

“I see, said the blind man, and he picked up his hammer and saw.”

A Riff on the Art of Seeing Through: Intuiting the Essence

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As an artist, one of the things that I’ve spent my life trying to do is process of “seeing through.”

Most of us see, almost all the time—obviously, the entire time we are awake. Even our blinking doesn’t interfere with our seeing—most of the time we are unaware of the movement of our eyelids. (Are you aware of them now?)

And we see in our dreams—while some lucky few may dream with taste and scent, much of what we experience in our dreams, we see.

But for all of that vision time—how much of it do we really see? In a yoga class I was taking the other day, the teacher mentioned that in the course of 24 hours, most of us draw about 20,000 breaths. She asked—how many of these breaths are we present for? My answer—not many.

I ask, how many moments between blinks and of REM’s are we present for? Again, not many. We walk through our days preoccupied with our fragile and fabricated crises, and do not notice what is around us. When we wake in the morning, we remember very little of the visions spun in our heads overnight. Even those of us who pride ourselves on our ability to see, see very little. As Sherlock Holmes said to the immutably dense Dr. Watson, “You see, but you do not observe.”

And so, as I think about talking about “seeing through,” I can find no better metaphor for this activity than seeing itself. (From see to shining see...)

So- to the physical process. Our eyeballs, through a complex system of rods and cones, corneas and pupils, expansion and contraction, manage to send us remarkable messages of size and shape and color and depth, light and shadow. We can see (though I’m finding this harder all the time—at 37 the warranty seems to be running out) the eye of a needle, the expanse of a mountain rising huge in front of us, and a turkey vulture, spiraling effortlessly upwards into the sun, until he becomes no more than a spec of black and then is gone.

We employ all sorts of tools to help us see better—farther, closer, more clearly. We wear glasses, use binoculars and telescopes, peer into microscopes. We place little bits of plastic on our naked eyeballs, we endure surgery. And still, we really do not see clearly.

That is, we do not see through.

We employ x-ray machines and CAT scans and MRI's to peer through tissue and bone to see the structures underneath. In many ways, these are the same tools that artists (and mythologists) in training work to use—to see the steps underneath the dance, the scansion underneath the poem, the “bones” of a good garden, a good painting, a good book.

But still, we are not seeing through. Maybe we've taken a step forward, cleaned off our lenses a little, and are “looking into it,” but we are still only seeing the structures. The X-ray can tell us that a bone is broken, but not how it happened, or why. The same is true for understanding the structure underlying a piece of art; we can see the elements that make it “good,” and still not really understand why it is.

But somehow, we intuitively understand that there's more to this seeing stuff than, if you will, meets the eye.

“Seeing is believing” “I came, I saw, I conquered.”

Or in the case of preparing to do a lecture, “Never let ‘em see you sweat.”

“Too much light often blinds gentlemen of this sort. They cannot see the forest for the trees.” Christopher Martin Wieland. *Musarion* (1768)

“I go to prove my soul! I see my way as birds their trackless way.” Robert Browning, *Paracelsus* 1835

“We are as much as we see. Faith is sight and knowledge.” Thoreau, *Journal* 1906.

We understand that this ‘seeing’ is important. We go on vision quests to seek answers about our own gifts and limitations, wise women and men who see the future (or the ‘big picture’ in modern corporate lingo) are called visionaries. Communities ‘vision’ themselves into the future—a verb that suggests a more active role than looking ahead. In this case, to vision becomes a making of something. When someone explains a difficult concept or tough emotional stance in conversation, we reply, “I see” – when there is nothing for our eyeballs to do in the situation. We see—we comprehend.

This is, perhaps, the reason why archetypal psychologists have landed upon an image as the basis (with apologies to Geigerich) of understanding. If you can see it, you can somehow comprehend it. An image is an idea in its most basic form.

Vision plays an important role in myth and story. You can see the wrong thing—like Medusa, and lose your wits or your life. Or you can be like Tiresias, a “seer” of the future who can see your destiny but not his own hand in front of his face, for he is physically blind. And in the wonderful manner of mythology, his greatest weakness becomes his greatest gift—he can see what’s important because he can’t see what is physically in front of him.

So let’s think for a moment about the phrase, “seeing through.”

To see through something suggests that there is some barrier to seeing—some opacity, whether misty or rock solid.

In some ways, we are fascinated by “seeing through” – scan through the pages of Victoria’s Secret—the “see thru” lingerie—especially that with a slight transparency spurs our imagination. The dance of the seven veils, where we strain to see through the wispy fabric is far more of a turn-on than just staring at a naked body.

But in this culture, we are (or so we like to think) rational creatures. We are Americans, solid, with our feet on the ground, literal, earnest, and scientific. We want proof, evidence, clarity.

We are also suffering from a dearth of soul.

Back to seeing—one thing we all see through on a daily basis is a window. Whether our bedroom in the morning, or the boardroom in the afternoon, we gaze out windows throughout the course of the day (unless we’re truly cursed in a hermetically sealed, windowless disaster of modern architecture—like, as an aside, the Psychology Department building on the UCSB campus—not a window on the place—perhaps it’s a case of creating market need)... but I digress. Most of us look through windows regularly.

It used to be that we saw through windows of wavy hand blown glass, distorting the world outside the window into a gentle funhouse. And we looked through small panes, up to 18 or 20 in a window, fracturing the view and repeating it into a whole series of pieces, each linked, similar, but unique.

But now, we Americans, in our need to stand analytically without bias, secure in the belief that we can look at the world dispassionately, empirically, and with objectivity—we Americans love our big, plate glass windows. Huge, unbroken expanses of glass in front of us (most of which no longer open, ensuring that we will never have any direct contact with that which we see-- we can't hear, it smell it, or touch it), we gaze upon the world thinking that we see it in it’s totality, without interference, without distortion.

And we are wrong. We forget that to see through a window, we are looking through something—which instantly puts limitations on what we are seeing and how we see it. Stand in one corner of a window and look out, and you will see one part of the landscape, the rest hidden by sill and wall.

Somehow, when we knew that what we were looking through wasn't perfect, we were reminded of our own inimitable perspective and our limitations, and through that, we could be visited by the gift of seeing the world a little differently.

But now we see literally.

How different that is than MacBeth's wife, who saw the dagger before her—and saw in a moment the path to claiming the throne. In her moment of imagination, or illusion, allows the audience to see even further than she—we know at that moment that she and her husband are damned. We have seen through.

Or when we join Tiresias, when we see through Oedipus' railings to know that he has done and will do all of the things he has spent a lifetime trying to avoid. We see his downfall coming, and we see the horror and despair that will accompany it. And even, if we are really seeing through, we will see our own moments as Oedipus, when we destroy the things and people that we love the most, even if in much smaller ways. And of course, Oedipus blinds himself when he can not bear to see what he has done, and what he is.

So, let us touch our eyes with the magic ointment of the Celtic fairies, so we may see what wonders are around us. Take a moment and close your eyes, and choose your lens—be it a window, a pair of binoculars, or a kaleidoscope. How can you intuit the essence, and how does your lens change that intuition?

What is it that you see?