

In Praise of Stillness

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October 2003
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Among the visual arts, there are two kinds of images: moving and still. It is a peculiarity of our times that the latter of these, the still images, are coming increasingly to seem mute, lifeless, and without consequence as they languish in our public and private spaces. Indeed, with the increasing preponderance (and size) of moving images in the cultural environment—the endless arrays of video monitors and LED displays, the gargantuan film screens and electronic billboards, each emanating its own explosion of color and sound—that which does not move barely stands to be noticed amid the pyrotechnics of its surroundings. And rather than positing some kind of critical opposition to this situation, much contemporary art has gone the way of a total capitulation to the demand for sensory excess.¹ In a culture that seems to have raised not just its tolerance of but indeed its *need* for sensory stimulation to unprecedented heights,² the still image has been all but silenced.

Is there anything of value being lost with the eclipsing of the still image by all this movement, or are we merely witnessing the inevitable replacement of the old and obsolete by the new and advanced, as necessitated by the ever-onward march of progress? If there were something of value inherent in the still image, how would we know it? Would it be possible to declare, in the interest of the investigation, some kind of moratorium against the tyranny of movement?

Before drawing any conclusions about these questions, a further exploration of the idea of stillness and what it entails is in order. On one level, what is meant here by a still image is simply an image that sits motionless while the viewer engages it. Within the confines of this literal sense, it could be said that before the advent of film, all the visual arts were still (with the exception of certain kinetic sculptures). But there is another aspect to stillness that is less literal and more figurative or metaphorical, and this has to do with its intentional separateness from linear time. In this more subtle sense, a still image (whether made before or after the advent of film) is one that does not seek to narrate or imply a sequence of events (either real or imagined) but that instead aims at a certain kind of ambiguity in relation to time, either rising above it (as in a meta-temporal image) or running through and across it (as in a trans-temporal or ahistorical image). One kind of image that exemplifies meta- or trans-temporality is a symbol, which functions as a carrier of abstract meanings and values rather than as a record of events, either factual or fictitious.³ Works of art are, of course, more subtle than symbols in that they have instead of one singular or fixed meaning an entire spectrum of possibilities for meaning, all equally valid and none forcing the exclusion of any other. What the symbol and the still work do have in common is their fundamental insistence on abstraction from the process of linear time. Non-narrative by nature, symbols and still works serve as generators of meaning as

¹ The carnivalesque nature of the countless multi-media installations that fill our galleries and museums is what is being referred to here. So many of these installations, while masquerading as high-minded "critique," are little more than indulgent reiterations of what is to be found already present in the cultural environment.

² Witness, for example, the popularity of "extreme sports," wherein unimaginably complex and ever-more death-defying stunts are performed in order, presumably, for the "athlete" to achieve the same sense of exhilaration that might have been achieved fifty years ago by simply driving an automobile at top speed.

³ In certain cases, however, a symbol can also allude to historical events. The swastika, for example, brings to mind the whole narrative history of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, but in essence it stands for a set of values and beliefs independent of time and place.

distinct from tellers of stories. A still work, then, is both literally still and non-narrative. Objects that meet both these criteria are also commonly referred to as objects of contemplation.⁴

Because the still arts are still, their meaning or impact does not force itself upon us uninvited. Instead, the still arts entice the viewer, often with subtle seduction, into an exploration of possibilities for meaning that are suggested (not dictated) by the particularities of the work. For unlike in the case of an action film, where the viewer's role is essentially that of a passive consumer of sensory events, each more titillating or exhilarating than the last, in experiencing a still work the viewer is being asked to *participate in its meaning*. In order for this to occur—for the viewer to willingly enter into a creative dialogue with a work of art—several conditions must be met.

