On Sharing

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In his article “At Galleries, Cameras Find a Mixed Welcome,” Fred Bernstein interviews a director at the Louvre who was greatly disturbed when a group of tourists rudely pushed her aside to take pictures of the painting she was admiring. According to the director, these tourists photographed every single painting, not even taking a minute to see the art apart from the lenses of their cameras. The tourists behaved as if cameras were “extensions of their senses” (qtd. in Bernstein).

People, more now than ever, depend on image-making technologies to capture whatever they consider noteworthy. It seems that our desire to photograph the Mona Lisa has surpassed our desire to see it. Yet, as art critic Karen Rosenberg writes in her article on image-sharing and social media, the mere “act of snapping a picture is no longer enough to confirm reality and enhance experience” (“Everyone’s Lives”). We are only satisfied when others acknowledge our photos and thus the richness of our lives. We solicit such acknowledgement by constant sharing, and the new social media sensation Instagram is one of the many platforms on which we convey idealized versions of reality, including ourselves. We often believe that the images we see on Instagram represent reality, and we forget that someone else framed this particular slice of life and filtered it to share in the context of some narrative. We choose to accept the copied versions even if we are aware of how easily and carelessly they are produced. John Berger warns us about the dangers of staying at such “copying distance” in his essay “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible” (108). Berger suggests that if we forgo direct involvement with art or life, if we fail to see truly, we may end up ceding the intensity of our experience to those who have the power to arrange our perception for us (107, 110).

Theorists and planners arrange perception and establish the criteria for sharing. Walker Percy calls them the “class of privileged knowers” in his essay “The Loss of the Creature” (756). According to Percy, the planners of
experience foist their own vision of the visible world on the untrained eyes of lay consumers who are “content to receive an experience just as it has been presented” (756). As a result, at the hands of planners, the experience of the consumer becomes mediated in a limiting way. Percy explains that the way we are educated especially affects the way we perceive and engage with the world. When a biology student dissects a dogfish, the fact that the singular fish is now called a “specimen” immediately devalues the unique existence of this particular dogfish (758). The student’s recognition of the fish does not depend on any kind of confrontation with the reality of the creature in front of him. As far as the student is concerned, there is nothing to confront: the whole experience and its outcomes are already determined by his professor. Later in life, when thinking about his school years, the student will forget about the dogfish. It never truly existed in the first place. He will merely remember the mediated, pre-planned “experience” of an experiment in a laboratory, just as tourists at the Louvre, whose engagement with Mona Lisa is limited to sharing filtered versions on social media, will remember not the magic of the painting, but the mere fact that they once saw it (758).

Automatic, superficial sharing also robs the sharers of the awareness that they are only seeing the Mona Lisa through the eyes of the planners—not only the museum curators in this case, but also Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger (inventors of Instagram) and the infamous Mark Zuckerberg. As Zadie Smith suggests, it is their visions of reality we share on Facebook or Instagram. We promote curtailed versions of unique moments that initially should have belonged to us.

Smith provides insight into Zuckerberg’s phenomenal influence over millions of people who have built a virtual second life around Facebook, his groundbreaking invention. In her essay, “Generation Why,” Smith presents Zuckerberg as a person who seems to be the epitome of Percy’s planner, for every single aspect of his invention is a reflection of himself. According to Smith, Facebook is “blue, because it turns out Zuckerberg is red-green color-blind”; it is “preoccupied with personal trivia, because Mark Zuckerberg thinks the exchange of personal trivia is what ‘friendship’ is.” Yet 500 million of us willingly check our Facebook accounts every day and partake in this “Mark Zuckerberg Production.” We’re deceitfully satisfied as we seek human contact by sharing and accessing superficial information about unfamiliar people we call our friends because Facebook entices us to do so. This illusion of keeping in touch with our acquaintances and even our actual friends and family transforms our relationships into streams of frivolous data. We opt for fleeting instances of digital connection rather than the intensity of intellectu-
al engagements and real conversations. We cling to technology and social media because they eliminate the risks and faults of physical existence. We can edit the texts we are about to send, we can retouch our photos until they are flawless before sharing them on Instagram—we are slowly losing touch with “our messy feelings, our desires, our fears” (Smith). We talk in comments and feel in likes. Eventually, we are reduced to our profiles and ironically, unavoidably, “become like Facebook: falsely jolly, fake-friendly, self-promoting [and] slickly disingenuous” (Smith).

