EPFF 9 Interiors Exteriors

For 3 November 9-10.30

A secretive and private person, let’s call him John, is reluctant to invite anyone into his house, almost to the point of rudeness. When a friend knocks on his door, he opens it only slightly before closing it with relief, and scuttling back by himself into the interior. It may be that no one apart from himself has ever seen the inside of his house. But we know perfectly well what it would be for us to go inside, to see whatever is visible, in just the way the owner sees it. Of course, things will have meaning for him that they don’t have for anyone else. But we understand entirely that the question of what John has in his house is an objective question, and there is no difficulty whatever in imagining what it would be to make a catalogue of the contents, say. As far as logic goes, anyone, including John, is in principle in an equal position to verify the contents of his house.

It’s different when the interior is a psychological interior, a mental house. I can’t get inside John’s mind *in the way he can.* This is what makes the question of what there is in the interior of John’s mind a psychological proposition as opposed to the material one. It is not that we believe we can see magically *through* another’s eyes, *as* they see things. We are tempted to say ‘we can’t see just what another sees’. A child might make this philosophical point by demanding, ‘Why can’t I see what’s inside your head? Why can’t I be you, just for a while?’

Yet of course we do get access to some people’s interiors, and we are barricaded from others’. One way this happens is when a writer portrays the experience of another not only in its content but in its form. I’m thinking of *The Sound and the Fury,* by William Faulkner, where he uses stream-of-consciousness narration to show Benjy’s inner world, like that of a toddler, perhaps. When Banji, aged 33, sees one thing he is immediately reminded of another episode in his life, to which he is instantly transported, there are jumps in time and space.

In Colm Toibin’s novel *The Master*, the central character, also a novelist, Henry James, who had been known as ‘The Master’, says*: ‘*Thus the reader would see the world through her eyes (the eyes of one of his characters), but somehow see her too, despite her efforts at self-concealment and self-suppression, in ways she could not see herself’.

Like this imagined reader, as a psychoanalyst I attempt to put myself into the shoes of the patient, while also seeing the person in those shoes. I aim to see the world as the patient sees it, through the latter’s sometimes distorting lens, but also to see the patient seeing it thus. I feel something of the pain or distress or pleasure felt by the patient, sharing it. Of course, I bring to the situation my own lenses or constructs, including my psychoanalysis ones. Psychoanalysis is in part the attempt to help someone with their professed problems. But it also becomes something more than that, a shared exploration of the patient’s way of construing and living his life, an open-ended enterprise without any specific end in terms of removal of symptoms. It is more like bringing up a child, than making a chair when the design is in place before we start. In Bion’s words, I try to ‘introduce the patient to that person with whom he will have most dealings in the course of his life, namely himself’.

This effort to put oneself into the mind or personality of the other in order to get to know him as a person, that is, to know something of his inner world, is aptly exemplified by biographer Richard Holmes in his book *Footsteps*. Holmes literally follows in the footsteps of writer Robert Louis Stevenson on the latter’s journey on a donkey through the Cevennes in Central France. Here too there is the double movement – Holmes imagines things (as far as he can) through Stevenson’s eyes, and, alternatingly, sees Stevenson from the outside.

These achievements are efforts of the imagination. Toibin, James, Holmes and the psychoanalyst immerse themselves in their subject (or object), learning facts about their lives, intuiting and inferring (by both imagination and working things out intellectually), not ignoring their own tendencies to prejudgement, to prejudice. When we share the feelings of another, we feel their pain, say, but we also stand back from too absolute an identification so as to think about what is happening, and to see them more fully.

At the same time I may feel distress projected by the patient, and see the patient from the outside, becoming aware of the patient’s impact on me and on other people. This attention may enable us to sense thoughts, emotions and feelings that have been repudiated or denied by the patient. I come to share not only his or her conscious feelings but also her disowned or denied emotions and thoughts. Holding up a mirror, I may tell the patient what I think I sense. If I have the wit to see it, and the good sense not to apply the idea rigidly, I can sometimes learn what a patient is denying in himself by what is projected into me. The boring patient may be letting me know what it was like for him as a child when subjected to a parent who bored into him with torrents of wordiness.

Here is an example. In this case the patient being interpreted is ready to accept the interpretation. A young woman patient seems irritable, even angry, with the analyst. She has snapped at her mother earlier in the day. The patient is about to go away on a walking expedition in a remote part of Central Asia. The analyst registers the anger. But entering her mind-set, and tuning in to some more troubled tone in her voice, he senses her anxiety about the upcoming expedition, about her going away from home and from the analysis. When he finds a way to talk to her about her feelings, suggesting that her aggression is not only anger at him and her mother for not keeping her with them, but that it functions also to protect her from anxiety, the patient’s mood changes at once; her tense hostility recedes; she cries about her fears and sadness, but also expresses her excitement about the challenge ahead. She is relieved that the analyst has revealed her underlying feelings to her. The relief allows clarity. In letting go of her anger she is less uptight. She is liberated into a more truthful expression of herself.

