

Are there limits to Voyeurism?

The very broadest possible meaning of the word “voyeurism” is watching others do something that one is not doing oneself. Thus, there is a sense in which all the visual arts are voyeuristic – that is, all the visual arts invite us to be spectators rather than participants. The word “voyeur” comes from the French word voir or to “see” which ultimately comes from the Latin word “videre”, which is the root of the word video. And so now we are right in the realm where we want to be -- the realm of film.

The whole film industry is based on the fact that people like to watch events in which they are not participating. So, of course, is theater; books, too, allow us to read about and visualize events in which we do not participate. Examples could be multiplied; for instance, sporting events cater to spectators; some of us spend time in the mall just sitting and watching. Why? What do we hope to achieve? Are we just killing time? Certainly, occasionally we are just killing time, but not always. Why do we like sitting and watching so much?

Some might think it odd to turn to an ancient philosopher such as Aristotle for an answer but he does provide several provocative answers. In fact, in this talk I am going to draw on the thought of Plato and Aristotle because I believe they can help us think about what are the proper limits to voyeurism.

Aristotle begins his work entitled *Metaphysics*, his most sophisticated philosophic treatise, with the claim that all human beings desire to understand. He makes the claim that sight is the sense that we like best because we learn the most from seeing (I guess he hadn't met those of us who like hearing the best since it gives us access to the lovely sound of our own voices!).

Perhaps it is only philosophers that get all excited by such an obvious truth that we like to see -- but we do get excited over such claims. We then ask *why* we like to see and *what* it

is we like to see. Aristotle says, “sight makes us *know* in the highest degree and makes clear many differences in things.” Certainly we like our other senses but not so much because they help us to know; through our other senses we experience more immediate facts and pleasures, facts and pleasures not so tied up with knowledge. As we say, “seeing is believing, or knowing.” In fact, we use images from sight to express the fact that we understand: we say things like “I see” and “she is a person of great insight” and “it’s finally clear to me.”

When we utter these words, though, we are rarely speaking only of the fact that our physical eyes have focused on and discerned a certain material reality. What we mean, rather, is that we see or understand something **invisible** conveyed to us by a visible reality. If that weren’t the case, the best selling films would be travelogues for travelogues especially are directed to showing us simply what other places look like, though, of course, we also learn something beyond the physical reality even with travelogues – it is written into human nature that we always are beyond the surface.

The famous image of the cave in Plato’s *Republic* (and if you haven’t read the *Republic* recently, I suggest you go out and do so tonight) might help us understand the role that seeing plays in knowing, even in knowing the invisible. Socrates provides his famous image of a cave in which people are chained to one wall and seeing only what is on the wall in front of them. Socrates is attempting to get the young men with whom he is speaking to think about how it is that they get their ideas. Behind the people in the cave there is kind of a shelf on which stand puppeteers. A fire is in a pit in front of the shelf, the puppeteers hang the puppets over the cliff and images of the puppets are projected on the screen. What those who are in chains see are shadows of images of puppets representing people, trees, rocks, the sky, etc. Yet the people in the cave think that what they are seeing is reality since it is all they have ever seen.

Every once in a while someone escapes from the cave and exits into the light. Outside the cave these escapees are at first confused and disoriented for they have never been in the light. Once their eyes focus and they begin to see clearly, they see real people, rocks, trees,

etc for the first time. And, of course, they prefer what they see there immensely to what they were seeing in the cave. Being a spectator is fine, being a voyeur can be interesting, but we prefer the really real.

As Socrates tells the story it is clear that he intends the people in the cave to represent normal human beings and the puppeteers to represent the educators of his time (who were Homer and the tragedians and the poets). (Now, I hope it is not bragging for me to announce that the individuals who make it out of the cave, in Socrates' view, are philosophers, who he thinks are the only ones who can get past the images to have contact with reality – that's why I am here – to try to help you get out of the cave!) What Socrates is saying to the young men is that they learn about reality not from reality itself but from how artists represent reality to them. My students immediately think of the wall upon which the images are being projected as a TV or movie screen, of the puppeteers as the makers of TV shows and movies, and of the viewers as themselves or couch potatoes. Those outside of the cave are those living real life.

