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"*People are gazing*". A Phenomenological Account of Viewing Velázquez.

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Abstract

What is it like to look at a painting? Research into art-viewing raises challenging considerations. Factors concerning the artwork, the viewer, the role of context, as well as conceptualisation of the response and how to measure it, present a wealth of complexity. Although such a topic might arguably lend itself to qualitative exploration, work of this type is notably sparse. In the research reported here, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore the experience of looking at a painting. 12 participants were individually interviewed whilst viewing Las Meninas by Diego Velázquez. Three Master Themes were developed, the first of which 'The Gaze' is presented in depth. Experiences of looking and being looked at by figures in the image are described and considered in relation to social and philosophical understandings of eye contact, seeing and being seen.

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1. Introduction

Theoretical and anecdotal accounts of art-viewing readily acknowledge its subjective nature. Yet when it comes to empirical investigation, subjective knowledge is typically avoided or rejected as interference. Vision, taste, semiotics; many lenses exist through which to examine how we look at art, however, presently little research considers what it is actually like to do so. 'Art' itself is a huge and diverse concept. The research reported here is concerned with paintings. The purpose of the study undertaken was to explore art-viewing from an experiential perspective. To learn about the 'what it is like' of looking at paintings, rather than consider any mechanisms or mechanics of how.

Much of the empirical research concerning art-viewing has concentrated on perceptual and mechanistic explanations of aesthetic experience employing a systematic, experimental approach to the exploration of processes and responses involved.

Viewers are commonly investigated separably from art objects or images and numerous viewer characteristics have been suggested to impact responses to art. These range from the broad and contextual such as culture (e.g. Bao *et al.*, 2016) or gender (Pulzella, 2000), to more individual features such as one's perceptual style. Boccia *et al.* (2014) for example, demonstrated that viewers with global compared to local perceptual tendencies differed in measures of perceived ambiguity and aesthetic appreciation of paintings. Even the minute movements which may occur during viewing have been considered in terms of viewers' experiences of art. Ganczarek *et al.* (2015) proposed contrasts in this *body sway* may reflect differences in the mental imagery which occurs when viewing pictorial depth.

Art objects are associated with a similarly complex range of variables or factors which may influence viewing. Image characteristics such as depicted depth (Papathomas, 2002), perceptible space captured (Kapoula *et al.*, 2009) and colour and size (Maglione *et al.*, 2017; Nascimento *et al.*, 2017) have been explored. In addition, more complex aspects have been investigated. Villani *et al.*, (2015) reported differences in gaze patterns when social, in comparison to solitary, characters were viewed. Massaro *et al.* (2012) compared depictions of human or natural, and dynamic or static, scenes. Images depicting humans tended to be judged as less dynamic than those depicting nature.

Research involving both viewers and art objects has traditionally been dominated by two comparative paradigms. Experts are regularly compared to novice viewers (Augustin and

Leder, 2006; Silvia, 2006; Vogt and Magnussen, 2007; Pihko *et al.*, 2011; Shourie, Firoozabadi and Badie, 2014; Koide *et al.*, 2015; Park, Yun and Jeong, 2015; van Paasschen, Bacci and Melcher, 2015) as is viewing of representational versus abstract artworks (Furnham and Walker, 2001; Vogt and Magnussen, 2005; Uusitalo, Simola and Kuisma, 2009, 2012; Vessel and Rubin, 2010; Nather, Fernandes and Bueno, 2014; Cattaneo *et al.*, 2015; Schepman *et al.*, 2015).

