I will call the 'counter-gaze'.

Let us look again at *Three Tahitians*. In the introduction, I sketched the painting as a representation of Tahitian, primitive life. However, we soon discovered that Gauguin is painting his own gaze, a gaze that seeks to depart from Western culture in order to celebrate the primitive. But there is more. What do I perceive in the painting? The three people have no visible contact with each other. Yet, the young woman on the left with the mango in her hand looks straight at *me*, the onlooker. I look at a life that is not mine, but *she* has already captured me with her intense gaze, making me feel like a voyeur. Mysteriously, something in her eyes tells me that she saw me before I saw her. Our eyes, in Benjamin's words, will never have their fill. She silently engages me in her world that I can never enter. Her eyes say more than words: everything was pure and authentic before I came, but because of my gaze, the paradise is lost forever.

This, to be clear, is an entirely subjective description provided by myself as spectator, gazing but failing to understand. It does not say anything about Gauguin's intentions. That is precisely why we are talking about art, not about someone making tourist pictures on a tropical island. Gauguin does not offer an informative representation of Tahiti, nor of its inhabitants. The gaze of the Tahitian is a counter-gaze. It is, to be sure, the *same* counter-gaze as the 'anti-conquest' gaze, the reversion of the imperial eyes, the 'gazing against the grain' that we read in Melville's *Typee*. In Gauguin's painting, however, it is an actual gaze, not the metaphorical description of a gaze. The counter-gaze in Gauguin is not a moral or political ideal that motivates art, but a *real* gaze. The human face in this work of art is not a portrait, but a gaze.<sup>26</sup>

In order to understand Gauguin, we have to leave behind the idea of representation, and even the ideal of the impressionist gaze. If Gauguin wants to succeed in his project, he has to get rid of the Romantic idea that art represents or depicts the world. Let us, once more, read Walter Benjamin in order to describe this ineffable gaze. It was Benjamin who famously wrote (in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility') that, in modernity, art lost its aura and became something that could be mechanically reproduced. According to Benjamin, a shift can be noted in the history of art from the artwork's cult value to its exhibition

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1968 (2007), 186-7.

<sup>26</sup> Gauguin wrote in his notes on Marquesan art: 'The basis of this art is the human body and face. The face, especially.' Daniel Guerin (ed.) *Paul Gauguin: The Writings of a Savage*, New York: Viking Press, 1990, 280 and 92.

value.<sup>27</sup> Art production begins with figuration in the service of magic, says Benjamin. Thus, there is a difference between art as a way of making present that which is sacred and art as 'exhibition'. Art in the modern sense of the word, with its roots in late mediaeval times, was increasingly understood as 'exhibition', or 'visible presence'. The religious prohibition of making images (i.e. the second commandment) had lost its power and art no longer stood in service of the sacred. Consequently, art no longer possessed magical power and become an object of visual contemplation. What counts in magic, according to Benjamin's use of the word, is not the aesthetic value of artefacts, but its presence:

What is important is that they are present, not that they are seen. (...) Cult value as such even tends to keep the artwork out of certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain images of the Madonna remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are not visible to the viewer at ground level.<sup>28</sup>

We encounter what Benjamin describes in the tension between the use of icons in the Russian Orthodox Church and the exhibition of the icons as works of art in Western museums. In orthodox theology, the icon is not there to be seen and venerated, since it presents a hidden, invisible truth.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, while looking at the icons we perceive that they look back at us. Perception in this case is the experience of being perceived: the gaze of the spectator is reversed and the spectator becomes the spectated. This, however, not only implies to icons. Visual art possess a quality which makes it more than a mere collection of objects to gaze at. There is something beyond this gaze, beyond aesthetics, something that gives art, as Benjamin calls it, a 'magical' power. And of course, the magical power which is not understood aesthetically is of relevance for understanding indigenous ritual objects. Most of the objects cannot be understood as depictions or representations, rather as objects of incantation. To Benjamin, this magic is lost once art becomes a mere practice of 'taking pictures'. He writes: 'What was inevitably felt to be inhuman, one might even say deadly, in daguerreotype was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze. But looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze.'<sup>30</sup> The young woman with the mango is not looking into an

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', in *Illuminations*, 224.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art...', p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> First described by Pavel Florensky. See Clemena Antonova, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God*, Surrey, Burlington: Ashgate, 2010. The reversed gaze and the image play an important role in contemporary phenomenology; for example, in the work of Jean-Luc Marion. See Ruud Welten, 'Le paradoxe de l'apparence de Dieu' and 'Vers une phénoménologie de l'icône', *Phénoménologie du Dieu invisible. Essais et études sur Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry et Jean-Luc Marion*, Paris: L'harmattan, 2011, 175-203 and 235-245).

