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DAYDREAMING WOMEN – PASSIVE BODY, ACTIVE MIND

Some Notes on Elin Danielson-Gambogi's and Helene Schjerfbeck's Art, the Brain and Creativity

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A young woman is sitting at a messy breakfast table, smoking a cigarette. Her gaze does not seem to fix on anything in particular – she seems to be stuck in a daydream. This is Elin Danielson-Gambogi's (1861–1919) painting *After Breakfast* (*Päättynyt aamiainen,* 1890), depicting her sister Rosa [Fig. 1]. From today's perspective, the scene is not very spectacular and the image depicted in the painting reminds us of a snapshot of someone in a relaxed Sunday mood. However, back then (in 1890) the painting was a revolutionary statement: the young woman in the painting does not seem to care if she meets expectations or not. And indeed, she did not. During that time, it was the duty of women to keep the household tidy. But it is not only the chaos on the table that was unconventional – smoking was as well for a woman. Women that were seen smoking (in public) were in general associated with marginalised social groups, such as prostitutes, actresses or New Women. Also, the room hints at a way of life that was the opposite of the normative life of a bourgeois woman. One can see some sketches pinned to the wall, which make it clear that we are not looking at a normal dining room, but at a room that also serves as a painter's studio. A closer look at the painting shows that the artist has left other traces of her presence as well: the empty chair on the right and the lit cigarette on the table edge give the impression that the artist has just left the table in a moment of inspiration in order to transfer this scene onto the canvas.[1]

The painting is quite unique in Finnish art, or even in European art, of the time due to its motif and especially due to the hazard of showing a woman smoking without socially discrediting her (as was typically done through caricatures depicting smoking women). *After breakfast* is painted in a naturalistic style, which was particularly

Fig. 1. Elin Danielson-Gambogi: *After Breakfast (Päättynyt aamiainen)*, 1890, 67 x 94 cm, Private collection.

Fig. 2. Helene Schjerfbeck: *Girl at the Gate I (Tyttö veräjällä I)*, 1897–1902, watercolour, charcoal and pencil on paper, 55 x 34 cm, Villa Gyllenberg, Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation, Helsinki. Image: Villa Gyllenberg, Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation / Matias Uusikylä, licence: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

popular in the 1880s in the Nordic countries.[2] During that time, many Finnish artists travelled to France and often studied at the private academies in Paris, such as the Académie Julien or the Académie Colarossi (where Danielson-Gambogi was a student in the 1880s). It was a special time for women artists in Finland as they had easier access to art education, as well as to travel grants, than before. One focal reason for this was the strengthening urge for independence as Finland was an autonomous grand duchy in the Russian Empire until 1917. Both, men and women were supported in their professional careers as artists, partly in order to contribute to forming the national identity by means of art. As a result, the number of female art students in Finland was above the average compared with most other European countries.[3] This also had an impact on the subjects of paintings: many women painters invented unconventional self-representations as a professional artist – either adapting forms of representation that were previously only used by their male colleagues or inventing completely new ones. From the 1880s onwards, many interesting self-portraits of women painters emerged – Elin Danielson-Gambogi's *After Breakfast* is one of those. She staged herself as a professional painter while being physically absent in the picture and showing only the moment of inspiration.

The first time I saw Danielson-Gambogi's painting, I was fascinated by its visual power and decided to write my master's thesis about it. It was the beginning of my research on Finnish women painters working in the nineteenth and twenieth centuries. After my master's thesis, I focused on the self-portraits of Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946) and this is where I got to know Tutta – who, almost from the beginning of my PhD thesis, supervised my work sharp-mindedly and who was always ready to give advice, for which I am very thankful. Without her energetic support, I am not sure whether I would have ever finished writing my PhD.[4]

In this short text I would like to analyse some of Elin Danielson-Gambogi's and Helene Schjerfbeck's artworks that show daydreaming female figures by referring to neuroscientific research.[5] I already discussed this approach with Tutta years ago but, back then, I discussed it with more of a focus on emotions and on the question of how artworks affect us emotionally and trigger neurological responses.[6] By adding an interdisciplinary approach to the preceeding art historical research, I hope to open up new perspectives on gender biases concerning the concepts of activity and passivity.

