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Ways of seeing

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Senior Project: Written Portion
Advisor: Giovanna Borradori

Reflection on *Ways of Seeing*

Structure

I found *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker to be one of the primary inspirations for my film. I don't mean this in terms of content, but in terms of formal structure, and the way that montage can be used to construct narratives. The main reason why *Sans Soleil* inspired me initially, can be credited to how it is able to produce great affect and engage the viewer, despite its explicit lack of linearity and formal elements as they are typically used. Somehow, within its disjointed narrative, constant digression, and deflection of authorship, Marker still manages to share with the viewer a way of seeing that manages to feel both visceral and comprehensive. And I became even more interested in my reaction to the film once I realized that, despite feeling this sense of intimacy and cohesiveness, I would not know how to summarize it if asked. As in, I quite literally had no idea what the movie was "about." Having seen it more since then, I'm now able to see the longer threads of narrative that run through the film, but at the time, this subtlety of structure revealed to me the power of montage, and its ability to carry a narrative by way of how it is told and visualized, rather than relying on the locatable content or "points made" within such a narrative.

This realization was very useful for me in my project, specifically because I had been having great difficulty in finding a way to represent the realms of thought and ideas that I hoped to communicate. In many ways, a large part of the labor that went into creating this film was repeatedly attempting to organize the ideas that I held very distinctly inside of me, but didn't yet have a language or terminology to describe. Working from an "I know it when I see it" body of examples - people, ideas, and events - from which I tried to work backwards, I started by trying to verbalize the connections I saw between contemporary art and religion, using terms like "transcendental" or "mystical", soon finding that these terms often confused more than they clarified.

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Framework

At an earlier point in working on my thesis, I had been aware that I would need some sort of grounding text or reference through which I could move through the content of my thesis. Eventually, this was fulfilled by *Ways of Seeing*, by John Berger. While I would consider another text, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard, to be equally influential to me in my thinking, it was Berger's book which I feel granted me more of a means for constructing a language. Although I would not consider the language of my film to create any sort of formal logistical framework, even just the decision to use the term "ways of seeing" when referring more broadly to ways of experiencing, ways of thinking, or states of mind (as well as actual 'seeing') proved very crucial in my process.

Through exploring "ways of seeing" and human vision, I was able to not only create a framework for exploring different aspects of human perception and experience, but I was also able to create a bridge between 'everyday' perception and the more profound realms of 'seeing', such as those held by Abramovic, Tolle, or monks who are capable of self-immolation. With my thesis, I do not claim to understand the content of such experiences, as they are largely inaccessible to me, but I do feel confident in my attempt to approach these experiences by orienting them within a system that connects them to more basic, commonplace modes of existing.

In addition to how 'ways of seeing' operates as a useful framework for my film, it also proved very useful in its relevance to film itself. While I do believe that a lot of what is said in my film could have been explored through other modes of sensing beyond just sight, it was sight which proved most relevant to the medium of my thesis itself. Because of this, there was a level of self-referentiality in the film that could not have been formed otherwise. Manifestations of this self-referentiality came in the form of the quote by filmmaker Dziga Vertov, in which he states

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that the camera is capable of constructing entirely new perspectives, as well as in sections of the film which serve as real-time illustrations of the content discussions. Included in this is the sections in which I talk about the 'color-patches' of the newly sighted, and with it show previous footage with distorted effects, as well as the section in which I discuss Moten's understanding of disorder, and with it show sequences of television static.

Content

While it is not the case that I intended to leave the 'point' of the film *entirely* up to the interpretation of the viewer *entirely*, I believe that my project, by virtue of the fact that it constructs a constellation/system of relations rather than a linear argument, has a range of possible meanings that can be realized or understood by seeing it. This was done intentionally. The 'points' that I attempt to make are multifaceted, and as such, I do not expect each particular meaning to be clear to the viewer, instead allowing them to receive the meanings that they are predisposed towards. In this sense, the film reflects the multifacetedness of my intentions in making the film. For example, there is a sense in which my intention for the film was to find ways of understanding the perceived 'limits' of human potential and those who have transcended such limits. However, there are other times when I would also say that my intention is to grant the viewer some sort of interest or access to such states. Even beyond this, there are a number of other possible ways of explaining my intentions, such as that it is an exploration of the immaterial links between arts and religion in terms of liberation, that it is more broadly an exploration of the sheer adaptability of perception, etc. I believe that all of these statements are correct, in that they all refer to a 'truth' about this film that cannot be clearly verbalized.

