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Introduction

Solitude has always been a present element of my visual practice and a subject of fascination that is associated with psychology, and philosophy. Within this essay, I aim to explore the subject of solitude in arts in relation to identity and space. I also intend to cover ways that these topics interlink and connect whether it is politically, philosophically, or aesthetically.

My exploration in this proposal will cover a broad range of theories and movements linked to art and solitude. I will commence my research by first looking into an artist's psychological relationship between solitude and creativity proposed by an English psychiatrist Anthony Storr in his 1988 book *Solitude: A Return to the Self*.

This will consequently lead to thinking about how possibly that need for seclusion is something that lies within the identity of the artist. I will touch upon the subject of self-portraits as an example of solitude, talking about artists such as Frida Kahlo or films by Andrei Tarkovsky.

Romanticism will also feature in this writing to help better understand how solitude, identity, and space coexist together in the sociopolitical and aesthetic context. *Solitude and the Sublime: The Romantic Aesthetics of Individuation* by Frances Ferguson explains the philosophical concepts of this movement.

Romantic artists such as Caspar David Friedrich or J.M.W Turner were very fond of nature (especially landscape) and often used it as a metaphorical escape from political and social changes. I will also reference the work by Gaston Bachelard – *The Poetics*

of Space, where he talks about our relationship with interior spaces, such as home, but also solitude and creativity.

It will all refer to one another exposing each theory and artist to their differences but also similarities that are inevitably shared between all these subjects. I hope to extend this research further in my dissertation.

Solitude and the artist

Solitude is not merely a subject matter that artists use as an inspiration for their art, it is also not necessarily linked with loneliness. As opposed to the loneliness that is oftentimes forced upon someone, solitude can be seen as a deliberate choice made by one and can be used to reflect or create. A need for solitude is however a mutual characteristic shared by many artists. They willingly seek seclusion from others to focus on their work and self-development. There has been a lot of literature written and studies done on solitude and its impact on human behaviour.

But by far Anthony Storr's *Solitude: A Return to the Self* is one of the most comprehensive books written on the topic of the human psyche and the dimensionality of solitude. The relevance and value of this writing is the unconventional point of view that Storr proposes in his book. He collected essays and case studies from artists and other psychiatrists to emphasise the importance and understanding of solitude.

But why the capacity to be alone is so important, especially among the creatives? Storr says "The capacity to be alone thus becomes linked with self-discovery and self-realisation; with becoming aware of one's deepest needs, feelings and impulses". (Storr, 1988, p.21).

It seems that seclusion is a fundamental part of human nature. From the very first days of our life, we learn to be alone in one way or another. Being able to experience things alone is what creates an important connection between the outer and inner world, and this is especially prominent for artists. There is an internal need for creatively gifted people to create a sense of individuality, by “finding it in interests, beliefs, patterns of thought” (Storr, 1988, p.74) rather than by making personal relationships. This links back to the idea that self-development and self-expression are strongly linked with the artist’s inclination towards aloneness.

In the history of art, “the idea that arts are vehicles of self-expression is still quite recent” (Storr, 1988, p.75). Primitive artists though not thought to create their cave drawings as a means of expression, were aiming to capture the external world through the eyes of their imagination to apprehend their surroundings. As the Western Civilisation progressed painting and sculpture were still rather inferior disciplines, as opposed to literature or science.

However, with the Middle Ages some sort of revelation came through and artists became more conscious of their abilities, especially when it comes to self-portraiture; “man became a spiritual individual and recognised himself as such.” (Storr, 1988, p. 77).

One of the earliest self-portraits appears to be an illustration in Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris* (*On Famous Woman*) from 1355-9 (Fig.1). An unknown artist depicted Marcia who “remained single all her life, painted a portrait of herself, executed with the aid of a mirror” (Borzello, 2016, p. 22).

Self-portraits like this one can often provide a greater outlook on the reasoning behind them, once again self-expression and seeking individuality become a prime focus for artists. With that search comes solitude. It is not hard to see that self-portraits are very much about the artist and themselves only. Self-portraits are not merely about exploring the aesthetic and physical side of self but are also key to exploring who we are as individuals. In this next chapter, I am going to investigate how can solitude shape identity.

