

Envisioning Vision

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V*ision is a job.* Every week patients sit in a chair, cover one eye, and read the letters twenty feet away to an ophthalmologist. “T, Z, V, E, C” means you have perfect vision. “O, F, L, C, T” suggests you’re struggling to see the board in school and need glasses. “E, G, H” could imply crippling dense cataracts. Vision is mathematical, mechanical. It is a collection of waves of different lengths, waves that bounce around the room and with any luck land on your retina. If they fail to, we create lenses, operate on cataracts, laser leaky blood vessels, reattach retinas; do all we can to prevent the loss of this basic evolutionary tool. We believe sight to be a mere replica of the external world. It is the fixed, unalterable image that arises from physics—a penetration of reality into our ethereal minds. Yet in her essay “Seeing,” Annie Dillard describes the failure of pure sight. Patients who have lived for years without sight are suddenly endowed with the ability, experiencing for the first time this “pure sensation unencumbered by meaning” (21). But instead of relief or security, their world becomes an even more incomprehensible “field of light, in which everything appears dull, confused, and in motion,” an overwhelming assault of detail that makes them want to retreat to their familiar, comfortable obscurity (21).

Vision is my study. Every week I ask my experiment participants to sit in a chair, stare at color squares on a computer screen, and rate their perception of the changing color saturation. I investigate how the meaningless “color-patches of infancy” that Dillard describes begin to swell with meaning (23). I research the neurological pathways that translate, filter, and distort the incoming waves so that in place of “the confusion of forms and colours” we benefit from discernible images (21). After all, it is these concepts of form, distance, size, and space that render vision an evolutionary achievement. It is this repackaging of our surroundings that makes vision a device for self-preservation. Our brain learns without our consent to code colors as a function of their borders, create shapes by assuming depth, attend to moving rather than stationary objects. Thus, although sight feels effortless and imme-

diate, it is only seemingly fixed. In fact it is wholly dependent on both intrinsic and extrinsic context. But Dillard seems to feel that at times this dependency has robbed her of the raw “dazzle of color-patches” (21). She finds herself unable to stop her own verbalizations, the instinctive itch to reason everything she sees. And thus, she nostalgically longs for a world in which space doesn’t make such “terrible sense” (23). But perhaps she can’t halt the incessant analyzing because without the prioritizing and categorizing, vision is limited to the entralling but trivial admiration of aesthetics.

John Berger celebrates these interpretations of sights as the products of the diversity of vision. In *Ways of Seeing*, he asserts that our individuality lies within our unique ways of seeing. Our identity is dependent upon the distinctive interpretive reasoning that transforms color patches into meaningful trees, buildings, faces, etc. And therefore, vision is not the invariable passive absorption of waves, but an active faculty of “looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (9). He says, for example, “The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter’s way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper” (10). Our soul is reflected in our selections of significance, the deliberate preference of a “single sight [from the] infinity of other possible sights,” a single element, object, person, moment from innumerable others (10). We deposit a trace of ourselves in these sights. An image not only represents how something or somebody once was, but also “a record of how X had seen Y” (10).

Vision is my inspiration. Every week I walk down the streets of New York and at least once, I see a reproduction of a photograph taken 50 years ago. This iconic photograph by Alberto Korda persists as one of the most popular, most recognizable in the world. It is reproduced, re-interpreted, recalled time and time again by people of all ages, all cultures, for all different reasons. The face of Ernesto “Che” Guevara adorns the side of buildings, covers of books and magazines, posters on dorm room walls, t-shirts, keychains, etc. Why are people so obsessed with this photograph? Is it, as Berger suggests, that we all crave to see Che the way Korda saw him on that day in Havana’s Colón Cemetery: resolute, resilient, angry, yet pensive with the trace of sorrow that accompanies a lifetime of fighting? Do we celebrate this image as a “direct testimony” of the sentiments during the Cuban Revolution (Berger 10)? Perhaps, but even more than the mere record of how Korda saw Che, how a follower perceived his leader, the usage of this image has become a representation of how we see Che’s vision. How I see how X saw how Y saw what the world *could be*. Traveling through Latin America as a young medical student, Che became profoundly troubled by the ubiquity of disease, poverty,

and oppression he witnessed. He observed, recorded, wrote and then propagated his vision of justice through action, speech, and text. A whole society shared and implemented this vision. How was he so successful? How has he come to represent something more than a person, more than a mere preference or point of view?

