

The Communicative
Power Of Silence:
'Why are you angry?'

BY MINOU NOROUZI



1. Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981, p.53–55

2. Roland Barthes, p.53–55

3. The degree to which this is actually possible is disputed. According to phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, intentionality already contains the pre-informed. See (Husserl's Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy). Nonetheless, I am an advocate for the practice of 'emptying out' as much as possible any assumptions, preconceptions about what a work of art should do (Hollis Frampton, On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton. Edited by Bruce Jenkins. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The Mit Press, 2009).

4. Forugh Farrokhzad, tr. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, Remembering the Flight; Twenty Poems by Forugh Farrokhzad, Los Angeles: Ketab Corp, 2004, p.31

5. Forugh Farrokhzad, p.35

6. Nicole Wolf, 'MAKE IT REAL. Documentary and Other Cinematic Experiments by Women Filmmakers in India' Kulturwissenschaftlichen Fakultät Viadrina, Lehrstuhl für Vergleichende- und Sozialanthropologie, der Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder, 2007

The photograph must be silent, Roland Barthes declares in *Camera Lucida* (*La chambre claire*), his famed and often-cited eulogy to his late mother. In this text too, he says that to see a photograph well it may be best to shut one's eyes.¹ Although the relationship Barthes sets up may seem peculiar, a non-literal interpretation points to the rewards that can be reaped when we let our affective perception do the work for us. The poetry of Barthes's 'silence' reveals an image politics that focuses on the relationship between the viewer and the depicted. In order to be touched by a photograph it may be best "to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness".² I read Barthes's silence like this: the act of photographing and viewing must both free itself from expectation and then actively resist the desire to secure meaning.³ You could think of this as meditation, or some kind of cognitive reboot – I think of it as responsible (image) consumption and production. Before exploring the expansive potential of this silence through a close reading of 'Why Are You Angry?', a video work by UK-based artists Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer. I would like to first declare my fondness for a poem, 'The Windup Doll', by the late Iranian writer and filmmaker Forough Farrokhzad. It opens with the line "More than this, yes / more than this one can stay silent".⁴ The words that follow set up the scene of the observer, the act of looking and of thinking. Farrokhzad continues with an irreverently polemic, thoughtful and detailed catalogue of all the other forms of activity a moment of silence may facilitate: to watch, gaze, stand motionless, find, trade, mould, "be constant, like zero", before crying out aloud "for no reason at all" – and in spite of all that has been seen and thought – "Ah, so happy am I!"⁵ Like Barthes's, Farrokhzad's is a bittersweet declaration. Although these silences may be born out of exclusion, crisis, pain or oppression, they can also be willed, decolonised positions.⁶ Both Barthes and Farrokhzad indict words and images with communicative inefficacy and introduce an alternative: the acts of looking and thinking in silence as an active means of communicating the world and ourselves in it. This is to say, by way of a rather broad introduction, that silence doesn't necessarily imply adversity. More than this, we can interpret silence as having a communicative power of its own, fully capable of conveying and transmitting thought. Nashashibi/Skaer's 'Why Are You Angry?' (2017) communicates through images and sounds and their absences, for the most part avoiding the spoken word. These absences invite viewers to overwrite the film with their own images and thoughts. The film takes its title from Paul Gauguin's painting *Why Are You Angry?* (*No Te Aha Oe Riri*, 1896), one of a series of three paintings depicting Polynesian women and landscapes that Nashashibi/Skaer restaged. The other two were *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892) and *Nevermore* (1897). These are recreated as moving image tableaux intercut with observational documentary footage of the day-to-day domestic lives of Tahitian women. Gauguin's opulent 'paradise' is disrupted by Nashashibi/Skaer's inclusion of messy yards, stormy weather and grainy black-and-white footage. The exacting sound design avoids explanatory speech. Instead, 'Why Are You Angry?' is composed of shifting auditory intensities ranging from field recordings to the total absence of sound. Their film traces the ambiguities in Gauguin's colonial narrative of exoticised women and faraway lands. Yet Nashashibi/Skaer's Tahitian women replicate the silence of Gauguin's women. But is it the same? By replicating Gauguin's pictorial ambiguities through their use of sound and its absence, Nashashibi/Skaer return to familiar questions about the representation of women without providing any answers. The value of their open-ended questioning comes with the decision to keep sequences mute and do away with speech acts. The images resist a definitive reading and encourage