In the case of both contrasts, a degree of circumspection has been raised concerning the feasibility of operationalising such concepts experimentally (e.g. van Paasschen, Bacci and Melcher, 2015). The expert-novice divide is not uniformly deployed (or deployable?) within the literature and Francuz *et al.*, (2018) for example, note that expertise can manifest in various forms. Art experts have been characterised as art-historians (e.g. Bauer and Schwan, 2018; Commare, Rosenberg and Leder, 2018) students of art-history or art (Cela-Conde *et al.*, 2002; Bimler, Snellock and Paramei, 2019), museums professionals (Locher, Gray and Nodine, 1996; van Paasschen, Bacci and Melcher, 2015) and artists themselves (Shourie, Firoozabadi and Badie, 2014; Koide *et al.*, 2015). This elicits various questions. Is the expertise associated with an art history degree like that of someone with a natural talent for life drawing? What makes one an artist? Is it relevant that training to paint in oils may require very different skills from sculpting in metals? To address such concerns, Mullenix and Robinet (2018) suggested that expertise be characterised beyond notions of art knowledge and developed a five component survey that measured aspects such as exposure to artworks and creative achievement. Similarly, Pang *et al.* (2013, p. 247) warned of "an artificial dichotomisation of an otherwise continuous quantitative variable" and thus used questionnaire data to assess expertise on a continuum.

Work comparing representational and abstract art is associated with similar complexities. The two types of artwork have been suggested to provoke different gaze patterns by some (e.g. Pihko *et al.*, 2011) but not all (e.g. Uusitalo, Simola and Kuisma, 2009) studies. Fairhall and Ishai (2008) suggested that (similar to the expert/novice divide) variation in findings comparing the types of artwork may be rooted in the way that the abstract-representational dimension is defined. For example, these authors implemented a three category (representational, indeterminate and abstract) measure whilst Pihko *et al.*, (2011) explored a most to least abstract five painting continuum.

Measuring the response to an artwork is no less complex (Carbon, 2019) and implicates an extensive range of variables (which are in turn variably conceptualised). Response to art has been measured, for example, in terms of hedonic tone (Marin *et al.*, 2016), emotion and preference (van Paasschen, Bacci and Melcher, 2015) ratings of specialness and impressiveness (Verhavert, Wagemans and Augustin, 2018), (dis)pleasingness (Plumhoff and Schirillo, 2009) and strength of insight elicited (Muth, Hesslinger and Carbon, 2015).

Categorical description of variables involved in art-viewing thus appears to be demanding and this is no less so when additional contextual factors are taken into account. Brieber *et al.* (2020) reported that art appreciation was influenced by viewing time (here found highest during intermediate presentations). Furthermore, divergences between naturalistic and typical laboratory-based viewings for both time and preferred viewing distance of artworks have been demonstrated (Carbon, 2017). The latter study further indicated differences between individual and group viewing behaviours (groups, for example, viewing longer). Thus, emphasising the importance of multiple contextual components in the study of aesthetic experience.

van Paasschen *et al.*, (2015, p. 1) concluded "there is no consensus in the literature on which mechanisms underlie our perception of art or what exactly defines an aesthetic experience". Topics that are associated with such intricacy, particularly those which resist clear definition or categorisation, have traditionally become the purview of qualitative research. Although heterogeneous, qualitative epistemologies typically represent a divergence from the application upon human subjects, of the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences. Rather than treating subjectivity as problematic, qualitative approaches use the recognition and integration of our unique position in the world as self-referential beings, to cultivate an alternative way of investigating human issues.

Phenomenological approaches, in particular, have been earmarked for studying phenomena that are abstruse and where relatively little understanding is available (LeVasseur, 2003) and indeed, a small number of promising qualitative studies have been undertaken which consider art-viewing. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) analysed 57 interviews discussing experiences with artworks. Four experiential 'dimensions' were derived, Perpetual, Emotional, Intellectual and Communicative. Each encompassed a notable level of intricacy via the delineation of multiple sub-dimensions and a range of variations and polarities *within* each category.

The respondents in Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) study self-selected the art discussed and referenced several artworks. In contrast, Lagerspetz (2016) pre-selected two paintings (*The Persistence of Memory* (1931) by Salvador Dalí and a contemporary image *Which Link Fails First?* (1992) by Finnish artist Teemu Mäki) which 82 participants then viewed and discussed. As illustrative of the diversity involved, in vivo coding produced 40 variables including factors such as familiarity, stylistic classification, intrigue, ease of understanding and affective evaluation.

