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The Aesthetic Understanding
Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture

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the criticisms of Robert A. Sharpe and Rickie Dammann, my fellow symposiasts at a conference organized in Bristol by Stephan Körner, to whom I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on the nature of photography.

10 Fantasy, Imagination and the Screen

Freud remarked that the artist accomplishes a passage through fantasy, back to reality.[1] He said little to illuminate the remark, although its tenor is in keeping with his admiration for the peculiar discipline of the Greek tragic stage. I want to consider a thesis which is suggested by it and which I believe to be of great interest to those who wish to understand the similarities and the differences between the stage and the screen. The thesis is this: that there is an opposition between fantasy and reality and that this opposition defines one of the ways in which art may be both the object and the cause of corruption. I shall be referring to fantasy not on the part of the artist, but on the part of his audience; and I shall not be using the word fantasy in its psychoanalytic sense (assuming that it *has* a psychoanalytic sense), but in a sense according to which fantasy bears directly on the understanding of art.

In the course of his reflections on the nature of poetry, Coleridge made a famous distinction between fancy and imagination, assigning to the second, but not to the first, the task of understanding the true nature of reality.[2] This distinction was made in terms of Coleridge's adventurous but undeniably eccentric reading of Kant's critical philosophy, and I do not propose to defend or attack it in its original form. Nevertheless, somewhere in his meaning, there are traces of a real distinction that will survive translation from the idiom Coleridge used to express it. I shall describe this as the distinction between fantasy and imagination.

My thesis will be this: that imagination is involved in the understanding of art, and that the aim of imagination is to grasp, in the circuitous ways exemplified by art, the nature of reality. Fantasy, on the other hand, constitutes a flight from reality, and art which serves as the object of fantasy is diverted or corrupted from its proper purpose. If there is a *transition* from fantasy to reality, it is because there is a discipline which turns fantasy into imagination. I shall be advancing the thesis that much interest in the cinema is a fantasy interest, and is inhibited by this disci-

1 'Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning' (1911), in *Collected Papers*, trans. Joan Rivière, 5 vols. (New York, 1924–50), IV.

2 *Biographia Literaria*, chapter XIII.

pline. Such an interest remains indifferent to the possibilities that the cinema may present, as a form of dramatic art. My thesis may be denied by arguing that the cinema is not a form of dramatic art; that is an objection that I will not attempt to answer.[3] I shall be interested only in those objections which arise from the attempt to map the difficult terrain of consciousness which is the subject of this paper.

There is an important point which must be borne in mind, if the *critical* significance of the distinction between fantasy and imagination is to appear evident from my discussion. When we speak of the satisfaction which lies in the fulfilment of desire, we might mean either of two very different things. We might be referring to the satisfaction of the desire itself, or to the satisfaction of the creature who possesses it. In the first case satisfaction is simply the completion of a motivating force. In the second case satisfaction is not related to any specific motivating force, but rather to the well-being of the creature as a whole. It is fairly obvious that satisfaction of the second kind is not necessarily the result of, and may even (depending on the desire in question) be undermined by, satisfaction of the first.

It is difficult to specify more narrowly the second idea of satisfaction; but since it is important to my argument I shall say a few things about it. These will, I hope, be sufficiently evident to prove acceptable without the full backing of philosophical analysis that they deserve. First, satisfaction of this kind is a state of the whole being; as such, it is a matter of degree. This is so whether we are talking of a person, or whether we are talking of some organism which, for whatever reason, falls short of the requirements deemed necessary for personhood. Secondly, the idea of satisfaction presupposes a state of flourishing, health, or 'success'. This state is analogous to the fulfilment of desire, since the organism or person as a whole can be thought of as in some sense striving towards it.[4] Thirdly, and in consequence of that, we must see the absence of satisfaction as a decline, a misfortune, or a corruption, whether of the organism or of the person. Which term we use will depend both upon the circumstances that engender dissatisfaction and upon the circumstances that we envisage as repairing it. Fourthly, it seems to me quite reasonable to suggest that, since not all organisms are persons, and since persons are distinguished in part by the peculiarity and complexity of their activities and aims, we should not suppose that personal satisfaction and organic satisfaction (happiness and health) are one and the same. In discussing the moral significance of things it is primarily the personal, and not the organic, that concerns us.

3 But see above, chapter 4.

4 Cf. Spinoza's ideas about '*conatus*', *Ethics* III, 7, and IV, *passim*.

In our case at least, if not in the case of animals, it is evident from the most primitive reflections, that the satisfaction of a desire may detract from personal satisfaction. I shall be concerned with certain desires which it is normal to call corrupt. It will be possible to consider only fleetingly the considerations which justify the use of that term. But I hope that it will be apparent that, whatever persons are, they have reason to avoid both the fulfilment, and also (if possible) the possession, of corrupt desires.[5]

I shall begin by defining fantasy, as a property of desire. I shall be defining a technical term, and it is not my concern to approximate to common usage. A desire exhibits fantasy when (i) its object in thought is not the object towards which it is expressed, or which it pursues; (ii) the object pursued acts as a substitute for the object in thought; and (iii) the pursuit of the substitute is to be explained in terms of a personal prohibition. By a 'personal prohibition' I mean a prohibition that forms part of the deliberation of the person himself and which is in some sense self-imposed, or accepted. The contrast is with prohibitions thought of as imposed by some external power, having no independent or intrinsic claim to acceptance.[6]

The definition is more simple than it appears, and should become clear through an example. A morbid person may reflect intensely and aimlessly on the subject of human death and suffering. The image of agony may rise frequently before his mind and begin to exert its fascination. There is born in him the desire to witness such a scene. At the same time fear, sympathy and respect for human life make it abhorrent to him to realize this desire, either by producing the circumstance which fascinates him, or by frequenting those places where it might be found. The effect of this prohibition is to turn his desire towards a substitute: he begins to seek the 'realistic' portrayal of death and destruction – for example, in a waxworks museum, or in the cinema. (The word 'realistic'

5 Cf. Aristotle's account of virtue and vice in *Nicomachean Ethics*.

6 The contrast reflects the more metaphysical distinction offered by Kant, between imperatives that are self-imposed, since they proceed from the autonomy of the will, and imperatives that are 'heteronomous', reflecting a constraint on the will.

occurs in inverted commas for reasons to be made apparent.) This desire for the perfect image of suffering is an example of fantasy.

It is possible to imagine many such examples and to extract from them, and from the definition which they exemplify, a description of the 'characteristic fantasy object'. The object of a fantasy is, as I have said, a substitute or surrogate. But it is not just that: the peculiar circumstances which generate fantasy also determine the character of this surrogate. For example, a fantasy will seek to gratify itself, not in the delicately suggestive, but in the grossly obvious, or explicit. Thus a fantasy desire will characteristically seek, not a highly mannered or literary description, nor a painterly portrayal, of its chosen subject, but a perfect simulacrum – such as a waxwork, or a photograph.[7] It eschews style and convention, since these constitute impediments to the construction of the surrogate object, ways of veiling it and confusing it in a mask of thought. The ideal fantasy object is perfectly 'realized', while remaining wholly unreal. It 'leaves nothing to the imagination': at the same time it is to be understood only as a simulacrum and not as the thing itself.

The reason why I earlier placed 'realism' in inverted commas is this: that it has come to mean something quite different from the 'realization' which is pursued in fantasy. It has come to mean, in fact, the attempt to *represent* the world as it is. Now to represent an object is not to provide a surrogate for it. The 'realization' of an object in a surrogate is, in fact, one way of relinquishing the attempt to understand it; it is, in one sense, the opposite of representation.

It is useful at this stage to distinguish the fantasy object from other – perhaps more innocuous – kinds of surrogate. A person who has a great desire to visit China might be compelled, by financial or other circumstances, to content himself with pictures and descriptions of the object of his desire. And if his desire is really to visit China, to see it and to know it in the way that it is only properly known in the act of acquaintance, then it is not a representation so much as a surrogate that he requires, and again his passion may expend itself on models and photographs, rather than on the thing itself. This is not, on my account, a genuine case of fantasy, since the 'transference' of desire (to borrow another psychoanalytic term) is motivated not by an interior prohibition but only by an external constraint. Should the opportunity to travel to China arise, then the interest of the surrogate would instantly decline. Of course, one can

7 On the photographic 'simulacrum', see 'Photography and Representation' above.

imagine some deep and darkly motivated prohibition against travel to some longed-for place (witness Proust's inability to reach Venice[8]). Here the search for substitutes again takes on the character of fantasy, as I have described it.

There are other innocuous surrogates that could be mentioned – the most evident being the use of models, photographs and the like in the course of instruction, where all desire, emotion and interest is still directed towards the reality, and not towards the substitute that is, fortuitously, required. I mention these things only because reflection on them might help to clarify the phenomenon with which I am trying to contrast them.

Even in the case of a docile and harmless fantasy, it must be remembered that the desire which underlies it is real. (In certain cases one may speak not of desire, but of compulsion. This does not affect the point, even if it suggests a *theory* of fantasy that may, in the end, be correct.) The subject of a fantasy really does want something. This is brought out by the fact that, in the case of sexual fantasy, the sexual experience may be pursued *through* the fantasy object, and attached to it by a definite onanistic activity. The subject wants something, but he wants it *in the form of a substitute*. This desire has its origin in, and is nurtured by, impulses which govern his general behaviour. Objects can be found to gratify his fantasy; but the fantasy is grounded in something that he really feels.

So we could define fantasy, briefly, as a real desire which, through prohibition, seeks an unreal, but realized, object.

There is a common instinct that fantasy, even when gratified, does not contribute to, but is in fact more likely to detract from, personal satisfaction. I here offer a semi-philosophical reason for thinking that this instinct might be sound. It seems to me that the fantasy-ridden soul will tend to have a diminished sense of the objectivity of his world, and a diminished sense of his own agency within it. The habit of pursuing the 'realized unreal' seems to conflict with the habit, which we all, I believe, have reason to acquire, of pursuing what is real. There is no expenditure of effort involved in the gratification of fantasy, and hence the fantasist is engaged in no transformation of his world. On the contrary his desires invade and permeate his world, which ceases to have any independent meaning. The nature of the fantasy object is *dictated* by the passion

8 Described in George Painter, *In Quest of Proust*, 2 vols. (London, 1959; New York, 1978), I.

which seeks to realize it; and the world therefore has no power either to control or to resist the passion. Normal passions are founded on the sense of the independent reality of their object. They do not invade, but on the contrary, are disciplined by, the world. They change as understanding changes, and come, in time, to bear the imprint both of the subject's agency and of the world's reality. Thus it is with the greatest of human benefits – love between equals. In love, all my fantasy is destroyed just so soon as it is erected, by the deeper desire to understand and respond to a being whose essence resides in his independence, in his freedom from me. It seems to be no accident that people have repeatedly described sexual fantasy as 'loveless'.

I now turn to the subject of imagination, specifically to the idea of imaginative perception. Consider a theatrical representation, say of the murder of Desdemona. This is an imaginary scene; which is to say that what is represented is not really there on the stage, nor anywhere else in the objective world. It is also perceived as imaginary, which is to say that the observer (at least the observer who understands what is going on) has no disposition to believe that what he sees is actually happening. There is something voluntary in this pattern of perception, although it is not, *pace* Coleridge, a 'willing suspension of disbelief': more like the opposite, indeed. We might say, that the episode is 'perceived in disbelief'. It is not merely that the scene is known to be unreal; it is that all pleasure and emotion derive from that belief, and from the recognition that here the unreal object is not substituting for the object of some real desire.

Of course, a man may bring to his perception of theatrical scenes just such fantasy emotion as I have described. In this case the theatrical scene performs, for him, the role of substitute. He will demand absolute lifelikeness, rather than dramatic realism. We know that the normal spectator does not demand this absolute lifelikeness of the stage and whether, like the Greeks, he expects all violence to take place off stage, or whether, like us, he merely expects gestures and language to be stylized and bound by convention, his interests are elsewhere than in the absolute reduplication of a specific object or event.

It would be wrong to say that this kind of imaginative perception is 'disinterested', if that is taken to mean that it is purged of all emotion and desire. Clearly the spectator feels something when he sees the death of Desdemona. But the object of this feeling is not the reality before him – two actors simulating murder – but the thing that is *not* there, and which he perceives unbelievingly, namely, the death of Desdemona.

There is a great difficulty in describing the nature and value of these 'imaginary' emotions. But one point needs to be made at the outset, which is that, whatever their nature, they are *responses* to a given situation, and neither pre-exist nor determine it. They arise out of the attempt to *understand* what is pictured. In this they are wholly unlike fantasy emotions. They have precisely the same character of objectivity (or response to something independent) as the healthy desires and feelings with which fantasy should properly be contrasted. They are informed, like all responses, by a 'reality principle' – which is to say that their object is also thought of as their justification.

There is a major difficulty in the description of 'imaginary' emotions. It is hard to find any real desire which is essential to them, as the desire to avoid is essential to fear, the desire to please essential to love.[9] A real desire always presupposes a background of belief, and in the present case the background is lacking. The thoughts which identify the intentional object of the feeling are imagined, not believed, and this fact determines the nature of the emotion. A desire that arises from an imaginative thought is not a real desire: I no more desire Othello not to murder Desdemona, than I desire to leave the theatre, even though murder is, in some imaginary world, as terrible as murders really are. One is tempted to speak here of a desire 'entertained in imagination'; just as one must say the same of its attendant thought.

In a sense it is even wrong to say that it is *I* who feel grief over Desdemona's murder. It is rather that I imagine this grief, and come to a conception of what, from the subjective point of view, it feels like. Then I find myself drawn into sympathy with the emotion that I have been compelled to imagine. We might say that, in imagination, there is neither real object nor real feeling. The feeling is an imagined response to the imagined object which compels it. In fantasy there is a real feeling which, in being prohibited, compels an unreal object for its gratification. These two phenomena, which seem on the surface to be so alike, turn out on inspection to be deeply opposed.

It is now possible to give some further characteristics of the imaginative emotions which will reinforce the contrast with fantasy. Since imaginative emotions are responses, they do not exist independently of those imaginary scenes which occasion them. They arise out of, and are controlled by, an understanding of their object. To exercise the understanding is already to take an interest in objective truth. The questions:

9 For further reflections on this theme, see 'Laughter', chapter 12 below.

are things really like that? is it plausible? is my response exaggerated or not?, will all be apt and even unavoidable outcomes of the imaginative endeavour. Such questions are, of course, the death of fantasy, which withers as soon as its object is represented as having a reality independent of itself.

For similar reasons, we can say that 'realization', in the sense earlier considered, is not the main aim of imaginative thought, and may even impede that thought, precisely by awakening fantasy. The imagination, governed as it is by a reality principle, seeks condensation, suggestion, dramatic completeness. These are the features which make fiction into the accurate representation of an independent world. The absolute realization of specific scenes is no part of the imaginative purpose; this purpose may be better served by convention than by an explicit image.

If the contrast be granted, then we must conclude that the imagination can, while fantasy normally cannot, play a part in the education of feeling. Imagination can present us with unfamiliar situations, or with familiar situations transformed by some new radiation of thought; it generates emotion as a response to this. Its object is not, as a rule, realized according to the mechanical impulses of fantasy, but presented and completed in accordance with the 'reality principle' mentioned earlier. In not requiring our immediate practical involvement, it may, 'teach us how to feel'.

Certain kinds of convention, together with stylistic constraints, have an important part to play in this process. They discipline the imaginative thought, by enabling it to pass over irrelevancies, to ignore what may fascinate the eye and exclude the understanding, to achieve the kind of condensation without which truthful representation is impossible. Fantasy, by contrast, is killed by convention, since convention prevents the lifelike realization of the fantasy object. Fantasy precedes and commandeers its object, seeking not to understand but to veil the world by means of it. Thus the imaginative object can, while the fantasy object cannot, possess an emotional and moral character quite other than that of the real object (which is in one case represented, in the other case realized). A fantasy realization of exquisite torture has all the moral character of torture: it is horrifying, disgusting and despicable. But a painting of such a scene may – like Mantegna's *Crucifixion* – set torture in a context which makes its representation serene. It is in differences of this kind that we see the real distinction between a representation and a substitute. We might also see the purpose in distinguishing, as many have distinguished, between pornography and erotic art.

It is now possible to consider the relation between the stage and the screen. First, it cannot be doubted that, leaving aside documentaries, and considering the normal case, a film is a kind of dramatic representation. But its conventions are not theatrical. Whence comes its representational power? It seems to me that we should not attribute this power to the photographic image. I have argued above that it is only in very exceptional circumstances that a photograph can be treated as a representation of its subject: documentaries are not representations, any more than tape-recordings are representations of concerts.[10] A documentary is a special kind of substitute for the thing itself. When we speak of representation in the cinema, the instrument of representation is not the photograph but what the photograph is *of*. It is Marilyn Monroe who represents the female saxophonist. She does this just as it is done on the stage, by acting the part. If representation were not understood in this way then it would be extraordinary that we should think of films as fictions, with a dramatic significance, involving character, plot and dénouement.

It is very difficult to say anything decisive and uncontroversial about the difference that is made to dramatic representation when it is mediated by the screen. It has often been remarked that there is an increasing 'conventionalization' of the camera by serious directors, an increasing tendency to replace reproductive with painterly techniques. (A very good example is the countryside in Mizoguchi's *Crucified Lovers*, executed so as to imitate the appearance of Chinese painting, and then used to generate an expressive atmosphere not unlike that of the 'journey narratives' in the Japanese puppet plays.) One could perhaps explain this in terms of a natural tension between the 'reality principle' which governs dramatic representation, and the 'realization principle' which governs the camera. For consider how the magic of the screen arises: the photograph is so pellucid to its subject matter as to reveal it to your eyes. You see an actor, portraying a famous detective; and he is walking through the streets of London. But the streets of London are not represented: they are *there*, realized before you, with all their bustle and noise and arbitrary design. The actor is part of this scene and must behave with the gestures, the speech, and the appearance, that absorb him into it. Were he to obey dramatic conventions (as Bergman's actors used to do, thanks to highly original techniques of conventionalized photography), then in the normal case there would be a grotesque clash be-

10 Chapter 9, 'Photography and Representation'.

tween the actor and his setting. The detective has to be, from the visual point of view, as realized as the street in which he walks. This is so, even when the 'reality principle' – which operates to take our attention away from our ordinary world, towards a fictional representation in which the world is condensed and comprehended – demands that the scene be, not realized, but swept up in an imaginative gesture.

The tension between realization and reality can be suppressed, kept out of mind, even eliminated. But the temptation towards the first is always there, both on the stage and on the screen. It is never more clearly apparent than in those subjects, sex and violence, for which both are most habitually condemned. And I think it is important to be aware of the greater strength of this tendency in the cinema. With the aid of a camera, you can realize violence or the sexual act completely, and so minister to the fantasy which has realization as its object. Our fantasies about such things are strong and immediate. There is therefore a danger that fantasy will take over, so as to dominate the interest in representation. The desire behind fantasy is a real desire; whereas that behind imagination is not. If fantasy breaks through the tissue of imagination, then the dramatic thought is scattered, and the imaginative emotions along with it; the value of dramatic representation is destroyed. A mechanism takes over, which imprisons the spectator in the bonds of his own untutored emotions, just as true imagination frees him from these emotions by granting an impersonal vision of a larger moral world.

What I have said is only a hint; I find it difficult to express the point precisely. But it seems to provide some explanation of the fact that many people are both quickly satiated by cinematic representations, and yet deeply disturbed and absorbed by features (violence in particular) which, from the dramatic point of view, bear little intrinsic meaning. Imagination withers when realization blooms; and understanding withers along with it.

Critics often wonder why it is that such people are unable to see their favourite film more than a few times. A lover of the theatre, of literature, and of the opera – of any other form of representation that qualifies as dramatic – can usually envisage no point beyond which his favourite works would begin to fatigue him. Perhaps my remarks contain the beginnings of an explanation. For many interests in the cinema involve no imaginative effort, and have no imaginative reward; and many films are made precisely as the objects of such interests.

I have drawn a distinction between fantasy and imagination, discussing only works of art that are 'about' the world: I have confined myself to representation. Yet are there not other kinds of art – music for example – which are without serious representational aims, and yet which demand an imaginative response from their audience? Is there an equivalent of fantasy here? Or would it be merely metaphorical to talk in such a way?

I believe that there is expressive music which gives form to a feeling and understanding to the listener. I also think that there is music which decks itself out in the colours of an emotion which it neither explores nor controls, but for which it provides a convenient reinforcement and perhaps a surrogate object. To describe the distinction is hard: but perhaps it is an instance, in the domain of expression, of a distinction which I have discussed in terms of representation alone.