

When Tom Sees Jerry

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Take a moment to remember the music and television shows you loved so dearly as a child. Do you think back on them fondly, the entertaining, electronic soundtracks to the trials and tribulations of your six-year-old self? Certainly there was a kind of magic in them, a distinctive mix of innocence and intelligence, something today's kid-centric pop culture seems to be missing. Now go back and watch an episode of one of those shows or listen to a song again, and pay attention to the quality of the work rather than to your nostalgia. Were there corny words, less-than-stellar performances, trite scenarios, or forced happy endings? Probably. But because we associate these things with the carefree happiness of childhood (and because, as children, we were more easily entertained), we remember them as incredible when they were, in fact, merely good. Our memories and preconceptions can make it difficult to see something for what it is.

This kind of cognitive struggle occurred in my dorm room a few weeks ago. The sound of a frantically wailing police siren pierced through my window and mixed cacophonously with my suitemates' loud laughter. Sounds that would have been merely irritating had I *not* been struggling with a writing assignment became almost unbearably distracting. I scowled, shoved my earphones deeper in my ears, shifted to a seated position on my bed, and resumed my search for meaning. It seemed useless. The text appeared as convoluted to me as Tom the cat's elaborate plots to capture clever Jerry in the childhood cartoon I used to watch (*Tom and Jerry*). I could comprehend my chosen essayist's words, but only at the most basic, denotative level. Each time I reread the essay, I saw anecdotes, turns of phrase, and arguments that I sensed were important, but I could not figure out *how* they were important. The essayist writes about an evening spent with friends, while the presence of my suite-mates and their friends was stalling my own exploration.

The author redefines words I was so sure I knew, and makes countless references to names I've never seen. *Why* did he emphasize this, italicize that, declare this, tell that story, in this order? There had to be a *reason*, indicative

of deeper meaning, that I was unable or unwilling to discover. The solution to the problem suddenly became clear to me, and an astonished “*ab-ba*” escaped my lips, the first noise I’d made in hours. I needed to get out of my own way, to lay aside my preconceptions and stop trying to force his words to “fit” into something my mind had already constructed. *I can do that, certainly I can do that*, I thought with renewed hope. But how does one forget oneself, see something for what it is, without being influenced by what one thinks it should be, or what it once was? Connecting the author’s unexpected words and insights with ideas to which I was already accustomed was *how* I tried to understand. Strangely enough, in this case, objectivity could only come from intimate familiarity. I needed to know his words thoroughly to avoid adding my own inaccurate ones. I sighed and settled in for another reading. If I were Tom, I would quit running around frantically and study Jerry’s habits. Less entertaining? Perhaps, but undoubtedly more informative. The piercing laughter from the next room sounded yet again, but this time I didn’t look up.

In his essay “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible,” John Berger confronts the relationship of the concrete and observable to both art and daily life. He feels that this experience as an art critic qualifies him to determine what makes a painting “authentic”; he settles on his sense of a *communication* between the painter and the model (108). The artist is not merely copying what he/she sees, with total control over a silent subject. Artist and subject both give themselves over to the process; the painter “forget[s] convention, reputation, reasoning, hierarchies, and self . . . also [risks] incoherence, even madness,” while the model offers its own truth, its essence, “what [it has] given nobody else” (108, 109). The work of art is a result of this collaboration, and looking at it brings us, the audience, into that collaborative moment. “The modern illusion concerning painting” he summarizes, “. . . is that the artist is a creator. Rather he is a receiver” (109). Berger further asserts that in today’s rapid-fire, technologically advanced society, we are being bombarded with virtual, disembodied images (“a spectacle of empty clothes and unworn masks”) and losing our connection with what is concrete and visible in the actual world (106). By no means does Berger assert that painting and the enjoyment of paintings are purely physical pursuits. The willingness of the model, the artist, and the viewer to be honest and receptive is essential for a painting to be created and appreciated. But he gives inadequate attention to how we *process* what we see, to what it could potentially signify or symbolize.

That “or” is essential. Suzanne Langer makes a clear distinction between these two ways humans use images in her essay “Signs and Symbols.” A sign is an indication of something that either *is* present, or *will be* shortly; it is

“always embedded in reality.” But she goes on to explain that “a symbol may be divorced from reality altogether. . . . It serves, therefore, to liberate thought from the immediate stimuli of a physically present world.” She claims too that language is “the highest and most amazing achievement of the symbolistic human mind. The power it bestows is almost inestimable, for without it anything properly called ‘thought’ is impossible” (528, 529). This, she says, is what separates humans from animals: our ability to grasp and grapple with *more* than what is tangibly present.