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', 188.

imaginary camera, posing *for* me, but she is looking *at* me. The spectator's gaze is reversed.<sup>31</sup>

This phenomenon of the counter-gaze is not only to be seen in *Three Tahitians*. There is, of course, the erotic gaze or the gaze of seduction, which we encounter in *Te arii vahina* (The King's Wife). A significant characteristic of the erotic gaze is that the spectator never knows for certain whether it is, in fact, an *erotic* gaze. In real life, this gaze requires a response, a smile, a confirmation. Only too often Gauguin is reduced to being a painter of erotic seduction. The gaze in the painting *Arearea* (1892), however, is as complex as the gaze described above. In some other paintings, like *Parau parua* (Whispered Words), painted in 1892, we encounter the gaze of just one person, while other people in the painting seem to take no notice of the spectator (although, upon closer inspection, they might be looking after all...). *Cavaliers sur la plage* (the version in which a man on a horse is gazing at the spectator) is a clear example of a gaze that marks the 'otherness' of not just a single person, but of a whole culture. The horseman is gazing beyond the limits of the painting, looking at me. Behind him, we see the life of 'the others' who do not seem to notice that they are gazed at. The gaze of the horseman represents the gaze of these others. His look is reproachful, making me a spectator, making me the colonialist who intervenes in what I consider a primitive life.

We encounter a double gaze in paintings such as *Arearea no varua ino* (Reclining Tahitian Women) from 1894, *Contes Barbares* (Primitive Tales) from 1902; *Le Sorcier d'Hiva Oa* (Marquesan in a Red Cape à la Cape) from 1902; *The Great Buddha* (1899); *Merahi metua no Tehamana* (Tehamana has Many Parents) from 1893; *Poèmes Barbares* (1896); *Manao tupapau* (Spirit of the Dead Watching) from 1892 and *Parau na te varua ino* (Words of the Devil) from 1892.<sup>32</sup> It is the gaze of the faces of Tahitians staring at us (i.e. the spectators) with, in the background, an even more pervasive stare by yet another presence – a god, a devil, or a ghost perhaps. There is something magical about these paintings. In *Bathers at Tahiti* (1897), two naked women clearly feel caught by the eye of the spectator, making the spectator feel like a voyeur. The same goes for *Bathers* painted in the same year and in *Pastorales Tahitiennes* (1892).

What marks the look of the Tahitian woman on the left in *Three Tahitians*, is the distance between her and the spectator. We see not just what Gauguin sees, we also experience what he experiences, namely the experience of being a voyeur, an intruder. What is at stake here is not just an exchange of erotic glances between two human beings, but a look that marks cultural difference. It is as if the Tahitian woman wants us to know that we will never understand her. Gauguin's desire for a near mystical unity with the 'other', as described in *Noa Noa*, completely fails here. But it is a sublime failure, raised to the status of art. Gauguin paints the unbridgeable distance between himself and the culture he is so eager to be a part of.

In Gauguin's paintings, we encounter a double gaze: the individual gaze of the woman makes the spectator (in first place Gauguin the painter) aware of the distance between Western and Polynesian cultures. Concerning Gauguin, two

<sup>31</sup> See also Frances S. Connelly's contribution to this special issue 'John Ruskin and the Savage Gothic', especially for *Manao tupapau*.

things are at stake. Firstly, colonialism is a gaze that reduces the 'other' to a primitive state – but a state valued as somehow more pure and authentic than that of the 'civilised' West. Gauguin certainly paints Tahiti from this viewpoint. However, there is more to Gauguin's paintings. It is precisely the 'other' that resists representation and, as such, gazes back. Gauguin's anti-conquest, therefore, is not a mere political or cultural revolt, but something that is phenomenological, hidden within the power of his art. Instead, it is the spectator who becomes the intruder, the voyeur, caught red-handed in his own primitivist gaze.

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