Danielson-Gambogi's *After Breakfast*, as well as many of Helene Schjerfbeck's paintings, depict women that are not engaged in any particular activity. Schjerfbeck's *Girl at the Gate I* (*Tyttö veräjällä I*, 1897–1902) or *The Seamstress (The Working Woman)*

(*Ompelijatar [Työläisnainen]*, 1905) are good examples of this [Fig. 2, 3]. The young girl at the gate is holding a twig and leaning on a gate or fence – it is hardly recognisable what it is exactly. She does not seem to look at anything in particular, her gaze is dreamy. The painting on paper has a sketchy character as one can see the lines from the charcoal and pencil drawing shimmering through the watercolours. The only thing that is worked out more thoroughly is the face and the head of the girl. No other details that would give more insight into her surroundings are given. So, the focus in Schjerfbeck's painting is clearly on the dreamy facial expression of the girl, which is also emphasised by the light blue that surrounds her head. The colour contributes to the general impression of an ethereal mood. With these characteristics, *Girl at the Gate I* can be seen in the context of the Symbolist movement, which was quite strong in the Nordic countries at the time, even if Schjerfbeck herself did not follow any Symbolist agenda with her art.[7] On the contrary, in her letters – about 2000 of her letters have been preserved – she expresses rather pragmatic perspectives on life and art: 'Einar, tell me, one can't like a "movement", a theory, only a painter, or *one* of his paintings, as one is not an academic!'[8] From the turn of the century onwards, Schjerfbeck's works became increasingly reduced. There were less narrative elements in her paintings and their content shifted more and more to moods and atmospheres. This characteristic was quite strong, especially in her figurative paintings.[9] She mainly painted female figures that often have a lowered gaze and seem somehow lost in thought. In her painting *Fragment* (*Fragmentti*, 1904) these features are particularly present and the dreamy atmosphere is evoked not only by the young woman's gaze but also by the pastel colours [Fig. 4].

Less dreamlike and more melancholic is the painting depicting the seamstress, who is sitting in a rocking chair.[10] Her gaze is also lowered and her eyes are almost closed, her hands rest on her knees, which underlines the moment of stillness. Even the rocking chair seems to be motionless. Still, all of the four paintings discussed here have something in common: they represent women in a moment of thoughtfulness or inwardness. It is not obvious what they are thinking about – they somehow seem to be disconnected from the outer world. Whether their thoughts are bright or worried ones, we do not know, but they all appear to be in a state of daydreaming. In psychological terms, a daydream is a waking fantasy, or reverie, in which wishes, expectations, and other potentialities are played out in imaginations. […] Among the important positive functions

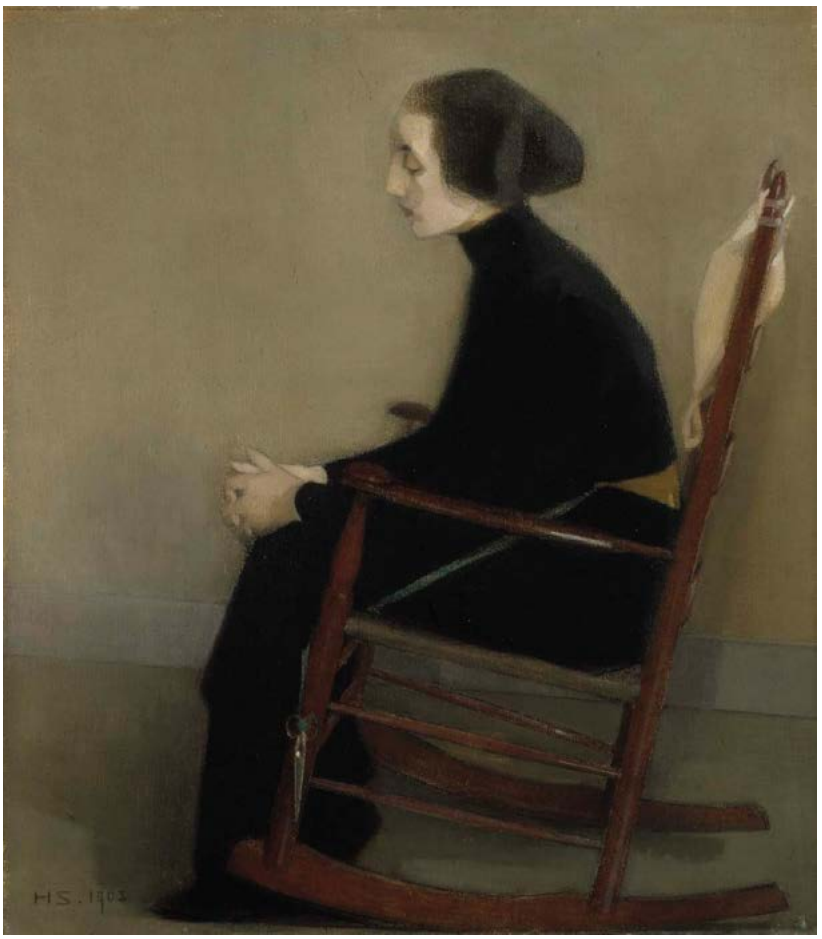

Fig. 3. Helene Schjerfbeck: *The Seamstress (The Working Woman) (Ompelijatar [Työläisnainen])*, 1905, oil on canvas, 95,5 x 84,5 cm, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum. Image: Kansallisgalleria / Hannu Aaltonen. Image source: kansallisgalleria.fi, licence CC0.

