

Revisiting the Invisible Hiding Place

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Preface

It seems important first of all to mention that this text is written with an awareness of the fact that most sources are misinterpreted and that all subsequent statements are based on confusion and therefore contain no scientific validity. The process has actually been initiated by my interest in this confusion, like digging up memories of which you were unaware they even existed because they were so long forgotten and therefore now you can't even be sure that they are really your memories at all. Besides this assumption I hope that my naivety towards the subjects posed, will give way to new forms of perception towards those subjects.

I have tried to deal with questions that arose during my practice as a visual art student at the Gerrit Rietveld academy. Accordingly this text can be read as a theoretical and literary inquiry, investigating those subjects I see myself confronted with in my artistic practice. The subject that has been of premier interest to me here is the concept of place. Therefore I will start this paper with an attempt to clarify ideas about the content of this subject. In resonance to the content of the concept of place the text continues to follow the spaces in and around place. Its purpose is to develop a position towards

the construction of these spaces, and how they have been formed by thought and theory until now. Moreover my intention is to introduce ideas about the impossibility and the desire of inhabiting an empty place. For maybe the empty place resists any attempt to understand it, even the conception of it being a place, and becomes a dimension of absence that unlocks a door to the wilderness, to unlimited space.

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago I decided to break away the wall that divided my apartment up in two. The wall on which I used to project my thoughts is now gone, which gives me space to let those thoughts take off through the window. The place where my writing desk used to be, against the wall, is now replaced by the dinner table and even though it would make more sense to keep writing at the writing desk, I find myself attached to its former location, which means I now write at the dinner table, which is empty; leaving open spaces for possibility, for change, and for a transformation in the negotiations between invention and reality.

Being present in one's intimate surroundings thus brings forth the realisation that the ordinary is a field of potential and of possibility; a field of possible meaning. Or better, the ambiguous space which, as Benjamin writes, 'opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room.'²

As for instance Georges Perec shows us in his

book *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*,³ the spatial settings of our intimate surroundings are what gives ground to the meaningful memories of the experiences with which we link our sense of self. Works such as *Species of Spaces and other Pieces* make us aware of our desire to render visible, readable and desirable the chaotic space of the ordinary; the apparent shutting off of oneself into the private realm, to bring together geographic zones of meaning, reinventing them each time, without ever imposing a single one of them; to move toward a multiplicity of emotions, between the constructed and the yet-to-be-constructed, between the mapped and the not-yet mapped.

On the subject of space itself Perec writes: 'I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin'. But he continues: 'Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it'.⁴

While the world offers itself before me, sitting here at my table, completely quiet and alone, I notice the difficulty I have in picturing how it could ever be conquered. But I agree with Perec that, 'I don't think I was wasting my time in trying to go beyond this improbable limit. The effort itself seemed to produce something that might be a statue of the inhabitable'.⁵

When I consider my thoughts and the space before me to be reflections of each other, I imagine they are set in an area quite reminiscent of a description of an imaginary city, which the author named Valdrada, with its reflection in the lake that surrounds it. Valdrada and its reflection 'live for each

other, their eyes interlocked; but there is no love between them'.⁶ Maybe there is no love because there is no will to conquer, no desire to inhabit; which, metaphorically, gives reason and room for my will and desire to at least make an attempt.

Next time I'm here I'll really be there

*To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the place one is in.*⁷

All the empty places, abandoned or unknown territory, are part of the landscape. We do not inhabit the landscape; we merely dwell in it with our gaze. This might explain why I enjoy looking at empty places so much.

Tuesday morning, the 26th of November (my mother's birthday), 1984, I am crouched underneath the closet. In front of me the wooden floor on which I learned to walk uphill, since our house bent forward so much, that there was a ten percent altitude difference between the front and the back of the living room. In my memory I look up from underneath the closet, towards the light entering through the balcony window, filling up the empty living-room with a warm, familiar glow.

There is something about the way we memorise the surroundings of where our experiences take place. Maybe these spatial settings are what give ground to those meaningful memories of the experiences with which we link our sense of self. But what are those spatial settings and in what way do they shape our experience?

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of place and its centrality to both geography and everyday life.

