Current Movements in Viewing Paintings: Reflections on Reflections

Most of the literature concerned with teaching the aesthetic appreciation of paintings presupposes the existence of "ideal viewing conditions." But however one understands these, it is clear that for most people nowadays they rarely obtain. It therefore seems desirable that attempts at aesthetic education in this area abandon their assumption of the ideal and take account of the actual conditions under which works of art are currently viewed.

It is common nowadays for exhibitions of valuable paintings to be attended by large crowds and for works to be displayed behind glass or protective plexiglass cases. Yet while viewing conditions have altered considerably over the past few decades, the relevant literature in aesthetics has largely ignored these changes. The present essay discusses ways in which current conditions in art galleries affect our experience, first by offering some reflections on the kinds of movement necessitated by viewing an exhibition in the presence of large crowds, and then by considering the effects of paintings' being displayed behind glass—there being a significant difference between viewing a canvas with and without the superimposition of reflections. (These ideas were stimulated by visits to three art exhibitions—of Picasso, Francis Bacon, and Japanese Buddhist paintings—during a recent summer in Kyoto, but they should apply to most large art shows.)

**Movements**

Before the viewing of great art became so popular, the tempo at which one moved through an exhibition was a matter of personal preference; one could view the canvasses in any order and linger at will before favorite works. But times have changed, and at major shows (even without zealous attendants stimulating rapid movement) the current of the crowd is often irresistible, or else the mass of bodies in front of the better-known works prevents their being viewed in the desired sequence and at one's optimal tempo.

In an exhibition that is chronologically arranged (and it is generally good to have the possibility of following the artist's development), one
may be obliged to forgo this order. Unless one is to be borne along by the relentless momentum of the crowd, one is advised to adopt a kind of flitting, zig-zag progression typical of the butterfly, floating while awaiting the opportunity to close in quickly on any work of interest that might be revealed by a parting of the crowds. The disadvantage of one's having to miss the chronological sequence can be minimized by a number of floating passes through the entire show that leave to the chance disposition of the crowds the order and number of one's points of alighting.

There turn out to be some silver linings to the dark cloud of masses of viewers. One often goes to an exhibition with fairly set ideas about which paintings to devote time to; but the density of the crowds may frustrate such plans and induce one to pay attention to other, unfamiliar works. If, in particularly heavy traffic, one should happen upon a quiet spot, the calm may encourage resting before an at first glance unimpressive canvas—often long enough to discover hidden depths that may have passed unnoticed under less crowded conditions.

Throngs of people (as well as distracting reflections from glassed paintings) may force one to adopt a position to the extreme right or left of a painting which, particularly in the case of larger canvasses, can make for interesting perspective effects. Where there is a marked difference in apparent depth across the breadth of the canvas—close foreground on the left, for instance, receding into far distance on the right—the perspective effect of apparent size is radically accentuated or diminished when one views from a narrow angle, and thus two significantly different experiences of the work are to be had from the extreme left and right. (The objection that these are abnormal or unnatural viewing angles surely stems from a prejudice in favor of the Western system of perspective developed during the Renaissance: Picasso and many artists since have been concerned to show the relatively arbitrary nature of this system.)

Two significant antitheses of movement in attending an exhibition occur between standing still and walking, and between the real and the imagined movement of the viewer's body (i.e., between actual moving relative to the canvas and imagined moving within and through the space opened up by the painting). Some interesting writing has been done on this latter contrast, primarily by critics with a psychoanalytic orientation. But the bulk of this literature has dealt only with imagined body movement and the kinaesthetic muscular sensations experienced while standing still, and not with the contrast between these and the viewer's actual moving about.

In most popular shows today, standing still in front of a painting for even a minute makes one realize how fast the stream of viewers flows. One wonders how much of the painting the majority can be seeing at such speed; the rapidity of their own movement would seem to preclude any appreciation of the dynamics of the still canvasses gliding by. And even if some viewers do pause long enough to become aware of these dynamics, their movement to the next painting is generally so quick that there must be a considerable “interference phenomenon” from such rapid superimposition of the rhythms of different works. As Heidegger has remarked, the
work of art "opens up a world," and for a proper appreciation of the
unique dynamics of the world of the next painting, an empty period or
blank interval of time is required. In this respect, a massive flow of viewers
can again be an advantage for the slow appreciator: the "butterfly"
progression offers lulls between paintings during which actual body movement
and the search for openings provide a stimulating contrast to the imagined
body movement experienced in following the dynamics of particular can-
vasses.