Tone Roald has offered notable insights into the art-viewing experience and the potential for phenomenology to be an advantageous mode of exploration. Roald (2007) for example, captured a complex relationship between emotional and cognitive responses to artworks whilst Roald (2008) drew attention to the temporality of viewing (initial responses to what was described as a 'good gestalt' and early experiences of pleasure associated with perceptions of beauty were followed by an intellectual engagement with the artwork and an embodied affective reaction).

Tam (2008), like Roald, interviewed participants in response to gallery visits and interestingly reported an overall sense of encumbrance. Describing feelings and experiences with paintings was suggested to be problematic for participants who reportedly struggled either with understanding or with expressing their responses.

Such work is illuminative of the diverse potentials and challenges associated with the qualitative, phenomenological investigation of art-viewing. However, a commonality is that the experience of art-viewing is addressed based on interactions involving multiple paintings and discussed primarily in retrospect. Qualitative psychological investigation which idiographically explores the viewing of one painting, rather than interactions with painting*s*, appears sparse. The following study, therefore, considers the question 'What is it like to look at a painting?'

2. Method

The existing body of art viewing literature has implicated numerous potentially relevant factors. These often overlap and in the context of an experimental approach may be considered confounding. Explicitly preconceived categories (representational and abstract art) and implicit assumptions (experts and novices are separable or distinct types of viewers) often shape investigation. The study presented here aims to 'go back to the beginning' by

taking an inductive, idiographic approach to its investigation. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis – IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) not only incorporates but notably prioritises these factors and so was selected to this end.

IPA involves a commitment to an exploration of experience on "its own terms" rather than as shaped by "predefined or overly abstract categories" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 1). Researchers aim to remain firmly anchored in participants' accounts whilst also maintaining an awareness of their own presuppositions and their potential influence upon the research. A stance of openness and acknowledgement of one's "own lack of preparation" (Bernet, 2012, p. 566) toward the phenomena to be explored is encouraged. Such an approach seems particularly apropos due to the challenges associated with defining what a picture, image, or indeed an artwork is. In addition, assumptions concerning the way a physical art object may relate to the artwork as an object of consciousness are resisted.

2.1. Participants/Recruitment

IPA requires a fairly homogeneous sample in order to facilitate an idiographic focus on the experience under investigation. It is recognised that determining the criteria for this homogeneity is itself an interpretative issue (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) and researchers must make decisions concerning factors that they feel may influence or constitute homogeneity. In this case, guided by indications in the extant literature concerning the relevance of prior experience with art, participants who were similar in terms of familiarity with art appreciation were sought. To resist the challenges associated with pre-emptive definitions, self-described art-enthusiasts who 'liked art, were interested in art and would be comfortable enough to talk about art' were appealed to. In the same vein, those with formal training or a vocation in art or art history were excluded.

Ethical Approval for the project was granted by the Birkbeck Research Ethics Committee. Recruitment was purposive and conducted via friends and colleagues. The final sample consisted of 12 participants aged between 35 and 65, six male and six female. All were Londoners, educated to at least degree level. None were direct personal acquaintances. The participants' openness and generosity were notable. Most expressed the desire to assist in academic research and that they were interested in the endeavour itself.

2.2. The Painting

This study involved viewing a painting and discussing it in real-time. The intent was to allow the participant and researcher to engage in the activity being explored and, following Carbon (2019, p. 5), to allow participants "the possibility to choose the time needed to inspect and to re-attend" to paintings during investigation.

The image selected was Las Meninas by Diego Velazquez. This choice was informed in part by investigation and in part by intuition. Popular listings of favourite and greatest paintings were reviewed, and artistically inclined friends and colleagues consulted. An image that did not contain graphic depictions of violence or overtly upsetting material was sought and, due to the literature indicating that abstract images often received more negative assessments, a figurative painting was considered preferable. The painting was presented as an A2 reproduction in the position each participant indicated was most amenable to viewing for the duration of the interview. In Figure 1 the image is cropped to allow focus on the figures depicted.

