AMBIGUOUS BODIES: LENA CRONQVIST’S REPRESENTATIONS OF GIRLS

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Introduction

This paper is an extract from one of the chapters of my forthcoming PhD about the representations of girls by the Swedish artist Lena Cronqvist (b. 1938). The overall aim of my dissertation is to look at the complexities of images of girls in contemporary art. In this presentation I look at how ambiguity and ambivalence permeates the bodies of the girl figures’.

In Lena Cronqvist’s painting Girl in Water, 1982, a figure stands alone towards an abstract background. The title, Girl in Water instructs us to read the pattern as water and the infinity of the pattern suggests a sea, further emphasised by the faint mirror reflection of the girl’s body in the water surface. The girl figure placed in the middle is figurative and particularly her nudity is descriptive; she has obviously undressed to take a dip. Her white skin shows the tan line of a short sleeved dress and the way in which the figure holds up her hands suggests that the sea is very tempting but a tad too cold to plunge into. Stopping my reflections for a moment to look again, I realise that nothing in the image or the title actually conveys how the painting should be interpreted. Without being able to help myself I have filled in the empty spaces of this ‘narrative’. As an art historian I might continue and make reference to the myth of Aphrodite, who in numerous paintings is depicted approaching land from the sea. Or I may look at it in terms of the voyeuristic male gaze objectifying the female body. As the private me, I am reminded of taking a skinny-dip in the cold Swedish sea in summertime. Either way what remains constant is the overwhelming presence of the figure’s body.

In the paper that follows I will look at the human bodies in Lena Cronqvist’s images. I will attempt to contextualise the ambiguities that permeate them by drawing on highly ambiguous images from the eighteenth century as well as leaning on contemporary feminist art history.
On a visit to the Wallace Collection in London in June 2002, I was taken by the hanging of one particular wall, coincidentally in what is called the boudoir room. Eight of the ten paintings are by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) and two by his British contemporary Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792). Of Greuze’s paintings six are têtes d’expression¹ most of which were made during the artist’s later years, and two are genre paintings telling stories, famous at the time, from the Comédie Italienne.² The adolescent figure, bordering between being a girl and a woman, is at the core in all of the paintings by Greuze. So what was the curator’s idea when putting together these pictures in this particular room? Of course, his or her material is static as all works in the collection were purchased by the Hertford-Wallace family, who set up the museum at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was Richard Seymour-Conway (1800-70), better known as Lord Hertford, who was particularly fond of Greuze’s images. It may be worth noting that he kept several of his Greuze paintings for private view.³ This hanging intrigued me because the display exhibits visual sensual pleasure in a way that, at least at a first look, could be a textbook example of a visual realisation of male erotic fantasy about female virginity. By putting these ten paintings together on one wall the sexual aspects are further emphasised and any other themes or narratives in these pictures are instantly repressed. The continuous theme of sexual undertones clearly present in Greuze’s images, are as accessible for today’s viewers as they were for his contemporaries.⁴ But it is the juxtaposition with Reynolds’s images, and their lack of erotic undertones that complicate the hanging. In Reynolds’s case the girls are portrayed as children and there is a profound lack of sexual undertones. Did the curator not see the erotic ambiguities in Greuze’s images, or did he or she perhaps over-read Reynolds’s, in the light of the formers paintings? Or perhaps considered all representations of girls similar? Whilst Reynolds
made romantic portraits of children in his vicinity, Greuze played with allegories, morality and taboos.

