

When Consciousness is Tempted by Sight

By Vassilis Karapostolis*

Many times human thought is arguably eroded by the objects preoccupying it. Even when it starts out with the intention of judging them and changing the relationship that man has with them, it happens that, at some point, it bends, losing its sharpness. Nowadays, this is often observed when considering the matters that arise due to the proliferation of images in contemporary culture. There is so much talk about the dominance of images in all spheres of life that one might expect that the observations of sociologists, psychologists, or political analysts to go beyond the realization that the meaning of things is increasingly determined by the way they are presented in the people's eyes. Their appearance predisposes their meaning. This is a valid point, yet it usually goes no further than the recording and correlation of the various ways in which reality is presented to vision. For example, a lot of energy is consumed for the identification of the technical means by which a commercial product, an artistic event, or a political message is promoted. It has been said that what is produced, and even what is sought, must nowadays take on the qualities of a visual event. For something to be accepted by consciousness it must "strike the eye" – which means that the eye, instead of functioning as an instrument of consciousness, it functions as an instrument of an alien will, the purpose of which is to capture the consciousness. Our eye is lured and bought by our conscience, while at the same time it betrays it. I truly wonder if there's anything more disturbing than that – to distrust your own eyes.

Nevertheless, social analyses will rarely move towards this direction – currently, the very concept of consciousness itself is the cause of an awkward feeling; it seems very esoteric and indeterminate. Its elements

* Vassilis Karapostolis is Professor Emeritus of Culture and Communication at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

are not easily discerned or precisely classified; the relations between cause and effect are vague. Attention is therefore being directed outwards, towards the visible or dead obvious, which are so numerous and varied that, at the end of the day, the relevant investigations bear the mark of fatigue. From their measurements and statistics, we cannot deduce anything else than the following simple conclusion: increasingly large crowds are seeing an ever increasingly number of images.

However, what is essential and needs to be clarified is that the absorption of images is a factor that, rather than keeping order in the viewers' brains, it disorganizes them. While the "society of the spectacle" was intended to disperse tensions, to half-sedate individuals by shifting their interest from real events to their representation – in short, by giving to the "artificial" a dimension of amusing discharge, it has resulted in creating the feeling that the world is dominated by the unexpected, by surprises, by coincidences. The spectacles became more and more disjointed; no director's mind could be discerned behind them. It was as if the game of images was playing by itself, without any rules. Thus, modern man felt that he became the master of his own impressions: He had nowhere to anchor his thoughts, the whole reality had no handles on which he could hold. No matter how much science and technology reassured him that he could program and control his movements, his uncertainty was constantly increasing: the images that accompanied things were in as state of constant flux. Due to their mobility, they were sent their signal saying that everything is fluid. What seems fixed is stationary and what is stationary ends up being boring. Because of the fear of boredom, we should be constantly moving. But when people are incessantly on the move, they eventually lose confidence to their will and the ability to decide when and where to stand or leave. Few feelings are more stressful and humiliating than the feeling that you are being swept along and you are a victim of circumstances; this happens not because circumstances are powerful, but because you are constantly doubting whether you are able to resist them.

Under these circumstances, it is very natural that people's inner life appears as a region of existence where they could take refuge and put themselves together. When the outer world is a source of turmoil,

people's holding up and reliance on their own mystical forces is what is most crucial for them. This is the reason why concentration, of reflection, of reviewing of their actions are so important for them. Therein lies the seat of religious feeling.

In the innermost regions of his existence, alone, withdrawn –at least temporarily– from the demands and pressure of his practical affairs, man discovers that he is capable of breaking away from his relationship with material objects, entering into a one with something higher, through which everything that is inferior is illuminated anew, taking on a new meaning. If consciousness ascends towards divinity, this movement indicates that man can now survey his true condition from a certain height. Trivialities are being placed where they belong; man does not attach greater importance to them than they really have. In short, he adopts an attitude towards the *important* issues in life. Nowhere else, outside of religious experience, will we find this axiom that cuts through the particulars and the current state of things. As William James¹ has once observed, “Great is that in which opposites are reconciled”. A great sorrow cannot fail to contain elements of joy – perhaps the strange joy of the fact that man's life is entering a new turning point. Accordingly, a great joy cannot fail to be marked by a certain sadness, that sinking that tells us that happiness is unlikely to last for long. In any case, man's connection with God, however we might understand him, somehow trains him to prioritize things. He ceases to confuse what is lasting with what is ephemeral, what determines with what is determined, what happens by necessity with what happens by chance.

We can understand that for such a feeling to arise, two psycho-intellectual faculties need to be sufficiently developed: the first is *insight*, the second is *imagination*. Thanks to insight we penetrate underneath the surface of things and beings, directly reaching their hidden core. A phenomenon may deceive us in the way it manifests itself. A person may cause us to question his character and his intentions. Having the

1. William James (1842-1910) was a pioneering American psychologist and philosopher, and was the first professor of psychology at Harvard University. He was one of the first to advocate the view that the proper way to study psychological phenomena is by examining their adaptive value and their functionality (“*Functionalism*”).

insight as a guide, it is possible for us to grasp the truth. Behind one's smirk we can see his or her reserved attitude. Behind the behavior of a reserved person, we can discern its unquenchable desire for acceptance or approval from some others or from all of them.