At other times people cannot or will not take back what they have unconsciously driven from consciousness. For example, a man deals with self-doubt and vulnerability by becoming cold and superior, even contemptuous towards others. His mode of escaping from such feelings has become hardened into a sort of character-carapace. It has mattered so much to him that he should not need anyone else, should not feel self-doubt, that any suggestion or interpretation of this process arouses more of the contempt that had been so useful in ridding himself of awareness of his true state for so long. Self-deceived, this patient doesn’t know that at root he feels vulnerable. Unlike Prospero, who says near the end of *The Tempest* ‘This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine’, he cannot, with all the sincerity that he can muster, own it.

My main point is that, remarkably, we can sometimes feel something of another’s pain when he or she has managed to disown it. We can sense what is disavowed, denied or projected, and at the same time know that consciously the other has quite different feelings and thoughts about his or her inner state.

In *Richard III,* Shakespeare has Richard in his opening speech know himself in his pathology in the way a psychoanalyst might have known him, including what he has repudiated: ‘But I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion, Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature, Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time into this breathing world scarce half made up….Why I, in this weak piping time of peace, Have no delight to pass away the time…. And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover To entertain these fair well-spoken days, I am determined to prove a villain, And hate the idle pleasures of these days’. Richard is presented as knowing not only his own character as ‘subtle, false and treacherous’, but also the causes of this in his hurt and envy at being deformed physically, ‘scarce half made up’. Shakespeare also presents him seeking to court some sympathy from the audience with this explanation, which we could scarcely call a justification.

Often we are unable to be sure how much someone’s perception of the world is in relevant ways accurate and objective, how far it is coloured by his fantasy, by what Shakespeare refers to as ‘wrong imaginations’. Here is one example of uncertainty. There is a portrait of me, painted by Jonathan Yeo. It is reproduced on the cover of my recent book *On Form.* (A plug!). I think it looks like me, But also, when I look at it, especially at the original, I can frequently see my father’s face in mine. I don’t think I look that much *like* my father. What’s more, the artist had never met my father, and my sisters and others who knew him can’t see him in the picture. But I do. My experience is not unlike that of suddenly seeing the rabbit in the duck-rabbit having previously seen it only as a duck – this is the famous optical example discussed by Wittgenstein and many others, referring to a picture that can be seen as both as a duck looking upwards to the left, and as a rabbit, its ears represented by the lines previously seen as the duck’s beak, looking to the right. With the duck-rabbit, a person who sees both creatures in the drawing, shifting focus from moment to moment, might be able to help a person who can only see one to see the other. He might say: ‘Look, here is the head, these are the ears, the mouth is there and this is the rabbit’s right eye’.

In the case of the duck-rabbit, we can safely say that both creatures are depicted, and that someone who can see only one or the other is limited in his perception. But with my father and the portrait, it’s harder to say. Is my father’s presence in the picture a case of my seeing something objective, that only I (so far) have been able to see, though in principle anyone else might? Or is it that I am under an illusion, that for me to think that my father is ‘in’ the picture is my ‘reading in’ to the picture? What is the difference between: ‘I see my father in the picture’, on one hand, and ‘The picture makes me think of my father’? There is a difference.

I suggest that film is a wonderful medium for such scenarios. It is a norm of film-making that it can show dream, fantasy and memory sequences vividly, representing a character’s inner world. Hugh Brody’s film *Nineteen Nineteen* moves between the objective and observational meeting between the two characters, Alexander and Sophie, both of whom had fifty years before been patients of Freud’s, and glimpses of their memories, fantasies and dreams. The film oscillates between the objective and the subjective. Such shifts from ‘realism’ to constructs of a characters inner world as shown in how he sees things, and back, may be registered by changes in the musical soundtrack, or sudden uncanny shifts in the weather (think of Kurasawa’s swirling mist of confusion and getting lost, in Burnham Wood), or through moments of surrealism. Something similar happens in Bergman’s early films, including *Wild Strawberries.*

Further, there are also ongoing greyer, more ambiguous areas, where the story is told partly through the eyes of one of the characters. The viewer is presented with images that are somewhere between an objective account of what is happening, as when the intention is for the scene to be what an entirely reliable narrator or observer would see, and on the other hand infusions of a character’s individual, perhaps idiosyncratic, ways of taking the world. There may, for example, be a paranoid tinge, or the main character, like Kafka’s K, may experience the world as constantly accusing him of crimes or errors of which he is unaware. We may take such a filmed sequence as representative of an actual authoritarian regime’s persecution of an individual, but we may also see it as a portrayal of K’s inner world, the place he occupies that renders him perpetually frightened, confused and obscurely guilty.

ENDS

NB THE TRIAL, OR THE CASTLE? YOU-TUBE?

Bergman early films and the oscillation (Wild Strawberries)

Interiors Woody Allen

Fellini Juliet and the Spirits

The Japanese film-maker Ozu keeps his camera fixed. Action moves in and out of the frame. This suggests how much we rely on imagination in constructing reality out of the bits and pieces that our frame of mind allows. The issue of objectivity applies to documentary films in a simpler way than in feature films (fictions). But the latter may be described, as by Michael Apted at an earlier EPFF, as a documentary of Lawrence Olivier, say, pretending to be Hamlet. There is less difference in terms of creativity and the achievement of truthfulness between fiction and documentary than we like to think. In each case we have to imagine our way into a character’s mind and personality.