This interpretation is pretty good, but it does not capture precisely what Socrates is maintaining. Oddly enough, Socrates wants the puppets to represent the physical trees we see, the physical people we see, the physical rocks that we see. What those who get out of the cave see are not physical people, physical rocks, etc. but what he calls the “really real”. Socrates thinks that even physical objects are primarily images. Although Socrates uses the image of sight he does not think that the really real things are physical or visible. In his view what are the really real things are invisible things, they are the essences or forms of real things. And what are the really real things are those that are not essentially physical realities – “things” like justice and love and kindness or on the other hand, “things” like hatred and evil and envy – things we can't see or touch or hear but we know exist. “Things” that filmmakers very much labor to get us to experience and think about.

So what Socrates is saying is that the images that we see in books and film are images of things that are in fact images of other things. Again, for Socrates, invisible things such as

feelings and values are more real than visible things. This insight is also beautifully portrayed in the film, *Il Postino*. There the fisherman-turned-postman-becoming-poet is beginning to learn what a metaphor is; as he begins to see that in a metaphor, one thing stands for another, he inquires of his poet mentor Neruda, “Do you mean that everything is a symbol for something else?” Neruda, seemingly realizing this for the first time himself, agrees. Yes everything is a symbol for something else. It is the job of the poet, the job of the artist, to provide symbols that help us understand the greater realities.

Let me repeat, the invisible is more real than the visible. Everything is a symbol for something else. Thus, those who have eyes to see always see more than what is visible. Those who see only the visible see only the surface of things. For instance, those who see only the visible would see x number people coming into this room, people of a certain height and weight, wearing clothes of certain color and style, making all kinds of gestures. Those who have eyes to see would be able to tell you which individuals are friends of other individuals, who is self-confident and who is depressed, who is eager to be here and who would rather be somewhere else, who is selling and who is buying. Those of you in the film industry are acutely aware of how much a gesture, a position, a certain angle on things can convey some mood, some relationship, some idea being fashioned in an individual’s head – invisible realities that are not directly accessible but can be made accessible by skillful use of visible realities. Think for a moment of Gene Kelly’s famous dance scene in *Singing in the Rain*; who cannot see that it is about much more than raindrops and splashing – it is an incarnation of the blissful joy that one experiences who has found true love. The true artist knows that the physical represents the spiritual.

In the *Republic*, Socrates is lobbying to have those who have some contact with the really real, to have those who are able to see beyond the physical, visible world, to be the ones who create the images that shape the views of those who watch the images, the cave-dwellers, as it were. True artistry, in his mind, is using images to portray the really real – the reality beyond what is visible. So image-makers are those who are communicating invisible

reality to cave-dwellers. Portraying material reality accurately is not as important and is in fact only a means to leading us to see and understand invisible realities.

Now, let me hasten to say, that speaking of cave-dwellers need not necessarily be pejorative. I feel safe conjecturing that everyone in this room loves film; that is, that we share in a nearly universal feeling of excitement when we position ourselves comfortably, when the lights go down and the reels start rolling; we regularly voluntarily go into the cave to see what others have fashioned for us. We experience a sense of anticipation that we will soon see something that will entertain, provoke, or edify us; that in some way we will be taken out of ourselves and get into contact with something beyond ourselves. In a broad sense, this is a voyeuristic experience – we expect to get enjoyment out of an indirect experience of a reality. We want to watch others do what we are not doing, and often, what in fact we can't, or never could or would do. We are all cave-dwellers, spectators, voyeurs. But as the organizers of this conference have suggested by choosing for my talk the title "Are there limits to voyeurism?", there are limits to what it is right to portray physically. **Sometimes the physical reality can be an obstacle rather than a means to grasping the invisible realities.**

One way of figuring out what the limits are is to turn from the broad sense of voyeurism of which I have been speaking to the usual meaning of voyeurism. The word, in fact, usually evokes a feeling of pity and disgust. Random House defines a voyeur as one who "obtains sexual gratification by looking at sexual objects or acts, esp. secretly." We generally find such voyeurs pitiable or pathetic. "Peeping Toms" seem pathetic because they do not have intimate relationships that allow them to achieve sexual gratification in ways that accord with human dignity; that is since they don't have a beloved other with whom to engage in deeply meaningful human sexual activity, they need to get their kicks by viewing others doing what they can't seem to accomplish in their own lives. Sometimes our feelings go beyond pity, sometimes we fear voyeurs for we think them perhaps not totally connected with reality and perhaps dangerous -- we sometimes fear that they will invade our privacy and maybe even do something violent to us. We don't like to think of someone peering through our windows as we

make love. We think voyeurs are creepy people, we think they are losers.