At the same time as I was puzzled by this curatorial strategy, seemingly lacking any insight into gender politics, I was pleased, because it proved my point that representations of girls are very complex subject matters. The sexual allusions in Greuze’s girl images stand in stark contrast to Reynolds’s children brimming with childhood innocence. I think this precarious hanging serves as a good starting point for thinking about the ambiguity in Cronqvist’s images. Hanging Reynolds’s pieces next to Greuze’s enhances the erotic and moral contradictions in the latter’s - elements that Cronqvist makes use of in a disturbing way. It is this streak of ambivalence that interests me in Greuze’s paintings, a kind of ambivalence or ambiguity that is also present in Cronqvist’s work, albeit with a twist. Ambiguity indicates an expression imprecise in meaning, alternatively uncertainty in meaning or a relative position. Ambivalence, on the other hand, is having two opposing and contradictory attitudes or feelings towards and object (or person). The difference is slight but if anything Greuze’s images of girls, as we shall see, rather manifest contradictory meanings, whilst Cronqvist’s tend towards the ambiguous. Despite the difference in time and place, or perhaps thanks to it, Greuze is one of many artists whose work is ideal as a background for understanding the ambivalence so often present in representations of girls. Of course Greuze’s images were made in a different time and place than Cronqvist, but as the American scholar Mary Sheriff’s argues when writing about Fragonard: ‘probably I’m not the ideal viewer for Fragonard [in my case Greuze], but his paintings are ideal for my interpretation’. 
**Broken Eggs and Dead Birds**

In Greuze’s earlier and more story-bound paintings a recurring theme is the coming of age, virginity and more specifically lost virginity. The pictures often capture the moment straight after the ‘girls’ have realised what has been lost, and they are crying or contemplating the event in solitude. The loss of a bird, a broken mirror, broken eggs or a broken jug implies the loss of sexual innocence. There are also a set of images where someone else discovers the loss of virginity, always something terrible or sad, for example in *The Broken Eggs* (*Les Oeufs Cassés*) 1756. In this painting an older woman, and it is not clear whether it is the mother or the maid, catches the perpetrator in the act, which in turn is symbolised by the basket of broken eggs. The girl is sad and the older woman furious. The characters’ postures and expressions reveal that although the man is deemed culpable for seducing the girl, it is the girl who will have to suffer, as it is her chastity that is irredeemably tarnished. In the painting *The Broken Mirror, (La malheur imprévu)*, painted before 1763, is an example of a sentimental genre scenes. In this case the loss is reflected through a broken mirror. A girl dressed in a white satin dress with a plunging neckline sits in a messy bedroom and is looking down at a broken mirror. The disorder in the room might suggest the thoughtlessness of the girl; it may also suggest an overwhelming, if not violent, activity. The mirror reflection can only be seen by the figure in the painting and is kept from the viewer, but whatever it is it causes her to look devastated. Diderot suggests that that the girl is not bemoaning the actual mirror but rather something else, implying her lost virginity. Yet another allegory of lost virginity is the painting *The Broken Jug* (*La Cruche Cassée*), a girl is standing upright, holding a bunch of pink roses in her skirt, which doubles as a basket. Over her right arm hangs the broken jug referred to in the title. Her garments are hanging loosely around her in a disorderly way. A monument or sculpture of some sort can be glimpsed in the background, and its most visible feature is a lion suggestively spurting water from its mouth. The girl is, according to Norman Bryson, a typical ‘Greuze child’ whose childlike features are exaggerated, for example the large eyes, and the big head. At the same time, as Bryson points out, the girl is represented in the role of a woman, not least through the emphasis on the moist lips and the revealed and developed breasts. Bryson points our that her awareness of her own sexuality is just as clearly expressed as her childishness. Greuze has, according to Norman Bryson, captured the moment in a girl’s life when she is both child and adult, innocent and experienced.
There is also a clear ambivalence in Greuze’s paintings in regard to the moral messages. A case in point is *The Morning Prayer*, (*La Prière du matin*), 1775-1780. A girl, dressed in a nightshirt, with a low cut décolletage, is doing her morning prayers on her knees in front of the unmade bed. The objects in the background are shrouded in a dark red light, but it is possible to glimpse a table with some artefacts. The girl’s gaze is directed up and out from the picture frame, indicating the directions of her prayers. The title, her pose and clutched hands suggest that the girl is in morning prayer, but her slightly parted and moist lips and longing eyes suggest more erotic undertones. As if her thoughts and her body were praying for different things.