Berger seems reluctant to use the word or the concept of a symbol. Instead he values that which is apprehensible at face value. When he describes a dream in which he is a “dealer in appearances,” he very clearly does not intend these appearances to be representative or symbolic in any way: “*Better* did not mean making the thing seem more . . . typical, so that the oak tree might represent all oak trees; it simply meant making it more itself so that the cow or the city or the bucket of water became more evidently unique!” (107) He perceives paintings as unique collaborations between the artist and the model: something that actually happened in the past being preserved for the future. But is this all that a painting is, all that it “means”?

If an artist has a collaboration with a tree and produces a painting of it, and we look at it and think, “That’s a very good tree,” the reason is likely because we share with the artist a concept of what a tree is and should look like. No tree is identical to another, of course, and we are not likely ever to see the exact tree with which the artist “collaborated.” But our knowledge of trees enables us to identify one when we see it, and the artist must have similar knowledge to produce an image that we recognize. This is why abstract, non-figurative art can be interpreted in thousands of ways: what the artist originally saw in his collaboration, and *what he meant* while participating in it, can only be guessed at, and only possibly shared by an audience. We don’t see a house or a mountain or a tree in an abstract painting; we’re not sharing that kind of perception with the artist. But even lacking that, we can find meaning and importance in the work by drawing from our own experience. And though we share the idea of a tree with the representational artist, the image may evoke something different from what he intended. It seems that, rather than just being a sign of “I have seen this,” as Berger explains it, a painting is also a symbol (107).

In fact, for everyone except the artist, paintings are largely symbolic, because no two of us have the same physical environment and experiences to draw upon. We might see the *result* of the artist’s collaboration, but interpretation distorts perception of what actually happened. E. M. Forster talks

about this phenomenon in his essay “On Not Looking at Pictures,” claiming that pictures “were intended to appeal to the eye, but . . . the mind takes charge instead, and goes off on some alien vision” (706). He asserts that he is “bad at looking at pictures”; unlike his critic friend Roger Fry (or, for that matter, John Berger), he knows little about the technicalities of art criticism and allows his mind to wander “indisciplined” through whatever thoughts the image brings to mind (706). He is *not* taking the picture for what it is, what Berger would want it to be, mere collaboration. Nor is he noting technicalities that Fry is quick to notice, such as perspective or “structural significance”; instead, his mind is generating “private fantasies . . . material for jokes . . . scraps of historical knowledge . . . landscapes where one would like to wander, and human beings whom one would like to resemble or adore” (707, 706). This reaction occurs because that’s what he has experienced. The task of critics, conversely, is to purposefully *not* bring personal memories into their interpretation. Once again, familiarity breeds objectivity; they know so well the nuances of style, color, and form that they notice these technical aspects of a painting before they make any emotional connection. It’s not an easy thing to do; Forster is still just “learning to get [him]self out of the way a little,” after years of trying (708).

Regardless of whether we’re staring at a screen, a page in a book, or a friend’s face, our experiences are shaping *how* we see and how we interpret. The physical process of seeing is the same in each case; also the same is our coloring of that concrete input with our recollections. What’s different is the nature of those memories.

But even our precious memories are not exact transcriptions of what we have experienced. The millions of images, sounds, textures, thoughts, and tastes we take in on a daily basis cannot possibly all fit faithfully into our 1800cc brain. Instead, as Daniel Gilbert describes in his book *Stumbling on Happiness*,

the elaborate tapestry of our experience . . . is compressed for storage by first being reduced to a few critical threads, such as a summary phrase. . . . Later, when we try to remember our experience, our brains quickly reweave the tapestry by fabricating—not by actually retrieving—the bulk of information we experience as a memory. (79)

When your friend inquires about your weekend, you don’t recall every detail about what happened in those two days: one, because you haven’t stored them all; two, because your friend would be bored to tears. So when a painter is recalling his physical experience and collaboration with an object, such as

Berger's struggle to paint his friend Bogen's face, he is not producing an exact transcription of the encounter as it took place (Berger 109). Rather, he is "filling in' details that were not actually stored," according to Gilbert, who goes on to say that "we generally cannot tell when we are doing this because this filling in happens quickly and unconsciously" (80). These details might be pulled from thin air because they seem to "fit," or they may be drawn from other memories. If we see a painting of a tree, and it brings to mind the big climbing oak in our backyard, we might remember the tree *we* physically experienced looking more like the tree that the *artist* physically experienced and depicted. What's more, we probably won't even realize we're doing it. Gilbert describes this discrepancy in the mind: "As it turns out, when brains plug holes in their conceptualization of yesterday . . . they tend to use a material called *today*" (113). Our minds are embellishing our experiences in two ways: our present is colored by our past, and our past is colored by our present.

