

LEARNING HOW TO SEE AGAIN

By Josef Pieper

MAN'S ABILITY TO *see* is in decline. Those who nowadays concern themselves with culture and education will experience this fact again and again. We do not mean here, of course, the physiological sensitivity of the human eye. We mean the spiritual capacity to perceive the visible reality as it truly is.

To be sure, no human being has ever really *seen* everything that lies visibly in front of his eyes. The world, including its tangible side, is unfathomable. Who would ever have perfectly perceived the countless shapes and shades of just one wave swelling and ebbing in the ocean! And yet, there are degrees of perception. Going below a certain bottom line quite obviously will endanger the integrity of man as a spiritual being. It seems that nowadays we have arrived at this bottom line.

I am writing this on my return from Canada, aboard a ship sailing from New York to Rotterdam. Most of the other passengers have spent quite some time in the United States, many for one reason only: to visit and see the New World with their own eyes. *With their own eyes*: in this lies the difficulty.

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During the various conversations on deck and at the dinner table I am always amazed at hearing almost without exception rather generalized statements and pronouncements that are plainly the common fare of travel guides. It turns out that hardly anybody has noticed those frequent small signs in the streets of New York that indicate public fallout shelters. And visiting New York University, who would have noticed those stone-hewn chess tables in front of it, placed in Washington Square by a caring city administration for the Italian chess enthusiasts of that area?!

Or again, at table I had mentioned those magnificent fluorescent sea creatures whirled up to the surface by the hundreds in our ship's bow wake. The next day it was casually mentioned that "last night there was nothing to be seen". Indeed, for nobody had the patience to let the eyes adapt to the darkness. To repeat, then: man's ability to *see* is in decline.

Searching for the reasons, we could point to various things: modern man's restlessness and stress, quite sufficiently denounced by now, or his total absorption and enslavement by practical goals and purposes. Yet one reason must not be overlooked either: the average person of our time loses the ability to see because *there is too much to see!*

There does exist something like “visual noise”, which just like the acoustical counterpart, makes clear perception impossible. One might perhaps presume that TV watchers, tabloid readers, and movie goers exercise and sharpen their eyes. But the opposite is true. The ancient sages knew exactly why they called the “concupiscence of the eyes” a “destroyer”. The restoration of man’s inner eyes can hardly be expected in this day and age—unless, first of all, one were willing and determined simply to exclude from one’s realm of life all those inane and contrived but titillating illusions incessantly generated by the entertainment industry.

You may argue, perhaps: true, our capacity to see has diminished, but such loss is merely the price all higher cultures have to pay. We have lost, no doubt, the American Indian’s keen sense of smell, but we also no longer need it since we have binoculars, compass, and radar. Let me repeat: in this obviously continuing process there exists a limit below which human nature itself is threatened, and the very integrity of human existence is directly endangered. Therefore, such ultimate danger can no longer be averted with technology alone. At stake here is this: How can man be saved from becoming a totally passive consumer of mass-produced goods and a subservient follower

beholden to every slogan the managers may proclaim? The question really is: How can man preserve and safeguard the foundation of his spiritual dimension and an uncorrupted relationship to reality?

The capacity to perceive the visible world “with our own eyes” is indeed an essential constituent of human nature. We are talking here about man’s essential inner richness—or, should the threat prevail, man’s most abject inner poverty. And why so? To *see* things is the first step toward that primordial and basic mental grasping of reality, which constitutes the essence of man as a spiritual being.

I am well aware that there are realities we can come to know through “hearing” alone. All the same, it remains a fact that only through seeing, indeed through seeing with our own eyes, is our inner autonomy established. Those no longer able to see reality with their own eyes are equally unable to hear correctly. It is specifically the man thus impoverished who inevitably falls prey to the demagogical spells of any powers that be. “Inevitably”, because such a person is utterly deprived even of the potential to keep a critical distance (and here we recognize the direct political relevance of our topic).

The diagnosis is indispensable yet only a first step. What, then, may be proposed; what can be done?

We already mentioned simple abstention, a regimen of fasting and abstinence, by which we would try to keep the visual noise of daily inanities at a distance. Such an approach seems to me indeed an indispensable first step but, all the same, no more than the removal, say, of a roadblock.

A better and more immediately effective remedy is this: *to be active oneself in artistic creation, producing shapes and forms for the eye to see.*

Nobody has to observe and study the visible mystery of a human face more than the one who sets out to sculpt it in a tangible medium. And this holds true not only for a manually formed image. The verbal “image” as well can thrive only when it springs from a higher level of visual perception. We sense the intensity of observation required simply to say, “The girl’s eyes were gleaming like wet currants” (Tolstoy).

Before you can express anything in tangible form, you first need eyes to see. The mere attempt, therefore, to create an artistic form compels the artist to take a fresh look at the visible reality; it requires authentic and personal observation. Long before a creation is completed, the art-

ist has gained for himself another and more intimate achievement: a deeper and more receptive vision, a more intense awareness, a sharper and more discerning understanding, a more patient openness for all things quiet and inconspicuous, an eye for things previously overlooked. In short: the artist will be able to perceive with new eyes the abundant wealth of all visible reality, and, thus challenged, additionally acquires the inner capacity to absorb into his mind such an exceedingly rich harvest. The capacity to *see* increases.