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IMAGE [&] NARRATIVE

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On Autohagiography: Sam Taylor-Wood's *Self Portrait as a Tree*

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Abstract (E): This essay investigates a selection of works by the British photographer and video artist Sam Taylor-Wood. The author argues that the often autobiographical work of Taylor-Wood makes use of narrative and visual procedures borrowed from Christian hagiography. This 'autohagiography' allows the artist to produce images that critically reflect on contemporary modes of visual autobiography.

Abstract (F): Cet article étudie une série d'ouvrages par la photographe et artiste vidéo Sam Taylor-Wood (Grande Bretagne). L'auteur démontre que l'œuvre souvent autobiographique de Taylor-Wood utilise des procédés narratifs et visuels empruntés à l'hagiographie chrétienne. L' 'autohagiographie' qui en résulte permet à l'artiste de produire des images qui reflètent de façon critique sur les formes que pourraient prendre les autobiographies visuelles contemporaines.

keywords: Sam Taylor-Wood, landscape photography, hagiography, intertextuality, self-portraiture, Roland Barthes, Jean Laplanche, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis

Article   Saintliness and the Photographic Subject

Sam Taylor-Wood's *Self Portrait as a Tree* (2000) seems to be far from the self-assurance and bravado characteristic of the work of the Young British Artists of the 1990's. Yet, we are presented with a similar surprising blend of exposure and exclusion, as is the case with Tracey Emin or Sarah Lucas. In fact, we are presented with an image invested with *saintliness*: not holiness or righteousness, but an image narrating a watershed in someone's life; if you will: a moment of conversion.

Self Portrait as a Tree is a large colour photograph that nevertheless lacks the billboard dimensions or monumentalism of the work of other contemporary photographers such as Jeff Wall or Thomas Struth. It has the size of a landscape painting and we may easily imagine it being displayed in a private room or cabinet. *Self Portrait as a Tree* represents a (British) country landscape that looks very familiar, to the point of being kitsch: the work is a willing reference to Victorian landscape photography - and through that to Romantic painting - and photographic pictorialism. The image depicts a scene of nightfall: a bright red-and-orange

evening sun highlights an isolated hillside tree that is tortured and shaped by the wind. A gleam of light bursts through the thick clouds drifting over and that almost obfuscate the sky and the sun. An isolated poppy can be distinguished in the grass at the roots of tree, from whereon a meadow stretches out, beyond the picture's frame, its yellow flowers faintly lit by the evening sun. The meadow is enclosed by a wall; a muddy track halts at the gate that gives access to the pasture.

As the title of Sam Taylor-Wood's work suggests, the image refers to Romantic personification of nature or identification with it. Capriciously shaped, doted with an individual history and a solitary figure in the landscape, the tree has been a preferred subject for Romantics, early photographers and Pictorialists alike. As viewers, we witness the transference of the artists' self-perception to his/her surroundings, having the tree as object of predilection. In fact, this type of auto-affection by detour, in which the artist's *destitution as an object* allows his/her *restitution as a subject*, emphasizes the very movement that is intrinsic to all auto-portraiture: in it, appropriation or self-recognition inevitably contains a moment of disappropriation and delegation (to the image on the canvas). Thus, *Self Portrait as a Tree* highlights the importance of (the principle of) *trajectory* in auto-portraiture. This significance is articulated in three steps: 1. the image is clearly situated in an art historical narrative (by its references to outmoded forms of art it is explicitly *anachronistic* as most of Sam Taylor-Wood's work is) 2. as we have just observed, the image offers a theoretical reflection on the (historical) genre(s) belongs to and, as we will see shortly, on its very medium 3. as suggested by its title and subject matter, the image is unconventionally autobiographical: it narrates a pivotal moment in the artist's life. It is precisely the constant interaction of these different levels in the work that sets *Self Portrait as a Tree* apart from both its historical references and contemporary forms of autobiography or autobiographical representations in visual art.