In the essay “Aching for a Self,” Jim Corder worries that our ability to transform the “soul in here” into the “self out there” through rhetoric is fatally inadequate (6). He tells us, “We try to get real only to learn that our rhetorics won’t let us; they go off and leave us behind, remnants” (6). Our words take off from the page, contorted by the mind of the reader, transformed by the analysis of the critic, and thus they bifurcate into ideas that no longer represent the mythically unique essence of the author. However, for Che and Korda alike, that escalation is the goal. A mere translation of the soul, even in its most perfect form, is not enough. Korda encourages the replication and distribution of his image in hopes that it will inspire, that his vision of Che’s vision will provoke action. Its popularity suggests that they are successful—countless chests flaunt the tenacity of Che—but if that is the goal, why does it feel so disingenuous to wear the face? I read about Che’s journeys, his sacrifices, his philosophy, and can’t help but feel that the parade of memorabilia is a betrayal, a superficial façade of rebellion and nonconformity that cheapens Che’s conviction. For as revolution once again reverberates throughout the world, I sit comfortably unaffected in a small Vietnamese café in the Lower East Side with a hot cup of coffee, looking at human destruction through the artificiality of pixels and paint.

Vision is not enough.

I watched as he sliced through the scalp, and with only a moment’s hesitation, the blood began to spill down into a plastic bag. The thick piece of skin was clipped all along the severed edge with small plastic contraptions that looked as if they could have been hair accessories, causing the bleeding to all but cease. He extended his hand, palm facing up, and a drill was immediately placed in his grasp. He pulled the trigger and punctured three holes in the thick, blood-stained bone of the skull. With a thinner drill he began to connect the dots, pushing metal to bone. Flecks of white and red leapt in the air, and my nose was filled with the smell of burnt flesh. With the drill screaming, I watched as one hand guided the device forwards, an unstoppable force, while the other stopped periodically to suction away the blood left dripping behind. When he finally painstakingly removed the skull and peeled

back the dura underneath, a brain sat exposed in front of me, pulsating gently.

Suddenly people were in and out of the operating room: residents, medical students, surgeons, nurses. The body was left alone for a minute as people and machines shuffled around, a deserved break after the violence of the past few hours. The lights around the room were dimmed and just the brain remained featured in the spotlight. A giant microscope with two heads was lowered in front of the surgeons, who both reflexively leaned in to assume their positions at the eyepiece; one colossal body with four hands, three brains, and one aneurysm.

The vascular portion of the surgery was strangely peaceful. The slow rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor mirrored my own beating chest. But I was minuscule, creeping through the brain along with the probe. I had the intuition that this is what it would feel like to be guided through a jungle by an experienced hunter, hacking down brush and branches with a machete, looking at the tracks and trees, not knowing what would be up ahead. Similarly, we squeezed through cortex, sliced connective tissue obstructing our path, cauterized blood vessels that threatened to drown us. Guided only by the markings of the vasculature, we traveled for two hours before we spotted the menacing aneurysm, an ugly flat brown creature surrounded by yellow calcification. It was examined. Poked, prodded, lifted, it remained stagnant; an innocent provocation of a dead animal. A small plastic clip was used to close off the blood supply to the aneurysm to prevent reoccurrence and further weakening of blood vessels in the area. The animal forever contained.

I left the room shortly after, never to know the outcome of that surgery. However, this didn't bother me, for I had witnessed an incredible feat—a rescue mission in the very organ that gives rise to both the soul and the self. I left the hospital with my heart racing, invigorated, excited, bursting with the inexplicable awe that Dillard had had in her youth. I had beheld the pinnacle of science and medical expertise.