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(Figure 1. about here)

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2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

IPA commonly makes use of the semi-structured interview to gather its data (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Semi-structured interviews involve a schedule of questions that is flexibly followed. Interviewers are led by participants and researchers probe or follow up on areas of interest allowing the discussion to proceed organically. The interview schedule used here was developed based on the questions asked in the extant literature and observations made during preliminary gallery visits (such as the types of conversations visitors engaged in). The full schedule consisted of 10 questions including "What are your first impressions of this painting?", "Can you tell me what it's like to look at the painting?" and for viewers familiar with the image, "Can you tell me about seeing this image before?". Interviews were conducted by the first author in private rooms where each participant felt comfortable to talk (e.g., their workplace or a room at Birkbeck University).

Participants consented to the recording and verbatim transcription of these interviews. They were given opportunity to retract any identifying details and allocated the pseudonyms used in this write up at the point. They consented to extracts from their interviews being used to demonstrate the findings.

Analysis followed the steps laid out in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Each transcript was analysed individually. The analysis for each participant was completed before moving on to the next and approached independently. Each analysis involved a close reading of the text and the development of a series of experiential statements which captured fine-grained meaningful aspects of the transcript (such as "The realisation of subjectivity (characters') via gaze" and "Seeing and being seen: experienced as enticing"). These statements were then clustered to develop a structure of superordinate themes which were divided into subthemes in instances where the material was particularly rich or complex.

The themes developed through each individual analysis were then explored for the group as a whole. A similar process of clustering meaningfully related material allowed the authors to identify patterns which emerged across the cases. A theme was considered representative of the group when it was present for at least half of the participants. Primary analysis was conducted by the first author and at each stage, the second was consulted to check interpretations and ensure that the developing thematic structure remained grounded in the data.

3. Results

To allow for depth of discussion, details of a single master theme, The Gaze, are presented here. This theme concerns the sensation of exchanging eye contact with figures in the painting and the various impacts and meanings that this engendered. Each of the participants' accounts evidenced this theme in a variety of forms and it is well summarised by Linda:

> *"This painting is all about the gaze and who's looking at who, how that configures how we see ourselves – which I think is interesting. This is these characters, what does that mean to our sense of selves and me as a viewer as well. So it is about gaze. People are gazing."*

It is something we perhaps take for granted, but the concept to which Linda introduces us in this extract is quite special; viewers perceive characters to look. These flat representations of humans, on a two-dimensional image set in the past, are perceived to direct their eye-line purposively and intentionally. The occurrence here is not limited to biological response but rather suggests a supreme work of imaginative dexterity. Furthermore, this looking "*the gaze*" is perceived as communicative and meaningful. Such interpretation has repercussions for our understanding of our sociality and for the ways that we perceive ourselves as viewers, as observers and as humans, it is "*all about the gaze and who's looking at who, how that configures how we see ourselves*".

Within this Master Theme, there are two subthemes: intersubjectivity, where within experiences of gaze, communication and reciprocal interactions of various kinds are emphasised, and implication, where the gaze becomes more value-laden and judgemental. Linda's comments here encompass both notions as she remarks upon people looking at one another and also the way this generates a questioning air – who are they, and we, who do this looking and "*what does that mean to our sense of selves"?*

3.1. Intersubjectivity

Depicted characters were seemingly experienced as able to complete looking acts that could affect the viewer, cause them to think, or change them. Here William introduces the vivacity of these looks (emphasising the depicted painter rather than the artist who created the painting):

> *"The painter, looking straight out to you, up, straight out, and that catches your gaze as he is looking at you, as he is looking at **you** rather than a window or something."*

William describes the allure he feels on identifying a direct look from a character. It attracts his own gaze. The looking is perceived as being directed 'straight' out of the image towards him. It locates him, specifies him, acknowledges his presence and in doing so, establishes a basic connection between him and the figure performing the looking act. The painter is looking right at William rather than anywhere else.

Owen also described synergistic feelings concerning figures in the painting whom he perceived to be looking at him:

> "I was a lot more engaged with the people in the painting and how they were looking at me and maybe what they were telling me and what I could tell them back."

Here he expresses a sense of communication between himself and the characters, engendered by their directed gaze ("*looking at me*"). This gaze has a transmissivity. It allows the "*people in the painting*" to tell Owen things and supports a movement of understandings. This gaze not only establishes a relationship between figure and viewer, it also has an invigorating quality bringing about a perceived degree of sentience. Here, being the recipient of the gaze apparently arouses issues of self-consciousness as well as those of other-consciousness; Owen comes to consider what he "*could tell them back*".