The first and most fundamental of these conditions is that viewer have some working familiarity with his interior life—that he, in short, know (something of) himself. This, the most basic of conditions for the genuine experience of any work of art, is in fact the most difficult to meet. Although this has probably always been the case, it is especially so today, when so much of our living environment—that invisible but very real medium in which we move and breathe and seek to create meaning in our lives—is geared toward distraction, toward oblivion and away from the reality of the self. The mass media (i.e., television and its offshoots), with its relentless insistence on entertainment (by definition a flight from self) and its perpetual manufacturing of novel needs and fears to preoccupy us, has so thorough a grip on our collective psyche that we are growing unable to differentiate ourselves from its insidious agenda. The mass media have become so pervasive—so invasive—that it has become nearly impossible to have a moment of bare, raw, unmediated experience. Underneath the onerous weight of the media's primary command—that we become always something *other* than what we are—who are we? Alas, as our knowledge of the unmediated self dims, that which obscures it seems to grow more forceful by the day.

So much of the efficacy of the still arts depends on our familiarity with ourselves, with that which we bring to the encounter with the work. There is another feature of still work that further distinguishes it from its moving counterparts, and that is its utter dependence upon the active imagination of the viewer/participant. While it can certainly be said that all serious art requires the engagement of the viewer's imagination, there is a peculiar sense in which this is especially true of the still arts. The visual arts, like all other arts, are founded, on a formal level, in the relationship between "events" and their opposites. In music, for example, there is a mutual interdependence between sound and silence; any sound would be unintelligible without the silence from which it emerges and in contrast with which it is perceived, while silence would be equally unintelligible—even imperceptible—without its occasional interruption by sound. Music is essentially about the dynamic tension between these two opposites. The visual analogue to silence is stillness, and in the visual arts it is stillness and motion that engage in this dynamic tension. What makes the still arts distinct among the visual arts is that in stillness there is no actual movement to be contrasted with its opposite. In the still arts, that which constitutes an event is imagined or projected rather than actual or external.

Much about the still arts' relation to imagined movement can be brought to light by a consideration of the language one generally uses when making formal descriptions of this kind of work. When we say, for example, that a painting has a great sense of movement, or that a certain shape in it recedes into its background while another hovers in the foreground, we don't mean that there is actual movement occurring on the painting's surface. Clearly, we are projecting or imagining the movement—which occurs often inside a pictorial space (also imagined)—based on what is suggested by the painting's particularities. In fact, so many of the words we use to describe paintings are movement words: a color vibrates, glows, or activates another area of the painting; a shape hovers, hangs, pushes or pulls; a line meanders, sweeps, darts, etc.

⁴ It is sometimes the case that only one of these two criteria is met in a still work. There are several films (i.e., motion-based works) that would, in spite of their medium, be best characterized as still works. In these rare cases, the salient feature of the work is its non-narrative style, and what movement there is in it tends to be extremely slow and subtle, and is often punctuated by periods of stillness. By the same token, there are many still (in the sense of being motionless) works that cannot really be characterized as still because of their explicitly narrative nature.

In addition to these projected formal movements, there is another kind of motion that comes into play in the still arts, and this occurs with the viewer's active role in generating meaning. When a painting evokes a response in the viewer, it activates a succession of associations and connections in his mind; an exploratory process is set into motion in which ideas, memories, longings, and other mental contents arise in different configurations, sometimes forming new ways of understanding, sometimes dissipating, but always moving along in a continuous (although not necessarily linear) motion. The quality of this stream-of-consciousness process (i.e., the complexity and intricacy of the patterns that are configured) is as much dependent upon the agility of the viewer's mind as it is on the excellence of the work that initiates it. A mind that is habitually sedentary—one that does not regularly engage in some kind of unhindered, non-purposive exploration, some kind of interior wandering done purely for the sake of the process itself—will almost certainly be oblivious at best (and hostile at worst) to any invitation into this activity that presents itself.

Have our minds become as sedentary as our bodies? When one considers the veritable dearth of imagination that is required to consume popular culture and mass entertainment,⁵ coupled with the amount of time the average person spends absorbed in the latter "activities," it becomes quite probable that this is so. Like so much of our physical musculature, the faculty of the imagination seems to be atrophying, with the diminishment standing in direct proportion to the hypertrophy of the sensory assault that has become our living environment.