*Têtes d’expression*

In Greuze’s so called *têtes d’expression* the balance between the ‘salacious and the charming’ is even cruder as the contradiction is all that remains. After Greuze’s defeat of not succeeding to become a history painter at the Academy in Paris, in the years after 1780, he turned to make these arrays of portraits of adolescents with sexual undertones. According to Thomas Crow these tearful explosions, or *têtes d’expression* were to ‘make his fortune and damn his posthumous reputation’. The setting in the paintings discussed above has disappeared as has any other characters or props (mothers, lovers, broken eggs, mirrors or jug etc). The *têtes d’expression* are anonymous portraits of girls and the odd boy, and the figures are sometimes accompanied by a pet animal. The titles are simply confirming the allusions in the image. For example, *Bacchante* is a painting where the girl wears a wine leaf crown. The allegorical elements are in some paintings also enforced by the animals, in *Innocence*, c. 1790, the
girl holds a lamb and in *The Souvenir (Fidelity)* a dog. In other paintings there are no allegorical elements apart from the figures themselves and the paintings’ titles, for example *Psyche* (1786).

The painting *Ariadne* (date unknown) is a great example of how Greuze treads carefully the borderline between the ‘salacious and the charming’. The painting is of girl whose auburn hair hangs freely over her shoulders, one hand is lightly supporting her childlike head, the other is held on her fossa jugularis. Her hand holds up a corner of her dress as a vain attempt to conceal her exposed breasts, at the same time as grabbing tresses of her hair, forming a backwards s-shape. The red nipples echo her red moist and parted lips, underlining the idea of the girl figure as erotic. Above her head is a circle of stars in the shape of a halo that could be interpreted as the constellation of Ariadne’s crown. The halo shape can of course also relate to a religious ideal that is desperately clashing with the sexual desire her body exudes. The conflicting elements of religious ideals, sexual innocence and desire, pleasure and guilt, a child’s features and a woman’s body, the moral and immoral that are part of most of Greuze’s images of girls, are taken to an extreme in the *têtes d’expression*. The figure is, as Ledbury writes ‘a development of the ‘naive-sophisticated adolescent trope, deliberately combining ignorance and knowingness, virginity and sexuality.’

![Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Ariadne*, date unknown oil on Mahogany Panel (49x42.8 cm), The Wallace Collection, London](image)

Ambiguity works on several levels, undoubtedly some of which are specific to the time and not within our reach. For example the full meaning of the philosophical ideal *sensibilité* that permeated the time and Greuze’s work may be hard to fully grasp. But even though many layers of meaning may pass us by several contradictions are inescapable. One layer of ambivalence is that in Greuze’s paintings the loss of virginity, outside wedlock, is something bad but is made charming in his paintings. Concerning their bodies, the *têtes d’expression* are great examples of the clash between the adult woman and the
child, but it is a clash that is made erotic. It is thoroughly bound to a male gaze, and has little to do with the models themselves. It is precisely this that I find relevant in relation to Lena Cronqvist’s work, the breaking of the balance between the decent and the shocking. In Cronqvist’s work, however, the parameters are different than in Greuze’s. As a viewer of Greuze’s girls, one loses the footing, wondering is this simply kitsch, or an expression for the male gaze fantasising about female puberty and virginity? Cronqvist plays with and even mocks those same ambiguities. The girl figures’ sexuality is emphasised, the situations can be perceived as precarious (like in Girl, Gorilla and Sun) but the figures are not made erotic or desirable.

