

The Subject's Gaze: Empowerment through Defiance in Arbus's "Young Man in Curlers"

Liana Cohen

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this excerpt, author Liana Cohen puts a new twist on a common assignment: **close reading**. Beginning with a close analysis of a photograph, Liana combines her observations with knowledge of the image's historical and artistic context to make her argument.*

Excerpt

On the one hand, we see this concept of the subject's imprisonment and the artist and beholder's empowerment at play in Diane Arbus's well-known photograph "A Young Man in Curlers at Home on West 20th Street." A tightly framed portrait, it depicts a man with his hair in curlers staring directly into the camera, lips slightly parted, a cigarette hanging between loosely curled fingers with nails painted silver. Given the fact that it is a photograph and not a film, the man's gaze is completely static and motionless, creating the sense that he is frozen in time. This entrapment reflects Boland's criticism of the way Degas takes living, breathing women and renders them on canvas to be forever captured in the moment in which he beheld them. Furthermore, the man is not only imprisoned in time, but he cannot physically look away—he is forced to always return the stare of whomever is looking at the photograph. Thus, his stillness makes him subject to our gaze, for we can choose to avert our eyes but he cannot. Indeed, while in Boland's poem Degas "takes his ease" watching his subjects and readying his pencil and easel, we as viewers can also take our ease—we can stare at the photograph of the man's face for as long as we'd like, giving us a sense of power over him. Therefore, the frozen quality of the young man in curlers' stare could reinforce Boland's notion of the artist and viewer's gaze as inherently invasive and unequal, for we are in a position of control.

However, the same static quality of Arbus's photograph that could be interpreted as stripping the man of his agency also, paradoxically, generates power. The man does not look at the camera fearfully—rather, his glance is bold and almost haughty, as if he is daring us to meet his eyes. The defiance of his glance is enhanced when coupled with the fact that it does not move or change; it becomes even more unwavering and direct because of its frozen quality. In fact, we as viewers will, at some point, "give up," as we cannot hold his gaze forever. By contrast, the man in the photograph is tireless—he does not blink, fidget, or grow weary as we do. Furthermore, his curled hand and sharp fingernails are located between us and him, as if to warn us not to come

any closer. Within this slightly threatening interpretation of his hand placement, its positioning comes to resemble a fist, which further emphasizes his authority and strength. The tightness of the shot also reinforces his power—when we meet his eye, we are immediately placed in close proximity to him, making his stare even more impactful and destabilizing our assumption that we have the control in the visual interaction. Thus, the subject’s already rebellious and bold gaze is emphasized and intensified by the fact that it is frozen in a single moment, lending him agency rather than powerlessness in relation to the artist and viewer.

Furthermore, the defiance of the man’s stare is rendered even more so when viewed in relation to his accessories, makeup, and attire; he gains a power because his expression suggests that he is steadfast and unapologetic in his refusal to adhere to gender norms. According to Veronica White, Curator of Academic Programs at the Princeton University Art Museum, Arbus was one of a group of photographers and artists during the 60s and 70s who gravitated towards unlikely subjects, capturing those who at the time were perceived as strange, exotic, or different. On the one hand, photographing those who do not fit in puts them on display, subjecting them to the judgmental gaze of mainstream American society and solidifying their position of isolation and difference to the larger population. On the other hand, acknowledging their existence gives them visibility, allowing them a presence in American culture and life. The element of voyeurism and the viewer’s power in relation to the subject vary from photograph to photograph and depend on the way the subject is depicted. Indeed, if, in Arbus’s “Young Man in Curlers,” the young man had appeared ashamed or awkward, we as viewers might have felt as if we had “caught” him doing something unsavory or forbidden. However, far from seeming meek or embarrassed, the man’s gaze is bold and unwavering, arguably placing him in a position of power because he acknowledges our presence and reacts with defiance. Furthermore, the fact that we are witnessing a relaxed, quiet moment in his home, as he unwinds with a cigarette and curls his hair for the next day, gives him even more agency when combined with the directness of his gaze. We as viewers have stumbled into his domain—we are interlopers, and we have not gone unnoticed. Hence, the source of the subject’s power in the photograph is the quality of his gaze; the man stares back at the viewer with a fixed and rebellious look, converting a moment in which he could have been vulnerable to one where he is completely in control.

Author Commentary

Liana Cohen

After a trip to the Princeton University Art Museum with my junior seminar, our instructor, Professor Sarah Anderson, asked us to write a descriptive essay exploring how an object we had viewed caused us to rethink a literary text. I knew immediately that I wanted to discuss Diane Arbus' "Young Man in Curlers." Throughout the semester, we had discussed the gaze of the spectator, unpacking the power dynamics of viewership and the element of voyeurism in art. The man in Arbus' photograph immediately fascinated me because he undermined the simple dichotomy between the watcher and the watched, the powerful and the powerless, that I had assumed before entering the Art Museum. I could not overlook the intensity and fixedness of his expression and relegate him to the status of "victim" so easily.