Like Owen, each participant alluded to resonances beyond the observation of figures looking out of the image and emphasised the experience of being looked *at,* as Linda explained:

> "Two figures that strike me are almost looking directly at you are the princess and the dwarf – they're both looking directly at you and I think the expressions on their faces they're very humane expressions on both their faces actually and actually both show this great confessional… like the dwarf she doesn't seem that interested almost in what's going on around er… it's almost as if she's looking at you the viewer."

Linda here indicates feeling an engagement with two characters who are "*both looking directly at you*". These direct gazes are seemingly felt to act as a conduit between the gazers, transmitting actively developing understandings. In her description, Linda first illustrates an establishment of commonality, the figures look directly at her. She sees in return what she describes as their humaneness and a sort of openness to interaction and sharing of truths. It is difficult not to associate the term 'confessional' with religious connotations and this

emphasises the depth of the connection Linda alludes to. More generically, the term implies that the interaction is understood by Linda to potentially be one of openness and generosity. When a person confesses, they may reveal vignettes of great significance or importance (or sin?). The gaze here brings the characters to life not just as representations bound to a moment, but as continuous people with narratives to share.

The importance of the directed nature of the looking becomes clearer in the finale of the paragraph. As Linda considers the interaction further, another sense develops. The characters move beyond a personable openness to become inquisitive, they gaze through their own context to see her specifically as a viewer. The connection established via the gaze seemingly surmounts all other goings-on. Linda does not leave her viewing position nor do the characters leave their image-world, rather the gaze somehow recognises they are painting and viewer and joins them in any case. It both acknowledges and disregards ontological difference somehow bursting through the space between worlds.

Being seen is captivating for Sasha too:

> *"I think the thing about someone looking out at you from a painting is about um. Drawing you in, um, you know making you feel there's a living person in there that could be looking back at you um and observing you as you are observing them."*

Here Sasha alludes to the particular draw of perceiving a sentient gaze originating from an image. This gaze is not random. The allure is attached to the perception of a look which is the return of one's own gaze and the counteraction to one's action as a viewer. Sasha, like the other viewers, describes an animating power present in the gaze. The figure in the image is alive and reciprocating her eye contact. They too are a conscious, critical observer, a partner in an exchange of looks. Both viewer and figure are apparently aware of one another, both are observer and observee.

There is a dynamic flow to this involvement. Perceiving a character to be alive and looking brings them into being and grants them the ability to perform such looking acts. This intersubjective flourishing was apparently enjoyable for Oliver:

> *"I like it because it's a very human connection, he's looking at me, looking at him."*

For Oliver, engaging in such reciprocated looking was a notably positive experience because of its 'human' quality. In this extract, we can see again, that through the perception of an act of looking, the figure in the image becomes a person, a fellow participant in a social exchange. This character is seemingly experienced as a living subject, just as capable of viewing Oliver as he is of viewing them.

All these interactions demonstrate the ability of the gaze to act as a bridge of consciousness between character and viewer. Aspects of this connection involve openness, communication and reciprocal acknowledgement. They involve the realisation not only of the figures as more than just depicted forms, but also the realisation of the viewer's position in this interaction and hence of themselves as viewer and fellow human alike.

3.2. Implication

The participants all indicated experiencing an additional, potent, capability of the gaze. To receive a character's looking could involve notions of questioning, appraisal, perhaps judgement or condemnation. Paul introduced this implicating twist to the gaze thus:

> *"It's almost as if there are people looking out from the painting and there's a kind of silent question that quite a few of them seem to have, a stillness, I don't know sort of 'what do you make of this?' Or maybe something more complicated than that but, veiled."*

In this extract, Paul describes his perception of characters' lookings and his experience of observing those looking acts. This dual involvement feels pregnant with an energy that potentiates further engagement and animates the figures in the frame. He tells us "*it's almost as if there are people looking out*" alluding to the life breathing quality resident in the perception of a character's gaze. Through their gaze characters become 'people', real and alive rather than figures brushed onto a canvas. The looking as Paul interprets it, is not arbitrary. Characters look 'out', their gaze is directed. For Paul, seemingly their looking possesses an intentionality.