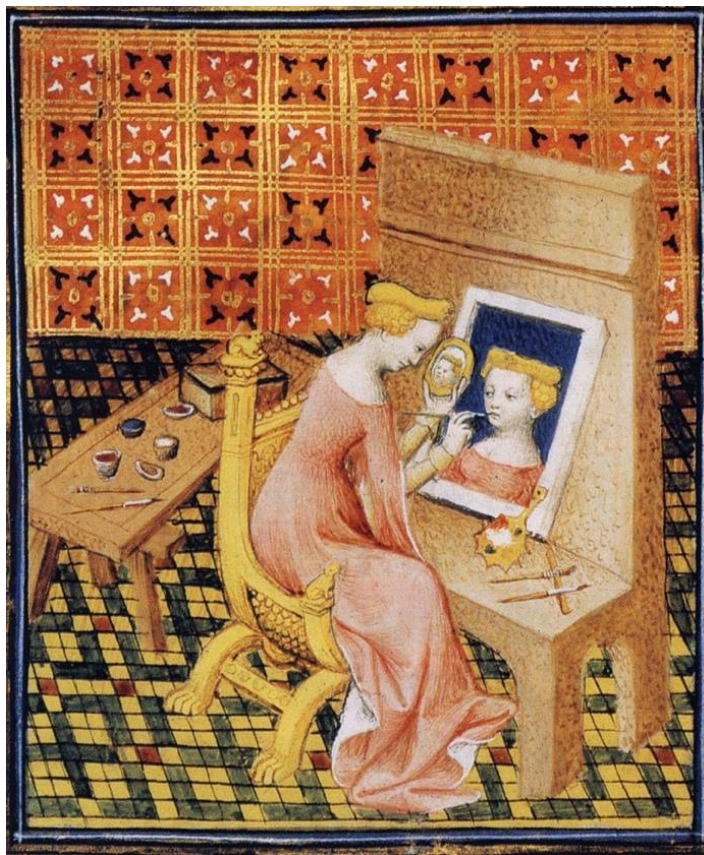


Figure 1. Marcia Painting her Self-Portrait.

Solitude and identity

According to the *Oxford Dictionary* it was not until 1674 that the word 'self' took on its modern meaning of 'a permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness.

(Storr, 1988, p. 79)

In the previous chapter, we talked about how solitude seems to be a sort of characteristic of a creative person that allows them to fulfil their subjective desires and allows for self-expression without necessarily having to base it solely on interpersonal relationships. But how and does that relate to the core identity of such an individual?

The answer could lie in the fact that identity and a sense of self can be encompassed through artistic practices. Artists such as Frida Kahlo are a good example of how one does embody cultural, physical and emotional identity within their paintings. The atmosphere of Kahlo's paintings is often dark, and the graphic elements of the human body such as heart or blood are almost a constant theme. She mainly painted self-portraits claiming she was the person she knew best.

However, her visually rich and colourful elements bring out her unique perspective on her Mexican culture. These sorts of contrasts are prevalent in her work. "Kahlo flouted both conventions of beauty and social expectations in her self-portraits." (Bravo, 2016). One of the most striking self-portraits depicting Kahlo in a state of solitude is *Two Fridas* from 1939 (fig.2). Kahlo created this painting shortly after divorcing her husband, Diego Rivera. This work features two seated self-portraits, they are holding

hands, and dark, stormy clouds cover the background. Both Fridas seem to be identical except for their clothing. Kahlo intentionally uses two different attires to emphasise the impact the relationship with her former had on her life:

She wore the modern European dress of the era, evident in her first self-portrait (left) where she dons a red velvet dress with gold embroidery. With Rivera's encouragement, Kahlo embraced attire rooted in Mexican customs.

(Bravo,2016)



Figure 3. The Two Fridas

She not only reflects on the end of her marriage but also her own culture and heritage. The duplication of herself is another interesting detail in this painting. Usually, self-portraits feature just one version of the artist, interestingly Kahlo opted for two self-portraits. Knowing the context and motivation behind this work, we can deduce that

Kahlo felt very much lonesome and perhaps painted “identical twin” to metaphorically bring some company and comfort in hard times. She oftentimes created because of the isolation she experienced due to medical issues. Perhaps, that seclusion allowed her to deeply explore herself and her identity.

