

Threshold and its Shadow (for YS)

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The intention of one who contemplates an image is said to go directly through the image, as through a window, into the world it represents, and aims at an object ...¹

The view from here makes you long for an absent scene. Despite all reference and materialization, the work establishes a paradox of representation, where illusion can be understood as a device or strategy to distance the viewer from the scene. It is always presented as illusion and is driven by a desire perpetually deferred and unfulfilled. The distance is defined both in terms of the illusion itself, what it looks like to you, from here, and also through the means of making, with what means you imagine it might have been put together.

You do not see what is represented, but rather see through a representation on the way towards it. There is no way to forget that this is a constructed sightline, whose purpose is to ask the viewer to look beyond. But the means are inadequate. They reveal their failure to represent. Absolute representation, after all, is invisibility or transparency. You would pass through the thing entirely. You would not see it for the illusion it was.

You come to rely upon the artifice as a device to alert you to the limitations of looking. You need things to get in the way, or to appear not quite right. You relish an idea of genre and its occasional failure for the opacity it produces.

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As in a desert, one can find no place to reside ...²

You always carry something with you. Something of the old place. The old place as you remember it, or as you imagine it might have been.

Or another place, quite different, impossible to name. You were never there; you only believe you remember. Or you construct an image of the place from the stories you have heard or absorbed over the years. And there came a time when you could no longer distinguish between those old stories and the recollections of unmediated experience.

It is always a case of looking out of the window. But you are hardly able to take in the view, as your eye looks away, perhaps to one side or another. You become aware of the window and the way that it frames the scene. Inadvertently the frame displaces what it contains and your eye wavers

between the window and some sort of generic view offered in reproduction.

Light enters your room, but the perspective beyond the room casts little or no shadow upon where you stand. The light moves around the room so slowly that the day might come and go and you would hardly notice your own shadow except when it obscured your sightline.

But the image of the thing incorporates the object and its shadow into itself to such a degree that they become one. They belong to the same flat plane of illusion, even as everything you know of the scene would mitigate against that flatness.

An exaggerated image of the scene, more visible precisely because it announces itself as a visual fiction of sorts, with saturated color. You unsee its frameless edges, dismissing any notion of a border to allow your eye to enter for one moment before it turns away.

But were you ever there? Did you ever step outside into this scene you are attempting to frame?

To what extent, you wonder, is witnessing essential to the configuration of the landscape, or even to its understanding? You might think to mark your relationship by your memory of it. But you were never there, and there is no return. Because even were your memory without flaw or lapse, the landscape of your youth or the landscape of your father is never still. It moves on, displacing its own image to the point of no return. Virtual by another name, in that it would not cast a shadow.

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And forgetting turns away from a past instant but keeps a relationship with what it turns away from ...³

Or perhaps you are drawn to an act of removal, where the space or gap that remains subsequent to that removal becomes the site or object of contemplation.

You cannot be sure where the space or hole begins or ends. You have neither the terms of reference nor the instruments to define the elements that prescribe it. You must approach it from several perspectives. In material terms the space or hole signals an absence of something. But you might require confirmation of that absence; it materializes, paradoxically, only through its lack. You might come to dig, for example, in

the grounds beyond your window, but leave the rubble by the side by way of confirmation.

Or another version. You compress the earth with your palm or finger and create an indentation in the ground. A space or hole of sorts, yet with no apparent removal or displacement.

And another version still, where you construct a vessel with the express intention that it should hold nothing but the apparent void that inevitably occurs within its walls or planes. Of course it is never truly void or absent.

You could never be sure where the space or hole begins or ends. Is the hole merely the space signaled by absent material, or must it be constituted by the surrounding 'skin' of material? You have, as a consequence of this paradox, come to see the space or hole in quite material terms. A negative theology of sorts, where what cannot be represented is defined only in terms of what it is not.

In this space you observe that the work comes to reflect back upon itself in the manner of a mirror. In the absence of a subject there is only reflection upon the means through which it is seen.

