

TO SEE THE GREAT THINGS BEYOND

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Can you see? Most people have probably been intrigued by the smile of *Mona Lisa* at some point in their lives, though few notice that the landscape behind *Mona Lisa* is, in fact, split into two horizontal levels. If they had taken a second look, this intentional “mistake” left by the master Leonardo da Vinci would have seemed obvious. How does something distinct and unusual manage to slip past people’s eyes? Despite seeing the physical painting, people fail to see it with their own eyes. They merely see the iconic smile through the lenses of others who had subjectively deemed the landscape behind her unimportant.

The first time I witnessed *Mona Lisa* was ten years ago at the Louvre Museum in Paris. It was a long struggle before I finally squeezed through the maze of visitors and ended up face to face with *her majesty*. I widened my eyes as much as possible, afraid to miss a single stream of her reflected light. I focused on her mouth because my grade school teacher had told me that her lips move, hence the famous smile of *Mona Lisa*. But she stayed perfectly still. After some time I let the crowd of tourists slowly push me away while they flashed their cameras wildly at the lady—I wondered if she was just too shy to move. Years later I finally *saw* *Mona Lisa*’s smile for the first time. A BBC documentary suggesting that *Mona Lisa* gave birth not long before she sat as a model inspired me to examine the famous picture once more, this time through a reproduced image online. To my surprise, after a minute or two, the edge of her mouth twisted further upwards in the slightest fashion! It was almost as if I could see her restraining herself from bursting out in spontaneous laughter: I mean, what mother wouldn’t be proud of her newborn baby? Perhaps half a century ago Leonardo sensed the same overwhelming joy from her and managed to capture it in his painting *Mona Lisa*.

An acclaimed art critic and novelist, John Berger defines masterpieces as “[the] affirmation of the visible,” and in a deeper sense, the “affirmation of the existent, of the physical world into which mankind has been thrown”

(107). “We live within a spectacle of empty clothes and unworn masks,” Berger explains in his essay “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible” (106). In today’s technology-driven society, it has become “easy to separate the apparent from the existent” (106). In other words, things are twisted to appear as other things, often profitable things that satisfy the manipulator’s forever growing “appetite for more” (106). In the field of fine arts, art dealers and promoters have exploited the vulnerability of paintings, developing and assigning brand names that paintings themselves cannot dispute. As a result, “many collectors—and museums—buy names rather than works,” while many spectators only see the names of paintings rather than the art itself (107). Berger’s claims remind me of the bustling crowd in front of *Mona Lisa*, holding their cameras as high as possible just to flash a quick photo of her before escaping the overcrowded exhibition room.

Berger might be quite disappointed with the fact that I, along with millions of others, approached *Mona Lisa* with preconceptions not my own. Our trips were a mere testimony to *Mona Lisa*’s fame. It is one thing to approach art, but an entirely different thing to *see* it. Berger sums up the process of interacting with art as a “collaboration” under the condition of a perfect distance between the viewer and the artwork (108). My initial encounter with *Mona Lisa* failed because of my childish assumption that the painting would move. Berger would say my first impression fell victim to a “stylistic trick which the model knows nothing about” (108). According to Berger, the ideal collaboration develops when people “forget convention, reputation, reasoning, hierarchies, and self,” along with any biases and assumptions rooted from outside influence (108). As an artist himself, Berger has had his own enlightenment: his drawings of a good friend, Bogena, used to be continuously unsatisfying because of the anxiety and shyness that clouded his thoughts in her angelic presence; yet when she leaves him her departure liberates Berger’s mind, allowing him to embrace the beauty of her face and capture her likeness in a pure and innocent way (109). In the cases of Leonardo and Berger’s paintings, nothing new is created in the process. Rather, “[w]hat seems like creation is the act of giving form to what [the artist] has received” (109). True artists possess extremely sensitive receptiveness and open-mindedness. They fully embrace everything their models have to offer. Their works capture what Berger calls the “existent” (110). We, as spectators, try to

enter a similar state when encountering objects whose appearances reflect their likeness. They spring alive and tell their own stories and destinies.