Photographic Hagiography, or: The Photograph as Altar Piece

The use of photography underlines the contingent character of the scene in *Self Portrait as a Tree*: it evokes the immediate presence of the artist, a brisk encounter with the solitary tree, an instant of recognition between the two subjects of the image, artist and tree. However, if, in Taylor-Wood's image, we witness a fortuitous encounter being transformed into a work of art, it does not constitute a form of documenting, let alone monumentalising. On the contrary, the photograph produces a strong sense of narrative by representing a personal trajectory. The multiple ways in which the tree is framed within the image suggests that, for the artistic subject that is identified with it, a frontier or tipping point has been reached: the tree is set against a stretch of dark woodland that forms an insurmountable horizon, it almost touches the enclosure that zigzags across the image, and there is of course the frame of the photograph itself. The looming nightfall and the sudden illumination of the tree in between the passing shadows of the heavy clouds, the remoteness of the location, the muddy tracks leading to the closed gate, the isolated tree itself on its hill side - it all adds to the overall sense of sudden enlightenment after a long journey. In the image, on the threshold of what is still visible, an abrupt *illumination* takes place. *Self Portrait as a Tree* effectively narrates a theme common to Christian *hagiography*; it depicts a scene we often encounter on the

predella of an alter piece: it stages a moment of epiphany, miracle or conversion. It represents a breach in between (ontologically) opposed phases in a subject's life: between humanity and saintliness. Similarly, the wind-battered tree in Sam Taylor-Wood's photograph is suspended in between life and death; or rather, as the unexpected highlighting of the tree implies, a subject that is suspended in between dying and regeneration (as is quite literally represented in Taylor-Wood's *Self Portrait Suspended* series from 2004). The image captures a personal and artistic trajectory that has been deeply affected and diverted; it captures a subject on the verge of restitution.

As for its specific use of the photographic medium, the image appropriates the obsolete genres of landscape photography and pictorialism; a usage similar to Walter Benjamin's conception of the outmoded which, when at the brink of disappearance yet briefly illuminated, tends towards the future (blending present and past utopias) (see for example Benjamin 1999). *Self Portrait as a Tree* has in fact recourse to outdated genres, that within the image are associated with the even earlier Romantic notion of the transference of the artist's Self, in order to articulate an imaginary of regeneration. Despite these Romantic and Victorian appearances, Sam Taylor-Wood's photograph does not present us with the sublime, there is only *reference* to the sublime: art historical reference is deployed here as a means of narrating. We do not witness the sublime rapture of the subject, but its emergence by means of transference that is inextricably bound up with narrative (of the Self).

As a result, the image presents us with what Roland Barthes called a 'narreme' (Barthes 2003: 131): a jolt of narrative, a condensed story; in this case, the indices of a personal trajectory or journey, the capturing of the instant of illumination or conversion. The term constitutes a variation on Barthes' neologism 'biographeme' from *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* which opposes instances of singular significance to mere chronology (Barthes 2002: 706). Barthes' ideal '(auto)biography' - the brackets and quotation marks are indispensable - would consist of a series of mobile sensuous details or a flux of images and scenes that paint a (self)portrait in a non-linear narrative shot trough with affect; a series of singular instances which may be transferred to the reader and allows him/her to subsequently paint his/her own auto-portrait. For Barthes, Proust's *Recherche* sets the example. Barthes provides the example in his *Lives* of Sade and Fourier, which are presented as a sequence of movable fragments often in the form of scenes of conversion or illumination, such as Sade's unfortunate yet decisive encounter with the prostitute Rose Keller or Fourier's important dreams (Barthes 2002: 853). 'Narreme' and 'biographeme' move to and fro image and narrative, between impression (with all its connotations of affect) and story. *Self Portrait as a Tree* explores the photograph as narreme and biographeme. In it, the use of photography's medium-specificity as the documentation of real presence (that is to say, a 'slice of life' taken from the subject's biography), combined with the use of both the formal characteristics and the history of different pictorial genres, create a singular yet highly complex (auto-)narrative.