Philosophers, especially those called phenomenologists, have been greatly fascinated by the phenomenon of shame, the experience of not wanting certain things known or seen, and not always things about which we are ashamed or things about which we feel guilt. We have a sense that some things about us are fundamentally, intrinsically private and we don't want them known or viewed by others, at least not by those who are not our trusted intimates. We feel violated if our personal letters or diaries are read by others. It is revealing that we are all happy to be voyeurs in the broad sense of enjoying the visual arts but would be very ashamed to be known as voyeurs in the narrow sense of those who get their kicks by spying on others making love.

Why is it that we, those seemingly more normal (for the sake of ease not necessarily accuracy, I will include myself and you the audience in the category of the normal), find those with such needs pathetic, that we have a notion of human dignity with which their actions don't accord? What is the notion of human dignity that lies behind these feelings and preferences?

Let me return to Aristotle's explanation of our preference for the sense of sight. He said that we like to see not only because it helps us to know but also because it "makes clear the differences in things." Knowing the differences in things that appear in some ways similar but in fact are different is extremely helpful. For instance, knowing the difference between an act of sexual intercourse which expresses the deep love that one person can have for another and an act of sexual intercourse which expresses loathing, or indifference to another is knowing a very important difference. Oddly enough, they may even "look" quite the same, but for those who have eyes to see – meaning eyes that see the deeper reality, they are radically different acts.

Voyeurs in the narrow sense may see but they don't understand or can't experience the greater reality. Perhaps voyeurs think that through seeing what represents an intimate relationship they are in fact experiencing an intimate relationship. Yet, again, they are pitiable

and pathetic because they are not truly experiencing the reality that they crave, and that is the reality of intimacy. What they don't understand is that what they want can't be had through watching other people have sex. And they also don't understand that voyeurism may in fact be an obstacle to their understanding and getting the intimacy that they really want.

Human beings in many realms easily mistake the false for the true. Perhaps the realm that we are most inclined to accept a facsimile for the real thing is in the realm of love. And it is unfortunate to be so easily mistaken in this realm, because by nature human beings desperately want to be loved and to love. Plato in his dialogue the *Symposium* portrays this facet of human nature marvelously through a speech made by the comic poet Aristophanes. The whole of the *Symposium* is the transcript of a party in which the participants were all to offer their definition of love. Aristophanes chooses to explain the nature of love by telling a story. He says that when human beings were first created by the gods, each person was a sphere, with two heads, four arms and four legs. Because man was disobedient, Zeus split the sphere in half and turned the heads around and made the private parts compatible. And so we spend an enormous portion of our lives running around trying to find the other half that will make us whole.

Religious individuals, such as St. Augustine, claim that only God Himself can satisfy the deepest yearnings for union in the human heart – he is noted for his statement that “our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” Much religious imagery is in fact sexual – the heart is portrayed as filled with eros for some perfect completely ecstatic union with another.

If Augustine is right, we can't achieve that completely ecstatic union with anyone else but God but we can obtain some kind of satisfying intimacy in this world. There are, of course, many different kinds of love; the truest kinds of love involve intimacy, or the sense that another really knows you – knows both your gifts and faults, your fears and your hopes, and really cares for you and is committed to you. Intimate relationships are always unique and deeply personal – they are relationships between individuals that are unrepeatable – they call upon

and tap into what is unique about individuals. No one can substitute for another in a truly intimate relationship.