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Intentions

While, I do believe that it would be difficult to verbalize a comprehensive list of each individual points I was attempting to communicate with this film, there are many meanings that are fairly clear, either to the viewer in the film or to me in my own intentions.

One main point made in my thesis, is that the act of 'seeing' is not a discrete category, which can be separated from other modes of perception and sensation, and is instead fully integrated with many aspects of thought and experience. This is most basically highlighted by my discussion of the sight in the formerly blind and the miracle of Jesus in which he heals a blind man. In these sections, I highlight the fact that seeing, even in what is understood as its most basic, concrete function, is still dependent on our own ability to interpret information. By explaining the ways that the newly sighted see, it is clear that the ways of seeing employed by the 'regularly sighted' already involve a great deal of personalization and interpretation. In addition to this understanding of sight, I also attempt to make the point that seeing is also not distinct from modes of sensing, such as the experience of pain. I draw upon a quote by John Berger in order to explain this: "In the Middle Ages when men believed in the physical existence of Hell the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today. Nevertheless their idea of Hell owed a lot to the sight of fire consuming and the ashes remaining - as well as to their experience of the pain of burns" (*Ways of Seeing*, 5). This quote is significant, as it shows Berger equating his discussion of seeing with his discussion of sensation (specifically, the experience of pain). I then take this point of his further, questioning the ways that the pain of burns was felt by Abramovic in the performance piece *The Conditioning*, as well as by Thich Quan Duc.

On the more mundane uses of sight, there are the differences informed by more explicitly quotidian experience, such as the differences between viewing a tree one played in as a child vs one that is 'inconsequential', or between viewing a tree for the first time vs the one

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hundredth, or the one thousandth time, as well as the differences in this sight between the botanist, the painter, or the boat-builder. Having established this basic relationship between knowledge and seeing, I also bring this relation into the realm of subjects which are largely ineffable, fugitive, and transcendental, showing that the relation extends.

While doing this, I explore ways of approaching such subjects, as well as explore the idea of unseeing as it relates to this transcendental knowledge. In spiritual literature, there is a constant idea of relinquishing consciousness, in many ways likened to a complete dissolution of the self or “death” which is prescribed to achieve these wisdoms.

With this comes the ideas of death as discussed in the film, as well as blindness. This is one of many ways meant to open up a conversation about the idea of seeing vs non-seeing in particular. The idea of seeing is first set up as an anxious issue of ‘needing to see more’, which is then disproven with this idea of unseeing as it relates to wisdom, as described by Annie Dillard, Fred Moten, and Eckart Tolle. In this vein, it runs parallel with the idea that un-seeing, or not being self-conscious, is synonymous with forms of enlightenment. Obviously there are ways in which not seeing runs parallel to ignorance, and the issue of needing to see in order to understand the value of “not-seeing” is brought into question, but my goal with this was not to prescribe an answer to this issue of seeing vs unseeing, but to travel into this paradox through the lens of sight, highlighting the parallels and integrations of sight and wisdom while simultaneously utilizing sight-related subjects such as blindness to do so.

There are fundamentals of seeing that come before approaching the image, and Berger even acknowledges this. In his analysis of the image, he largely speaks about the relationship between and artist imbuing an artifact with their sight, and then a viewer interpreting this artifact with their own respective sight, but the fundamentals of vision and how it functions seem to be laid down as a foundation that largely precedes the history of the man-made images.