Another creative whose work explored topics of solitude and identity within his work is Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. Although his archive of work is rather slim with only seven films, Tarkovsky’s unmistakable vision and filming techniques have influenced many artists for generations to come. The uniqueness of his work comes perhaps from the transcendental and spiritual motifs that reoccurred through all seven of his films.

He drew inspiration from his own life making his work both very familiar to the viewer, yet quite distant and mysterious with otherworldly sceneries or unexpected dreamlike elements. Those dream elements along with the sense of solitude are particularly noticeable in his 1983 film *Nostalgia* (fig 3). The main protagonist moves away from his home country to research the life of an 18th century composer. However, he finds himself unable to fit in his new environment, feeling displaced and longing for his homeland.

The solitary feeling throbs through long and slow scenes as the character reveals his internal struggles and reflections. The use of isolated characters and slow paces is a signature feature of his films. It amplifies the profoundness of existence.

Tarkovsky often uses painting and poetry within his films as his main inspiration. “Paintings influenced Tarkovsky’s use of space within the frame. He often sought to flatten out the image, and to spatially divide the contents of the frame” (BFI, 2019). Tracing his artistic references helps to better understand his intentions within his work. He often recreated or inserted paintings within his films, romantic artists such as



Figure 3. Nostalgia (still)

Caspar David Friedrich (which I am going to talk about in the next chapter) were included in his films.

Romanticism was a movement of great nature painting which influenced Tarkovsky deeply. His use of space and architecture represents the solitude as well; either by showcasing abandoned buildings or intimate interior spaces. Landscape and nature are also a major participant of Tarkovsky’s world:

Tarkovsky always insisted that nature was as much, if not more, of a character in his films than any person. Yet when his images capture an intensity of emotion, they are not suggestive of specific feelings.

(BFI, 2019)

Nature is a powerful representation of not only elements that could symbolise human feelings but is also a very suggestive example of someone's presence or absence. Interior or exterior spaces are equally valuable for those kinds of representations. This leads to exploration of yet another aspect of solitude within arts and artistic expression. Solitude and space are another aspect of my research which I am going to explore in the next chapter.

Solitude and space

Space and solitude can offer a range of themes and symbols that reflect human emotions and the complexity of existence. They can be an invitation for an artist and a viewer to embark on their journey to self-reflection and self-discovery. In this chapter, I am going to outline how romantic artists and their fondness for nature and landscape can be representative of solitude. I am also going to talk about interior and exterior spaces and our relationship with them according to the book by Gaston Bachelard: *The Poetics of Space*.

When thinking about the word space many of us will probably think about all sorts of imagery: something vast such as the cosmos, sky, or ocean or perhaps something intimate like a bedroom, or enclosed garden, an artist's studio or maybe about the scientific kind of space. Nonetheless, space is a very subjective term and there is not a set idea of what it should be.

Bachelard also talks about the concept of psychological space such as a home where imagination and creativity have space to be released, and with that comes the

solitude. Moreover, any type of space is inherently linked to something solitary or isolated. “[...] He knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative; that even when it is forever expunged from the present” (Bachelard, 1994, p.10). Daydreams and memories are born and stored within the realms of spaces we live or have ever lived in. According to Bachelard intimacy and fondness for certain places or objects “are designated by an attraction” (Bachelard, 1994, p.12). All these elements lead to a psychological connection humans make with spaces around them; spaces create memories, memories create feelings, feelings inspire creativity, and creativity is within.

Interior spaces such as a house often create an intimate atmosphere of a home where one can daydream or create. It is also common that a home is what creates a sense of security and comfort, hence why people can feel the truest to themselves while being inside the house either alone or with others.

However, not only interior spaces can create an intimate and personal space, often the nature can feel very comforting as well. It can be a source of inspiration for artist to a place where one can simply contemplate alone.

In the late 18th century Romanticism as a movement was created a reaction to another movement known as Enlightenment that emphasised on aspects such as rationality and knowledge. Romantic artists and poets on the other hand wanted to place emotions and subjective perception of the world in the centre of attention. Their attempts to do so often resulted in a solitude but also isolation at times. However, that seclusion was not merely their artistic choice but “artists in general were becoming isolated by social changes, by the growing anonymity of their audience”. (Vaughan, 1978, p. 25).