Meanwhile, one might wonder how *seeing* benefits the amateur viewer of fine arts. Instead of providing a straightforward answer, Berger examines the sorrowful life of an animal that loses its sight later in life. Perhaps the images of its home, the plain, the bushes, the stream, and the mountains still linger in its memories; yet the “likenesses” are lost—the feelings of freedom from the boundless steppe, of safety knowing that no predators wander around, and the contentment of abundant life. These sensations, along with the physical appearances of everything within, constitute Berger’s “existent” (110). “Deprived of the existent,” he sadly notes, “[the animal] begins to diminish until it does little but sleep, therein perhaps hunting for a dream of that which once existed” (110). Imagine if we refuse to appreciate our surroundings despite our gift of sight. How are our lives different than the deteriorating and meaningless life of the blind animal?

In spite of Berger’s effort to extend the “collaboration” to include the environment of one’s livelihood, his argument ends abruptly by leaving readers with the choice of either seeking spiritual advancement (where seeing is essential) or continuing the pursuit of materialistic wealth (110). Berger is certainly justified when he questions whether “the pursuit of profit is considered as the only means of salvation for mankind” today, yet one simply cannot seek spiritual enlightenment unless one first survives (110).

Cast Away, an adventure-drama film directed by Robert Zemeckis, ignites the possibility of *seeing* as complimentary to our material lives. The film begins tragically when a FedEx employee, Chuck Noland, washes ashore on an uninhabited island after his company’s cargo plane crashes in the Pacific Ocean. Living in what Berger would call “a solitude confirmed daily by networks of bodiless and false images concerning the world,” Noland had overworked himself under a suffocating corporate hierarchy in hopes of a better life with his fiancée (110). With his past evaporating in mere hours, Noland desperately searches through the remains of FedEx packages and finds surprising new life in the most absurd items. Viewed with the purpose of survival, an ice skate transforms into an axe while a party dress becomes a fishing net. Under the extreme circumstance of life and death, Noland rediscovers what Berger names “Necessity, which is the enigma of existence . . .

[that] continue[s] to sharpen the human spirit" (107). Immersed in the civilized world of "empty clothes and unworn masks," Noland had taken the intrinsic values of basic objects—the very necessities that civilization is built upon—for granted (Berger 106).

With his physical needs ameliorated, Noland struggles with loneliness in an attempt to maintain his sanity. At night, a locket given to him by his fiancée shields Noland from fear by offering him an indispensable sense of security that no power, fame, or wealth can provide. It transcends its purpose as an ornament and transforms into a life-saving haven. At the same time, the dead silent night pacifies Noland, providing a state of tranquility for him to rediscover the love and support he had neglected. Realizing the infinite capability behind objects, Noland creates Wilson, a volleyball with a blood-drawn face, who becomes his best and only friend for the next four years. In Wilson Noland *sees* the perfect companion to confide in and, in return, he receives necessary encouragement and reassurance to fuel his escape back to civilization. Berger would appraise Noland's spontaneous discovery of the secret to getting inside the volleyball as "arrang[ing] its appearances for the better"—neither "more beautiful or more harmonious . . . [nor] more typical . . . [but instead] more evidently unique" (107). Ultimately, Noland returns home and delivers the only package that he intentionally kept throughout his four years on the island. The lone package, perhaps long-forgotten by its sender, symbolizes Noland's steadfast determination to return home, to return to where he belongs. Society has not changed, yet Noland is reborn. With his new-found perception, Noland discovers his purpose in contentment, love, and faith.

Though a dramatization, *Cast Away* demonstrates how an average man thrown unexpectedly into a dire situation saves himself both physically and mentally through encounter, collaboration, and interaction. The title *Cast Away* not only summarizes the adventure but, perhaps more importantly, hints at casting away frivolous pursuits that conceal our true purpose in living. Why is it only in circumstances where the "volatile" appearances of society vanish that people interact proactively? (Berger 106). Why is it only when luxury is deemed worthless that people appreciate things of practical use? Why is it that only when profit-driven relationships cease yielding benefits that people yearn for and treasure kinship, friendship, love—the basis of our

humanity? The answer possibly lies in Berger's pessimistic—nonetheless realistic—view of collaboration: it “is seldom based on good will: more usually on desire, rage, fear, pity, or longing” (109). Indeed, people only tend to cherish things when they are taken away; they are only enlightened during the toughest times. Noland's feat attests to the hope of our perceiving Necessity. As Berger claims, ever since paleolithic hunters carved their perceptions of animals on cave walls, mankind has utilized painting as the confirmation of a “magical ‘companionship’ between prey and hunter, or, . . . more abstractly, between the existent and human ingenuity” (108). Therefore, people needn't be forced onto deserted islands, nor blinded, in order to reveal their forgotten ability to *see*.

