

Creating the past in their own self-involved image

Joanne Laurier
18 February 2004

Girl with a Pearl Earring, directed by Peter Webber, screenplay by Olivia Hetreed, based on the novel by Tracy Chevalier

Girl with a Pearl Earring is an adaptation of the ersatz-historical novel by Tracy Chevalier. The book follows the painting of Johannes Vermeer's masterpiece of the same name, also known as *Girl in Turban* and, less officially, the *Gioconda of the North*.

The British film by first-time feature director Peter Webber attempts, in the form of a banal psychodrama, to fill in the historical and personal blanks. Unfortunately, the middle-brow effort is treating arguably one of the greatest painters in history.

Set in the town of Delft, Holland, in the mid-1600s, the movie follows Griet (Scarlett Johansson), a young Protestant girl forced to descend the social ladder due to a tragic accident which blinded her father, a tilemaker. She has been hired as a maid by the town's prestigious Catholic painter and his family (Vermeer is struck by the care Griet takes in separating colors when she is chopping vegetables!)

Vermeer's household teems with children (with more on the way). He is also burdened with a jealous and possessive wife and a shrewd, money-minded mother-in-law. The disparate menagerie is financially beholden to Vermeer's main patron, the lascivious Van Ruijven (Tom Wilkinson), who very quickly takes note of Griet.

Finances for the incessantly growing brood are problematic, as the painter completes and sells only a few works a year. Tensions, including of the sexual variety, are further heightened as the lowering Vermeer begins to discover that the new maid has the soul of an artist. What is remarkable, by contrast, is how unsympathetic and inartistic his spouse and offspring appear to be.

Griet's soulfulness triggers some rather silly scenes intended to evoke the repressed but seething nature of the passion between the maid and the painter. In an act of vicarious lovemaking, Vermeer chooses Griet to model for his latest commission. When wife Catharina violently objects, Vermeer insensitively blurts out that she is thoroughly lacking in the artistic appreciation department—this, despite her apparent value as a breeder. Patron Van Ruijven gets his “Girl with the Pearl Earring” portrait of the pretty maid, but has been denied access

to the emotional process that went into the work's creation—leaving him in a well-deserved state of unrequited lust.

Griet quits the Vermeer residence to marry her butcher boyfriend, but she has lost her virginity (in the symbolic sense) to the artist. The reserved, simple, former servant girl is no longer reserved or simple, having appropriated the artistic restlessness that haunts her mentor—as well as the prized pearl earrings.

Webber's film prides itself on having the “look” of a Vermeer painting. Much effort undoubtedly went into this. However, although *Girl with a Pearl Earring* has interesting visual effects, particularly in its lighting, they do not compensate for a tedious and unimaginative narrative. Worse is the cartoonishness of its characterizations: Griet is the ever-angelic and soulful maiden; Vermeer the ever-cantankerous *artiste*; Catharina the ever-green-eyed shrew and Van Ruijven the ever-pawing lecher.

Even beyond that, however, the film lacks any real historical sense or genuine artistic sensibility. The ahistorical, superficial approach of the film's creators severely weakens the endeavor and while they may mean this as an homage to Vermeer, their work trivializes a monumental figure.

While superficially reproducing certain qualities found in Vermeer's masterpieces, as well as presenting a few obvious personal and historical facts (and speculating about others), the film ends up as little more than a projection into an imagined past of the all too contemporary concerns and interests of the filmmakers—a piece of complacent petty-bourgeois self-imagery.

Although it is beyond the scope of this review to discuss in depth Vermeer and the “Golden age” of Dutch art in the seventeenth century, a few points might be made to highlight the film's inadequacies.

Dutch paintings represented one of the great artistic and intellectual achievements of the nascent bourgeois era. According to Arnold Hauser in *The Social History of Art*: “Dutch art owes its middle-class character [versus aristocratic], above all, to the fact that it ceases to be tied to the Church.... Motifs of everyday life, of landscape and still life form not merely the accessories of biblical, historical and mythological

compositions, but acquire an autonomous value of their own; the artist no longer needs an excuse to portray them ... *It is as if this [everyday] reality were being discovered, taken possession of and settled down in for the first time*" (emphasis added).