**Ambiguous Bodies**

The human body plays a central role in most of Cronqvist’s work, with the exception of landscape paintings, although, even these often incorporate bodies such as animal cadavers. In the representations of girls the body is of double importance. Not only do they enact the ‘story’, but there is also a narrative to be extrapolated from the bodies as such. Furthermore, the typical nondescript backgrounds serve to enhance the presence of the body even further. One example of how the human bodies dominate the picture space is the painting Two Girlfriends, 1991, where the background is nearly non-existent in its pale grey colours divided into two fields, ground and background. Two identical figures holding hands are dressed in bright red short trouser–suits. The figure on the right, from the viewer’s perspective, is holding a mummy doll. The two girls are literally filling up the space, stretching over two thirds of the canvas both vertically and horizontally. Girl in Water, discussed at the very beginning, is another such image where the body literally dominate the picture space.

Despite the human bodies in Cronqvist’s work dominating the picture space, critics tend not to mention their physicality more than in passing. Eva Ström, however, writes in a review that the sexuality of the figure is ambiguous and disturbs the interpretation and any easy viewing experience. She writes that the figure’s body posture in Girl in Water signals a freezing discomfort, and its white body makes it look doubly exposed. Ström argues that the sense of exposure is further accentuated by the figure’s genitalia, placed in the exact middle of the canvas. One painting where the sexual ambivalence is at its most intriguing is Girl, Gorilla and Sun, 1992 (43x39cm). Our main character is very young in this image, standing erect in the middle of the canvas with her feet placed towards the lower edge. A faint difference in nuance separates the upper and lower field, but even more so the application of the paint. The upper part, or the sky, is thinly painted with vertical strokes and the lower half is painted with thicker paint and horizontal strokes. We get the idea that the figures are placed outdoors because in the top right corner (from the viewer’s perspective) an orange circular shape, a sun, has been painted over. Exactly behind the girl figure a seated gorilla is portrayed supporting itself with its long arms. That supporting, or balancing act also serves to frame the girl figure.
Pets are often represented in Cronqvist’s images, but like the swan in the painting *Girl and Swan*, the presence of the gorilla complicates the interpretation, these are not cosy, cuddly animals. In society as well as in fiction there are no famous relations between a gorilla and a little girl. However, there is a tradition of Gorillas as a feature for b-movies. Particularly in the plethora of Hollywood produced thrillers from the 1930s and 1940s, based around a gorilla as an evil and sexual force capturing the leading lady. The prime example of course is the feature film *King Kong*, 1933, where the giant gorilla falls in love and kidnaps the beautiful woman. This particular film would be familiar to a Swedish audience as Swedish Television, for some years during the 1980s, used to broadcast it each New Years Eve. Clearly, written in the 1930s the implications of the big black male and the victimised white female are significant of the racism in Hollywood at the time. Even though the b-movie might be far fetched as a direct reference to Cronqvist’s painting, the idea that the gorilla is male springs to mind. The word gorilla in Swedish, apart from denoting an animal, is also slang for *bouncer*, a very male occupation and as well as an expression for *gangster*. One argument to read the animal as a metaphor for masculinity is that in the early 1990s Cronqvist made several paintings where there is an uncertain sexual relationship between the girl and a male figure. In previous chapters I have discussed the potential reading of the presence of a male as a sexual subtext in the paintings *Girl with Swan*, and *Girl in Swimsuit*. Another example where exposure and vulnerability are at stake is *Girl and Man at the Edge of the Wood*. In front of a flaming red background - the ground as well as the sky and the forest are painted in red tones - the naked girl, with the trade mark ribbon holding the fringe to one side, is standing straight at the forefront of the canvas. Behind the girl figure, closer to the forest, a
naked adult man approaches her. The male figure is not actually portrayed as walking but the upper body is leaning forward as if the image was captured when he was about to take a step. The man coming after the girl does evoke feelings of threat. Why are they naked? Parents warning their children not to follow strangers to unknown places come to my mind. But the figures are moving away from the dark forest, not going there. It is possible to continue to speculate about the reasons behind the painting and the story it is telling. For now, I will simply point out that when looking at several of these paintings there is without doubt troubling sexual undertones. The same sense of a double message is also present in the painting *Girl, Gorilla and Sun*. But we find in Cronqvist’s body of work on one hand references of exposed girls whose sexuality might be threatened, and on the other hand self-sufficient girl figures denying that threat. The gorilla in this painting could also be looking after the girl, the animal’s long arms framing her body an act of protection. This reading might be even more convincing if the gorilla is interpreted to be a female, an argument supported by the fact that its breasts seems inflated, as a female’s would be. But then again, the gender of the gorilla may not be significant. Much more striking than the gender of the gorilla, and that which really emphasise a sense of ambiguity and sexuality, is the girl’s body in itself. The red slabs of paint dominate the otherwise pale figure: the red ribbon, the blurry mouth and the red line on the lower part of her tummy – indicating her genitalia, which are also echoed in the v-shaped ribbon. The attention to the colour red is furthered by the red smeared mouth, much too vibrant to be a natural colour, and by the redness in the figure’s eyes. A woman’s mouth painted red is evocative of her sex, a strategy that is often employed in for example in advertising. (One example is the advertising campaign for Magnum strawberry ice cream, currently running in the UK, where a woman suggestively is embracing an ice cream with her red moist lips). As in *Girl in Water*, in several paintings the girl figures’ sexual parts are abnormally large and very much at the centre of attention. In this example the figure’s tanned face and arms catch our attention at first but once the abnormally large genitalia are observed, they become the centre of the image. As I pointed out before, they are placed in the exact middle of the image. The hairless triangle crowned by the crevice looks like a separate part attached to the rest of the body. Once the eyes are set on that part of her body her rounded belly starts to appear more prominently. In *Girl in Water* and *Girl, Gorilla and Sun* alike, the bloated belly of the young child stress the girl figure’s youth. Except that the roundness is very poignant and was it not for her age she might be taken for being pregnant. The round belly is also echoed in the animal’s circular shape. There is an immediate visual contradiction in the childlike figure’s body; it is much too young to be pregnant and from a social and moral aspect too young to be sexualised.