Although changes made by a fast-progressing society left artists feeling overwhelmed, Romanticism became a movement of artistic upheaval bringing new visions and emotional experiences. This is possibly why artists turned their attention to the nature.

Interestingly, today's societal shift resembles struggles of romantic artists. This especially concerns young people who are flooded with overwhelming amount of information coming from social media that create a very polarised environment that is offering both a room for individuality and self-expression but is also putting pressure on creating an idealistic internet persona, this often leads to a social sort of seclusion.

Artists of Romanticism such as J.M.W Turner or Caspar David Friedrich challenged the landscape painting which was "previously considered 'lesser' of genres" (Vaughan, 1978, p.132). In their new attempts to bring out the individuality and emotions in art they turned their attention to the power and aesthetic of the nature. Paintings of that era often featured a solitary figure in the foreground staring out at the landscape in the background. This technique is called "rückenfigur" (back-figure). The other type of painting depicted dramatic seas (Fig.4), or vast open spaces. The figure or lack of it in the landscape could serve as a profound symbol of solitude and space.



Figure 4. Rough Sea with Wreckage

At first glance romantic paintings might be perceived as aesthetically appealing, but artist's aim was much more than just to please the eye:

It has been recognised that aesthetic pleasure could be stimulated not only by the awareness of beauty, but also by a more mysterious and elating experience known as the '*Sublime*'.

(Vaughan, 1978, p.32)

Frances Ferguson in *Solitude and Sublime* studied the phenomenon of the 'Sublime' and its intersection with solitude. He examined how romantic artists utilised solitude to attain higher sense of self and individuality which was a key element of the sublime.

From the visual perspective as mentioned above, artists communicated their inner emotions by placing figure along with the landscape. In *Woman before Rising Sun* (Fig.5) Friedrich placed an unknown woman glancing over the morning landscape, very typical of the era, artists often were "painting subjects who appeared so thoroughly absorbed in their activities". (Ferguson, 1992, p. 130). The contemplative atmosphere of this painting really sets the tone of the Romantic movement. The composition is symmetrical, and colours are well saturated but also very naturalistic, creating a sense of presence and absence within the space. These elements make the artwork both aesthetically appealing as well as quite melancholic and tranquil. Very similar to Tarkovsky's films where the polarising effect of known and unknown are intertwining throughout the long, slow flowing scenes. Solitude is encompassed in the space around the figure as well as the figure itself.

Yet, with all these visual elements artists of this period still often wondered whether representation of nature could be significant enough to convey their feelings and visions (Vaughan, 1978, p.132). Nonetheless, many artists of Romanticism such as Constable or Turner established their practice in this very movement and are well known for their landscapes. Overall, the introspective nature of Romanticism can give a great insight into a human mind.



Figure 5. Woman before the Rising Sun

Conclusion

In conclusion this research led me to explore the intersectional relationship between solitude, space and identity among artists. I wish to continue this research in much more depth in my dissertation. Romanticism appears to be a significant movement when it comes to understanding solitude, space and identity; it offers a great insight into not only aesthetic and visual aspects of art, but also artists's mind and their philosophical beliefs, that I believe can be very much relevant in this modern world.

The connection to nature seems to be a broad topic that can be discussed alongside the Romanticism and current world. I would like to see how my chosen topic of solitude can be explored further in the context of philosophical and psychological debate. I would like to discuss solitude not only from historical aspect but also from a contemporary social perspective and examine how modern media support or influence creative people and think about their negative impact too.

Solitude is a broad concept connecting a spectrum of other disciplines and can hopefully challenge how we perceive it and understand its positive impact on our wellbeing and self. As we have seen, solitude is richly present in visual arts from self portraiture to film to landscape painting. Many creative people used it as a means of expressing themselves, however, is it always intentional? Or is it perhaps coming from the unconscious mind? Are all artists conditioned to solitude? All these questions led me to my proposed dissertation question: **Solitude: Artist's condition, means of expression or intention?**

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