

It's All in the Eyes

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People say that Mona Lisa's eyes are always looking at you. Her eyes are always peering in your direction—no matter what angle you look from. I suppose that's probably true, though I've never personally seen the eyebrowless beauty in all her painted glory. I would venture to say that Mona Lisa's relentless eyes and their majesty are an insightful piece of evidence for John Berger's idea of art and its mystical powers of sight. "The Marquise de Sorcy de Thelusson, painted in 1790 by David, looks at me," Berger writes (33). The painting does not, of course, have legitimate eyes; it is not living. Perhaps the painting isn't even "pulling a Mona Lisa" and giving the almost magical illusion of vision. Perhaps it's something more expansive and yet more personal.

But what does Berger's idea mean? It's a difficult, almost impossible idea to—pun intended—see. Berger justifies himself with a subsidiary concept—collaboration. It is the collaboration between artist and subject that breathes life into art. Using another sense to strengthen his idea, Berger writes, "And when the painted image is not a copy but the result of a dialogue, the painted thing speaks if we listen" (33). In essence, the dialogue is the collaboration. The connection between the artist and what he or she is painting is crucial to elevating a work from mere representation. For Leonardo da Vinci to have properly and so poetically transposed every nuance of Mona Lisa's face from human life to paint on poplar wood, the artist could not have simply copied what he saw in front of him. His job and his art involved much more. Da Vinci had to connect to his subject. He had to go beyond the artist/subject relationship and enter into a much stronger bond. The artist's job is not to simply copy. Xerox has that covered in our modern world. The artist's job is to breathe new life into something—to re-create rather than create, to humanize rather than to regurgitate.

But does the artist force a painting to look at someone? With Berger's findings and distinct recollections in mind, I can summon the understanding that the "looking" is a fruit of that connection—the dialogue, the collaboration. The viewer is feeling, in what is often a metaphysical version of sight or

voice, that raw interplay between them. I would describe it as an emotional transmission from subject to artist, to paint brush, to paint, to canvas, to viewer. Somehow the feelings carry through and flow through all the different levels of re-creation.

Six years old, afraid of kindergarten, dramatic beyond belief, too sensitive to grasp the words of others, unknowingly homosexual, I stared at the painting that decorated the burgundy walls of my downstairs bathroom, Hugo Simberg's *The Wounded Angel*. This was a ritual that took place once or twice—maybe even three times—a day. Rumor has it that we spend somewhere around 56 hours a year resting on the toilet. I think I spent about half of my time in the downstairs bathroom—staring, wondering, worrying.

As I looked at that sad little boy depicted with striking reality in that beautiful painting, I couldn't help asking myself, "What is wrong with that boy? And why do I feel just like him?"

Like the skin, the eyes are organs. But unlike the skin, which becomes clammy when it's nervous and bumpy when it's frightened and red when it's embarrassed and maybe even green when it's sick, the eyes are our only bodily windows, the only visual portals into our selves and into others. This explains the artistic fixation with these ocular spheres. Whether it is the eyes of a Hollywood actress stretched over a movie screen, the eyes of a hungry homeless child on a television infomercial, or the stunning eyes of a dying woman in a portrait, eyes fascinate.

Meryl Streep has *those* eyes—eyes that simmer, eyes that radiate. I distinctly recall my first experience watching Streep's performance in *The Hours*, a film based on the Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Michael Cunningham. Sprawled out on the oversized red couch in my darkened poolroom, my straight friend, Collin, resting in the chair next to me, I felt the power of Meryl Streep's eyes for the first time. The awakening arrived at a pivotal moment in the film—a tense scene of poetic language and lingering music, set in a gloomy New York, culminating in a marvelous death of a central character, the crazed homosexual poet. But it wasn't the thought of the helpless character's cold body lying dead on a city street that moved me. It was the next frame, the next image. It was Streep. It was her eyes. Her character was trapped in a crumbling world, and every nuance of her emotional state was there in her eyes. To freeze-frame the film at that exact moment would be to produce a work of art. Those eyes saw me. Those eyes moved me. Even in the presence of Collin, who, I assume, still laughs inside when he thinks about

this situation, I cried. The eyes pierced me in a way I had only experienced a few times.