Obviously, with this procedure, one by one the veils of appearances are setting aside. The mind persistently searches for the truth; during that quest, the imagination comes to its aid, beginning its own work. He who guesses something substantial behind the surface begins to imagine what it would be like. The insight points towards the hidden essentials, and the imagination works it out according to its capabilities. Thus, through an evocative landscape, it is possible for clues to be given for the existence of a harmony so wonderful that it touches the concept of the divine, just as through the laughter of an infant can suddenly spring, at least to anyone sensitive enough, the idea of an innocence which, though belongs to man, its origin surpasses him. Heavenly things emerge into the earthly ones. It is the moment when the collaboration of insight and imagination reaches its climax. Such an experience is impossible when both of these factors suffer from atrophy.

Both insight and imagination are pushed aside by the prevailing conditions of social life; for them, what it really counts is how people react to events, how they are adapting to them, how one they catch with their eyes everything that passes by them. Everyone must look beside them and in front of them at a short distance, never too far away. Whoever is always looking far away or is constantly daydreaming, runs the risk of stumbling on abnormal points scattered around. It is obvious that, pressed in this way, contemporary man finds it difficult to separate his life into an external and an internal one, devoting to the latter the necessary psychic energy. By all means, the exterior invites and commands him to move exclusively within its realm. Instead of refining his insight, it tells him to scan the skin of the world with his gaze without touching it, and even more, without even thinking of caressing it. There is no time and no need for affection and love in the flesh. If there are charming spots on the surface of things, they are more than enough. Those who are attracted to them can be content to appropriately collect made images, ending up to desire nothing else than to be satiated

by bodies they do not touch, to become visual lovers, and finally to be upset and retreat if a charming person happens to appear before them as a candidate for a real bond, both carnal and mental.

After all the above, we should not be surprised that the modern consciousness perceives the religious values as being too demanding. They seem to demand a focus of thought and emotion, while everything around them seems to lead to the opposite direction. Why for someone to be focused and on what? Someone could answer: To seek for meaning in what is happening. The answer that the current age gives is the following: Is it not better for people to seize all the opportunities offered to them to distract themselves, instead of struggling to find meaning and purpose in this medley of things? After all, man does not possess consciousness to remember everything and ruminate on them. If things were like this, we might be wiser and most definitely unhappier. It's been ages since the word *wise* meant anything. The time has also passed when the word *happiness* meant something or, rather, a lot of things. Living in such a contingent age and being so uncertain about the future, happiness seems painfully elusive, just as God has always seemed painfully indefinite. So, it is better for us to leave behind elusiveness and take hold of what is tangible. See what is given to you to see. Imagine whatever is given to you to imagine. Forgetting is much more vital than remembering or thinking. That's is the way our age is talking to us, leaving aside, of course, the question of what might happen when we will finally realize that we are only living to forget that we could have lived differently.

At this point, a significant intervention would be possible from the religion's side. Religious discourse could encourage modern man to assume his responsibilities towards his own life. How? By reminding him that living with illusions is far inferior to what he should be. For such an intervention to be effective, it is imperative for the religious discourse not succumbing to the charms of its opponent. If the preacher attempts to mitigate the effect of virtuality by using, in his own way of course, the techniques, or even the cunning mechanisms by which images are disseminated, impressed and self-promoted, then the operation: "back to the essentials" will have already been undermined. Indeed, it

is more than common for the preacher to become an actor. Whoever goes on stage plays a role. But in what sense would we say that the preacher is playing his part? The meaning of a play necessarily reaches the audience through the actor's performance. But it would be absurd for someone to claim that the truth, the most crucial of them all, the one that concerns man and his relationship with what transcends him, can be presented in the terms of theatricality. Such an attempt would end up in self-contradiction. If man's destination is not to devour spectacles, you cannot propose to him to live by God as you would propose to watch a thrilling performance.

There are many traps and temptations in this field. For example, we must not forget that a whole series of clergymen in the USA who, from the 1960s onwards, have been addressing their audiences assuming the style and tone of expert counsellors in dealing with psychological, professional and personal problems. Thus, religious discourse was transformed into a discourse, with the help of which its recipients were supposed to come closer to what has become a deity in our time – the *Success*. In order to contribute to succeeding this goal, the clergyman had to acquire the corresponding qualities: to become convincing, eloquent, flexible, and, above all, able to make his sentences sound like prescriptions, as many psychologists do when they direct their clients to resolve a blockage in their marriage or career with a “key” behavior. The clergymen who use such means recognize in practice that the battle they are fighting is not about the most essential issues, it is not about the *eschata*. The virtuality and the theatricality have corrupted them. They are dealing with what is in front of them. Although they know its finite and fleeting nature, they are absorbed by it; their age is providing them with many tools to process it, to flank it, and finally to play with it, abandoning their original purpose.

However, like everything else today, even the idols are gradually diminishing. We have idols without worship. As much as it wants to live frivolously, humanity cannot completely erase from its memory what has been said at times about vanity and the ephemeral by its poets, prophets, and teachers. That is why success is not really worshipped. People want it without loving it. Therefore, Christianity must and can

Speak again about love – that love which is not only mercy but also creative action. And of this love no one can speak, unless he or she is given to it body and soul.