**The Female Body and Critical Writing**

I said at the start that Greuze’s paintings of adolescent girls are ambivalent in their iconography, being both messages of morality as well as a celebration of the lack thereof. Cronqvist’s representations of girls are also ambivalent, or rather ambiguous (as discussed earlier), both in terms of themes and in
terms of the figures’ bodies. As discussed in previous chapters representations of girls are characterised by double standards. It is at once a body that is idealised and eroticised and thus ends up being scandalised. It is unacceptable in society at the same time as it is well exploited, in media, fashion and fiction alike. As I have already pointed out, there is surprisingly little literature on the matter. It is also an issue that is difficult to obtain a standing to, both risking exploiting and moralising, all at the cost of real children. I would like to confirm that I am whole-heartedly against all exploitation of girls. But, having said that, I think that images such as Cronqvist’s, or for that matter those by Greuze, are important to look at critically, art historically. Rather than providing an understating of children, they give us an insight into politics of representation and interpretation in visual arts. If there is little literature on girls in art, there is far more on the adult female body. A way of approaching the ambiguities of the girl figure is through the discourses around the adult female body in representation. Even though the problems of the female body in art might be less disturbing in the 21st century, as history of art and criticism has come a long way, it is still a problematic issue.

Since the emergence of the new wave of feminism in the 1970’s, artists and feminist scholars have been concerned with the female body in representation. To review the development of theory and art produced concerning the female body would be a nearly insurmountable project, certainly too vast to be included in this context. The British art historian Lynda Nead pointed out in her book *The Female Nude*, 1992, that it is easy to be ‘/…/ impressed by the immensity of the subject and the diverse areas of contemporary and historical culture that are opened out by study of the female nude.’ The *Female Nude* is in fact the first major rethinking about the underlying structures, and implications of the female body since Kenneth Clark’s seminal book *The Nude*, first published in 1957. Nead mentions that lots of writers have made interesting and very important observations about individual artists, but with the lack of a major survey Clark’s tropes about the naked and the nude have remained unchallenged for a long time. (As a young student of history of art in the beginning of the 1990s I recall how I was taught the difference between the naked and the nude with reference to Clark’s paradigm).