In what exactly does this living environment consist? So much of it is framed, literally and otherwise, by television. A brief foray into any residential area in the U.S. will reveal the extent to which the moving image box defines our lives; wait until after dark, and you will soon notice that in nine houses out of ten, the most prominent light emanating from the windows is the flickering blue light of the television screen. Then, as more and more of us go online, daytime consists in another rapid-fire succession of images: pop-up windows, scrollbars, flashing ads, logos, and video clips, all set against an endless drone of auditory and visual filler, punctuated by the frequent alarms indicating the validity or invalidity of our latest command. In both cyberspace and the physical world, to leave home (with or without the intent to engage in any kind of commerce) is to move through a veritable sea of manufactured auditory and visual stimuli, much of it moving, all of it tuned to the highest tolerable pitch of color and volume, so designed to subdue the subject/consumer into a state of utter passivity, mindlessness, and suggestibility.

Quite aside from the quality of the content—the "message"—being imposed on us by way of this sensory onslaught, there is the subtler, more insidious effect of its means of attack. The rapidity with which the images and text flash across the screen, the very pace of the transitioning from one semantic unit to the next, makes it virtually impossible for one to fully process any of the information⁶. Perception is one thing; full absorption quite another. It is easy to understand, then, why we have become so unaccustomed to anything that does not blare, flash, blink, etc. The more interesting question is why people not just tolerate but actually seem to celebrate and crave the sensory overload that is so severely compromising their autonomy and shrinking their imagination.

In part, the answer is simple. There is something undeniably addictive about the rush of sensory stimulation induced by our living environment. Like any quick burst of adrenaline, the rush is intoxicating—but only for an instant. For the sensation is purely superficial, and because it does not penetrate any deeper into one's being than the outermost layers it leaves nothing of substance behind in one's memory. And, like that produced by a mild scratching of the skin, this sensation tends to induce a craving for its continuance. The

⁵ I say consume (rather than enjoy or appreciate) because it is clear that consumption is what popular culture and mass entertainment are geared toward. Consumption implies both speed and a decided indifference to the quality or character of that which is being consumed. The emphasis in consumption is on quantity: how much, in how little time, can one incorporate into one's self.

⁶ CNN is the quintessential example here. In just a single minute of CNN, the viewer is blasted, by way of split screens and multiple simultaneous newstracks, with an amount of information it would take any thoughtful person hours to fully process.

itch initiated by the scratch is never satisfied, leaving one in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction and agitation.

But it seems there is another, more substantial reason for people's apparent craving for the kind of quick, frenetic auditory and visual movement supplied to us by the mass media and entertainment industries, and this has to do with something that was touched on earlier, namely, our sense of time. It was said that still images, in contrast to moving, act in such a way as to temporarily suspend one's involvement in (and preoccupation with) linear time. With the still image, one is raised out of the sense of time in which things happen in linear sequence, one after another, with cause and effect, in a manner which is unidirectional (i.e., moving toward the future and away from the past) and teleological (i.e., end-oriented, working always toward a "final conclusion," as in a story). Our culture is a distinctly time-oriented culture. We are taught (both in our formal education system and otherwise) not only that linear time is the only temporal dimension (allowing for nothing against which it can be contrasted) but that it (linear time) must be consciously directed, controlled, fixated upon, and pushed toward a certain end. The latter point is exemplified by our preoccupation with technological progress—with moving forward at an ever-increasing rate toward the goal of mastery over nature, in the hopes that technology will bring about our salvation, our ultimate deliverance from all that is painful in human existence. What makes this project so curious is that the ostensive goal—that toward which we are so energetically striving—is never really defined (e.g., what would "salvation" be like, exactly?), so that we find ourselves caught in an interminable cycle of expending all our energy and resources in furious pursuit of an endlessly elusive and utterly abstract finality.⁷

The net result of this fixation on linear time is an existential situation in which our very mode of being is defined by a hypertrophied sense of compulsion toward action and movement, toward having always to do something to change things, toward having always to be moving in the direction of something *other than* (however abstractly *or* concretely this is conceived) and *away from* that which presents itself in the here and now. This mode of being represents a kind of hyper-futurity that so severely distorts reality that the present is all but obliterated by the future. Whether in the form of conscious ideas, unconscious assumptions, or even vague feelings of expectation, the future has come to constitute the "real thing" in relation to which all our present actions and experiences are but preparation.⁸ The fundamental illogicality of this mode of being is revealed when one takes a moment to think about what one *really* wants: after all, it is not the promise of a future full of anxious anticipation for the future that one is after but a future replete with the resplendent glow of a rich and meaningful *present*. But if one has lost all capacity for experiencing the present in the striving to "get there" (as if one weren't "there" already), all the striving is—and will certainly have been—in vain.