Reflections

Most viewers (and, I surmise, aesthetic educators) appear to regard the re-
flections caused by a painting's being displayed behind glass as an unmiti-
gated distraction. In some cases, especially when there is glare from the
lighting, they undoubtedly are; but they can also enhance the viewer's
response.

Oriental paintings, being generally less full than Western canvasses, tend
when glassed to offer more empty room for reflections. The work of Francis
Bacon is, however, an exception in this respect, in that his larger paintings
surround the figures by such vast voids of uniform color as to provide
ample space for reflected images. It is worth drawing attention to Bacon's
attitude toward the glassing of his works, as reported in Sir Lawrence
Gowing's account (in his introduction to the catalogue for the Japanese
exhibition) of the artist's early shows in London. After speaking of Bacon's
uncouth soiling of unprepared canvas, Gowing reports: "Another breach
with fashion; as if to protect something refined and precious, these pic-
tures were exhibited under glass. Bacon announced that he preferred it and
insisted that it remain. He stated that the pictures required the cared-for
look and even the reflections in the glass to complete them."

The experience of viewing an unglassed painting is already multilayered
(with the superimposition of images of other works, personal memories
and fantasies, and so forth), and looking at paintings behind glass both re-
minds us of this circumstance and further compounds the experience. The
reflections appear at first glance to be on the surface of the canvas—but
actually one's focus is quite different for the surface and for the reflected
scene that appears to be behind it but is in fact in front (though mostly
behind the viewer). Nevertheless, two worlds meet on the picture plane:
the world of the work, mediated by the illusory depth of the canvas, and
the world of the viewer, mediated by the illusory reflection on the work's
surface.

Three kinds of things are reflected in glassed paintings, the viewer's
body (or parts of it), other viewers, and other things and works in the en-
vironment; I shall devote most of my attention to the first as the most sig-
nificant. The effects of reflections of oneself clearly depend on the size
and scale of the picture: larger canvasses can incorporate the image of the
viewer's entire body, often on the same scale as the figures in the depicted
scene; and since such works generally have more room in front of them, they also afford more opportunity for moving so as to vary the location and size of the reflected body-image.

One of Picasso's most significant innovations was his technique of combining several different perspectives on the subject in a single visual presentation, thereby affirming the multiply superimposed temporality of experience and freeing Western painting from its fixation on representing its subject as seen from one point in space at one particular time. In the case of the nudes of 1932, reflections greatly enhance the effects of this technique. In some of these paintings, the apparent contortions of the sleeping body can be seen as the superimposition of several visual presentations (Husserl's *Abschattungen*), all of which would be possible without the subject's moving, requiring only that the viewer change position a few times. But in others, the multiplicity of presentations would be impossible to apprehend if the subject remained immobile, no matter how many viewpoints the spectator adopted, and possible only if the nude were obliging enough to turn over (and since several of them are characterized as *couchée* without necessarily being *endormie*, this appears plausible enough): in this way the picture incorporates a span of time rather than depicting a discrete moment. And in those of this series which are glassed, one can see one's reflection as viewer (and *voyeur*) on the far side of the subject's body—in precisely the position one would have to adopt in order to apprehend simultaneous opposing visual presentations.

With the much larger nudes of 1932-34, the experience of being able to float one's body-image through the sea- and landscapes of such hugely fragmented bodies is temporally deepened by the reflected presence on the painting's surface of a number of other works from the same period—superimposed retentions and protensions of one's past and future viewing. And with the magnificent Minotaur series of 1933-37, some of which are now mounted behind glass, one comes to see through reflection that not only is the minotaur the artist, his animal surrounded by images of *anima*, but he is also—more portentously—the viewer.

The opportunity for this kind of identification with the subject of the painting is perhaps a motive behind Bacon's predilection for having "the reflections in the glass complete" his works. In the case of the famous *Study of a Dog* of 1952, the surrounding barrenness provides room for the viewer to position his body image in a variety of attitudes toward the bestial figure. And indeed most of Bacon's portraits offer sufficient space for the viewer to merge his body-image with and separate it from the depicted body so as to identify or disidentify with its nightmarish distortions. Comparably existential is a mirror play with the famous "cage" paintings: not just the unhappy popes are encaged by those eerily strong lines of light, but we, the viewers, are in there too.