This change in our minds can only occur if our world itself is also changing. Berger comments on the role of this impermanence and uncertainty in his artistic craft of choice: "Painting is, first, an affirmation of the visible which surrounds us and which continually appears and disappears. Without the disappearing, there would perhaps be no impulse to paint, for then the visible itself would possess the surety (the permanence) which painting strives to find" (107). Perhaps *because* the world changes, there is an impulse to create—and preserve—what we know now, what we understand today.

But what about representing or preserving what we *don't* understand? Isn't that also important? What is it that makes us human? Langer says understanding the external through language; Berger says creation through collaboration with the external. Neither is wrong, but neither is complete. Our desire to understand and represent our environment is driven by the very fact that we *don't* understand it. We can't, fully; it's too big; too many intricate threads are woven together in too many complex ways for us ever to be able to step back and *see* them, to comprehend them. If we *could* fathom all there is to know about our environment, we would have no need to try—to capture, to preserve, or to reflect. This is not to say that ignorance is a commodity as valuable to humans as our capacity to create and communicate. Rather, the fact that there will forever be some things we struggle to understand makes our discoveries valuable. It is for exactly this reason that we develop these methods—written and spoken language, painting, even science—to break down the complications into easier-to-understand pieces, and to *make* something of those pieces. We may not always realize we are actively making; we

may believe we are grounded in reality, surrounded solely by what surely exists. But though there is *a* reality, the only thing we can possibly experience is *our* reality: the world filtered through our minds, no two of which are exactly alike. There is no “view from nowhere” that we can access, because not one of us is a blank canvas. Instead, we consist of thick streaks of red paint, splatters of yellow, and splotches of blue: countless combinations of shades and shapes.

The word “conceive,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means “to take into, or form in, the mind.” But as we’ve seen, humans are not receptacles of experiences; we don’t simply and faithfully “take in.” Understanding is not merely an act of reception. It is also an act of creation. We craft and we form all we experience in order to understand: we are literally trying to *make* sense. Langer emphasizes “not only [our] ability but constant need of *conceiving* what has happened to [us], what surrounds [us]” when she says, “What [we] cannot express, [we] cannot conceive; what [we] cannot conceive is chaos, and fills [us] with terror” (528).

Certain horror films scare us out of our wits because they capitalize on our fear of the unknown. A character stepping into an unlit basement to a chilling soundtrack lets us know that *something* is down there, that *something* dangerous is going to happen. If we knew it was “a portal to the underworld” or “twenty corpses left by the murderer who used to live there,” we could prepare ourselves, and the scene would be merely unpleasant. But because we don’t know *what* awaits us, we have no idea what terrible fate will greet our protagonist, and this uncertainty makes us nervous. We can’t make anything of what we don’t know or can’t imagine. We experience “blind terror.” As a certain writing professor once said, “We have to *look* at something to conceive”—whether it be physically in front of us, as Berger prefers, or merely in our mind’s eye, as Langer suggests.

Berger tells us that “painting is the affirmation of the existent, of the physical world into which mankind has been thrown” (107). And this is partly true. Without seeing an unscathed Jerry waving smugly at him from beyond a maze of mousetraps, Tom has very little to reckon with (and very high chances of a pinched paw). But a more accurate version of Berger’s claim might read: “painting is the affirmation of *our interpretation* of the existent, of *our imperfect relationship with* the world into which mankind has been thrown.” Reading “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible,” my mind immediately (and without my permission) set to work attempting to make sense of what Berger had written by using my rich background of memories. But this resource alone wasn’t enough to allow me to reach a deeper level of

awareness, as I realized that noisy evening in my dorm. After several re-readings and collaborations with other minds and other texts, I've created something new. It is imperfect and incomplete, but it is mine. I'll never be able to capture and incorporate every single facet of Berger's intentions, just as he could never paint every minute detail of his friend's face. And, following Langer's sense of language, we can never convey *all* that we think and feel. But these attempts to make sense of whatever we encounter force themselves upon us; our response seems both innate and involuntary, reminding us, if we pause to notice, that the struggle to make meaning is what makes us human.

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