Phantasm and (Self-)Portraiture in The Work of Sam Taylor-Wood

If only for its title, *Self Portrait as a Tree* is not a conventionally autobiographical work of art; but where exactly does the appearance of Sam Taylor-Wood take place beyond her being as an artist a conventional instance of the image? Why is this work not simply a textbook example of contemporary appropriation or citation of the sublime? Although there is no

unmediated presence of the artist, Sam Taylor-Wood's image of regeneration is emphatically a work about personal hardship and revival.

Portraiture is essential to Sam Taylor-Wood's photography and (disguised) self-portraits constitute and significant aspect of it. *Self Portrait as a Tree* can be compared to two other images from the turn of the century. First of all, *Fuck/Suck/Spank/Wank* (1993) represents the artist standing in a barren studio with her trousers draped around her ankles (in a pose reminiscent of Botticelli's Venus), wearing dark sunglasses and a T Shirt that spells the words that form the work's title. The image and the subject it captures seem to remain suspended between a kind of bloke-ish assertiveness and matching crude humour, and the (unintended) exposure of vulnerability (as that of Botticelli's rising Venus). Secondly, *Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare* (2001) shows the artist posing in a black suit and flashy trainers against a white background, looking directly into the camera, holding a remote control in one hand and a stiff, stuffed hare in the other. Both photographs make use of allegorical props (T-shirt and glasses, suit and hare) and emphasize the subject's inquisitiveness into her own position. In Sam Taylor-Wood's self-portraits this position is simultaneously that of the artist, the gendered subject and the private person or body. However, *Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare* significantly focuses on the latter. In fact, in the interval between the two images the artist's biography takes a dramatic turn: the dead hare, a familiar component in still life painting, and the dark single breasted suit allude to the breast cancer that has struck the artist. *Self Portrait as a Tree* captures this dramatic trajectory at its tipping point, resulting in the imaginary of regeneration in *Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare* in which Sam Taylor-Wood, her brash silvery trainers contrasting with the black suit, firmly has a hold of the hare as well as the camera, which is directly and inquisitively looked into.

Sam Taylor-Wood's other, less explicitly personal, photographic work from the past two decades presents a similar complex blend of (auto)biography, the meta-reflexive use of medium and genre and narrative procedures. What is at stake in *Self Portrait as a Tree* becomes particularly perceptible in the light of the *Soliloquy* series (1998). It consists of life-size photographs that are divided in two parts. The upper part of the works contains a staged portrait of an isolated figure, such as drug-induced sleepers, a model gazing at her mirror image or lonely masculine figures trapped in their own thoughts. Yet these portraits also explicitly refer to canonical and familiar images from Western visual culture (i.e. Velasquez' *Toilet of Venus*, Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ* or Henry Wallis' *Death of Chatterton*). The bottom part of the images resembles a traditional *predella*, that is to say the bottom half of an altarpiece, which narrates scenes from the life of a saint or Christ. As a form of visual biography later used by the Pre-Raphaelites (who constitute one of Sam Taylor-Wood's many art historical references), the *predella* presents a comprised narrative, mainly of pivotal (and exemplary) scenes from the road to saintliness, analogous to Barthes' concepts of the narrame and biographeme. Among other things, Sam Taylor-Wood's contemporary *predellas* show scenes of madness, brutal sexuality or lascivious sensuality, and possibly murder. The images are made by means of 360 degrees panoramic photography that simultaneously shows all of the different angles of a certain space (loft, artist's studio, boudoir, asylum). This technique produces images that show (almost cinematographic) *suture*, the stitching of a series of images into a single frame, as well as they suggest the *simultaneity* of the action taking place in them; both procedures suggesting and effectively creating a strong sense of narrative. Yet, it is the very same (possibility of) narrative that the *Soliloquy* series put into question.