Reflections of one's body have a somewhat different significance in Buddhist painting. Much Buddhist iconography represents the various divinities in human form, and the range of postures, attitudes, gestures of the hands and positioning of the feet constitutes a subtle language of the
The underlying philosophical idea here concerns the various bodies (kaya) of the Buddha as manifestations of the essential buddha-nature at various physical and metaphysical levels of reality. The modern phenomenon of reflections on the surfaces of Buddhist paintings can help us appreciate the possibility of our identity with this buddha-nature. Depending on the size and scale of the painting, the viewer’s body-image is dwarfed by the image of (say) the bodhisattva, or else the bodhisattva’s image appears within the locus of the viewer’s body: one realizes one’s being within the divinity and the divinity’s being within. Further, paintings in which the disposition of the depicted figure’s clothing, necklaces, bracelets and other adornments symbolizes the centers and channels of the body’s energies make a deeper impression when contemplated in superimposed reflection of the viewer’s own body-image.

Reflections of other viewers and things in the environment have two kinds of effects: the first is a reminder that viewing works of art is basically a communal rather than a solitary undertaking; the second, perhaps more important, is to point up that not only is the painting a unique and solitary thing, but its appreciation is a singular event at a particular point in time and space and in a particular context. If one should happen to catch the reflected eye of another viewer, the painting is suddenly seen through—leading to the realization that here, now, are two mortals facing a manifestation of the artist’s quasi immortality.

What one takes in from a good exhibition is generally so rich that a period of subsequent rumination is desirable, for which tranquil ponds (often to be found in the grounds of museums in Japan) offer the perfect environment. A placid surface gives the sated viewer room to digest the afterimages amidst reflections of sky, clouds, and trees, elegantly rippled by the occasional fish’s gently touching the undersurface of the water—a perfect no-man’s-land between the currents of movement within the world of painting and those reflected in the painted world outside.
Reflections on Projections: Changing Conditions in Watching Film

GRAHAM PARKES

A number of changes have taken place in our perspectives on the medium of film over the past few decades. When films began to be shown on television, our attitude was modified through seeing them on a small cathode-ray tube in the privacy of the home. With the advent of the videotape recorder home viewing increased spectacularly. And yet video is a medium more different from film than it first seems, and its popularity is in turn affecting film in ways not yet fully apparent. The differences in viewing conditions occasioned by the shift from a context of public ritual to a domestic situation of privacy and relative intimacy, and from watching a film projected on a reflective screen and seeing it inscribed on a cathode-ray tube, have implications which are well worth exploring.

From Day to Cave

Since its inception as public entertainment film has always had its own special place, a dim *temenos* often dignified by a name invoking a suggestion of the regal or the otherwise exotic. At the movies we resemble the prisoners in Plato’s cave: in the dark, sitting transfixed by a world of illusion, we are caught up and taken in by the shadow play projected on to the two-dimensional surface before us. One difference is that we knowingly and—unless we are dragged children—willingly enter the darkness of the theater and are able to leave more or less when we please, whereas in Plato’s story we have all of us been in the cave longer than we can remember and are shackled by the neck so that we can’t get out. But we should be aware that caves with their darkness figured also as actual sites of enlightenment in Plato’s time—in mystery cults such as the Eleusinian Mysteries.

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The entering and leaving of the theater are acts resonant with ritual significance. The waiting before going in; the purchase of tickets (a more complex task since the fragmentation of many theaters into multiplicities of up to six); buying provisions for the trip; and then, on crossing the threshold, the encounter with that wonderful species of guide to the underworld (sadly moribund in this country, but still thriving in Europe and parts of Asia)—the usher. One does appreciate being free to choose where to sit, since members of that clan can be dauntingly imperious and occasionally downright authoritarian. On the other hand, however, to follow that gliding blob of light down the dark carpeted aisle, the guiding shining from the red ring borne by the uniformed one who knows, intensifies the sense of initiation into a deeper level of reality. Especially on coming in from the bright of day when the film is already underway, with no guiding light to follow and under pressure to find a seat quickly amidst the dark crowd already in place, the chances of dignified entry are diminished. But it could be worse: recall the sorry fate of the philosopher who has escaped to the light of real day and on rushing back down to the cave before his eyes have dark-adapted incurs the fatal wrath of his still be-nighted fellows.

When the film is over, the audience tends to leave in two groups: those who head for the exit immediately, shunning and often blocking from view the final credits, and those who remain seated for a while, beyond the receding into silence of the last notes of the soundtrack, sometimes in a reverent hush, allowing the spell of the film's world to fade gradually away. Depending on the depth of one's immersion, it can take some effort and attention to adjust to the world outside the darkened theater. Worse still, egress into unexpected daylight—surprisingly bright—can be a distressingly powerful experience. One empathizes with the condition of the liberated philosopher who has successfully negotiated the arduous ascent from the depths of the cave—to emerge into the blinding light of day illuminated by the most real and ideal sun.

