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## Maya Hawke - Thérèse Music Video

If you have seen a popular Netflix series, *Stranger Things* past its 2<sup>nd</sup> season you know of a character named Robin. She's portrayed by the actress Maya (Ray) Hawke. You may also know her parents, likewise actors Ethan Hawke and Uma Thurman. But what you may not be familiar with is that in addition to her acting, she's a singer-songwriter. Her professional music career started in 2019, when she released the singles *To Love a Boy* and *Stay Open*. Her songs are reminiscent of poetry, which is likely due to the fact that she has been a lover of it her entire life. (Almeida, 2020) Growing up in the public eye influenced her artistic perspective, particularly her fascination with the duality of public and private personas. Today I want to talk about one of the songs that explores this dualism titled *Thérèse* – the first single and lead track from her sophomore album *Moss* released on 23rd of sept 2022. I choose it as it is a good song, but with some context it transforms into a great song. So let me give you the context:

It adapts Balthus' (1908–2001) painting named *Thérèse Dreaming* (1938), depicting a young girl in a pose some may consider sexually suggestive (a minor with underwear visible and legs apart). This image and other of Balthus's works sparked controversy early on, but the painter insisted that viewers should engage directly with his art rather than his personal life. (AL, 2013) His refusal “*now let us look at the pictures*”<sup>1</sup> – is itself a public gesture asking the audience to view his work as a self-contained entity rather than a window into the creator's psyche. (Balthus, b.d. and McDonald, 2013) The statement<sup>2</sup> I connect to part of the chorus "*It's just Thérèse*" insisting on the girl's ordinariness against those who project meaning onto her body.

However, Balthus's work remained a subject of ethical and artistic debate into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2017 a *New Yorker* was calling for its removal from the museum display as “*The artist... had a noted infatuation with pubescent girls, and it can be strongly argued that this painting romanticizes the sexualization of a child.*” (Merrill, 2017) This is referenced in the second verse: “*And get her down, take her off the wall.*” However, Met Museum responded by adding a label noting that some viewers could find the work ‘offensive or disturbing, given

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<sup>1</sup> »Balthus is a painter of whom nothing is known, now let us look at the pictures. -Regards, B.« from a telegram sent by the artist Balthus to the Tate Gallery (in 1968), when the gallery requested biographical details for the catalogue of his retrospective.

<sup>2</sup> »Balthus is a painter of whom nothing is known, now let us look at the pictures.«

Balthus' artistic infatuation with young girls'. (Gaskin, 2022) This institutional compromise exposes the central tension: art cannot be separated from public interpretation when viewers bring forward moral frameworks, histories, and anxieties to the image. The painting is therefore a starting point because it already dramatizes the collision between private subject (the girl in the painting) and public meaning (critique, outrage, or erotic projection).

At the same time, this is not the first or the last time Hawke was directly inspired by this painting. Reusing the reference as *Thérèse Dreaming* was a lifelong mirror for her (Bua, 2022): a way to explore girlhood, visibility, shame, and the tension between public and private. (Tercero, 2022 and Bergeson, 2022) It becomes a self-portrait across mediums. Hawke has said "The girl in the painting, in my head, is me." (Yashira, 2022 and Patridge, 2022) Each reuse is a new chapter in that self-portrait; first imitation in the music video for her song Blue Hippo (2021), then embodiment (in *Therese*) and later transformation (that happens in her third album *Chaos Angel*), where she is referencing it only thematically.

The embodiment of *Therese* is connected to her own experience of growing up under the public scrutiny as well as to the broader experience of young women whose bodies become public property before they're ready. (Tercero, 2017 and Bergeson, 2022) Maya begins the work of reclaiming the painted subject by giving her an inner life. While painting invites projection, the song supplies interior detail: dreams of horses, sport cars, and a boy named Marlon. These details are small but decisive, they convert a static object into a person with desires and fantasies. Lyric "*Therese does not belong to you / The horses, cars, and cowboys do*" draw a clear boundary between personhood and the symbolic objects others claim. (Tercero, 2022) By narrating her interior life, Hawke performs an act of reclamation: she returns agency to the subject and refuses the passive role of a muse or an object.

The music video approaches the same themes from different angles. Hawke and Brady Corbet stage the argument visually and escalate it. The video depicts a group of young people naked and intimate in a forest, which is later invaded by police who arrest the participants. Similarly to the way the culture [quoting Hawke] "crushes down on us" after childhood, replacing authentic self-expression with conformity and shame. (Yalcubjaya, 2022 and Paul, 2022) The raid literalizes the social policing of bodies and desires: what is private and consensual becomes criminalized when exposed to public authority. The final image – Hawke singing while handcuffed – translates metaphor into a stark visual: bodily freedom and self-expression are treated as offenses.

The video's visuals also matter. They were inspired by Japanese photographer Kohei Yoshiyuki's *Kōen* series (translated as Park), which captured people engaging in sexual activities in Tokyo public parks at night. It foregrounds the tension between secret intimacy and voyeuristic spectatorship. (Yalcubjaya, 2022 and Institute of Modern Art Brisbane, b.d.) By referencing that work with the use of 35 mm camera, infrared film, flash filters, presence of lurking spectators and nighttime forest setting, the video complicates the idea of voyeurism: the forest scene is both a site of mutual pleasure and a spectacle for those who watch. It's provocative, daring and sensual.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge ethical complexity. Balthus's painting raises legitimate concerns about the sexualization of minors, and Hawke's engagement with that it can be read in multiple ways. She does not erase the controversy, rather she reframes it. Her work uses painting as a provocation to explore how public discourse seizes on young bodies and how those bodies might reclaim narrative control. Her project is reflective not celebratory.

Across painting, song, and video, Hawke stages a shift from objectification to subjectivity. Balthus's canvas becomes a point of departure rather than a final verdict. The song supplies interiority while the video dramatizes the social consequences of exposure. Together they argue that the most radical act available to young women is to exist without shame and to insist on the separation of their inner lives from public ownership.

To close, I will return to the simple insistence that structures the whole song: "It's just Therese." That line asks viewers to stop projecting fantasies and to start recognizing personhood. Hawke's work does not resolve the ethical questions around Balthus but reframes them. I'll leave you with Hawke's own hope for the piece: that it might make people feel something other than shame, self-hatred, and loneliness (ibid).

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