In the light of today’s research in the field of history of art, and in related disciplines such as visual culture or film studies, Clark’s study seems nothing but offensive. Or rather, considering that it was written in the 1950s, with its particular context of gender stereotyping, it is astonishing that it has had a bearing for so long. Clark’s project was to analyse the nude in relation to the concept of the ideal. The naked body is seen as fundamentally different from the nude, as the naked is undressed and the nude is dressed in the robe of art. Today it is hard to even imagine that there would be a difference, naked is naked whether it is art or not. It is interesting to read Clark because it engages with the ideal body in a most problematic way. Clark’s idea that: ‘Since the 17th century we have come to think of the female nude as a more normal and appealing subject than the male’ has been proved untrue by
many including the American scholar Abigail Solomon-Godeau in her book *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation*. Solomon-Godeau demonstrates that it was in fact the male body that was the ideal for beauty and nudity by the turn of the eighteenth century. A telltale sign of the underlying sexist prejudice of Clark is that whilst he discusses all the female bodies in terms of passive objects, the representations of male nudes are primarily discussed in terms of performing, active bodies. Some examples are representations of Apollo in action or the pathos expressed by Michelangelo’s *Dying Captive*. In the chapter *Energy* Clark does talk about representations of female athletes and warriors but emphasises that these were only favoured because it allowed the artists to elaborate with the movement in their dresses. In Clark’s own words:

> /…/ the subtle and complex drapery both reveals the nude figure and accentuates its surging movement, like ripples on a wave. Yet this noble embodiment of energy was one of the least prominent figures in the group. It was naturally in the figures of women that this convention of clinging and floating drapery was most fully developed; and perhaps the part it played in carrying movement through a composition may have been one of the reasons why a battle with Amazons so long remained a favourite subject with Greek sculptors, an iconographic motive surviving so often, simply because it was artistically manageable."

Tellingly other female bodies represented as energetically moving, like in Henri Matisse’s painting *Dance* are brought up under the chapter *Ecstasy* – an emotion or mental state characterised as being out of control (as opposed to the heroic act of a warrior).

Clark’s paradigms have been contested surprisingly little until the 1990s, as Nead puts it: ‘Clark’s text now stands as a monument to official culture; it is regarded as the classic survey of the subject and there have been curiously few scholarly attempts to revise or rework it.’ In her book *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting 1830-1908* the British scholar Marcia Pointon revisits some of that period’s grande oeuvres. Pointon contests the ‘Clarkian’ view that the nude is a timeless ideal, and she is particularly engaged with the female body. Pointon successfully establishes the nude body in a cultural discourse and something that is negotiated in relation to a viewer (who is not necessarily male). Also, she continuously points out that the nude body in representation is never a signifier of ‘real’ events. Since Clark’s book one of the most cited text on the female nude is probably John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*. From a Marxist perspective Berger argues in contrast to Clark, that a nude is not a form of art but a convention of looking. But regarding representations of women, Berger fails to avoid some fatal tropes himself. Berger (and the co-authors of the book) writes about of how men and women in representation are perceived as fundamentally different:

> If a woman throws a glass on the floor, this is an example of how she treats her own emotion of anger and so of how she would wish it to be treated by others. If a man does the same, his action is only read as an expression of his anger, If a woman makes a good
joke this is an example of how she treats the joker in herself and accordingly of how she as a joker-woman would like to be treated by other. Only a man can make a good joke for its own sake. One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male. The surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.26

