

Seeing and Believing

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In Tim Burton's eponymous movie, Edward Scissorhands, with his ghostly pale face and crazy jet black hair sprawled over his head, is initially surrounded by his admirers—housewives dressed in yellow and orange and grassy green who ambitiously spoon-feed him with great chunks of their home-made coleslaw and ambrosia salad at a barbeque party held just for him. But in a later, darker scene, he is chased out of the neighborhood in the middle of the night, a police car flashing and wailing behind him, followed by an angry horde of neighbors—the same people who so admired and welcomed him before.

How swiftly and dramatically our perception of others can change. In Tim Burton's movie, Edward, an innocent man with scissors for hands who has recently entered the neighborhood, is tricked into a robbery and unfairly held responsible. Because of his misunderstood act of "theft," his initially friendly neighbors turn hostile. They begin to spread rumors about how dangerous he is, until they have turned him into a horrible scissor-monster, whom they frantically chase away.

Perhaps it is human nature to easily allow other people to dictate our view of others. But misled perceptions can have drastic results, as when a few leaders in Bosnia, by "[calling] forth the legacies of earlier and previously unaddressed grievances," goaded entire ethnic populations against each other into a bloody war in the early 1990s (Weschler 784). In his essay "Vermeer in Bosnia," Lawrence Weschler relates stories told by Antonio Cassese, a jurist serving on the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal, about Muslim victims who were tortured during the Bosnian War. They are stories hardly believable for their unnerving cruelty: one Muslim, legs broken, handcuffed to a radiator, was forced to watch as his captors "repeatedly raped his wife and two daughters and then slit their throats" (778). A second Muslim prisoner was forced to "emasculate another—*with his teeth*" (778). Perhaps even more unbelievable than the horror of the acts themselves is the fact that the victims

were tortured only because of their Muslim identity. The criminals and the victims did not know each other.

As he reckons with such bitter intergroup violence, Weschler discusses the paintings of Jan Vermeer (1632-1675), a Dutch artist who himself lived during a time of intense intergroup conflict. The popular view of Vermeer, according to Weschler, was that his paintings criticized the women of his time by portraying them as images of the feminine's typical moral shortcomings, thus creating "moralizing genre images" (782). The painting *Girl Asleep*, which shows a maid dozing at a table in front of a wine glass, or *Procuress*, which shows a girl flirting with a man, are easily viewed as genre images "castigating" feminine sloth and prostitution. But Weschler proposes that Vermeer's paintings portray precisely the opposite, that they are actually about "female reserve and autonomy and self-sufficiency in the face of the male gaze" (781). While the "male gaze" sees the girls in the paintings as "types" representing certain sins (a *lazy* maid, an *adulterous* woman), Vermeer, by using "conventional iconography," actually highlights the absurdity of such typological views of others. "His paintings all but cry out, this person is not to be seen as merely a type, a trope, an allegory," Weschler tells us (783).

When we view others as "types" representing a certain category, we inadvertently burden them with labels. One person under a certain label is the same "type" of person as another under the same label. The "individual dignity" of being an irreplaceable, infinitely unique "self" is lost (782). Weschler proposes that such a categorical view of others may be at the heart of intergroup conflicts. "I found myself thinking . . . the entire Yugoslavian debacle has been taking place in a context wherein the Other, even one's own neighbor, is suddenly being experienced no longer as a subject like oneself but as an instance, a type, a vile expletive, a Serb, a Croat, a Turk," he tells us (783). When people come to hold grudges against another group, they fail to see anyone of that group as an autonomous being, quickly reducing all of them, the individuals, to the collective term "enemy."

Weschler fights against viewing others as "types." But our identities are often derived from categories: White, Black, American, Asian, student—or even funny, lazy, tall, big, or ugly. How is our "self" different from the typical traits attributed to us by the categories to which others assign us? What do categories miss?

The word *typical* opposes the word *unique*. In his essay "Steps toward a Small Theory of the Visible," John Berger, who believes that the essence of things lies in their uniqueness, shares a dream he had, in which he was a "deal-

er in looks or appearances.” In the dream, he made the appearances of things *better*. That is, he did not “[make a thing] more *typical*, so that the oak tree might represent all oak trees; [he] simply [made] it more itself so that the cow or the city or the bucket of water became more evidently *unique!*” (107). Whatever makes a certain, single oak tree *unique* necessarily has to be that part of it which is not common to other oak trees. The category of oak trees can say nothing of the uniqueness of any of its individuals, because the concept is formed in the first place from only the commonalities. Perhaps categorical classification of humans, too, only describes commonalities, and fails to describe the uniqueness of any individual, the “self” part of us, or what Berger might call “the existent, the body” (106).

Berger refers to the newsreaders we see on television as examples of “disembodied spectacle[s]” (106). They talk to us, but their words belong to someone else. Their professional looks and their facial expressions have all been carefully choreographed, so that they no longer appear to be actual people. The audiovisual image of the newsreader the viewer receives is a separate entity from the real person. It is an appearance that does not really belong to any actual body.

We come to understand oak trees in a similar way. The image of oak trees we have in our minds does not actually belong to any specific, individual oak. This image is constructed in *our own minds* based on commonalities. This image, then, is “disembodied,” belonging not to any actual oak in particular, but simply to a category. Perhaps the whole concept of “group” is nothing more than a perceived idea. It is derived from what *we* think of as common among a number of people; it does not reflect any particular individuals.