The *Soliloquy* series engages a variety of discourses, vocabularies and problems: the images shift from aesthetic discourse (genre, art history) to religious narrative, from (auto)biography to psychoanalysis. At the same time, and in a vibrant dialogue with the above, it explores a range of *modi operandi* belonging to different media: mise-en-scène, narrative, painting, photography and cinematographic montage and suture. That is to say, the series does not consist of *mixed media*, but rather explores and puts to use multiple discourses and medium-specific procedures. As a result, this mixture of formal and intertextual strategies problematizes the biographical possibilities of portraiture. The *predellas* do not offer us a unifying narrative, they cannot be reduced to neither confession nor revelation, but they do not abandon narrative altogether either. Rather, narrative and biography, as procedures that allow for semantic closure, by their immediate entanglement with formalistic and art historical questions, are displaced (and their qualities of foreclosure differed) as soon as they are introduced.

Quite obviously, the superposition of the absentmindedness of the portrayed subjects and the violent scenes of the *predellas* suggests that these constitute - all too literally - the subconscious of the subjects. However, the allusion to hagiography and the mere fact that the hallucinatory scenes depicted in the *predellas* are not necessarily related to the portrayed subject does not allow them to be read according to rudimentary psychotherapeutic schemas: in other words, as traumatic biography. If the inner frame separating the portrait from the *predella* is an almost literal illustration of Lacan's 'barred subject', the *predellas* rather appear to present the mise-en-scène of *phantasms*. The *absence of the interlocutor* in any soliloquy, provides it with a phantasmatic character: it constitutes an inner dialogue that presupposes and/or gives shape to an imaginary self. The *Soliloquies* show us the phantasm as a "scenario with multiple entries," as Laplanche and Pontalis write (Laplanche and Pontalis 1985: 71). As an *auto-hagiography* of sorts, the phantasm allows the subject to act out his/her desires, providing his/herself with an imagined self that does not necessarily coincide with the subjects every day identity (Laplanche and Pontalis 1967: 152). For Laplanche and Pontalis, in his/her phantasms, the subject may even shift in between different characters (Laplanche and Pontalis 1985: 82). Nonetheless, the phantasm invades and shapes the subject's conscious or daily life, it constitutes the passage or joint between conscious/subconscious, between the imaginary and the symbolic order. Unlike the linear biography of the subject, the phantasm scrambles chronology; like those of Freud's Wolfman, phantasms may only take on significance retrospectively, or - as is the case of the Wolfman's primal scene - may be *constructed* retrospectively (echoing other phantasms). It is this indecisive back-and-forth between two dissymmetrical modes of biography or relentless construction and deconstruction of (phantasmatic) narrative that the *Soliloquy* series incorporates.

The photographic series insistently do not comprise a photo-novel of sorts: Sam Taylor-Wood explores the possible uses of narrative *within a single frame*; the single frame of a medium whose specificity, according to Barthes, is the immediate presence of its referent (interestingly, most of her video work takes the opposite direction: the 1995 video installation *Brontosauros* almost reduces the moving image to a film still). As we have seen earlier, within that single image, visual imagery itself is put into question by constant reference to its history and the characteristics of its media and genres. Sam Taylor-Wood's images phantasmatically fictionalize portraiture, as they make use of the biographical as genre in a reflection on the image.

Equally, *Wrecked* (1996) addresses the theme of the Last Supper, which ideally allows Sam Taylor-Wood to investigate the possibility of a simultaneity of narratives within a single image. *Wrecked* stages Leonardo's iconic Last Supper as anachronism. At a large clothed table full of food (also reminiscent of traditional still life scenes), contemporary figures (both male and female) are engaged in conversation (as in Da Vinci's work, a multitude of micro-intrigues appears to take place), and barely noticing the upright figure of a bare-breasted female Christ, who is already assuming the posture of the crucified. The image is anachronistic in yet another sense: similar to the narratives of the *predellas* of Christian hagiography, the image shows, as Roland Barthes writes on the particular anachronicity of the photographic medium, "that which has already taken place and is about to happen." (Barthes 2000: 94) Again, Sam Taylor-Wood deconstructs the narrative genre of biography by means of a foregrounding of technique and aesthetic genealogies. Similarly, the characters caught in the *predella* from *Soliloquy III*, among other things, represent models in between photo shoots who are situated in a phantasmatic space that is simultaneously studio, office and upscale apartment, thus possibly referring to a prehistory of the very image that we look at. An image that itself is inscribed in an intertextual art historical narrative, representing Velasquez's *Venus*, in a vertiginous *mise-en-abîme* of genealogies, biographies, hagiographies.