The main problem with Ways o Seeing, as I see it, is that in Berger’s Marxist perspective woman is stuck in representation as an object. To use Pointon’s words: ‘I am constantly surprised by how uncritically we have tended to accept an author who proposes that “Women watch themselves being looked at” and that “the surveyor of woman in herself is male”, phrases that have become a litany for generations of students.’27

Erotic Ambiguities

It is towards this ideological background, that so profoundly permeated the understanding of the female body in representation, that feminist artists and writers had to re-negotiate the female body and female sexuality. Nine years after Nead’s study on the female body Helen McDonald published Erotic Ambiguities: The female nude in art, 2001.28 She analyses ambiguity as something enabling, constructive and positive in relation to representations of women. According to her study, a turnaround in the debate, and in art, came about with the emergence of pro-sex feminists in the 1980s and with pop artists such as Madonna, bordering between exploitation of the female body and liberation for her sexual drives. This turnaround, according to McDonald has opened up for artists to rethink the female nude in representation as something positive, and enabling ways to express ‘woman’s’ sexual desires. McDonald maintains that reconsidering ambiguity as something positive, rather than a suspicious side effect (see Lynda Nead) will allow artists and interpreters to rethink the body in representation.29 According to her ambiguity is a term that is ‘associated with the imprecision of language’. But, as she points out, ambiguity in visual arts, whether employed as a conscious strategy, or as an accident, is a result of complication, vagueness or obscurity. McDonald continues and argues that ambiguity can: /…/occur in the mind or the body of the artist, or the way the artist is positioned as a “subject” in discourse. It can be found in the artwork or in the spectator, in public or in private space, or in the relationship between the art and its historical context. If art is to be seen as an extension of the body, and as a point of mediation between the artist’s body and that of the spectator, ambiguity is an effect of its being both an object for erotic display and an object of erotic, visual pleasure. As such, ambiguity is of primary interest in a feminist analysis of the female body in visual representation.30
Cronvist’s girl figures subscribe to all of the above, in the ways in which they are ambiguous. I will discuss the way in which the woman artist subject position may be ambiguous in relation to representation of the girl figure in a later chapter. For now it suffices to recognise that working with a theme that has been used as a means of expressing erotic desire by an economy of looking, dominated by a ‘male gaze’ (to borrow Laura Mulvey’s much employed and much debated term)\(^31\), does provoke a whole set of issue for the woman artist. The way that Cronqvist’s and Greuze’s images are both ambiguous, or ambivalent raises different questions and interpretations. Greuze’s images are useful as they provide such clear contradictions. Even though different viewers may respond in different ways, they remain great examples of fantasies about the girl or girlish woman. Diderot wrote about *La Jeune Fille qui pleure son oiseau mort*, exhibited in the Salon of 1765, that it is one of that years most interesting works.\(^32\) The painting shows a girl, with a loose shawl around her shoulders and some flowers tucked into her low neckline. She is leaning her head in one hand mourning the dead bird lying on top of the wooden cage in front of her. Diderot wrote: ‘One would have approached that hand and kissed it, had one not respected the child in its pain’.\(^33\) Diderot asks rhetorically why the girl cries so over her lost bird and proceeds to imagine the events that could have foregone this situation. In the morning her mother left her alone, something that would prove to be a mistake. Diderot imagines that a man came, and showed the girl his charm and passion and said to her precisely the right things that went straight into her heart. The man was taken by the young girl’s beauty and the girl overwhelmed by his confidence. The girl should not be blamed for what happened, but her mother, who left her all alone and exposed. But why cry, Diderot asks, and proceeds to answer that a man who promised and met such a wonderful young girl won’t forget what he has promised. He will not desert her. And the bird? If one has forgotten oneself then forgetting one’s bird is not so surprising. He continues to say that if it were him who was guilty of the girl’s misfortune he would not be very sad at all. Regarding her age he decides that whilst the head is about fifteen, the arms and hands are more like eighteen, nineteen.\(^34\)

Instead of playing with contradictions and sexual pleasure, as is common in representations of the girl as girl-woman (see for example the femme-enfant in Surrealism, the girl figures in Balthus’s many works, or *Lolita* as in Vladimir Nabokov’s novel or the films by Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne\(^35\)), Cronqvist works with vagueness and obscurity. Her representations play with a multiple of possible interpretations as I have discussed in relation to *Girl, Gorilla and Sun*.