As in many of the aforementioned extracts, the gaze has the power to locate the onlooker and to specify their position as a viewer. Paul also senses something additional, veiled, complicated. In this extract, the Gaze is interpreted in the form of an oblique question *"what do you make of this?"*. It is targeted towards a specified 'you'; the question is not '*what is this all about?*'. As the characters are granted a personhood through the gaze, so the person they

gaze upon is brought into view. And the viewer is not only looked at by their counterpart in the image; their interaction has an appraising, maybe abrasive, aspect. The viewer is involved in a communication and the character/s have a stillness, waiting for a response. The Gaze has potential beyond simply that of a tether between viewer and character. It not only establishes a connection, communiqué of different forms also travel through this bond. Oliver recounts:

> *"I can see the painter who is looking at me, trying to say 'are you interested in what I'm trying to tell you?'."*

Through the perception of an active directed looking, Oliver also interprets an appraising aspect of the gaze. The gaze contains and can transmit ideas. However, not only is the artist attempting to communicate something to him, he is also questioning Oliver's interest in his teachings. In Oliver's interpretation here, there is an air of superiority associated with the artist. He has something of value to say and as such his gaze has the potential to belittle, should he see Oliver as lacking in his ability to engage. Via this gaze, Oliver attributes the artist in the image with the possession of his own mental life and faculties. He can interpret, consider and perhaps judge others' (Oliver's) mental states.

In these accounts, the gaze seemingly breathes subjectivity into both character and viewer. It brings fictional characters to life, according them with active minds, minds which in turn may locate the viewer in the viewing experience. Via the gaze the viewer can be implicated in reciprocal social interaction and, importantly, this may occur in circumstances not always of their choosing, as further explored by Paul:

> *"The people looking out, various people looking out er they seem to be inviting a response erm particularly the painter in it…. the little girl it might be you know looking you know 'aren't I pretty, aren't I behaving well?' etcetera. The painter is, it's a bit more not nastily but a bit more confrontational I think. He's sort of caught in er the act of painting…. And his… he's got the 'ah yes'…"*

In this extract Paul refers to the characters in the image as "*people*" who look "*out*" from the image, traversing the boundary of the canvas and seemingly inviting a response. This appears to Paul at first to be a somewhat friendly request for acknowledgement. The little girl desires her appearance and good behaviour to be recognised. Despite her childish (as Paul perceives

it) nature, she is capable of an awareness of her audience and of considering their potential reactions to her.

The painter's looking act similarly is interpreted by Paul as behest to mentally react. He attributes a "*bit more confrontational*" aspect to this interaction. Interestingly he talks about feeling as if he has caught the painter "*in er the act of painting*". A turn of phrase that suggests deviance or nonconformity. The painter's response to this is then a somewhat guilty "*ah yes*" which could be interpreted as either resigned or belligerent. Why might a painter in the act of painting be considered unorthodox? How does this relate to the idea that he is being seen by his viewer?

Owen also discussed shades of deviance possibly associated with looking, concerning the gaze of one of the female servants:

> "*She has a quite, almost accusative gaze as if saying 'Well why…. Why are you staring at me so much?'.*"

The notion that a figure in a painting may be concerned with being overly stared at is quite powerful in its nonsensical nature. A figure created to be looked at, regards her onlookers in an accusatory fashion. She is at once constituted through this looking and is also scathing of it. Owen uses the terms "*staring*" "*so much*", which lends the looking act an intrusive or improper feel. In the same way that the artist was "*caught*" in the act of painting, some boundary has been overstepped.

It is an interesting idea that the figures in the image, who exist in a viewer's gaze, might dictate the guidelines by which they are viewed, and, paradoxically, that they might do so through being looked at and looking back. The implicating aspect of the gaze is apparently potent. It may assess and judge, recognise the viewer's faults and even beguile them into impropriety.