Resisting Exposure, Displacing Autobiography

However, simply branding Sam Taylor-Wood's work as one of many examples of post-modern *jouissance* of the multiple self and subsequent intertextual aesthetics, would not do it justice. In fact, her photographs, foremost, constitute the attempted reappropriation of the (self-) image, hence her incessant yet displaced use of portraiture. In the above mentioned *Fuck/ Suck/Spank/Wank* there seems to be no escape from the demand for immediacy and transparency from the contemporary (pornographic) image dictated by the aesthetics of exposure of the tabloids (a theme we also encounter in the work of Emin and Lucas). The bright white studio surroundings, the emphatically present lamp, the subject that is literally cornered against the wall - ironic as the image may seem - leave little room for one's own (the subject's Ray Ban sunglasses can be read alternatively as a negligible protective screen or as a sexual prop …). The *Soliloquy* series in particular offer a different type of image, an image that resists the demand for immediate visibility through (sexual) stereotyping that leaves little room for conceptions of narrating one's life other than that of exposure and exhibitionism. It offers a meditative image that not only depicts self-reflection, but effectively *is* self-reflexive through its foregrounding of technique, genre and history. The *mise-en-abîme*-like character of its narratives defers the immediate presence of its subjects to *us* - the subjects of the pornographic gaze. In that sense, Sam Taylor-Wood's images present a phantasmatic reappropriation of the subject depicted - phantasmatic precisely because they make use of 'scenarios with multiple entries'.

Self Portrait as a Tree deploys a similar strategy of displacement to narrate the reappropriation of the self, at a pivotal moment in the artist's biography. The complexity and precariousness of this strategy, finally, is illustrated by two of Sam Taylor-Wood's works made in the year following *Self Portrait as a Tree*. In both *Poor Cow* and *Bound Ram* (2001), she uses the outmoded, originally Victorian, genre of animal photography as self-commentary - a genre also recently rediscovered and explored by fellow British photographer Richard

Billingham. In these pictures however, the near-sublime effect of *Self Portrait as a Tree* has faded. As indicated by its (not entirely un-ironic) title, *Poor Cow* is foremost an expression of self-pity. Capturing a lonesome Friesian on a bleak and windy day, in a meadow not unlike that of *Self Portrait as a Tree*, the image attempts to provoke the same sense of isolation and transference of the artist's self. Yet, the cow is innocently but stubbornly staring into the camera and thus staring back at the person operating it. In its odd passive inquisitiveness, the cow resists being the object of personification. The effect of this vacant defiance is a stand-off of sorts between object and artist. The cow clearly remains herself: a framed animal; the daytime light, the animal's position in the centre of the image, the yellow tag in the animal's ear that emphasises its victimization by the hands of humans simply do not allow an unproblematic transference of selves. The same applies to *Bound Ram*: the submissive expression on this archetypical victim's face (we also see dark stains on the floor below the animal that suggest sacrificial blood, as does the red ribbon which binds the animal's legs together) in fact makes it difficult to tell who is the object of pity here. Do we pity the ram or does the ram pity the viewer since, through all its Christian connotations that are so clearly emphasized in the image, it refers to the figure of Christ and subsequently to the notion of forgiveness? In any case, the image's relation to the artist's biography at best remains allegorical.

On the contrary, *Self Portrait as a Tree* escapes facile allegory. It presents us with neither the modernist fable of the subject as the sum of its impressions and affects, nor its postmodern rewriting as that of the joyous consumer as multiple subject. In *Self Portrait as a Tree* Sam Taylor-Wood has created a narrative of reappropriation of the self through deconstruction and *mise-en-abîme* of medium, genre and history, thus resisting the immediate exposure of lives and selves that dictates contemporary collective imagery and imagination and more often than not appears to be the only mode of (auto)biographical representation left.

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