We cannot judge an oak tree based on our mental image of the categorical oak tree; and in this way, grudges against another group are intrinsically flawed. A group cannot wrong anyone because a “group” is a perceived idea, not an actual physical entity (unless the “group” physically refers to a number of very specific individuals who together commit a certain deed, which is different from the intergroup wars, in which “groups” refer to entire populations). When the Serbs held grudges against the Muslims, they were actually being angry at the *idea* of Muslims, which tells little, if anything, of what a Muslim individual is actually like, and absolutely nothing of what he or she has done. Holding a grudge against such a group is as nonsensical as being angry at the news reporter for what he or she looks like and reports on television.

Lately, there have been growing tensions between Christians and non-Christians in my hometown in Korea. News of fanatic Christians committing absurd acts in the name of God have received nationwide attention. “You who eat the food that God provides but do not believe in Him are pigs,” declared a minister on a megaphone to devotees in a Buddhist temple (“Tramping”). Fanatic Christians—including elders and ministers—literally beheaded numerous statues of Dan-gun, the mythical founder of Korea, in different elementary schools across the nation to “protect” children from the evils of idolatry (“Continued Sufferings”).

Such stories spawned a host of increasingly malicious criticisms not just against the perpetrators but against the whole religion—and consequently, its believers. Many people in Korea now derisively refer to Christians as dogs (in Korean, the two words sound similar). A comment on an Internet forum claiming that “Christianity is Korea’s cancer” received 157 virtual thumbs-up’s (“No Answers”). I have been a Christian all my life. As a Christian, I feel as if I am being criticized for something I did not even do. It is as if the entire Christian faith is being held responsible for what the fanatics did, even though few Christians condone those ridiculous acts.

In Korea, Christianity itself is under attack for what a few of its disillusioned members did, and I wonder if interethnic wars such as the Bosnian War are any different—after all, these are all stories of Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, who for a long time “lived in relative peace with one another” before turning against each other in brutal violence (Weschler 784). Initial conflicts were most likely small in scope and involved only an extremely small fraction of the entire ethnic populations. But the malice that emerged from these contentions must have been directed not just at the individuals actually responsible but at the “disembodied” idea of Serbs or Muslims, thereby culminating in a calamity of hatred and vengeance.

Even in America, attributing the deeds of individuals to their group identities is not uncommon. Due to our frequent exposure to reports of crimes committed by African-American people, many have come to associate crime with the *idea* of black men. In one essay, Brent Staples, “a broad six feet two inches” black man, gives an account of how he was personally affected by the prevalent image in Chicago of black men as potential criminals (153). One day, when he rushes into a magazine office to turn in his story, the office manager takes him for a burglar and calls security. Another time, when he enters a jewelry store, the owner chases him out of the shop with a Doberman pinscher (154).

Staples describes himself as “a softy scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken,” an image that sharply contrasts with how other people see him (153). Staples, construed by people as a typical dangerous black man, contributes nothing to the negative notion of “Dangerous Black Men,” a category already rooted in people’s minds before they encounter him.

As unfair as this seems, however, Staples himself acknowledges that “the danger they perceive is not hallucination” (154). When one hears news of “[black] muggers who occasionally [seep] into the area from the surrounding ghetto” (153), being wary of the next black man one sees may be an act not of prejudice but of wisdom. Likewise, when one hears of Christian fanatics beheading statues in elementary schools in the name of God, one cannot but become more suspicious of the religion itself.

Is there a fine line that divides being prejudiced from simply being reasonable? Or is our view of others with regards to their group identity a continuum, with “prejudice” on one end and “logical association” on the other? Perhaps the context of our encounter with the other is also an important factor in how we react, but even in the absence of an immediate encounter, we retain in our minds preconceptions of certain groups, which inevitably influence how we react when we do make contact.

But no context or logic can justify the treatment Muslim prisoners received during the Bosnian War. Considering our history, laden as it is with inter-group wars, discrimination, and even genocides, I think we have a certain knack for forming exaggerated negative notions of other groups of people. When we encounter news of crimes done by some people belonging to a certain group, we exaggerate the crimes to apply not just to the individuals but to the whole group. We forget that news by nature is an infinitely small, selective window to a few select people, all purposefully chosen by the media or the gossip to emotionally provoke the receiver. Generalization through such an inevitably skewed and narrow scope must be, even by the cold logic of statistics, flawed. The warm hearts of human beings should know better.

Watching Tim Burton’s film, I feel disgusted at how the news reporters crowd in on Edward Scissorhands the minute he is released from jail for his misunderstood theft, and how the neighbors, on and off their phones, gossip about him, one of them saying, “All along I knew that there was something wrong with him.” His redeeming actions and qualities—the many bush sculptures he carved for the neighbors, the haircuts he gave them, and the obvious innocence that radiates from the way he talks and walks—are forgotten. Rather than allowing Edward as a person to shape their understanding of

him, the neighbors judge him on the basis of rumors, gossip, and news of his “crime.” Such behavior is all too familiar. Tim Burton is mirroring how we, the people of the larger, actual world, tend to perceive others.

We are so quick to conclude from our skewed and small window of perception that someone or some group is so-and-so and possesses such-and-such a negative trait. Such imperfect beliefs about others are the precursors to misunderstanding, conflicts, and wars. We must consider individuals on an individual basis—not as faceless members of the groups we’ve made in our minds.

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