In these considerations of intersubjectivity and implication, we have seen that the gaze can be multiply and dynamically laden. We have seen that the gaze can be felt as a warm human connection and equally as a more rousing challenging force. That it can call into question aspects of the self and implicate the self as a viewer. That it can locate subjectivity and reflect its shared aspects. That it can animate characters and allow them to critically observe us, their observers, in turn.

4. Discussion

The Master Theme 'The Gaze', outlined experiences of viewers as being looked at or gazed upon by characters in the painting. It was developed through the in-depth analysis of individual accounts which were then considered for a group of participants to derive meaningful experiential patterns. Although some idiographic detail was inevitably lost when the analysis was developed from individual to group level, the original fine-grained approach, combined with a small relatively homogenous sample, facilitated development of a detailed account of the experience in question. In the following discussion, reference to *the group* or *the viewers* indicates the majority, but not necessarily all, of the sample.

The study involved participants who were self-described art enthusiasts and their viewings of a particular painting. These conditions evidently influence the findings. Potentially research involving participants disinterested in art, or who viewed a different style of artwork, would suggest different facets of any broader notion of the experience of art-viewing. Conversely, this painting and these viewers are by no means alien to all other paintings and viewers but are part of a greater whole. The relationship between inner thought and public speech is not simple. There is no claim to replicate or capture, simply by asking about it in the moment, the exact content of a participant's internal thoughts when viewing a painting. By interviewing each participant whilst looking at the image over a period of time as one might naturally, the hope was to become *closer* to the experience involved. The work reported here is, therefore, not intended to be definitive, but rather to contribute to what it is hoped will be an ever-growing experiential collage.

Eye contact has been described as one of the "most intimate modes of interpersonal encounter" (Heron, 1970, p. 243) and is commonly considered a social phenomenon. Frischen, Baylis and Tipper (2007) describe a 'language of the eyes' through which information about the direction of attention, emotion and meaning can be conveyed. Gaze has been demonstrated to play an important role in social cognition (Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991; De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007; Itier and Batty, 2009) and direct gaze, in particular, is suggested to be a significant communicative signal (Conty *et al.*, 2007).

However, in research regarding paintings (which is sparse), perception of gaze has historically been treated as the purview of psychophysics. The sensation of being followed by the eyes of a portrayed figure, for example, is often explored via manipulation of spatial awareness and pictorial features (e.g. Koenderink *et al.*, 2004). Similarly, gaze direction of

characters is commonly treated as a prompt, orienting the direction of viewers' looking, (e.g. Dukewich, Klein and Christie, 2008).

Experience of gaze in the accounts reported here was characterised by impressions of intersubjectivity and implication. Gaze established a dialogical connection between the viewer and the gazing character. It appeared laden with far more meaning than that which 'cued' attention. Linda, for instance, termed the gaze *"confessional"*. Paul described a sense of being questioned *"sort of 'what do you make of this?' Or maybe something more complicated than that but, veiled"*. As surmised by Oliver *"it's a very human connection"*.

The gaze which viewers sensed had a particularly implicating character. It reminded many of their physical presence as they stood before the image. It generated an awareness of their mental, intentional selves as they were gazed upon, witnessed in the act of their looking - Sasha experienced the characters *"observing you as you are observing them"*.

The implications of becoming self-aware through another's gaze have been the concern of various philosophers. A central question for Jean-Paul Sartre in his discussion of looking and being looked at was, "What does *being seen* mean for me?" (Sartre, 1992, p. 347). Sartre's famous notion of the 'look' (*le regard)* describes the epistemological nature of being located in the gaze of another. According to Sartre, the self gains knowledge of its own consciousness, or comes to be aware of itself, through *le regard.* Consciousness apprehends itself as the result of recognising that it exists in the consciousness of others: "I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me" (p .349.). Such consequence of being looked at is echoed in the accounts presented here. Lookers are located by the stares coming from the painting, the gaze is experienced as directed specifically towards them *"looking at you rather than a window or something…"* (William).

The gaze flowed both ways for the viewers. It was not experienced solely as a discharge of information from the image but also acted as a conduit, equally able to communicate information from the viewer back to the character, as from the character to the viewer: *"how they were looking at me and maybe what they were telling me and what I could tell them back"* (Owen).