In her study *Erotic Ambiguities*, McDonald also incorporates representations of girls, which prove to be more complicated than with adult women: ‘While the principle of inclusiveness may be extended to older women, on ethical grounds for example, the increase in child pornography and the eroticisation of children in advertising suggests that this principle [ambiguity as a positive force] should not always be applied.’\(^36\) McDonald argues that the debate about children and representation of sexuality is in a
way a continuation of the feminist debate about sex-war in the 1980s. Furthermore that whereas sexual exposure of children, as in advertising, is undeniably questionable there is no evidence that children these images promote child abuse. McDonald makes a careful attempt to open up ambiguity as something interesting also in relation to adolescents’ bodies. Kristina Mezei writes in a review of Cronqvist’s girls that they portray a state of ‘…/innocence and cruelty, threat and exposure’ blended in a nauseating mix. The hidden sexuality is both appealing and scary.  

It is interesting that even though the female body has been a dominant theme in history of art, it is only in the last 15 years that the subject has been thoroughly debated and reassessed. I have discussed some major works on the female body and it is clear that scholars and critics have successfully renegotiated the female body in representation. It is also interesting that ambiguity as discussed by McDonald is seen as a positive force with regards to adult women’s bodies, but is more problematic in relation to children or adolescents bodies. The human body or the ambiguous body in Cronqvist’s representations of girls involve this whole debate about the female body in art. The figures evoke the ambiguities of the woman’s own sexual experience of her body and what happens to her body in representation. I would like to propose that if ambiguity can be used as a constructive strategy in relation to girls’ bodies, Cronqvist’s images are good examples. Cronqvist’s girl figures are sexualised in the sense that attention is drawn to their emphasised sexual organs, but their bodies are not made erotic, they are not objectified. The figures are often naked, or half dressed, posing in traditionally erotic environments (I discuss images of young girls bathing in history of art in chapter one), but they are not seductive. With reference to the ongoing debate about girls in representation, I would like to argue that Cronqvist’s girls are neither good nor bad. Cronqvist’s girl figures can in some cases be read as victims of the male gaze, but they are also challenging the viewer. Because the beholder of the image has to fill in the story the images only suggest. It is as if the ambiguities happen in the viewer rather than in the image.
Notes

1 Anita Brookner The Rise and Fall of an Eighteenth century Phenomenon, (London 1972).
8 Ingamells, p.206.
10 Norman Bryson Word and Image, Cambridge 1981, s. 131ff.
11 See Ledbury 2000.
12 Louis Hautcecoeur, Greuze, Librairie Félix Alcan, Paris 1913, s. 44ff.
15 Ledbury 2000, p. 141.
16 See further Brookner 1972.
21 Clark 1957, p. 171.
22 The Dance was made in several versions, see for example The Dance from 1909, in The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
26 Berger 1972.
27 Pointon 1990 p. 4. These are just a selection of texts, for a fuller picture of writings about the female body in representation see Helen McDonald, Erotic Ambiguities: The female nude in art (Routledge, London and New York 2001).
29 McDonald 2001, p. 74.
32 The painting is in National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh
"On s'approcherait de cette main pour la baiser, si on ne respectait cette enfant et sa doleur" (my translation) Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, 1979 s. 180.

Diderot *Salon de 1765*, 1979, s. 177-186.


McDonald 2001, p. 219

Ibid p. 219. See Catharine Lumby *Bad Girls: The media, sex and feminism in the 1990s*, 1997, for an argument that moralising and victimising teenage sexuality in representation is not a constructive feminist goal.


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