The frequent visitor to the cinema has often settled on an optimum location and orientation in relation to the screen. Arriving in an auditorium close to full, he is forced to choose a seat closer to or farther away from the screen. The question is then whether to lean toward engaging the image at closer quarters, getting up front and under it, or toward backing off for a less overwhelming experience, a more detached attitude. Positioning left or right of center seems generally less important—though for a film with subtitles the short of sight may favor the left so as to ensure catching at least the first part of the utterance. (In Japan, where the "sidetitles" tend to run vertically along the right edge of the screen, the strategy would be reversed.)

Going to see a film on one's own is obviously simpler in this respect
than going with others, whose distance and orientation preferences may complicate the process of deciding on optimal seating. However, one still has to weigh the trade-offs between closeness to the image and strain on the neck, extra legroom and audibility of the soundtrack, and so on. Indeed, since the question of where to sit often appears to be disproportionately difficult, the issue may have deeper implications—being perhaps a metaphor for the problem of attaining proper perspective on our projections and projects concerning the world as a whole.

Film often works through projecting a world powerful enough to draw the viewer in so far as to eclipse the "real" world. To stay in that other world requires a certain insulation from distractions from this one. In a theater, loud commentators, explainers and exclaimers, and inappropriately raucous laughers can force even the finely concentrating viewer to move to a quieter area. Nevertheless, cinema is an ineluctably social event, and, for all the drawbacks this entails, the communal aspect can itself enhance the experience. For one thing, the responsiveness of a good audience may alert the temporarily inattentive viewer to some element that he is overlooking. At the other end of the scale, in a (solemn part of a) serious film the silence observed by a large audience is correspondingly more impressive than the silence of only a few viewers.

To see a foreign film in a foreign place, particularly if the dialogue is in a language which one doesn’t understand and there are no subtitles, intensifies the sense of mystery. Confronted with a stream of dialogue the meaning of which she can only infer and guess, the viewer may gain a refreshingly different perspective on the medium by being forced to give up following the plot and induced to focus more attention on the visual and filmic elements. Even on home ground, it is remarkably difficult—perhaps even impossible on first viewing—to see a foreign film in an entirely unfamiliar language. People usually opt for concentrating on the subtitles and thereby miss the visual richness of the film. It can be a revelation to go the other way and completely disregard the subtitles: what one loses in terms of the plot is more than compensated for by the appreciation one can gain of the film’s purely visual dimensions.

From Projection to Inscription

In most cultures there is a distinction between domestic and public ritual and a general consensus that the former is prior and then subsequently extended to the collective, public domain. In the case of film the direction would be reversed: the public ritual elements are transformed—and some of them lost—in being transferred to the living room of the home. But on the way, that quintessentially American institution, the drive-in, constitutes an interesting intermediate area, in which many individual groups of
viewers maneuver to congregate in the public arena and view a single screen of gigantic proportions. In this situation one loses some of the intensity that comes from viewing in the immediate presence of a large group, but gains from being able to maintain within the collective situation a privacy that allows the smaller group to converse and ingest, for example, to its heart's content.

There is something particularly fascinating (at least for the neophyte) about joining the ritual procession waiting to enter the arena. And for those initiated at an early age, to participate later in life must bring to resonate, however unconsciously, deep memories of importantly formative experiences. A power failure during the showing of a film under any conditions is a rude—though fortunately rare—shock. In the drive-in situation, it lacks the claustrophobic character of the experience in a theater; and indeed the vision of phalanxes of darkened cars, tilted up in the sudden silence towards a shadowy blankness, is awesome in its eeriness. And if the more common misfortune of rain should befall, it is an intriguing experience to see a film through a glass rhythmically swept by wipers. (I am told that snow, if not too heavy, enhances the experience even more.)

When films began to be shown on television, participation in the direct experience of the audience's reactions to the film was reduced to the knowledge (if one even gave it a thought) that a much larger audience was viewing at the same time, though dispersed throughout the land. The move out of the public auditorium provided freedom from disturbances caused by overly loud conversation or consumption on the part of one's neighbors, as well as freedom to indulge in such activities, if desired, in the presence of a select audience of one's own choosing. The interruptions occasioned by commercials, while an annoyance, were found to provide opportunities to attend to various aspects of physical comfort without missing any of the action. But on the whole the ritual elements of home viewing have not yet assumed the power of the public ones. The ritual of loading the videotape and settling down for the show lacks the overtones of mystery that surround the start of a film shown in a theater.