But this mechanism transforms the representation, rendering it unfamiliar, even as it replicates the scene. You do not recognize yourself, even, when you look in the mirror, let alone the reflected scene. Your eye strains for detail or feature that you might recall or recognize. You still believe that you might know this place, that you might have once called it home or thereabouts.

* * *

It is already here from the other side of the wall ...⁴

The landscape is always highly charged. You come to the land and reclaim it as your own. You mark the space with posts or boundaries. But more than this you remake the terrain, reorganize its nature into a form you might recognize or one that reminds you of another time and place.

Landscape, here, defines itself as genre without limit. An idealized form of representation that anticipates its making. It conforms to a history of making. And it situates you within it to such a degree that you are implicated with every contour or line.

There is a sense of collective ownership to landscape; it

retains markers of recognition, however abstracted. But this abstraction is rarely articulated, in that we carry with us assumptions of witnessing. You believe that where you stand in relation to the object in front of you is a site marked by where its maker once might have stood. You may not witness the scene directly, but you may always be witness to its making. The landscape may yet come to serve a symbolic end, but its origins lie in the translation of one mark for another; a siting in the simplest sense. You both mark your place and abandon it. And still you carry it with you in some shape or form.

You are drawn to negotiate beyond the view, such as it is. You live under the illusion that the landscape is always 'found', a blueprint of what will come to be rendered, and exists as a manifestation of witnessing, of having been on the spot. The landscape painting marks place by remaking it and removing it to other parts. It becomes a memory of that witnessing, a secondary experience, of an apparently lived encounter.

But that encounter must always be viewed with suspicion. How could we be certain that there is any correlation between what was there and what was seen? Between what was observed and what was rearticulated in its image or shadow? The means of representation are deliberately restricted. They acquire three dimensions through frames and windows, but the surface is a simplified ritual of colorless line.

Even full reference to the genre at stake cannot lend a name to these renderings that operate somewhere between two and three dimensions. Or more precisely, to a space defined through a series of willfully flat surfaces, with the hand working away, inching across surface, but without inflection or accent. It could only have been made by hand, and yet it is not at all about the hand. Or a particular hand, at least.

(But whose marks? In whose name? What style or deliberation do they betray?)

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In contact itself the touching and the touched separate ...⁵

The threshold does not demarcate or separate, although it might give that impression. It is an indeterminate space that provides passage between one space and another. But it is hardly a line drawn in the sand, or a mark of finality. The

threshold is a state of mind through which you may or may not pass. A remnant of utopia, of an apparently neutral territory, if you could conceive of such a place. Where you do not know where you were.

Again, it is a matter of faith. Faith in the image the threshold has constructed before you. Suspension of disbelief, perhaps, to put it in another way.

But rare are the times that you are sufficiently close to it that such indistinction occurs. You cannot be sure whether the threshold is for you to pass through or to avoid. A non-space or a line, for which it is convenient, if not necessary, according to the laws of nature, to consider as having no width at all. A moment that defies stasis or punctum, that resists definition or site.

The threshold sets you in perpetual motion, moving you from one space to another, momentarily defining the spaces through which you pass.

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A past that is articulated – or ‘thought’ – without recourse to memory, without a return to living presents, and that is not made up of representations ...⁶

Towards another view from the window. Or a view of a view. Because it always depends on how far back from the scene you might choose to stand, and what might interrupt your view with that retreat. Perspective begins with the definition of what is observed from the position of the observer. Here, then, the object is embodied by the motion through it. You move through this space, testing it by virtue of your own embodiment. And since you are rarely if ever still, the perspective shifts under your feet. It is never the same, from one glance to the next.

Looking out, or looking over, or looking through. The scene exceeds itself, through reflection or shadow. You cannot be sure which. But the matter of both remains.

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Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Lévinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” trans. Alphonso Lingis, in ed. Seán Hand, *The Lévinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 134.
- 2 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), p. 136.
- 3 *Ibid.* p. 145.
- 4 *Ibid.* p. 144.
- 5 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 86.
- 6 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith, Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 148.