Sartre posited that self-awareness must be different phenomenologically from awareness of objects: "My objectivity cannot itself derive for me from the objectivity of the world since I am precisely the one for whom there is a world" (p. 281). What does this mean when self and

object meet and blur in the way art-works can engender? This seeing somebody whose look grants my self-awareness is also some*thing*, not an actual person but a depiction. What does this mean in terms of being seen and the nature of our subsequent self-reflection?

Sartre suggested that the look has both phenomenological (being seen by someone else) and metaphorical (the metaphor of being able to 'see' oneself) forms. The look then is not necessarily bound to another person or body: "the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, a light movement of a curtain" (p. 281). However, although an imagined or implied other can 'look' upon us and take the form of a 'probable' being, Sartre also asserted the importance of the embodied sentient aspect of the encounter. The other is apprehended as a "presence in person" (p. 278) and "I am vulnerable, I have a body which can be hurt" (p. 282)

Echoing this tension, the gaze as experienced here was perceived as coming from the *painting*, associated with a physical object, and so more than something 'only' implied or imagined – and yet this other, depicted and looking, was not fully an embodied, sentient, living being. A depicted physicality, positioned in space with a gaze that has a direction and originates from an identifiable place is identified, but a corporeal, sensing, responding being with its own physically established presence extending back, it is not.

Is there something particular about this sensation of intersubjectivity without intercorporeality which gives viewing a painting a particular experiential quality? We engage with the world through our bodies. Bodies determine how we experience the world and allow us to suggest our selves to others (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). Fuchs and De Jaeger (2009) describe enactive intersubjectivity as the "coordination of two embodied agents", "a process in which the lived bodies of both participants extend and form a common intercorporeality" (p. 465). In the case of art-viewing, the second embodied presence is lacking. Does something else fill this void? Perhaps viewers impregnate the space through othering aspects of themselves? Is this why the interaction is felt to become "*more confrontational"* (Paul) and *"almost accusative"* (Owen)? Such considerations could lend interesting direction to future investigation in this area.

More broadly, a bidirectionality, consciousness as realised through looking, was alluded to in this theme. Viewers' gazes were directed towards the characters in the painting and in turn, they were gazed at. Through this movement viewers and characters were both found and

forged. This experience was sometimes agitating and unsettling. It was variously felt as an intrusion or a reaching out and a meeting or union.

Attention is drawn to the experiential shiftings and sublimations which emerged in the accounts here. Via their interaction, entities became located and re-located in physical and personal relations to one *another*. Experiences of reciprocity and connection disclosed subjective and intersubjective movements and exchanges. A disruption or imbalance within the usual way meaning is formed and developed through social interaction was alluded to. The facticity of the other altered. The relation between the self and epistemological space shifted and potentially called into question.

Seemingly when we view art, we are not separate entities from a 'reality' which we are presented with, and into which we can become more, or less, immersed. The painting and viewer do not necessarily represent distinct independent worlds, the meeting of which is mediated by external contextual factors. Rather art-viewing is an enactment of a world, complete with a background of pre-givens and alive with interpretative activity and meaning-making. It could be argued, therefore, that trying to understand art appreciation by attempting to establish a meaningful differentiation between image content, perception of that content and viewer characteristics, may distance us from what happens when we look at art.

Indeed, as previously described, much of the quantitative and experimental literature regarding art-viewing considers separate typologies and components of images and viewers or models interactions between them. Experientially, such categories appear far more fluid. Viewers can exist within images, images can look, one can become part of a painting in a manner that erodes the boundary between the image and one's safe position as an external detached viewer. Notions of expertise or nativity, or artistic genre, recede in the face of oils somehow shaped to form a little girl, a figure created to be viewed and yet with "*a quite, almost accusative gaze as if saying 'Well why…. Why are you staring at me so much?'"*. A question with the potential to tax veterans and laypersons alike.

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Figures:

Figure 1: Detail from *Las Meninas*. Painter: Velázquez (1656). Illustration is in the public domain. No permission needed. Retrieved from Wikipedia