the viewer's active engagement in constructing their own narrative. The first restaging we see is of Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892). The original image features Gauguin's young Tahitian lover Teha'amana, and is thought to deal with questions of sex and sexuality.⁷ It shows an adolescent nude lying on her stomach watched over by another figure dressed in a black cloak. The tone of Teha'amana's gaze in the painting, described as fearful, remains the subject of speculation. Writing in his autobiographical fiction *Noa Noa*, Gauguin sites 'tupapau', the Spirit of the Dead in Tahitian mythology, as the cause of Teha'amana's fear.⁸ Others argue that Teha'amana was fearful of Gauguin himself – the much older, colonial, white Other.⁹ Reading into the ambiguity of her look is part of the viewing experience. One thing of which we can be certain is that Gauguin painted his own gaze. What we see is his act of looking at 'the native' and the projected 'authenticity' he hoped to sell to European viewers. Although the painting purports to be a criticism of European imperialist domination of 'nature' – one Gauguin hoped to remedy with the sexual freedom implied in Teha'amana's pose – it ends up implicating the viewer in the colonial gaze: the viewer, alongside the painter, is the intruder.¹⁰ Since there is no record of Teha'amana's own account of her experience, Nashashibi/Skaer's restaging of Gauguin's image could be viewed as an attempt to reclaim this silence by overwriting it with their own.¹¹ This may seem incongruous. Why reinforce silence and ambiguity? Susan Sontag offers both an indictment and appraisal of the uses and abuses of silence in art:

7. See Stephen F. Eisenman, Gauguin's Skirt, *Thames & Hudson*, 1999; Griselda Pollock, Avant-Garde Gambits 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History, *Thames & Hudson*, 1993.

8. (Gauguin 1919)

9. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism" in Race-ing Art History, ed. Kymberly N. Pinder, Routledge, 2002.

10. Ruud Welten, 'Paul Gauguin and the Complexity of the Primitivist Gaze.' *Journal of Art Historiography*, June 2015, p. 14.

Silence is a metaphor for a cleansed, noninterfering vision, in which one might envisage the making of art-works that are unresponsive before being seen, unviolable in their essential integrity by human scrutiny. The spectator would approach art as he does a landscape. A landscape doesn't demand from the spectator his "understanding".¹²

But we could also say that silence, like landscape, does demand understanding. Rather than looking at

11. For a discussion on the appropriation of Gauguin's work as a feminist practice of resistance including the work of Polynesian artists see "Taking Back Teha'amana: Feminist Interventions in Gauguin's Legacy" (Norma Broude, Gauguin's Challenge: New Perspectives After Postmodernism, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018: 229 – 249).

12. Susan Sontag, Styles of Radical Will, Vol. eBook, New York: Picador USA, 2013, p. 30

13. On the topic of opacity as a "source of unknowability that is also a sign of potentiality" see T.J. Demos's essay titled "The Right to Opacity: On the Otolith Group's *Nervous Rerum*", October Magazine, 2009, no. 129: 113–28.

landscape, if we consider being in it (both as observers and performers of actions within it), the need to navigate through it, for example, and more specifically the safe passage through a landscape, we can determine that all these things require a movement towards understanding. The filmic landscape of 'Why Are You Angry?' similarly demands navigational initiative from its viewer by means of the ambiguities produced by the absence of sound, spoken word or any kind of explanatory frame. This type of communicative opacity can be a position of strength, asking more from the viewer than a speech act would.¹³ In short, communicative opacity, or silence, can invert the gaze, turning it inward. In Nashashibi/Skaer's restaging of Gauguin's 'Spirit of the Dead Watching', a woman lies naked on her stomach on a divan. Later, she is replaced by a young nude figure who assumes the same pose. Neither of the women standing in for Teha'amana looks afraid. The figure of Death, seated in the background of Gauguin's painting, is initially absent. Later, both women stand in for this figure, taking it in turns. Throughout this scene the sound is muted, and returns with a wide shot of the young nude with her companion seated in the background as the figure of Death. Contrasting the women is inevitable. The women either look straight at the camera or past it. At times they appear thoughtful; at other times ambivalent. As one of them gets up during the first part of this sequence, she smiles. Reading her lips, she is saying "Je ne sais pas". The muted sequence invites viewers to read the silence. Gauguin's painting is a frozen action. We do not know how Teha'amana felt about being seen, or how willing she was to be painted.



In contrast, the film includes scenes from the making of a painted reproduction. These contain the wordless negotiations between the image-maker and sitter that we can only imagine for the original situation of Gauguin's painting. Nashashibi/Skaer's interventions reassure us that the sitters were willing participants. The predominantly silent interactions between image-maker and sitter, including their hesitations, foreground the vulnerability of both. Neither knows exactly what the effects of their experiment will be. Unwilling to provide an explanatory frame, Nashashibi/Skaer intensify the uncertainty, ambivalence and ambiguity present in Gauguin's painting.

