

Woman with a Moving Mirror and Man with a Movie Camera

A REVIEW OF MARYAM TAGHAVI'S VIDEO "Study on a Silhouette (God Sees)"

BY BAVAND BEHPOOR

One night in the presence of his students, Bayazid [the Iranian mystic figure of the ninth century] said, 'God is in my clothes.' By that, he meant he is nothing but God, and whoever wants to find God should look for Him through Bayazid. On the next day, his followers narrated what he had said the night before. 'When I said it, was I in a normal state?' Bayazid inquired. 'No,' they replied. 'From now on, have your swords and daggers at hand during the night. If you hear me utter such words again, kill me without hesitation.' The following night Bayazid repeated his words and so the students attacked. But the more they tried to stab him, the more they cut themselves.

Following the above anecdote about Bayazid Bastami, Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, the 13th century Iranian mystic poet and thinker concludes:

His image had disappeared and he was nothing but a mirror. There was no more room for the image of a stranger [to truth]. If you spit to the mirror, you are spitting to yourself; if you cut the mirror, you cut yourself. If you see an ugly face, that's you. If you see Mary's Jesus, that's also you. But God is neither this nor that. He has put your image in front of you.

Rumi's bold conclusion can also give words to the silent bitter tone that underlies the piece 'Study on a Silhouette': one cannot fail to recognise the condensed pressure, even quenched anger, embedded in the poetical image of Maryam Taghavi walking around gracefully in the Art Institute of Chicago. In silence and with much dignity and care, as if in a ritual, she carries a mirror that covers her face and body. The mirror prevents her from seeing, or being seen (hence just a silhouette), yet it represents, as it were, the artworks in the museum and the museum itself as she walks along corridors, halls and up and down staircases. If one could consider a mirror image a representation, then

'Study on a Silhouette' would have been, to borrow Socrates' words in Plato's *The Republic*, 'thrice removed from reality':

[...] And is there not a maker of the works of all workmen, who makes not only vessels but plants and animals, himself, the earth and heaven, and things in heaven and under the earth? He makes the Gods also. 'He must be a wizard indeed!' But do you not see that there is a sense in which you could do the same? You have only to take a mirror, and catch the reflection of the sun, and the earth, or anything else – there now you have made them. 'Yes, but only in appearance. 'Exactly so [...] Reflect: Here are three beds; one in nature, which is made by God; another, which is made by the carpenter; and the third, by the painter. God only made one, nor could he have made more than one.

What the viewer sees in 'God Sees' (the work's previous title) is a video representation of a mirrored representation of a painted representation of a thing. But the mirrored image is somehow very different from the other two: within the mirror, there is 'no more room for the image of a stranger' as Rumi puts it. Probably for the same reason, no one else accompanies Taghavi in the museum apart from the cameraman, Rodrigo Gratacos Brum. Until the end, the viewer does not see the woman behind the moving mirror, nor the man with a movie camera, nor their reflections. The mirror does something here that the camera or paintings don't: It does not simply copy, imitate or re-present. Nor does it record, categorise, interpret or archive. It displaces reality and emphasizes it as an image. In other words, it makes self-conscious that one is looking at the painting and prevents her from being absorbed into the act of seeing. It shows rather than representing. As Umberto Eco has argued, the mirrored image is no sign, and fundamentally differs from an ordinary representation.

Is the mirror a semiotic phenomenon? Or else, is the image reflected from the mirror surface a sign? These questions may well be nonsense—in that common sense would suggest that mirrors are just mirrors. In any case, putting such questions is not without purpose: it might be somewhat meaningless to discover that the mirror image is a sign, but it would be more interesting to discover that the mirror image is not a sign and why.

Contrary to signs, the object presented by a mirror is always present. It is a representation in the presence of the thing. The mirror confronts you with you. It does not refer to you: It is you. In 'God Sees' the museum sees itself. Taghavi ventures to confront museum with itself, in the presence of a camera and the absence of viewers. Hence, the blasphemous quality of Taghavi's move within the ideological temple that is the museum. There is always an ethical side to act of holding a mirror up to another, and forcing upon them a mirror stage, particularly if they have not passed any, as in the case of museums, which are very young creatures. This is exactly because mirrors refuse to interpret or represent. It is because the mirror is always silent, and cannot be addressed except by a narcissist culture: 'Mirror! Mirror on the wall!'

The mirror has no desire. If you prostrate one hundred times before the mirror and beg it: 'This is my dear friend, do not reveal this one defect of him', the mirror will reply in silence, 'That would be impossible.'

However, the piece is not just a visual critique on museums per se. It rather evokes a silent cultural protest of a different kind, one which brings in issues of gender and racial background, and of museums as archives that deprive other cultures of their wealth: a wealth of material that accentuates poverty elsewhere. Or in other words, the presence of every historical object in such an 'encyclopedic' museum refers to the absence of that object somewhere else. In this sense, Taghavi begins a competition that cannot be won, unless the idea of representation, framing and valuing art is radically redefined. The mirror image has the power to do so. As for Socrates (in Plato's words), it is the easiest means to remake the world; without falling into the trap of signs and categorisation, as Eco had argued. Taghavi's walk in the museum, in this sense, is a one-woman-march: a silent attack; a re-enactment of a competition long lost.

The earliest example of an art competition in Persian literature is the story of Chinese and Greek painters narrated by various Iranian poets of different centuries (including Nezami, Jami, Ghazali and Rumi just to name a few). According to the story, a match was organised by an emperor between the Chinese and Greek painters. The two groups of painters were to paint to facing niches, and a curtain was drawn between them. When both groups are done with their work, the curtain is opened only to prove that both paintings are identical in every detail. Once the curtain is drawn again, one painting disappears. A closer inspection reveals that the Chinese painter had only polished the

wall instead of painting it. The story ends, curiously enough, with polishers being announced as better ‘painters’, because the reflected image was livelier and brighter than the original. Also because it moved as the viewer changed their standpoint.

Maryam Taghavi accepts a similar challenge by taking a mirror into the museum. She avoids seeing, rather plays the role of a mirror, diverting the gaze and leaving the judgment to the viewer. The mirror frames the objects as it moves, disrupting their spatial position, without ever hiding the frame itself. It is unimportant that she does not see: God sees. In Rumi’s words: ‘her image disappears and she is nothing but a mirror. There was no more room for the image of a stranger. She puts your image in front of you.’ Within the silence of the video, it is as if one word of Socrates, still silently reverberates: ‘Reflect!’

¹ *God Sees* was the initial title of the work for an exhibition called ‘Painting in Time’, 2016.

² Mowlavi (2016) *Masnavi*, Book IV, Part 79, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson (Tehran: Hermes), p. 642-3, shortened, my translation

³ Ibid.

⁴ Plato (2016) *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Woodstock, Ontario: Devoted Publishing), p. 61.

⁵ Umberto Eco (1986) *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 202.

⁶ Shams al-Din Mohammad Tabrizi (2012) *Maghālat-e Shams-e Tabrīzī (Shasm Tabrizi’s Essays)*, ed. Muhammad Ali Movahhed (Tehran: Kharazmi), pp. 69-70, my translation.

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Born 1980 in Shiraz, Iran, Bavand Behpoor is an artist, art historian and curator based in Tehran. Having completed a master’s degree in architecture at Shiraz University, he continued his studies in the UK and graduated with an MA in Contemporary Art Theory at Goldsmiths College. After four years of working as a lecturer at Tehran art universities as well as serving as a curator and art critic, he earned a PhD in Art History at Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich. He has recently founded his own art school in Tehran where he experiments with innovative ways of combining art education and art production which are informed by the local visual culture.