Fading Mirrors and the Collapse of Artificial Paradises

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If a visitor wants to fully appreciate the significance of the Parthenon, one option will be to read the ionic friezes, which show the extravagance of the Athenians when they celebrated the birthday of Athena. Those friezes, originally over five hundred feet high, force the visitor to look up as if they were peeking at the great Athena herself in the clouds. Architects from Ancient Greece use measurements such as heights and depths to manipulate the viewers and create an immersive experience where the visitor could feel the majesty. Painters adopt similar techniques known as perspective to project the three-dimensional reality onto a two-dimensional canvas. Just like the architects, the painters also attempt to manipulate the emotions of the viewers through geometric calculations and composition. The use of perspective in paintings culminated in the hands of Raphael during the Renaissance. His depiction of the great philosophers and

mathematicians in *The School of Athens* is so meticulous that everyone looking at this painting can feel those intellectual movements from hundreds of years ago converge to the present. However, this masterpiece is in fact not an honest record of the past, but rather a recreation by the artist himself. As grandiose as it seems, the architectural background of this painting is St. Peter's Basilica, a Catholic church constructed during the Renaissance, which could not possibly be extant back in Ancient Greece. What appears as a truthful depiction turns out to be a complete fabrication, synthesized with techniques such as perspective.

Perspective, in this sense, is just like wine, opium, and hashish in Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels*, artificially created to create artificial paradises. "You are sitting and smoking; you believe that you are sitting in your pipe and that your pipe is smoking you; you are exhaling yourself in bluish clouds." (Baudelaire, 1971) We are looking at the painting; we feel the emotions as if we were in the painting, and perspective is manipulating us; we drown ourselves in the delusion created by Raphael, who has the power to determine what we see and what we feel. However, the true power of an artist does not lie in his ability to manipulate the viewer, but to give the viewer the freedom to interpret the painting as they see appropriate. The mission of an artist is to serve as the frame of the painting, acknowledging there cannot be any replica of reality itself, however skillful the artist is, because a painting is just a painting. The modernists constituted a prominent faction that stood against Raphael and his art of manipulation, which relied heavily on techniques such as perspective. Preceding the modernist movement, some

artists sought to offer a multiplicity of interpretations to their paintings instead of confining them to a single point of view. Subsequently, the modernists went even further, questioning the very concept of space and dimensions in art.

Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* represents an early attempt to break away from a single interpretation of the painting. The painting, completed during the Northern Renaissance, depicts the marriage of an upper-class couple. While van Eyck still uses perspective to create a sense of depth in the room and attracts the viewer's vision to the hands of the couple, by no means can one neglect all the intricate details scattered around the canvas, such as the chandelier with half of the candles unlit. At first glance, the touching hands of the couple convey the impression of a blissful union, yet upon closer inspection, these details signal quite the opposite, that the wife might have died in childbirth because candles that symbolize life are out on her side. An alternative interpretation of this painting is that it portrays the fragmentation of the upper-class, despite their efforts to maintain their status. This can be demonstrated by their awkward postures and expressions. Despite their interlocked hands, their gaze seems to be averted from each other. (Bedaux, 1986)

Another thing that is worth examining is the convex mirror on the intersection of the perspectives, which shows two additional figures besides the couple. A commonly held view is that one of the two figures reflected in the mirror is the artist himself, Jan van Eyck, as the inscription encircling the mirror reads, "Johannes de Eyck Fuit Hic 1434", which means "Jan van Eyck was here 1434".

(Panofsky, 1934) The other figure is the viewer of the painting, who is situated as a witness to the couple's union. Similar to Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, van Eyck employs the mirror to position the viewer, thereby exerting a form of manipulation. However, van Eyck bestows the viewer with greater freedom to construe the nature of the couple's marriage: is this a wealthy happy couple, or a fragmented family that is falling apart because of the death of the wife or capitalism? The Northern Renaissance led by van Eyck and the Italian Renaissance led by Raphael happened almost in parallel. However, in contrast to Raphael's resolute clarity in his portrayal of figures and the overall atmosphere of *The School of Athens*, van Eyck diverges from Raphael's excessively calculated approach and grants the viewer greater autonomy in interpreting the painting's mirror.

In Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, the traditional rules of perspective are challenged, as Raphael's skillful use of perspective is further destabilized. The painting abandons the intricate composition of surfaces and members and the reception of lights, which were deemed crucial for perspective and positioning by the Renaissance master, Leon Battista Alberti. (Alberti, 2005) Rather than using perspective to direct the viewer's gaze towards a single focal point, Manet instead opts for a more democratic approach, allowing the viewer to determine where their attention should be directed. Simultaneously, he provides multiple perspectives to observe a single element of the painting, achieved by subtly incorporating a mirror on the wall. This reflects the back of the barmaid, which would typically be out of sight if space was considered, given that the viewer is positioned directly in

front of her at the table. In contrast to van Eyck, who aimed to create the illusion of depth by painting a three-dimensional convex mirror with thickness, Manet reduces the three dimensions into two dimensions by flattening the mirror into a plane. This technique undermines the illusion of depth created by traditional Renaissance techniques.