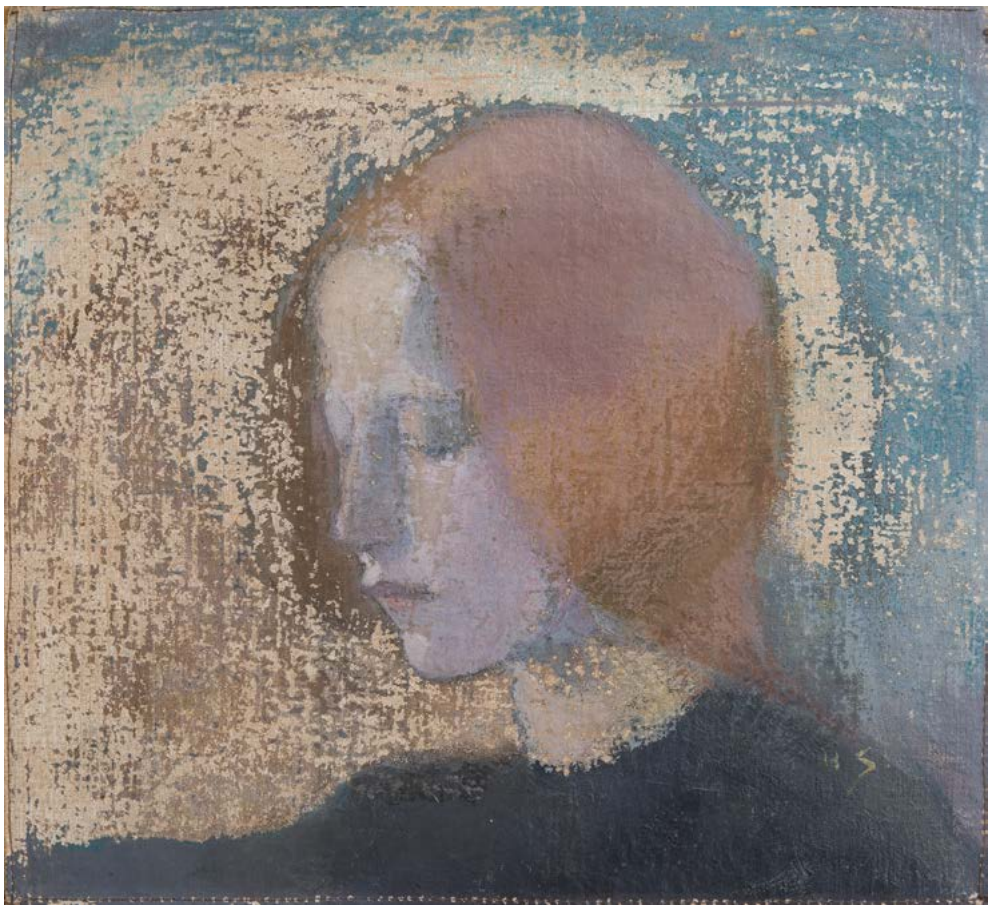

Fig. 4. Helene Schjerfbeck: *Fragment (Fragmentti)*, 1904, oil on canvas, 31,5 x 34 cm, Villa Gyllenberg, Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation, Helsinki. Image: Villa Gyllenberg, Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation / Matias Uusikylä, licence: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

that daydreams may serve are the release of strong affect, the gaining of self-insight when reviewing past experiences or rehearsing future situations, the generation of creative solutions, and the production of greater empathy for others.[11]

Considering this, it makes it clear that the first impression of the passivity of the women in the paintings is merely a consequence of their physical appearance – their mind does not have to be passive at all. This observation is underlined by the neuroscientific research results. Daydreaming is a state where specific regions in the brain are highly active. The same regions are being activated when we rest or are not busy solving any specific tasks. In neuroscientific terms, one speaks of the so-called *default-mode network*.[12] This network can, for example, be triggered by monotonous activities or inactivity and thereby result, for example, from daydreaming or mind-wandering.[13]

Interestingly, the latest neuroaesthetic research has shown that the default-mode network is also active when we look at artworks that we find aesthetically moving. This is quite surprising as the network is mainly active when we are disconnected from our external environment.[14] It is exactly in these moments of stillness that highly complex brain performances can be generated, which then can lead to, for example, developing new ideas or finding creative solutions to problems. So, approaching the artworks discussed above from a neuroscientific angle challenges the concept of passivity and activity to a certain extend. Passivity at the turn of the twentieth century was something

that had traditionally been attributed to women; activity instead, was understood as a 'masculine' characteristic. By the means of a neuroscientific reading, Danielson-Gambogi's and Schjerfbeck's paintings can be interpreted as revealing quite the opposite. The female figures depicted in the paintings are shown in a state of daydreaming and, consequently, in a moment of high neurological activity. Exactly these moments of idleness are an important pre-condition for developing new ideas – something which, like creativity, was also understood as a 'masculine' characteristic at the turn of the century.