The place I grew up in became a place where my childhood memories are kept safe. There is a place in my attic where I have put aside, in a box, the pictures of that time. Also I keep in mind the

possibility that some day the place where I live now will end up in that same box, in the attic of my new home.

Our world is built up out of places we live in, places we travel in between and places we discover. In our practical everyday lives we organise our experiences of the world to be able to know, differentiate and respond to these various places. In itself this practical knowledge of places is quite superficial and based mainly on the explicit functions that places have for us. That there is a deeper significance of place is apparent in the way we feel connected to certain places, for example; feeling at home, being homesick or feeling nostalgic about a place.⁸ In defining the development of place, we could start by saying that primarily it is a focus in space, it has a location, a site, a here or a there. It would be meaningless to imagine any happening or experience without reference to a locality, although with place we mean more than just a certain location. When describing a place we think of the totality made up of concrete parts, each having substance, shape, texture and colour. Only together do these things determine the full character or atmosphere of a place. A place is therefore a qualitative, total phenomenon, which we cannot reduce to any of its parts or properties without losing its concrete character.⁹ The character of a place expresses itself in these appearances. Through the appearances we are able to experience a place, and inscribe it with experience. Subsequently we can define place by the production/formation of it, and the way we approach or experience it. Heidegger illustrates the problem of formation by means of the bridge; a building which visualises, symbolises and gathers, and makes the environment become a unified whole. He explains how a bridge brings together the riverbanks and the landscape behind it, it brings them into each other's neighbourhood. Heidegger also describes what the bridge gathers together and thereby uncovers its value as a symbol. Before, the meaning of the landscape was hidden, and the

building of the bridge brings it out into the open. The bridge gathers being into a certain location that we may call a place. This place however did not exist as an entity before the bridge, but comes-to-presence with and as the bridge. The existential purpose of building (forming place) is therefore to make a site become a place, that is, to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment. Here place is deeply metaphysical and a long way from the distinction between one location and another. It is a-way-of-being in the world, or *Dasein*. In describing how we come to this *Dasein*, Heidegger uses the terms building and dwelling. To 'dwell' is derived from the old Norse *dvelia*, which means to linger or remain. Heidegger related the German *wohnen* to *bleiben* and *sich aufhalten*. He points out that the Gothic *wunian* meant 'to be at peace', 'to remain in peace'. The German word for peace, *Friede*, means to be free. That is, protected from harm and danger. According to these linguistic relationships, Heidegger shows that 'dwelling means to be at peace in a protected place'. Furthermore the Old English and High German word for building, *buon* means to dwell, and it is intimately related to the verb to be. Building is inherently related to dwelling; both are connected to being. A properly authentic being-in-the-world to Heidegger is one rooted in place. As a main example of rootedness, Heidegger chooses his farmhouse in the forest. It is relatively straightforward to portray such a place, a very romantic and nostalgic image, as rooted as if in the soil. Not surprisingly, dwelling, to Heidegger, is a highly poetic form of being. 'Poetry is what brings man into the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling'.¹⁰ The relation between dwelling and poetry becomes most visible in the work of Bachelard. In *The Poetics of Space* he gathers, visualises and symbolises the way in which place has gained meaning through poetry, using many examples to depict our physical and mental relationship to places.¹¹ Alphonso Lingus provides a simple example of this by showing how the active body connects a certain region of alien

reality to its own body:

My bed was, the first night, crisp and brittle, foreign; little by little it has become intimate. It has acquired a very decided and very obvious fleshy texture; as I lie enveloped with it I no longer distinguish where my body leaves off and where an alien surface begins.... The intimacy of the flesh diffuses throughout the whole bed-sheet, finally into the bed itself, and the room also by a sort of contagion. They have become incorporated.¹²

Not surprisingly it is the same subject, being incorporated, which Merleau-Ponty depicts as the essence of our relationship with the perceptible world as such. In *The Visible and the Invisible* he writes:

The body unites us directly to the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two laps: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born by segregation and upon which, as seer, it remains open. It is the body and it alone, because it is a two dimensional being, that can bring us to the things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey it from above, open to him alone that, if it be possible, would coexist with them in the same world.¹³

We are able to perceive the physical world because we are part of it and by physically coexisting in it we have access to its depth.