"Realistic and naturalist art had deconstructed the medium by using artifice to conceal artifice, while Modernism utilized art to draw attention to its own artifice," as Greenberg comments. (Greenberg, 2018) Rather than striving to deceive the viewer with an honest representation of reality, Manet employs a different kind of honesty by abandoning the attempt to transform reality into a work of art, which is an inherently irrational endeavor. Different from Raphael, who uses perspective to conceal the painting's flat surface, Manet frankly acknowledges the limitations of painting and alerts the viewer that they are observing an artwork rather than reality itself. As a result, whereas one tends to see the scene depicted in an Old Master painting before one sees the picture itself, in a Modernist painting, one perceives the image as a picture first. (Greenberg, 2018) Rather than dictating the viewer's focal point towards a specific scene, Manet grants the viewer the autonomy to independently discern how they wish to interpret the painting. Certain spectators may identify themselves as the man in close proximity to the barmaid and empathize with the implications of their male gaze, while others may visualize themselves as passive bystanders observing the spectacle. However, for those who acknowledge the painting's artificiality, it may merely serve as a snapshot of the

Folies-Bergère bar on a specific day back in the nineteenth century, and nothing more.

If we consider the modernist as the first to veraciously represent two-dimensional space, then the cubist is the first to abandon dimensionality altogether. As the pioneer of cubism, Picasso embodies this concept in his work, *The Poet*. Utilizing a monochromatic palette of grays and browns, a variety of geometric shapes combine to form the likeness of a mustachioed poet holding a pipe. The figure is not explicitly outlined but rather dissolves into the canvas, requiring the viewer to analytically reconstruct the composition based on various geometric objects. Picasso's analytic cubism liberates the viewer from the strictures of a single authoritative perspective, as the scattered color blocks convey no discernible meaning on their own. However, just like the opposite of nothing is everything, showing no meaning explicitly enables every possible interpretation. With imagination, groups of colored blocks take on a multiplicity of meanings. The undulating lines behind the poet may represent flowers in a vase, smoke from his pipe, or even ideas emanating from his mind. Similarly, the poet's facial expression is ambiguous, leaving the viewer to speculate whether he is gazing at or averted from them. Ultimately, the interpretation depends on individual subjectivity.

In *The Poet*, the absence of dimensionality is palpable, as there is no sense of depth whatsoever. The poet's face seems to alternate between appearing two-dimensional and three-dimensional, depending on whether the viewer can mentally envision the depth using the scattered fragments. The cubists, who followed

in the footsteps of nineteenth-century modernists, further challenged traditional perspectives and distinguished artificial artwork from reality. As Picasso himself remarks, "Nature and art, being two different things, cannot be the same thing. Through art, we express our conception of what nature is not." (Picasso, 1966) Instead of aiming to depict reality faithfully, the cubists focused on their personal conceptions of reality. The three-dimensional convex mirror present in *Arnolfini Portrait* and later reduced to a two-dimensional flat mirror in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* has now completely vanished, giving way to one-dimensional lines and angles. The painting itself now serves as a physical mirror, with the frame of the painting functioning as the frame of the mirror and the canvas serving as the reflective surface. Whenever a viewer looks at the painting, they see their own reflection as they find something within the work. It is precisely the individual who finds something within the painting, no matter what it may be, that captivates our interest and admiration. (Picasso, 1966)

The collapse of artificial paradises marks a significant shift in the art world. Instead of using artificial artworks to manipulate the viewer, artists now wield true power by affording them more freedom to interpret their works based on their own unique perspectives. It seems that this progression can be considered a type of evolution, moving from the past to the present. However, Picasso himself rejects the term "evolution" in favor of "variation," as he believes there is no past or future in art. (Picasso, 1966) The great masterpieces that have endured over time are still relevant today precisely because they are not artifacts of the past, even if the

artificial paradises they aim to create are fleeting. Just as Baudelaire comments, "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable." (Baudelaire, 2010), the essence of modernity lies in the fact that the eternal is kept out of something transitory. Artists throughout history have employed different techniques to capture their perception of the world around them, whether it be through three-dimensional, two-dimensional, or one-dimensional fragmented art.

Undoubtedly, the means through which artists attain this objective have undergone transformation throughout history. However, this ultimate aspiration of creating timeless works remains a common theme. As Picasso explains, "If an artist varies his mode of expression this only means that he has changed his manner of thinking." (Picasso, 1966) The fact that artists alter their modes of expression implies a change in their thought process, catalyzed by factors such as the dominance of the Church during the Renaissance, industrialization in nineteenth-century Europe, and booming economies in the United States during the twentieth century. Adapting to their own respective time lies at the foundation of art creation, and that is what we refer to as a truthful record of reality. This constant contemplation and reevaluation of artistic creation serve as the driving force behind the limitless creativity of artists, fueling them to generate works of eternal significance. In essence, artists serve as frames of their respective eras, with their artworks serving as mirrors that reflect their time periods, which inevitably dissolve into time. And time, being an omnipotent force, endows us, the viewer of

history, with unparalleled freedom to interpret and meaning from these reflections captured within the artist's mirrors. [1]

[1] I went to the Guggenheim Museum to see Picasso's *The Poet*, but I couldn't find it. Maybe it wasn't on display on that day. But I did have the chance to look at another cubist painting by Picasso at the Met, which is pretty similar as they both incorporate analytical cubism. Still, I decide to write about *The Poet* because Baudelaire is a poet, and I like Baudelaire:)

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Figure 1: Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434.

Figure 2: Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882.

Figure 3: Pablo Picasso, *The Poet*, 1911.