

## On The Nature Of Seeing

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I have a "could be worse" habit of browsing bookstores, allowing my eyes to be captured by books begging to be judged by their covers or titles. The habit recently pulled me in the direction of a new book by James Elkins, historian at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>1</sup> A pair of eyes converging to a butterfly, like a too-close bead on a Brock string, invited me beneath its cover. Neither its oil on canvas painting nor its title (*The Object Stares Back*) seduced me, but its subtitle, "On the Nature of Seeing," drew me inward as it would you.

Curiosity was rewarded by the first two paragraphs of Elkins' introduction: *At first, it appears that nothing could be easier than seeing. We just point our eyes where we want them to go, and gather in whatever there is to see. Nothing could be less in need of explanation.... Seeing is detached and efficient and rational.... Each of those ideas is completely wrong. The truth is more difficult. ... Seeing is like hunting and like dreaming, and even like falling in love. It is entangled in the passions ... it is soaked in affect.... Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism.*

Elkins grapples with the limitations of what we, in the health and vision sciences, call reductionism. Emphasizing the art of vision, he attempts to state what seems obvious to us: vision is more than the sum of its parts. This holds true, as well, for any transdisciplinary account of vision. As Elkins explains: "In this case, psychoanalysis, neurophysiology, phenomenology, exis-

tentialism, experimental and clinical psychology, painting, art history, medicine, and strains of poststructuralism are all at work on questions of how we see, and it does not always help to keep them distinct."

Myopia, hyperopia and astigmatism are not just medical conditions, according to Elkins, but a way of seeing. People with these conditions often concentrate on nearby or distant objects, ignoring the middle ground. Some people think *as if* they are nearsighted or farsighted, comprehending only the immediate problems or the most distant abstractions, remaining oblivious to the bulk of the world. Some people think astigmatically, distorting nearly everything they see. Might there be a cause and effect here, or are these observations parallels and analogues? Can visual discrimination be developed in an individual the way that wine differentiates itself on the connoisseur's palate? The author leaves the reader pondering whether these are idiosyncrasies or metaphoric fact.

Leave the realm of refractive status behind, for a moment, and consider the parallels between vision and audition. Efficient auditory processing demands that we do not notice a good deal of auditory stimulation about us. We keep this background noise to a healthy minimum. Likewise, it is a relief, in part, to think that we don't have to see everything. If we did notice every detail around us, the world would turn into a fluttering, buzzing confusion. We would be overwhelmed, and diverted from what we want or need to see. In order to be able to see at all, we need to perform intuitive reductions and omissions.

Elkins' theory is fertile ground for the plight of those who find it difficult

to attend, for whom the necessary reductions and omissions of surrounding stimuli are not performed intuitively.

The distinction between sight and vision does not come easily to those outside of optometry, and Elkins offers this parenthetical explanation: "Vision usually means the anatomical action of the eye, and sight refers to all the wider senses of seeing." We cannot quibble much with Elkins, though in optometry we proffer the inverse. In his book of vivid and sometimes painful images, he stakes the claim for a different enterprise—one that leads to different claims and begs different questions than existing science can answer. He concludes that vision is too close to our lives to be left languishing in its opaque disciplines.

Well done, Mr. Elkins. You have unearthed one of the world's best kept secrets—the field of *behavioral optometry*.

### Reference

1. Elkins J. *The object stares back: On the nature of seeing*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

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