Our culture seems to have forgotten that one can have an intimate relationship with a parent, child, sibling, friend, or God, for instance. If we weren't a culture that is sex-obsessed we would know that intimacy and union with others can be gained through many different kinds of relationships. Or maybe if we were a culture that knew that intimacy could be gained through many types of relationships we wouldn't be so obsessed with sex. Neither love nor intimacy require sexual relations but sexual relations because they involve nakedness and the vulnerability that comes with nakedness easily symbolize intimacy and can easily be mistaken for intimacy.

We are obsessed with sex largely because we avail ourselves of few of the other means of fulfilling our intimacy needs. The voyeur is the one who is having an especially hard time doing so; he or she is on the outside, looking in; he or she is one who is unable to achieve the kind of union that is deeply satisfying and meaningful, and thus one who latches onto some kind of facsimile. And it is sad, of course, that engaging in voyeurism won't fill that intimacy need and will likely make one less able to have healthy relationships.

Not only is there something sad and pitiable about the voyeur, voyeurism is immoral – it is degrading both to those who are being spied upon in their intimate acts and degrading to the voyeur furtively viewing others in the sexual act. The dignity of all involved seems compromised.

The concept of human dignity is a concept employed by nearly every ethical system; that is, nearly every ethical system holds that actions should respect human dignity. What does this mean? The reason that human beings are considered to have dignity is largely credited to their being entities that can make free choices. Other things, we use – we use grain for bread, animals for food or transportation, beds for sleeping on, etc. We also use human beings – to pick up our garbage, heal our wounds, teach our children; but while doing

so, we should be attempting never to treat them solely as things – as things there merely for our service rather than as human beings who have hopes and desires of their own to fulfill, as human beings who have a worth far beyond what they might do for us.

Respect for human persons is at the foundation of the values that guide the lives of those interested in being moral. In a world where most people reject the claim that there are universal moral laws, they also hesitate to grant that rape or slavery might ever be moral. These and other immoral acts are immoral because they disrespect the other person. And the disrespect or harm that is done need not be physical; we feel harmed by insults.

Our culture makes a great deal of the right to privacy in sexual matters; voyeurism is clearly a violation of the right to privacy -- it treats something as public that is intrinsically private. For someone to be watching us have sexual intercourse is a violation of who we are as persons, because in the act of having sexual intercourse we are doing something of immense importance; we are giving of ourselves in a unique way to another – a way that symbolizes that we have feelings for this person and a commitment to him or her that we have for no other. The best of all possible worlds, of course, is that our sexual partners would know us well and love us sincerely, would care deeply for our happiness and well-being, that is that our sexual relations would be an expression of intimacy rather than a substitute for intimacy. The voyeur intrudes upon the exclusiveness and intimacy of a sexual relationship. The voyeur tries to steal some pleasure from an act in which he has no rightful share.

So what are we to make of the amount of explicit sexuality that is in films today? Is it helping us achieve the intimacy that we desperately desire or to understand what intimacy is and perhaps even how to get it or is it leading us all to be voyeurs in the despicable sense?

I don't want to be nostalgic or retrograde but I believe that many of the older films were better at conveying romance, sexual tension, and intimacy than are today's films. The scene with Jimmy Stewart talking to a half clad Donna Reed in a bush in *It's a Wonderful Life* is arguably more fraught with sexual tension or at least romantic tensions than are some of the

sex scenes in *Eyes Wide Shut*. Jimmy and Donna are on their way to a truly intimate relationship and their repartee at the bush suggests great attraction, great affection, and respect as well. The audience does get a sense of two human beings building a human relationship in which sexual attraction is a powerful force but is not a substitute for intimacy. Contrast this with the sex scenes in more contemporary movies. For instance, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman have invited others to be voyeurs to their relationship and it's likely that few feel more ennobled after watching those scenes. Many of us feel like voyeurs watching exhibitionists.

If it is true that the invisible realities such as love, justice, hatred, evil, are more important than the visible realities of color, fabric, flesh, etc., and if it is true that everything symbolizes something else and that true artistry is finding the best symbols to convey the invisible realities, one wonders how necessary and successful explicit sex scenes are for doing so. Most human beings experience a great deal of curiosity and some level of arousal when viewing others – even those they know to be acting – engaging in sexual acts. That fascination is rarely one that enables us to get past the desires of the flesh to what is more fully human – the union of the flesh and the spirit, the human quest for true intimacy.