Another main point I make in my film is the idea that spiritual leaders, artists, etc. are not

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discretely in their own categories. The discussion of “sight” as a way to approach the pursuit of liberation is a lens which allows me to equalize the connotations of these different archetypes, identifying them primarily as ‘visionaries’. However, it is also true that the artists referenced, such as Marina Abramovic, cannot be easily separated from the ways of seeing embodied by religious practitioners. Regardless of whether the work of artists such as Abramovic, can be formally considered [psuedo-]religious, spiritual, mystical, etc. in its own right, for example, does not change the fact that such work has been heavily influenced by, and draws upon, religious teachings and practice. However, I believe the mere existence of such a synthesis from the explicitly religious into the context of the art world only serves to display the flexible, comprehensive nature of such forms as approached through the lens of sight. By this, I mean that the way sight is discussed within the film is meant to make a statement about human potential, and how it has been fulfilled especially, but not exclusively, within religious contexts. Though my project is transcendental in nature, and heavily revolves arounds spiritual subject matter, I believe that there is a degree to which the comprehensive philosophy it utilizes still precedes, or, rather, can be thought of as not strictly reliant upon, religion. In other words, I believe that there are many ways in which the film can be perceived secularly while still retaining its overall impact.

Authorship

In this way my role is almost contradictory: On one hand, I am identifying with the audience in assuming the role of “the one that is not in the know” regarding these fugitive elements of sight, by approaching the film as an active and current exploration and attempt to understand those with such transcendental wisdom. On the other hand, however, I am in practice actively employing the “knowingness” required to construct this film, given the necessarily deliberate structure of montage. Furthermore, it is made apparent that, at least to

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some subtle degree, the intention of this film is to grant the viewer some sort of access, or at the very least, an orientation towards, the liberated possibilities of seeing that are referenced within the film, despite the implication/my claims that I am not in a place of adequate authority or knowledge to do so. The elements within the film that make it most apparent that I actually am employing this authority/role of the 'knowing' are my explicit reference to Vertov, in which he describes filmmaking as the intentional process of creating new perspectives for the viewer, as well as times when I have explicitly constructed/edited the film to embody the content in question.

Reflection

My experience in creating the film has required me to utilize ways of thinking and working that are unlike anything I had ever encountered before, especially in the world of academia. In the process of developing ways, I had to constantly re-orient myself to think in ways that lay outside of the linear, thesis-oriented approach that I have been accustomed to using, especially in academia. Ultimately, I found that the subject matter that I am attempting to address in this film largely resists this sort of approach, and that if I attempted to form a logically-conclusive, continuous account, I would quickly become lost and lose sight of my original vision. This can be related to my previous account of what my 'goal' or 'intention' was with the film. If I became anxious about my inability to concisely explain what the 'point' of the film was, and as a result picked one 'explanation', I quickly would have eclipsed the non-verbal totality of the film's meaning. In a way that rings true with the Moten's *The Undercommons*, I have had to simply submit myself to the perceived disorder which constituted my film's subject matter. And this disorder came in two parts.

The first came from forms that have already been discussed. Namely, the forms of wisdom and experience that simply cannot be verbalized in any clear, discrete way. This can be related

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most easily to notions of spiritual wisdom and enlightenment. For example, spiritual teachers of all religions are often quote as having saying proverbs that in any concrete logistical sense are nonsensical, such as “God is everything and God is nothing,” or “There is nothing that must be done in order to attain enlightenment/There is nothing to attain.” While these statements don’t make logistical sense, they still contain great insight. My understanding is that such statements are meant to point to truths that dwarf the truths that can be fully expressed through language, such as “The apple is red,” or “The house is big.” I believe that my film, in many ways, attempts to reconcile with or explore realms of knowledge which exist on this plane, and as such, can only be alluded towards instead of verbalized.

The second source of disorder in making my film came from its more physical parameters of creation. Between recording, schedule who or what I was to record, finding idea or quotes to discuss in the voiceover, how to match the voiceover to images, how to order the segments, etc., especially in relation to what the subject matter was, made it sometimes feel as though to the make the film, I had to listen to twenty radios at once and attempt to synthesize a narrative. At least, this was how it was when I felt compelled to construct a narrative.

Because of the disorder described, my experience working through the film has required a great deal of following my own intuition, and only being able to know what the next immediate step was. This is like the common analogy in which one is driving on a road at night and can only focus on the first 10 feet in front of them at any given time.

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