Merleau-Ponty goes on stating that the visibility that is created does neither belong to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact, since each is only the rejoinder of the other. They form a couple, the couple more real than either of them alone.

Thus since the seer is caught up in what he sees (a mirror placed in front of a mirror), it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all

vision. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as for example Lacan also states: 'I feel myself looked at by the things', my activity is equally passivity - which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism; not to see the outside, as the others see it, but especially to be seen by the outside. To exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible correspond to one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.¹⁴

When brought in relation to the concept of place (the direct perceptible one is surrounded with); to be in a place is to emigrate into it.

The question remains: how does this existential exercise in 'seeing and being seen' have repercussions on our understanding of where we are? What do we emigrate into? Developing Heidegger's concept of dwelling, Edward Relph seeks to escape from simplistic notions of place as location. Location, to Relph, is not a necessary or sufficient condition of place. He works through a list of characteristics of place including: their visuality, the sense of community that place supposedly engenders, the sense of time involved in establishing attachment to place and the value of 'rootedness', but none of these, he argues, can suffice to explain the deeper importance of place to human existence and experience. In defining the essence of place, he states: 'The basic meaning of place, its essence, does not come from locations, nor from trivial functions that places serve, nor from the community that occupies it, nor from superficial and mundane experiences -- though these are all common and perhaps necessary aspects of places. The essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centers of human existence'.¹⁵ As Gabriel Marcel has summarised it simply: 'An individual is not distinct from his place; he is that place'.¹⁶ Then, to emigrate into place might mean to

emigrate into oneself.

In the effort to become one with place, Relph makes the distinction between the experience of insiderness and outsiderness. 'To be inside a place is to belong to it and identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is the identity with the place'.¹⁷ We become insiders through an authentic attitude. For Relph, authenticity means a genuine and sincere attitude: 'As a form of existence authenticity consists of a complete awareness and acceptance of responsibility for your own existence'.¹⁸ For Relph, as such, place is a centre of meaning and a field for care. 'An in-authentic attitude to place', Relph states, 'is essentially no sense of place, it is merely an attitude which is socially convenient and acceptable, a stereotype ... it can be adopted without real involvement'.¹⁹ Inauthentic places are seen as 'flatscape', lacking intentional depth and only providing possibilities for commonplace and mediocre experiences.²⁰ These places are new, quickly made, distant and unconnected to their environment. Relph blames mainly tourism, as 'it encourages the disneyfication, museumization, and futurization of places.' The same example of disneyfication is used by Baudrillard. According to him, Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, it is a machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real.²¹ Baudrillard depicts the world we experience as real as the result of a fictional construction without an original.²²

To Relph, Disneyworld represents the epitome of what he calls placeless-ness, as it is constructed purely for outsiders. He uses this term to describe a place that has no special relationship to the places in which it is located -- it could be anywhere. Realising that modern-day society is full of these placeless places, it seems typical to think of reality and authenticity to be elsewhere; in other historical periods and cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles. But just as Nietzsche observed that truth can come from error

or good from evil, it is recognised that authenticity may come from inauthenticity or vice versa, and that these two modes of experience are not always clearly differentiable. The two phenomena pervade the creation and experience of the modern environment. On the one hand, there is a growing amount of places, buildings and things that are commonly called fake or inauthentic - for example, plastic flowers, false shutters, staged tourist environments, pseudo-vernacular buildings, and mock woodwork. On the other hand, there is a strong cultural trend involving a search for an authenticity, which seems to be missing in these examples, a desire to have the 'real' thing and to deride any synthesised substitute. Authenticity cannot be created through the manipulation or purification of form, since authenticity is the very source from which form gains meaning.²³ Here Dovey argues that replication stems from the attempt to preserve or create a shared meaning, using a prop that has lost its role in everyday life; that the phenomenon of fakery is essentially a replication of meaning. As such inauthenticity emerges out of the very attempt to retain or regain authenticity.²⁴ The replica then, is an attempt to preserve a particular construction of meaning at a certain time, in a certain place, and accordingly will eventually continue to remain a mark of that moment and not of the imitated thing itself. As such the replica is in fact an impossibility, for what is created with the intention to imitate becomes a new form, which is not in any way related to what it tries to imitate.