Films recently have gone beyond the voyeurism of sex; films now portray “bathroom scenes.” It is worth pondering why. The embarrassment of bathroom situations makes for some ribald humor, of course, and some makers of film will need to live out their need to express adolescent humor and to appeal to adolescents. And those who think courage is equivalent to doing the shocking and forbidden will always try to violate whatever sense of propriety our culture has left. But here too, we may be seeing another pathetic attempt to attain some intimacy. Since people can't find it in their own lives, since they can't find it by watching others have sex, maybe now they need to look in even more private and unlikely places such as the bathroom. For decades soap operas have been a substitute for intimacy for many; rather than being involved in the lives of real people, rather than sharing the joys and sufferings of those whom they know and care for, they come to care for the fictional characters

in the soap operas. At least since soap operas are stories crafted with the intent of telling us something, they have some possibility of conveying meaning, however contrived. The new shows such as Big Brother are sadly voyeuristic, they have us just watching people living their daily lives -- there is no artistry there, there are no artists trying to manipulate symbols to draw our attention to some invisible reality that will help us understand reality better, if only to laugh at ourselves. These shows are certainly anti-art and are rightly loathed by those who think that our entertainment should be a product of human intelligence. They drive us deeper into the cave.

But, again, even some of the best films, incorporate elements that degrade us -- in the name of artistry, I suppose, but ultimately I think, at the expense of artistry. I recently saw the wonderful movie *Sunshine* but was terribly off-put by the explicit sex scenes. The tension in the theater seemed miserable when those scenes came on the screen -- perhaps I am projecting, though I certainly thought the general sense in the theater was "let's get back to the movie." When I expressed my dis-ease to the woman I was with she simply said she was "able to get past those scenes" -- and that's what I think a lot of us, especially the females among us do -- we try to get past them. Males tell me they get some pleasure watching such scenes but don't find them ennobling; they say the scenes are sexually titillating but are objectively not respectful to women; that is, males enjoy the physical sensations with no regard for the feelings or dignity of the woman involved; she is there simply to serve their pleasure. Females I associate with tell me they hate explicit sex scenes; they find them degrading to the actress involved, to themselves and every other; they think they are pure fantasy -- male fantasy and not female fantasy. It is worth pondering why -- if women tend to hate such scenes -- are there so many of them in contemporary films -- is it because it is still largely a male dominated industry?

What made me particularly sad and angry about the explicit sex in *Sunshine* was that it made the movie inaccessible to so many people. Studies show that the movies that do best at the box office are not R rated, though perhaps mediocre films need an R rating. I wonder if

the artists composing the film, the screenwriters the directors, the actors, should be so pleased with an R rating since it limits the number of people and I want to say kind of people as well who will ultimately see a film. I can recommend *Sunshine* to few of my friends and none of their children though its story of the way idealism turns into brutality and of the way that hurt turns to hatred and vengeance is one much worthy of being viewed. It could help lead a lot of us out of the cave.

It is nearly impossible to lay down rules for what are the limits to voyeurism. As Aristotle says, we learn through seeing. But what we see should not degrade us, should not make us into pitiable and disgusting voyeurs, should not impede our abilities to discover the invisible realities, to have the relationships we truly desire. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that films must portray only healthy relationships; films will and should attempt to communicate with us about what really is. What I do mean to suggest is that what is portrayed should not violate human dignity: not the dignity of the actors, the crew, or the audience. What is intrinsically private should remain private; what needs to be conveyed about private realities can be conveyed by the power of suggestion, a power that filmmakers who are great possess in abundance.

Some may think that I am taking film too seriously – they may argue that it is not the job for filmmakers to shape our view of reality – it is their job to entertain us. I certainly would not want all film to “educate” or “edify” but it is undeniable that even films made strictly for entertainment purposes are not without their influence on our thinking. You screenwriters need to remember that we cave-dwellers entrust ourselves to you. What you put on the screen before us will inevitably affect how we perceive reality – it will either help us advance in our understanding of human dignity or will degrade us. If you keep some of these principles in mind, you will yourselves discover what should be the limits to voyeurism.