Selecting a text to accompany the photograph was not difficult—Boland's poem "Degas' Laundresses," with its themes of voyeurism and the unequal gaze, felt like an excellent work to discuss with Arbus' "Young Man in Curlers." However, when I compared Arbus' subject to the women in Degas' painting, I found that the power dynamics differed. Why did the laundresses appear to be the prey of the artist, while the man in curlers did not? I could not shake the sense that, in the confrontation between me, the spectator, and the young man in the photograph, *he* had triumphed. Ultimately, I realized that the defiant quality of his gaze and his awareness of my presence were the key to his power; while Degas remains unseen as he observes the laundresses at work, the viewer of Arbus' work is spotted and exposed by her subject.

This essay was a joy to write, mostly because it allowed me to apply "close reading" principles to an unconventional kind of text: a photograph. I found myself enacting the title of my junior seminar, "Reading Bodies," as I studied the man's facial expression, hand placement, and adornments within Arbus' tightly-framed photograph. More generally, I love thinking about visual media, in both academic and creative settings. The chance to consider both the content and composition of a photograph and my relation to its subject was a truly fun and rewarding experience.

Editor Commentary
Rosamond van Wingerden

Most of us have been assigned close-reading papers at some point. The assignment seems straightforward: select a short passage, usually from a longer text, and analyze it in word-by-word detail; then, put those observations in context to make an argument about the text. What Liana does in this excerpt, though, is an unusual spin on this approach. The main object of her analysis is not a text but a photograph, and she adapts the techniques of close reading to an image rather than to writing.

In the first paragraph of this excerpt, Liana begins with a general description of the photograph, contrasting it with the poem she had analyzed in the passage preceding this excerpt. She then looks at the photograph more closely. The second paragraph provides a detailed look at the image in which description and analysis are intertwined. As in any good close reading, Liana identifies specific aspects of the photograph and explains their significance to her reader. Finally, in her third paragraph, she moves from this detailed analysis to a discussion of broader themes. Placing the image in the context of the photographer's work and of its historical moment, she draws on her own analysis to make a larger argument about its significance.

By following a close reading of a poem earlier in her paper with the close analysis of the photograph in this excerpt, Liana provides an opportunity to reconsider a familiar form of analysis. She shows that the same techniques can be applied to her textual and visual sources, allowing her to contrast them more closely. Her paper unites very different sources with the same form of analysis and, in doing so, demonstrates the versatility of close-reading techniques.

Professor Commentary

Sarah M. Anderson, Department of English

The photographs of Diane Arbus take our words away, and we look, look away, are left sputtering, stunned by the terrifyingly queer quotidian that she saw and shot. Liana closes in on Arbus's 1966 gelatin silver print "A young man in curlers at home on West 20th Street, NYC", a print not much larger than a huge iPad, though cooled to blacks and greys and silver, through detailed descriptions of nail polish, the curl of the subject's hand. But Liana's eyes are held by the subject's gaze, and her sympathies as a viewer of the subject widen and engage as she considers that neither she – nor he – can look away. Notice how Liana plays against the subject's inscrutability by lining up two nouns in the first sentence of the excerpt whose sounds ring near each other: "imprisonment" and "empowerment". Clunky nouns that could take us no nearer than the shades of grey and darker grey in the background of the print. Nouns that could have been airy abstractions signifying nothing. But Liana sounds them, and through an aural and perhaps visual synonymy, she performs a number of critical acts: arcing through the gender norms undone in the photograph to Eavan Boland's remarkable poem, "Degas's Laundresses", about the gaze and masculinist framing of the female subject. Liana frees us from the received truths about m/f by insisting that we both study and permit ourselves to be studied by Arbus's "young man". Liana accepts the problem of describing the look on the young man's face, despite the danger of trying to do so, as have so many who have looked at this famous print. Liana's writing makes us pursue the complex sensibility of what it is to be seen. As John Szarkowski, former director of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art, has declared, "Arbus did not avert her eyes". When Liana does not do so either, her essay nearly exhausts its own subtle reading, running close to the softly rounded clichés we all tend to mouth when we view a photograph by Arbus, a "secret about a secret". But Liana keeps her edge. I notice that Liana's lexicon in this excerpt tabulates many words for "seeing" and "looking". Her writing does not just offer synonyms in some sort of mechanical version of "elegant variation", though. As she did through the word-play of the first sentence, Liana pairs "visibility" and "voyeurism" toward the essay's conclusion. Through the near-match of these words, Liana indexes Susan Sontag's furious critique of Arbus as exploitative, a topic Liana indexed when she mentions Boland's rejoinder to Edgar Degas and his oil-painted prison of laundresses. Arbus often makes the viewer mute or hyperbolic. But Liana keeps writing, wiring together the apparatus of the essay all the way to the reversal of her final sentence, as unblinking an eye as the photographer's.

Works Cited

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Bios

Liana Cohen '20 is an English concentrator from New York with certificates in Spanish and Creative Writing. On campus, she is the show-runner for All-Nighter and the long form essay editor for *The Nassau Literary Review*. In her free time, she can be found rollerblading, eating grapes, and watching cute dog videos online (sometimes simultaneously). She wrote this paper as a junior.

Rosamond van Wingerden '20 is a Comparative Literature major from Amstelveen, the Netherlands, with certificates in Ancient Greek, Vocal Performance, Music Theater, and Russian and Eurasian Studies. Her research focuses on 19th- and 20th- century Italian and Russian opera. On campus, Ro sings with the Princeton Opera Company and the Glee Club and plays viola in Princeton Camerata. She is also a member of the Edwards Collective alongside Liana. She wrote this as a junior.