But it might not be technology alone that distances us from deeper engagements with reality. The Mona Lisa experience can still be far from genuine if we don’t realize that the curators plan every small detail before exhibiting the world’s most famous, enigmatic smile. They determine the exact spot for hanging; they decide on the distance visitors must maintain while observing the artwork. The only way to escape partially is to become aware of their influence, and see through their mediation. But such clarity of perception requires a very specific kind of sight. In “Steps” John Berger worries that technological mediation distorts our ability to see. With cameras even in our cellphones, “appearances [are] registered, and transmitted with lightning speed,” and as images multiply, physical appearances become increasingly volatile and lifeless (106). Berger believes we can overcome the reductive influence of technology through the process of collaboration with the visible. He wants us to see the world as good painters see their models, through an act of emotional connection that allows us to capture the essence of the objects hidden beneath transient appearances. This process requires us and the artist to establish a degree of intimacy that would allow us to receive whatever the model or object can give. Given the degree of engagement, collaboration is “seldom based on good will: more usually on desire, rage, fear, pity or longing”—negative and frustrating emotions that are part of the condition of our existence (109). Like Percy, who insists on confrontation as a prerequisite to genuine engagement with the reality of our experience, Berger calls us to establish a dialogue in which we try to discover the unsettling as well as the pleasurable emotional aspects of our object. However, as Smith notes, if we want to avoid the anxiety produced by such feelings, in our contemporary culture we can. We carry our relationships to the virtual world where we can have tighter control over them. For instance, after a couple ends a relationship, their home pages typically fill up with status messages intended to demonstrate their contentment after the breakup, and their flawless profile pictures not-so-subtly imply, “This is what you’re missing.” The digital environment gives these people space to carry on an ersatz conversa-
tion on computer screens and smartphones, so they can avoid the genuine yet embarrassing outbursts of real emotions inevitable in face-to-face encounters.

The broad consequences of this lack of engagement may not be as trivial as those of a romantic breakup. Sometimes the price for lack of genuine engagement can be oppression that—if not recognized for what it is—may never be overcome. In “On Seeing England for the First Time,” Jamaica Kincaid, an author born in the small British colony of Antigua, examines the consequences of colonial oppression. As colonized citizens of Antigua, Kincaid and her family had been forced by the colonial power to substitute the reality of their impoverished lives for images that allowed them to feign participation in British culture. While Kincaid’s father cannot escape the British identity imposed upon him, Kincaid achieves freedom through a long and arduous process of continuous engagement with the often discomfiting truth of her existence. Kincaid’s father hopes to claim a place in the colonial power structure by wearing a British-style hat not suitable for the climate he lives in. He internalizes the British ideologies and hopes that imitating what he considers a superior culture might entitle him to the riches of the empire. Kincaid, however, analyzes her place under colonial rule more critically and realizes that she cannot draw similarities between her life and the life of a Briton. British customs, like the breakfast that makes her feel sleepy, seem unsuitable for island living, and “[her] dresses did not rustle in the evening air” as they would have had she she walked with the heroines of Jane Austen’s novels (723). The British lifestyle is a fairytale far from reality. Its characters are prosperous and powerful, and when Kincaid turns her gaze towards her own surroundings, the magic suddenly gives way to the painful picture of the economic and psychological burden carried by the colonized people. “The reality of my life,” Kincaid explains, “was conquests, subjugation, humiliation, enforced amnesia” (723). For Kincaid and her countrymen and women, the unrealistic idea of England, constructed by their teachers—the planners—resulted in an alternate understanding of the empire, an understanding that would form the basis of their sense of reality, their sense of the meaningful and the meaningless and, most important, their sense of identity and place in the world. But, unlike her father, Kincaid can identify the ways in which colonial oppression infringes upon her freedom of mind, and she fights to regain her intellectual independence.

To reclaim her identity from the destructive forces of colonial rule, Kincaid shares a specific vision of her experience with us. Her essay is a public counterattack against years of subjugation. She establishes the true conditions
of her existence through candid portrayals of colonial hypocrisy and an analysis of her compatriots’ misplaced respect for their oppressive rulers. She is not afraid to confront the realities of her oppression and bravely invites us to collaborate with the rage and disappointment that arise from her own sense of truth. Kincaid’s conceptual work not only cultivates her identity but also enhances our perception of the ways oppression works on her and us. We react to her words, and we are fascinated by her honesty. Kincaid’s captivating awareness makes us wonder how much we are aware of our surroundings. She prompts us to discover what we are not seeing: the reality hidden, perhaps, beneath layers of oppressive mythologies. The colonizing myths filter and share a perfected reality, just as Facebook and Instagram distort our sense of reality. But Kincaid’s intellectual engagement and honest sharing now solicits a genuine response through confrontation and collaboration. Her cognitive process allows her to diagnose, analyze, and act against a lifelong oppression; if we follow in her footsteps, we too could begin to see beyond our own myths.

It is highly unlikely that we will stop using cameras, social media, and other technology, but we are not necessarily doomed to surrender real human interaction to superficial and virtual contact. It is up to us to reclaim what awaits us on the other side of our cameras and to see our existence for what it is instead of doctoring it with mind-altering technologies. We can still be active online, entertaining ourselves with instantaneous and superficial sharing, while keeping in mind that the key to meaningful discovery lies in critical sharing, engaging with our world in an often unsettling but honest way. Confrontation and collaboration give us a chance to experience real human contact, and restore contact to its original root—tact, touch—so that we can expand beyond our digital profiles and touch, or even collide with, others as we seek ultimately to restore our sight.

WORKS CITED

