

Rest

Oleg Polounine

I once went to a lecture by John Walton, an American professor of the Old Testament; the lecture was called *Genesis through Ancient Eyes*. He discussed how one of the problems with interpreting the Old Testament is that it was written a very long time ago in another language and cultural context. Thus, translation and interpretation is required for us to understand it now. What interested me most was Walton's claim about the seventh day of creation where God rests from all the work that he has done. Walton's claim is that in this case, "to rest" means to take up residence in a place where on the seventh day God, having ordered the cosmos, comes to reside in it. In his lecture Walton says that, "In the ancient world gods rest in temples, that's the only place they rest. Temples are very much built for gods to rest in, this is what they do" (Walton, 2012). He goes on to say that for people reading the Bible at the time, the cosmos was a temple,¹ thus, "when God has put everything in order, He is now ready to rest, that is take up His residence ... to live in this world that He has created and to run it" (2012). In this case, "rest is engagement, not disengagement" (2012). However, the scripture is worded, "He proceeded to rest on the seventh day from all his work that he had made" (Gen. 2:2). My opinion is that in this particular case, what is being described is the action of resting from work. Walton's concept does, however, appear in other parts of the Bible written in Hebrew and Greek. A translation from Hebrew: "And now do rise up, O Jehovah God, into your rest" (2 Chr. 6:41), and from Greek: "For the man that has entered into [God's] rest has also himself rested from his own works, just as God did from his own" (Heb. 4:10). I became interested in this concept of *taking up one's rest*, this residing in, and an active engagement with, in regards to art.

Sitting in my studio and looking at one of my metal constructions on the wall, I realised that in a way I was taking up my *rest* inside it. My eye paused upon the work and my mind took up residence within it. I noticed that in my *rest* I was actively engaging with it, and found that the work appeared to be engaging with me as well; it appeared activated. A polarity occurred; there was a constant circulation of content between me and the work.

One of the ways in which an object of engagement can appear activated is through anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is when one attributes human-like qualities to non-human entities. One is usually aware of their anthropomorphising, and usually the object has something inherently human about it; one spotting that a cloud looks like a person for example. However, there can be complex forms of anthropomorphism. For example there can be objects that have nothing inherently anthropomorphic about them at all, yet they still have a, to use Herbert Aikins' term, "necessity" about them (qtd. in Hume 31). One can also be unaware that they are anthropomorphising. The content that the object has to offer can appear to be

¹ Walton, 2012

actively occurring of its own accord² which can intensify the sense of an object's *necessity*. How this can occur is best looked at through the literary arts³. When caught up in the act of reading, one loses awareness that they are in fact reading; for Elaine Scarry in *Dreaming by the Book*, the "awareness of the role of our volition has been suppressed" (Scarry 33). When caught up in the act of experiencing an artwork, the subject can become unaware that they are the one engaging with the object. This state of unawareness is what causes the complex form of anthropomorphism.

This phenomenon can be intensified by the absence of the author/artist from the work⁴. When a viewer looks at an artwork they do not have the artist booming the explanation of the piece to them (at least in most situations); likewise, when one reads a book, the author is not there. Maurice Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*, writes that the author, "having renounced himself ... maintained the authority of a certain power: the power decisively to be still, so that in this silence what speaks ... might take on form, coherence, and sense" (Blanchot 27). I think that this separation of the creator from the created can strengthen the sense of an object appearing anthropomorphic⁵.

Having discussed how an object can appear to be engaging with a subject, I would like to return now to the notion of *rest*. The first significant feature of this state, I think, is the unawareness of a subject's engagement, as discussed earlier. What needs to be added here is that one does not notice this occurring. In a way it is similar to the process of falling asleep, where you are not aware of the process occurring.⁶ The second significant feature of this state of *rest* is that we choose to engage, to be caught up; we consent to being affected.

These features of *rest*- unawareness and consent are not dissimilar to undergoing hypnosis. Theodore R. Sarbin's theory of hypnosis is based around social psychology, wherein he supposes that an individual acts out roles that are appropriate to social situations they are in, where being hypnotised is just one of those roles.⁷ I do not think that this means people are just pretending to be hypnotised, but rather that in such a situation, it is completely up to the subject whether they allow themselves to be hypnotised or not. This theory is reinforced by what Joseph Reyher writes in his book *Hypnosis*.

² This is more apparent with inert objects where there is a contrast between their static nature and the occurring content.

³ I think that anthropomorphism requires an object, when reading there is no object, there is only content, so anthropomorphism cannot occur when reading, but it is a good example of the same state of unawareness.

⁴ It is needless to say that there are countless exceptions to this, Chris Burden's 1971 performance piece *Shoot pops to mind* (pun intended).

⁵ There are other ways of an object appearing activated. For example pretence, where one pretends that something is somehow more or different to what it is. Unfortunately this did not fit into the flow of the essay.

⁶ Most of the time that is, I did have an active awareness of falling asleep, an experience best avoided!

⁷ Reyher, 18

Linguistically convenient as it is to speak of inducing hypnosis, its implication that hypnotic subjects are passive individuals who have hypnotic experiences thrust upon them is simply not the case ... The process of hypnotic induction can usefully be viewed as a situation in which the subject co-operates with the hypnotist, and this co-operation can be withheld if the subject wishes. (Reyher 60)

I have always thought that engagement with an art form follows similar cues to being in a hypnotised state. What Reyher touches on, is that there needs to be co-operation. If we look at it in terms of art, a subject has to co-operate, and be receptive to what it has to offer, otherwise there is no way that it can affect the subject, there is no way that the subject can *rest*.

I do not think that an artwork can accidentally evoke a hypnotised state. However, I think that the concepts around hypnosis can be helpful with regards to art. Erika Fromm used the term *ego receptivity* to help understand hypnotic and other states⁸:

In ego receptivity, critical judgement, strict adherence to reality orientation, and active, goal-directed thinking are held to a minimum, and the person allows himself to let unconscious and preconscious material float freely into his mind. There is an openness to experiencing, which William James (1892/1961) would have characterized as watching the stream of consciousness flow by. (Brown, and Fromm 202)

Let us consider this in terms of a subject actively engaging with an artwork. This allowance of one's mental material to float up is a good example of how a subject's engagement can be less about defining and interpreting, and more about their own visceral response. In a way the artwork is the hypnotist, for it is the hypnotist that directs the flow of the subject's consciousness, and either funnels, or allows it to burst forth. It is always about the subject, the viewer, the engager; it is their stream of consciousness which flows through the artwork. The artwork redirects the flow backwards, in a constricted, bursting, clear, or muddy consistency.

Rest is a state of residing. The subject has to consent to be affected, to co-operate and be receptive to what the object of *rest* has to offer. *Rest* is a state of unaware active engagement. *Rest* results in a circulation of content between subject and object.

⁸ Ibid. 20

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