Hauser points out that the unpretentious new middle-class naturalism was an attempt to explore the spiritual qualities of everyday life, a style that sought "not only to make spiritual things visible, but all visible things a spiritual experience. The intimate easel painting, in which this conception of art is embodied, became the characteristic form of the whole of modern middle-class art—no other is such an expression of the bourgeois spirit with its untiring psychological inquisitiveness and its limitations at the same time."

This was also the period which initiated "economic freedom and anarchy in the realm of art" that "still controls the art market today." It is concomitant with the development of capitalist market relations—the beginnings of "the social uprooting of the artist and the uncertainty of his existence." Rembrandt, Hals and Vermeer—the three greatest Dutch painters of this era—all had acute financial worries.

The Dutch artists' portraiture represented a form of direct personal communication and as such was "the most important turning point on the way to the present situation, in which all objects appear as mere impressions and experiences of the subjective consciousness."

Vermeer's lifetime output includes 30 generally accepted paintings and nine possible attributions that have survived. The film does rather off-handedly allude to the fact that scientific innovations were important for the art of that time, particularly the *camera obscura* and the Galilean telescope.

According to art historian Erik Larsen: "In fact, certain distortions in form and composition, reflections and treatment of highlights leave no doubt that Vermeer did not eschew the help of what contemporary science had to offer in the artistic field.... The flourishing of experimental as well as theoretical activities in the natural sciences in Protestant Holland encouraged artists to find mechanical devices constituting a shortcut in the rendering of perspective possible. Theoretical treatises were available, but the possibility of replacing calculations with a gadget opened up new horizons for the simple craftsman."

Thus, on many different levels, the grasp of the importance of the individual and individual moments—the discovery of everyday life—was the *revolutionary* achievement of Vermeer and the Dutch masters.

This seems to be a closed book to Webber, who offers up in *Girl with a Pearl Earring* a glorified garden variety romance that would not generate any particular attention, but for the fact that it is nominally about Vermeer. Asked by numerous interviewers to point to his favorite scene, director Webber invariably (and dishearteningly) replies: the "lip-licking scene" (when Vermeer is positioning model Griet and sexual tensions between them are at their height).

FutureMovies.com, interview Webber

some of the conceptions that underpin his film: "I wasn't desperate to make a film about Vermeer from the outset, in a way I was scared about that side of things, but I saw that it was a fascinating tale about power, about sex, about the relationship between money and art and it was all interesting stuff.... I think that it's a film in which no one really gets what they want and that's an interesting thing in an age when we seem increasingly obsessed with self-gratification."

This is remarkably limited. The reality of Vermeer's life and time, as well as our own, is far more complex. The painter died only three years after the 1672 war during which the Netherlands had to defend itself against both an invasion by France and a declaration of war by England. The war brought the art trade to a grinding halt and enormous poverty to Vermeer. Only 43 at the time of his death, the artist left his widow with 11 children, eight of them underage.

Far from Catharina being the narrow-minded, narcissistic, inartistic competitor for Vermeer's affections portrayed in Webber's film, a petition she submitted in April 1676 to the high court of Holland seeking permission to defer payment of her debts, gives a different impression: "During the long and ruinous war with France, not only could [my husband] not sell his work, but in addition, at great loss to himself, the pictures by other masters that he bought and traded were left in his hands. In consequence of that and because of the large burden of his children, having no personal fortune, he fell into such frenetic state and decline that in one day, or a day and a half, he passed from a state of good health into death."

Although Webber no doubt sincerely acknowledges being struck by the magnificence of Vermeer's work, describing him as "one of the first of the older artists who had a simplicity and directness and a mystery and sensuality that I could appreciate," he and his collaborators are ill-equipped to create a serious piece about such a figure. Lacking any grounding in history or any aesthetic-intellectual urgency, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* takes its place among a series of self-involved and small-minded works about artists of the past (*Immortal Beloved*, *Frida*, *The Hours*, *Sylvia*, etc.) as a film made in the image of its creators at the expense of its far more prepossessing subject.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact