Trevor Cargile

Professor William Nericcio

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The Reciprocal Relationship Between Seeing and Identity

Oliver Sacks's *The Mind's Eye* envelops us in a nightmarish situation where the recognition of the familiar ceases to exist; what was once used to identify language, passions, and family instantaneously become unintelligible, vanishing without a trace. Patients in Sacks's novel experience day-to-day life being forced to discover new ways of seeing that don't focus on just the visual sense, but rather on other senses, such as sound, to further illustrate their surroundings, culture, or the loved one's they can no longer recognize. Vision as a means to reconnect with one's personal, unaltered lifestyle contrasts with John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* where seeing focuses on an envious, selfish desire for change, pleasure, and superiority. With excerpts from articles by E.M. Zemach and Virginia Slaughter, I hope to show that although both Sacks and Berger describe wants and needs originating from the ways people view the world, Sacks's ideas of seeing are rooted in a personal desire for self-identification while Berger's ideas focus more on a materialistic fantasy deriving itself from the influence of visual culture.

One common occurrence between Berger and Sacks is the prevalence of the human face and its importance to the viewer. Berger treats the human body as an object waiting to be viewed; the face of the individual does not matter, as long as the bigger picture attracts the attention of the spectator. This ambiguous, stranger mentality takes form when Berger details Holbein's painting of The Ambassadors: "Except for the faces and hands, there is not a surface in this picture which does not make one aware of how it has been elaborately worked over" (Berger 90). What attracts the attention of the spectator isn't the person but the objects surrounding that person, as if to watch in envy at all jewels, technology, and general success that anonymous individual possesses. On the other hand, the simple fact of not being able to recognize one's face becomes an increasingly disturbing nightmare for some in Sacks's studies. Prosopagnosia, the inability to recognize an individual based off of their face, forces the sufferer to recognize "people by an unusual nose or beard, spectacles, or a certain sort of clothing" (Sacks 90). The valuable visual in this case steers away from what is important to that person and focuses more on things that objectify an individual, much like how Berger reasoned. In this case though the sufferer values the human face, and their new, inhibited way of seeing forces them to take note of objects and sounds in order to connect and relate to that person; they aren't paying attention to materialistic desires.

Now, Berger's way of seeing when it comes to the person isn't wrong, just different. The perception and separation of body and face becomes increasing apparent the older the spectator - cultural norms, hence visual culture, also govern this disassociation. In "Perception of Faces and Bodies: Similar or Different?", Virginia Slaughter investigates face and body detection, explaining that "faces and bodies are both used for communication" and "recognition encompasses a variety of processes, depending on what about the face or body is being represented in the mind" (Slaughter 220,222). Could this mean Berger's way of seeing emphasizes a more sexualized desire then that of Sacks? Since "women appear" and as a result turn themselves into objects one could conclude this; it all depends on the spectator's perception when seeing an individual (Berger 47). Rather than focusing on the body, keeping the face as the main focal point creates personal relationships solidifying a familiar image in one's mind. Without the ability to distinguish a person's face creates a sense of alienation from society and loss of identity, much like how A.H. felt when he awoke to discover all faces to be unrecognizable, resulting in unrecognizable family members and a dissatisfaction for visual culture like magazine articles (Sacks 97).

When discussing ways of seeing, one instinctively thinks about eyes, physically seeing, but what about those who were born blind, or developed a disease which lead to their blindness later on in their life? They may not see in the literal sense, but they have the ability to imagine, with their other senses, what their surrounding world feels like. Berger mentions briefly that "the faculty of touch is like a static, limited form of sight" as to demean any other sense besides sight (Berger 9). Besides, most if not all of his novel focuses on the perception of pictures using sight and the influence they have when people view them; his ways of seeing primarily focus on the influence of images, people, and objects relating to the present. Unlike Berger, Sacks investigates a different way of seeing with John Hull, a blind professor of religious education (Sacks 202). When John loses his vision he feels a great deal of discomfort but eventually comes to terms with his situation, so much in fact that sound becomes his way of seeing; it's his way of belonging in the world when he explains, "Rain has a way of bringing out the contours of everything; it throws a coloured blanket over previously invisible things" (Sacks 204). He can see through sound, which portrays a beautiful image once left invisible to him. Again, like the human face example before, Sacks discusses another way of seeing that develops because of the desire to familiarize themselves with the world around them that they once knew; there are no desires originating from the influence of media, just one to get one's life back to normal.

Although Sacks's and Berger's ways of seeing appear to be different, they share a common outcome - the ways an individual sees the world shapes the process in which they view themselves and others around them. In E.M. Zemach's "Seeing, "Seeing", and Feeling", Zemach debates what defines the word seeing and how seeing shapes our everyday lives: "What we see is partly determined by what we believe, by what we expect, and by what our values, motivations and interests are" (Zemach 13). Our personalities depend on the way we view the world and vice versa. If Berger's ideas about seeing dominate a person's lifestyle then that person may be longing for a better future, noticing the successful individuals in magazines and on television; that drive to be envied by others becomes a "solitary form of reassurance" for them and they may act depressed or inferior just because of the way they view society (Berger 133). However, someone "seeing" the world through the eyes of one of Sacks's patients may notice fewer materialistic advertisements and more personable pleasures like friends and scenic landscapes because those things remind them of happy times. Depending on what a person values or the situation they are going through, the manner in which they perceive their life and the ones around them affect their particular way of seeing.

There are many ways to view the world around us, some described in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and Oliver Sacks's *The Mind's Eye*, but the process in which an individual identifies themselves with their surroundings, the way they see themselves within their culture, differ depending on the situation and desires of that person. Without these differing ways of seeing, our world would lack a diversity of culture and individualism.

Works Cited

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