But I had also spent six hours in the operating room, witnessing an attempt to save a life without really thinking about the brain as part of that life. I contemplated the biology and the surgeon's dexterity, but not the person lying on the table. That 64-year-old fat man sprawled with every vulnerability exposed was a mere project, a learning experience. We seek to see, to experience, to gain exposure to the cultures of the world with the belief that we are learning, growing wiser and more aware. But perhaps in reality, we are merely chasing the exhilaration of novelty. Whereas I had once thought myself a scientific, knowledge-driven individual who, like Dillard, "talks too

much,” I suddenly worry that I too will be lamenting the dull rationalizations that eradicate the alluring mystery of new sight (23). I can’t help but feel that without the rawness of the new, knowledge is dull, disconnected; that the ubiquity of information on human strife in the Middle East somehow degrades its empathetic effect; that with enough exposure, aneurysms will cease to be anything more than a tedious procedure. How can our experiences take on profound meaning and affect the soul inside when we quickly become jaded by familiar sights?

Perhaps the answer lies not in eliminating the knowledge of sights to preserve their novelty, but by adding to it. In “Souls on Ice,” Mark Doty describes the arbitrary image of a collection of rowed and stacked mackerel in an ordinary Stop n’ Shop. He stands before them, fully aware of their purpose, familiar with their taste, consistency, and color, and yet remains entranced. He attributes his “sense of compelled attention” to the “part of his imagination that gropes forward . . . looking for the right vessel” to carry his thoughts (26). He is excited, not by an entirely novel sight, but by the possibility of novel *insight* into even the most familiar. He subsequently realizes this possibility through the re-creation of the image in the form of a poem. Among the words, between the lines and stanzas, within the internal discourse in his mind, he discovers the significance of the image. As he simultaneously reflects on the death of his partner and the collective beauty of the mackerel, it becomes apparent that it is in those moments of contemplation and creation that we craft the connections between what we see and what we have seen. An event, an image, an experience is not just another snapshot in time, but becomes indelibly intertwined in our history as it converses with all that came before.

Perhaps Doty’s enduring fascination with his sight eluded me and Dillard because “[we] see what [we] expect” (Dillard 17). Without the deliberations, we have only physical sight, sight that is limited by the boundaries of the external world. However, in insight, in the unexpected patterns of relation, there exists the verve of freedom and novelty. Corder describes the “inventive world” engendered by writing and speaking that is free because “no one knows for sure the next word they’ll say or inscribe” (8). In this way, experiences (novel or banal) have the ability to touch the soul inside when we rewrite, re-tell, re-create events in relation to the poignant experiences that had previously shaped our identity. We begin to empathize with similar situations or understand the conditions it would take for us to feel the same way. We don’t always see everything in relation to ourselves as Berger suggests; rather, works of prose, discourse, and art force us to do so. And as a reward we receive

insight—the perception, understanding, and empathy to care about foreign situations. Only through this contortion of sight into insight can events even begin to affect us, begin to produce an empathetic response.

Che wrote in *Notas de Viaje*, “I am not the person I was. All this aimless wandering through our America with a capital A has changed me more than I thought” (32). Embedded in the written scenes and records of that first trip through Latin America is the reflection that gave him insight into the extent of injustices suffered, suffering that he would come to empathize with. Interwoven throughout the narration are the thoughtful considerations of a community that would reveal the power of human solidarity. This insight not only changed how he felt, but also inspired a *Vision*, with a capital V. Sight, digested into insight, provoked him to envision a better world.

Corder and Doty cite collectivity and community as a consolation for the loss of the individual. The inability for us to be remembered and preserved exactly as we are seems so grave that we tell ourselves our actions are propagated through the community, a part of the “collective experience” that lives on (Corder 7). But perhaps the only means to true memorability is through the celebration of the release of self, the emergence from the confines of corporeal identity, the metamorphosis into the imagined. The *envisioned* does not yet exist in reality, persisting only as an abstract concept in the realm of writing, speech, and art, and thus it transcends a singular context, transcends any one person’s way of seeing. A better world thus envisioned can be morphed and modified to fit all contexts; it can be truly shared, adopted, propagated. This is why Che Guevara, aware of his own metaphysical transformation, bel-lowed at his executioner, “Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man.”

Vision is our eternal identity.

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