Other muted segments in the film feature joyful interactions, either among the Tahitian women, or with those behind the camera. The soundscape of the film is diagetic, reflecting what we might hear when we are silent: the wind gets to speak; waves; roosters crow; the sounds of cars; the sound of the 16mm film gauge turning; the drone of an airplane cabin; all manner of birds; barely audible music from a distant PA system. Only once do we hear the women speak. They tell each other their names. Although they otherwise commit no speech acts, dropping in and out of sound, this seems to amplify their expressiveness. A certain compositional intensity is achieved by the uncertainty of the silence.

The second restaging addresses the painting *Why Are You Angry?* (*No Te Aha Oe Riri*). This features a group of women watched over by a central, matriarchal figure. She sits on her doorstep with her hand held against her face in a gesture of contemplation, but it isn't convincing. The painting's still figures are restaged in real time, with moving figures, intercut with documentary images of the women in their daily lives. As is the case with some of Nashashibi's previous works, here "real action and ritualised action coexist".¹⁴ Remade like this, the imperfect restaging of Gauguin's 'authentic native' in 'Why Are You So Angry?' renders any mythological reading of Gauguin's scene impossible. The process of remaking renders the whole exercise unreal, awkward, and therefore casts doubt on the project of representing 'authenticity'. The power of the film resides in showing how the mythology or exoticism of Gauguin's paintings relies on the viewer's construction of it. The domestic and banal 'reality' of the staging disrupts the mythology of 'paradise' and the colonial gaze. Gauguin presumably wanted to sell paintings, and the descriptions provided in *Noa Noa* work towards that goal. Nashashibi/Skaer mythologise in order to draw attention to the conflict present in framing these images of Tahitian women through the colonial gaze. They introduce questions about the viewer's complicity in the production of that gaze. While aware that their mythologisation has its limits, they acknowledge that being female authors of mixed ethnicity does not give them greater access to 'authenticity'. Nashashibi explains that in order to break through the exoticised colonial tropes, they set out to replicate Gauguin's position to see if in their hands the process of image production could inspire a different reading. By their own admission, the degree to which they have succeeded is debatable. As indicated earlier, their success is entirely contingent on the viewer's participation in forming their own relationship to the images and the questions they raise. Gauguin's women are silent, and since the film deliberately replicates this muteness, it is not easy to pinpoint how the integrity of the women, their 'wholeness' is communicated. But it is significant that one of the only times in the film a woman 'speaks' is through the soundless but readable "Je ne sais pas". Is it in their willingness to participate in the roleplay designed by Nashashibi/Skaer, the ways they choose to look at or past the camera, that we begin to feel their agency? Does their silence open up other possibilities for knowledge and understanding?

Silence, Sontag writes, "remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment), and an element in a dialogue".¹⁵ Its distinguishing mark is its openness to not knowing and not needing to know. Ambiguity can be productive. 'Why Are You Angry?' doesn't claim to produce meaning for the viewer and it doesn't claim authenticity. Its value might simply lie in its opening or reopening of a discussion. The camera introduces the conditions of an open-ended looking: undecided, unguarded, without epistemological certainty, without any certainty at all. This form of communication, while often understood as a loss of power, erasure or lack, can also be

¹⁴ Vincent Honoré and Manuela Ribadeneira eds, Rosalind Nashashibi, *Drawing Room Confessions* 6. London: Mousse Publishing, 2012, p17

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, p. 21

16. Erika Balsom, 'The Reality-Based Community', e-Flux Journal #83, June 2017

17. Susan Sontag, p. 24

18. 'Object! On The Documentary as Art' symposium (Whitechapel Gallery, February 2017) organised for Sheffield Fringe.

seen as cultivating the capacity of thought to call another's thought into being. Similarly arising in the context of disempowerment, this type of communicative opacity feels to me very similar, if not identical, to the empowered silence I described in connection with Farrokhzad's poem.

In her polemical essay 'The Reality Based Community', Erika Balsom advocates passionately for the observational documentary mode as a "space of attunement" where encounters "with alterity and contingency can occur, with no secure meaning assured".¹⁶ This approach, favoured by many filmmakers operating in the art context, but also practiced within distinct historical branches of documentary, like direct cinema, *cinéma vérité*, ethnographic film, and experimental and avant-garde cinema, is to say nothing, or very little, aiming only to be there, nearby, alongside, waiting. Insights may or may not emerge. To quote Sontag once more, "[T]he notions of silence, emptiness, reduction, sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc."¹⁷ The "pleasure of the real" then, as Nashashibi put it in a symposium at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2017, may be located in the conscious practice of not knowing and not needing to know.¹⁸