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Viitteet

1 For further research on Elin Danielson-Gambogi, see Salla Leponiemi, *Niin kauan kuin tunnen eläväni. Taidemaalari Elin Danielson-Gambogi* (Helsinki: Gummerus, 2021); Riitta Konttinen, *Elin Danielson-Gambogi* (Helsinki: Otava, 1995).

2 On Naturalism and portraits, see Tutta Palin, *Oireileva miljöömuotokuva. Yksityiskohdat sukupuoli- ja säätyhierarkian haastajina* (Helsinki: Taide, 2004).

3 A central role played the Finnish Art Society, founded in 1846, that established an art school, as well as a prize for artists and awarded stipends to artists. See, e.g. Rakel Kallio (toim.), *Dukaatti. Suomen taideyhdistys 1846–2006* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2006). For the important role of women artists in Finland during the time, see Riitta Konttinen, *Totuus enemmän kuin kauneus. Naistaiteilija, realismi ja naturalismi 1880-luvulla: Amélie Lundahl, Maria Wiik, Helena Westermarck, Helena Schjerfbeck ja Elin Danielson* (Helsinki: Otava, 1991).

4 On Helene Schjerfbeck's self-portraits, see Annika Landmann, *Helene Schjerfbecks Selbstbildnisse – an den Grenzen des Ich. Eine hermeneutische Studie zum Porträt im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2018).

5 The question of how artworks affect our brain – the field of neuroaesthetics – is a relatively young scientific tradition and has been received quite controversially in art history. For pioneering research in the field of neuroaesthetics, see e.g. Semir Zeki, *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain, Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) and Eric Kandel, *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science. Bridging the two Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

6 In his research, Klaus Herding brings together different approaches concerning emotions and works of art, see Klaus Herding (Hrsg.): *Wie sich Gefühle Ausdruck verschaffen. Emotionen in Nahsicht* (Taunusstein: Driesen, 2008).

7 For Symbolism in the Nordic Countries, see Marja Lahelma, *Ideal and Disintegration: Dynamics of the Self and Art at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2014) and Salme Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet. Tutkielma Suomen maalaustaiteesta 1891–1895* (Helsinki: Otava,1966).

8 'Einar säg, inte kan man tycka om en 'riktning', en teori, bara om en målare eller *en* hans tavla, man är ju inte akademiker!' Schjerfbeck, Helene. Helene Schjerfbeck to Einar Reuter, 'till julen', 1931, letter. Åbo Akademis bibliotek (translated by the author).

9 See Marie Christine Jádi, *Helene Schjerfbeck und Gwen John. Der Ausdruck von Emotionen in der Malerei der Moderne* (Berlin: Reimer, 2017).

10 The melancholic mood is also a recurring subject in Symbolist portraiture, see Tutta Palin, *Modernin muotokuvan merkit. Kuvia 1800- ja 1900-luvuilta Taidekoti Kirpilässä* (Helsinki: Suomen kulttuurirahasto, 2007), 87–103.

11 Definition from the American Psychological Association, 'Daydream' (read: 13.12.2022), https://dictionary.apa.org/daydream; for a neuroscientific perspective on the daydream, see Steve Ayan, 'Die Vorteile des Tagträumens', Spektrum (read: 13.12.2022), https://www.spektrum.de/news/das-gehirn-beim-tagtraeumen/1401860. Research on the daydream started in the 1950s; one of the central figures was Jerome L. Singer, see for example, Jerome L. Singer, *Daydreaming and Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

12 The brain regions that are interconnected when the default-mode network is active are the medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex/precuneus and angular gyrus.

13 Marcus E. Raichle is one of the leading neurologists behind the discovery of the default-mode network. For his research on the default-mode network, see Marcus E. Raichle, 'The brain's default mode network,' *Annual Review of Neuroscience* Vol. 38 (2015): 433–447.

14 An international research group from the Max Planck Institute researched the question of how aesthetic experiences impact on our brain. In order to find this out, eighteen participants were shown different artworks while their brain activity was measured by means of magnetic resonance imagining. The participants were shown photographs of visual artworks (paintings, collages, woven silks), as well as photographs of architecture and landscapes. The samples shown to the participants were from different centuries and different cultures and included both abstract and figurative art. All the photographs were of lesser-known artworks. The results of this study showed that when the participants looked at the paintings, the default-mode network activated; see Edward A. Vessel et al., 'The default-mode network represents aesthetic appeal that generalizes across visual domains,' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Vol. 116, No. 38 (2019): 19155–19164, https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1902650116.