

Using Simple Eye Exercises to Explore How Sight and Insight
Interact to Shape What We See

Book Review:

Eye Yoga: How You See Is How You Think

by Dr. Jane Rigney Battenberg

and Martha M. Rigney

Although visual perception is fundamental to all arts fields, the impact of how we use -- and care for -- our eyes gets relatively little attention. In school we all learned, on an abstract level, that our visual perception is fabricated by the brain out of the welter of electrical and chemical signals sent up the optic nerve, from the retina to the brain. For this reason, what we experience as sight is, in fact, a product of the mind. The human eye is a wondrous biological light-gathering device, but vision is manufactured in the brain.

The sister team of Jane Rigney Battenberg and Martha Rigney have provided all who care about the arts with a thought-provoking investigation of how these physiological facts shape what we see. On one level, their book describes a system of eye exercises designed to improve vision and help people use their eyes in a healthy way. The reference to “yoga” in the title is reflected in their emphasis on the importance of stretching and strengthening the eye muscles; this helps to keep the eyes healthy and also to minimize the strain caused by fixating on computer screens or printed pages for hours at a time. There is also a deeper connection to yogic practice in their examination of the habitual choices we make about where to focus of our attention.

Battenberg and Rigney argue that thoughtful use of eye exercises can awaken a deep sense of connection with the world, an assertion that resonates with John Dewey’s view of art:

The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife tending her plants ... the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals (McDermott, 1981, p. 527-8).

In Western culture, the immediacy of such experience has come to be considered of lesser importance than the byproduct—the building, book, painting, or statue—that records it: what we conventionally think of as “art”. In contrast, for Dewey, artistic activity served as a

model for the combination of active engagement and sensitive receptivity that unifies experience and gives rise to creative thinking:

A painter must consciously undergo the effect of every brush stroke or he will not be aware of what he is doing and where his work is going. Moreover, he has to see each particular connection of doing and undergoing in relation to the whole that he desires to produce. To apprehend such relations is to think, and is one of the most exacting modes of thought (McDermott, 1981, p. 563-4).

As Battenberg and Rigney point out, the eyes are literally an external extension of the brain. *Gray's Anatomy* (1988) describes the process by which the eyes are formed in embryonic development: "The optic nerve and the retina are developed as an outgrowth of the rudimentary brain, which extends toward the side of the head..." (p. 1180). The relationship between eye movements and thinking becomes evident soon after birth, as the baby learns to use his or her eyes to guide every move. "Although most people are born with the potential to see, vision itself is learned. We learn to interpret the light falling on the retina. Most of this learning occurs naturally before the age of six" (Cook, 1991, p. 76).

Although, as yet, there is no scientific consensus as to whether eye exercises will improve vision in the average person, many individuals argue passionately that such exercises have helped them stop the deterioration of their vision and attain clearer sight. Battenberg and Rigney invite the reader to adopt an attitude of relaxed curiosity, akin to the natural progression experienced by a young child, while trying out the eye exercises. In building their case for vision therapy, they describe the inner workings of the visual system and draw from such diverse fields as brain neuroplasticity, Neuro-Linguistic Programming and natural vision improvement.

However, the authors' light-hearted exploration of the connection between sight and insight is enough to justify buying this engaging book. They note: "We begin to see that vision is not a stand-alone process, but is integrally related to our motor skills, such as balance, eye-hand coordination and 'where we are' in relationship to the world" (Battenberg & Rigney, 2010, p. 137). By becoming conscious of visual processes of which we are normally unconscious, we are able to recognize the order imposed on experience by the mind. New links are observed among the varied parts of daily life, highlighting the connection between thought and insight. This makes open-minded experimentation with the exercises described in this book an eye-opening experience for those who value esthetic insight. As John Dewey once observed:

Thinking is pre-eminently an art; knowledge and propositions which are the products of thinking, are works of art, as much so as statuary and symphonies ... Scientific method or the art of constructing true perceptions, is ascertained in the course of experience to occupy a privileged position in undertaking other arts. But this unique position only places it the more securely as an art (McDermott, 1981, pp. 316-317).

References

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