The link between this all-pervasive preoccupation with *becoming* (i.e., with linear time) and the moving image is in the latter's complicity with technology. The moving image is the golden child of technology, and everything it does reflects the brilliance and the glory of its parent. When confronted with a high-definition screen erupting with sound, color, and larger-than-life likenesses of people and places, we are so awed by its very existence (i.e., by the mysterious and invisible forces that make it possible) that any concerns about the meaning of what is being communicated quickly fall by the wayside. Thus, every encounter with the moving image—even when it is brought to us by way of something so seemingly

⁷ In the absence of any real idea of what this end might look like, how will we know when we have arrived? If the goal is ultimately eternally-onward (somewhat like Infinity, that ultimate abstraction at whose end there can never be a "final arrival"), we are left with nothing but the striving itself as the purpose and meaning of our existence. Given alternatives, I doubt that any sane person would choose to expend his existence on a process so inherently anxiety-oriented and so utterly one-dimensional.

⁸ The connection between the mode of being described here and the Christian worldview will be obvious. In light of this connection, it is a glaring irony that we consider ourselves such a secular, "modernized" society.

mundane as a television screen⁹ —is an endorsement and a celebration of technology. And everything that serves to strengthen the authority of technology also further deepens our imprisonment in the project of becoming, thus further alienating us from Being.

Just as the moving image is implicitly a celebration of time and a reinforcement of the project of becoming, the still image stands as a beacon for the possibility of release from becoming. In its stillness, it both represents Being and serves as a portal into it. In an encounter with a still image, one is both stilled and stirred: while all external movement is suspended, the interior life is ignited. As past and future dissolve, the present, which had been shut out of consciousness by fixation on time, emerges and expands to fill one's entire field of awareness. And in this expanding interior space one becomes more keenly aware than ever of the mind's subtle movements as it explores both sense data and mental events. For there *is* no absolute stillness; even when there is physical stillness at the relatively gross scale to which our sense organs are attuned, there is, both internal and external to us, a world that is teeming with movement, with vibrations and oscillations and rhythms which are perceptible to us by way of the process of consciousness itself. It is the awareness of—and participation in—these movements that constitutes the experience of the timeless and eternal (i.e., of Being).

A great and vast *horror vacui* seems to lie beneath our cultural obsession with sensory excess. It is as if we have become so mired in time, so deeply entrenched in the project of becoming, that we think (albeit not consciously) that to venture out from the sense of home we have found there means certain death. For it is an unpleasant but nonetheless common observation that people will remain desperately attached to the familiar no matter how painful it may be. Can we extract ourselves from this situation, or are we condemned to forever suffer the ever more narrow and bounded existence that we ourselves have created in the name of liberation?

It is by no means being argued here that the moving image (or, more generally, technology itself) should be abolished, or even that it is inherently pernicious. Rather, what is being suggested is that we recognize that there exists, in stillness, a valuable and necessary counterbalancing force to the hyper-futurity that so pervades our culture. For there is no question that linear time—or, more precisely, our conceptualization of it—has been and continues to be an eminently useful tool for navigating through the world. But it is by no means the world itself. It would so greatly behoove us to periodically close the map and go forth, unaided and unmediated, into the unmarked territory. For it is in the richness and depth of stillness that one discovers that one has, and will always have, already arrived.

⁹ Even after 50 years of television, the sophistication of the optics and engineering involved makes the TV set seem, to most people, more like magic than the empirically evident result of a particular manipulation of matter and energy.