Perhaps what I felt, and still feel, when I saw Streep's eyes is what Roland Barthes describes as *punctum*. Barthes describes this idea or theme as a "sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice" (169). A work displaying *punctum* affects the viewer in a more intense way than everyday like and dislike. The effect is physical—think chills, goose bumps, a small gasp—but not harmful. It is merely a jolt—a deep internal reaction to what the eyes are processing. In fact, what the eyes are processing is what Berger has found so fascinating. I'm a third member of this artistic process, and the conversation goes from filmmaker to Streep to me by way of a script, a camera, a DVD, and a television screen. *Punctum* comes from translating that conversation between the subject and the artist into our own words and letting those words speak to us. If the painting is able to speak to us or even able to see us, we can feel the shock that Barthes details.

On the other hand, we can respect a work of art and even "like" it without feeling anything substantial toward it. This is how I feel about most art I see. *Studium*, another term Barthes employs in his diagnosis of how we view art, is much like this attitude I have described: "a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity" (169). This "special acuity" is the fruit of the connection between artist and subject; it sets off the sparks of *punctum's* flare. *Punctum* and *studium* are not necessarily antonyms. According to Barthes, *studium* is a polite or perhaps even "watered-down" reaction; whereas, *punctum* is a symbolic stab or punch (169). *Studium* taps, while *punctum* slaps.

The Wounded Angel slaps me. Depicting two young boys, likely peasants of some sort, carrying an angel to an undisclosed location, this painting doesn't find its sole thematic importance in the eyes of one subject. But the eyes of one of the two young boys captivate me and bring me into the "conversation" of this painting. Of the two young boys in the painting, only one is looking out, presumably at the viewer. Simberg's choice to depict only one boy in full face draws the viewer's eyes immediately to him. His eyes are looking out; we go there first. This boy, dressed simply and without any embellishment, sports an expression of worried solitude and remorseful restraint. He is ensnared. Whether that is a good or bad thing—to be burdened by an angel—I do not know. I do, however, feel that through those eyes, I am able to connect with the boy and feel the emotional frenzy of a mind masked by a sullen face. Through his eyes, I see a soul caught in a mess of solitude and confusion. This young man is part of something he cannot possibly under-

stand, yet has no way to escape from. He has no way to rid himself of this angel, perhaps because of his social limitations, his religion, or his simple amazement. The boy is trapped, a sensation I know all too well.

“The process of art is a series of jolts,” writes Winterson (21). “A series of *punctums*?” Roland Barthes might respond. “No, a series of collaborations,” John Berger would no doubt clarify. I think, in many ways, they would all be correct. There is no calculable way to classify art, especially one’s reaction to it. The experience of *punctum* and the sensation of joining in on the collaboration of a work are simply two ways of verbalizing the intoxicating rush that is art. As I delve into a work and let it look at me as I so deftly look at it, I can feel it send jolts through my being.

“What is wrong with that boy?” I would ask myself so frequently as I looked up at the small copy of Simberg’s painting that adorned the crimson wall of my bathroom. Jolt number one. “That boy kind of looks familiar. He’s so sad.” Jolt number two. Then, I would feel an overwhelming sense of sadness—both for myself and for the boy. Jolt number three, what would most likely be, for me, *punctum*.

“There is a constant exchange of emotion between us, between the three of us; the artist I need never meet, the painting in its own right, and me,” writes Winterson (23). This exchange does not require me to know what Simberg was thinking about when he painted *The Wounded Angel*. Nor do I need to know what Meryl Streep was thinking as she filmed that particular scene on the set of that particular movie. All I need to do is look into the eyes—of Streep, of Simberg’s painted subjects—and puncture them even as they puncture me. By doing so, we see into each other’s souls, and cease to be alone.

I used to sit on the toilet (such a crude place for such weighty artistic exploration) and stare intently at Simberg’s painting. Overcome with sadness but somehow filled with a sense of belonging, I found solace in that boy’s eyes. That little boy is my personal Mona Lisa. True, I have never seen da Vinci’s mesmerizing masterpiece in person, but I don’t suppose I need to. I have found the eyes that will always be looking at me. Trapped like a mouse in a cage, that boy was like me, trapped in my own Southern Catholic world of football and Sunday mass, where the Bible said God only liked boys who liked girls. That toilet and the art that hung across from it have morphed into new things in my little bubble of existence, one of which is the eyes belonging to Meryl Streep. Watching that film for the first time on that red couch with Collin, I was a little boy again, trapped in my own blemished skin—the skin of a gay young man. “It is connection that we seek,” writes Winterson

(21). I longed for some sort of connection even as a young boy; I still most certainly do. I found it in the eyes of a sad boy burdened by the weight of a dying angel, in the eyes of a Hollywood actress portraying a desperate woman, in art.

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