More numerous and striking are the differences between the nature of the image in film and video. The reflected image from a projector has a luminescence that the cathode-ray tube can never attain. It is less tiring for the eyes to look at a projected image and also (if we are to believe the increasing number of scientific reports on the effects of long hours' looking at television monitors) less dangerous. The contrast effects in film between a light and dark screen, together with its absolute brightness, provide an intense visual experience with no danger of damage to the retina—even in prolonged viewing.

The shape of the image is another factor. It used to be that when films were shown on television, the shape of the original was retained (though
broadcasters never attempted to replicate the extremes of panavision) by maintaining its width and leaving blank bands at the top and bottom of the screen. This practice seems to have been abandoned by both television networks and producers of videotapes, with the result that one loses the edges of the picture or else is subject to the distressing phenomenon of the horizontally compressed image.

The most important factor, however, is the difference between the actual sizes of the film and video images. Even with an apparently “still” image, as in the case of paintings, a canvas larger than the human body facilitates incorporation—in the dual sense of assimilating it physically and letting one's body into it. Similarly, with a large movie screen the viewer can move through it somatically, feeling the movements of the image in action, and sensing it with kinaesthetic response. When the world of the film reflects off a screen several times the height of a human being, it is easier to release one's body into it, and the presence of the actors (especially in close-up) attains more overwhelming dimensions than it ever can on the small screen.

The condition of the viewer is often significantly different between the public and private locations. The moviegoer frequently arrives at the cinema after a period of relatively energetic movement, some having bicycled from home, the majority having walked from home or bus stop, subway station or car park. The activity of the musculature perseverates after one has become seated and immobile, thereby intensifying the kinaesthetic responses to the body movements of the characters in the film, and to the camera movements, or simply to the dynamic tensions of the cinematic image itself. This effect is generally absent in video, because of the smaller screen and less pre-viewing physical activity; and an image as small as a video screen is in any case more difficult to get into, there being a tendency to objectify the world presented through it as something “within” our world, rather than to participate physically by entering into the film's world.

The potentially overpowering nature of the filmic image contrasts with the power over the image afforded by video. Part of the power of a film in a theater comes from its providing the possibility of entering another world. This world proceeds—like life or the so-called “real” world—inexorably. Except in cases of mechanical failure or inept projectionists, once the film starts there is no going back. (Gradually going are the days, sadly, when having missed the beginning one could simply wait for the first reel to be shown again.) With video, on the other hand, the viewer becomes a player with considerable power over the image. A film is transformed when one can own a tape of it and be free to play it any time, viewing it alone or in the company one chooses. If in a theater the image should become too overwhelming, the viewer's choices are restricted to closing the eyes or
walking out. With video one can stop the film at will, or else fast-forward—or even (if one has two recorders) play Editor.

For the enthusiast a major benefit of owning a videotape recorder is that it makes close and repeated viewings of a film convenient and relatively inexpensive. Repeated viewings in particular allow one to develop an appreciation for the extra- and nonnarrative features of film, which is generally possible only after one has become familiar with the plot. The versatility of tape and the freeze-frame function enable the keen student to examine a film in minute detail and the obsessive to rerun his favorite sequences ad libitum. And for the true fanatic there is the peculiar joy of viewing an already familiar film silently, without sound, or else on the fast-forward mode. Then the purely filmic qualities of the work—visual rhythms and harmonies and patternings of images over time—are brought into relief. There is, however, a trade-off in the shift of power to the hands of the home viewer. Something is lost when one’s control over the unfolding of the image is so close to total—which suggests that it belongs to the medium of film to render the viewer relatively powerless, that surrender of autonomy is essential to the experience.

We speak of seeing the “same” film in a large theater with wide screen and a powerful sound system or in a small local cinema, at the drive-in, in a foreign land, on commercial television or videotape in the home, or in a screening room at film school. There are more and greater differences than between seeing the same painting “in the canvas” and in reproduction and between hearing the same piece of music in the concert hall or from a recording (though this latter contrast is more closely analogous). It may soon become relevant, aesthetically speaking, to ask not just “Did you see such-and-such a film?” but also “Under what conditions and through which medium did you see it?”

NOTE

1. Discussed in my previous article, “Current Movements in Viewing Paintings: Reflections on Reflections,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1984), to which the present notes are intended as a sequel. I am grateful to my colleague Lee Siegel for stimulating conversation on the present topic.