“Who could have foreseen . . . the solitude in which people today live?” exclaims Berger rhetorically (110). Indeed, who could have thought that art, the primary way for humans to depict the existent, would now be threatened by “images [that] abound everywhere” through the internet (106). By constructing an easily accessible virtual platform for the exchange of human knowledge, the internet has no doubt amplified our perception of the world. Unfortunately, many are unable to break free from the entrapment of the inter-web once they lose themselves in the electronic world: “the game that nobody plays and everybody can watch” (107). Inevitably, the internet drives us away from reality to various degrees, gradually distracting us from the genuine relationships and tangible necessities that help us live. Disappointed by those enslaved by technology, Berger ends his essay pessimistically, ironically stating that “to try to paint the existent [today] is an act of resistance instigating hope” (110). Throughout history, art has taken on crucial roles in superstitious rituals, religious worshipping, and, most importantly, the expression of thoughts regarding our existence. Art takes advantage of the curious nature of humans, attracting spectators who beg to live through the extraordinary experiences that originally inspired the works. Hence art can certainly disenchant the internet-obsessives from the cyber world and guide them back to the existing one. Instead of avoiding technology to preserve art, we should fight poison with poison: “get inside” the virtual and “arrang[e] its appearances for the better” in order to bring us closer to reality (107). Berger's metaphor of altering objects from within should never be mistaken for the act of deceitfully manipulating objects for selfish gain. He is instead suggesting a

change in us, the spectators of the world: to abandon the idle attitude of social conformity and to encounter the real on a personal level.

Like most of my generation, I too was captivated by the charms of the internet at a young age despite my parents' constant objections. It was not until I waved goodbye to my parents four years ago at the Beijing International Airport that my mother finally compromised. "Don't forget to get on QQ when you get there," she reminded me for the fifth time. QQ, a Chinese social media platform similar to Skype, was no doubt the most feasible way of staying in touch with my parents and friends as I embarked on a journey to study abroad by myself. The first few days in the U.S. were overwhelming. Thankfully, I could always find encouragement from my mother on QQ. It was reassuring to see her QQ icon flash, indicating her presence behind the computer, as if the monitor was the only barrier between me and my home on the other side of the globe. As I gradually adjusted to my new life and caught up with friends back home, my mother's flickering icon began to slip past my eyes, and our conversations were buried deeper under prioritized chats with others. Despite her "starred" status on my friend list, my mother's icon lost its appeal in the same way that the oddly placed landscape behind *Mona Lisa* has been overlooked.

Little did I know, however, that my QQ chatroom was soon to be desolated, and I would be cast on the deserted island of loneliness. It was out of my control—conversations with friends often ended awkwardly in abrupt silences as we quickly ran out of common topics to discuss, and we drifted further apart as we went down different paths and entered different circles. I grieved over my silent chatroom, checking back every few minutes in hopes of seeing the icons flash to life again. Then one did. As a matter of fact, it had never stopped. In that moment, I realized that I, too, had fallen into the pitfall of technology, seeing my mother's chat icon as just one of the hundreds of icons on my QQ friend list. Only when I suffered from the absence of love did I *see* my mother beyond the scope of her icon. I felt her anxiety, patience, and everlasting love—all embedded within that tiny pixel on the monitor. QQ has since brought me closer to my mother despite the thousands of miles physically between us.

As ephemeral as the internet might seem, it has nevertheless connected people in ways no longer constrained by physical barriers. As worldly as our

society might seem, the internet has provided a home for humanity. The "freedom of choice" that Berger claimed to be lost in society is not given but earned (107). Only by *seeing* are we aware of life in its entirety—not only the apparent materialistic wealth that satisfies our needs, but also the sensations of freedom, safety, and contentment that nourish us spiritually. To *see* is to see things at their fullest, unifying the "existent" with outside appearances; to *see* is to see without prejudice or bias, eliminating pre-developed opinions and opening our minds; to *see* is to see beyond false appearances, targeting the Necessity buried within and focusing on what is important and lasting. In order to *see*, it is neither necessary to abandon civilization to live the life of a castaway nor to abandon technology and return to primitive self-sufficiency. Provided that we can *see*, the modern dilemma of pursuing profit and fortune can perhaps be truly balanced by our own intuition, rather than that of others. If we were to embrace technology with a keen eye, technology might then weave mankind into closely-knit communities bound by love and compassion. While Berger ended his essay with painting as "an act of resistance instigating hope," I end mine with *seeing* as an act of revival instigating humanity (110).

WORKS CITED

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