Where Relph makes a connection between inauthenticity and placeless-ness, anthropologist Marc Augé replaces 'placelessness' with 'non-place'. By non-places Augé is referring to sites marked by the 'fleeting, the temporal and ephemeral'. Non-places include freeways, airports, supermarkets --sites where particular histories and traditions are not relevant--, unrooted places marked by mobility and travel. Inauthenticity is found within mobility. Mobility here can be seen as a mark of all life in an increasingly accelerated world.²⁵

The same traces of movement, speed and circulation are depicted by Nigel Thrift as characteristic of the modern world. Thrift's focus is on these 'almost places'. In Baudrillardian terms, it would mean a world of third-order simulacra, where pseudo-places have finally advanced to eliminate places altogether. Finally, one might read them as frames for varying practices of space, time and speed.²⁶

He concludes with saying that the implicit moral judgements of inauthenticity and lack of commitment are gone, but just as place appears to be more or less irrelevant, it seems to be a present-day subject. Place has become sentimentalised and commercialised, we are encouraged to get to know places and to protect the loss of places. Many urban dwellers leave the city to look for a place in the country where life will slow down.

Lucy Lippard has also reflected on what place might mean in the speeded-up world we inhabit. Lippard suggests that mobility and place go hand in hand as places are always already hybrid anyway. By moving through, between and around them we are simply adding to the mix. She suggests that, 'the pull of place continues to operate in all of us as the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation'. Even in the age of 'restless, multitrade people', she argues, and 'even as the power of place is diminished and often lost, it continues—as an absence—to define culture and identity. It also continues—as a presence—to change the way we live'.²⁷ Most of us 'move around a lot', Lippard continues, 'but when we move we come into contact with those who haven't been moving around or have come from different places. This should give us a better understanding of difference (though it will always be impossible to understand everything about difference). Each time we enter a new place, we become one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity, which is really what all 'local places' consist of'.²⁸ We may conclude that the concept of

place presumably relies on the symbiosis of locat- edness and motion rather than the valorisation of one or the other.

A place is thus a configuration of different elements that, when together, create a qualitative consensus, by which we can say that we are not anywhere, or somewhere, but we are in a place. Accordingly a place gives us a profound sense of 'hereness', being specifically in a particular place. The realisation that 'this' is where we are might even be independent of the qualitative elements that form a place. But if we are not looking at a mix of ingredients that continually changes and continually links this place to other places, do we then merely look at the anti-manifestation of elsewhere? And if so, then what does it mean? Or as Blaise Pascal, the renowned 17th century philosopher and mathematician, has put it beautifully:

Whenever I think of how little space I occupy and see this space devoured by the endless immensity of the spaces I have no knowledge of and which take no notice of me, I become frightened and amazed that I am here and not there: there seems to be no reason why I should be here instead of there, live now instead of then. Who put me here?²⁹

It is this 'thisness' that John Duns Scotus has called 'haecitas', which he defines as a non-qualitative property of a substance or thing. It is what is necessary for a thing to be singular. Italo Calvino also speaks about the un-qualifiable element of the object:

A stone, a figure, a sign, a word that reaches us isolated from its context is only a stone, figure, sign or word.: we can try to define them, to describe them as they are, and no more than that; whether, beside the face they show us, they also have a hidden face, it is not for us to know. The refusal to comprehend more than what the stones show us is perhaps the only way to evince respect for their secret; trying to

*guess is a presumption, a betrayal of that true, lost meaning.*³⁰

Of course I have no intention to betray, however, I must admit my curiosity towards this lost meaning of things. Could there in fact be a similar lost meaning of place; a hidden face that can be respected?

The problem is that we are incapable of isolating places from their context, because they usually create it. In continuing this search for the indefinable element of place it could perhaps be reasonable to turn the opposite direction, to places we know very well; intimate space. The place we probably all know best is our bed, the elementary space of the body, it is the individual space *par excellence*. We spend more than a third of our lives in a bed. Not surprisingly, George Perec remarks in *Species of Spaces and other Pieces* that:

*All I need to do, once I'm in bed, is to close my eyes and to think with a minimum of application of a given place for the bedroom to come instantly back into my memory in every detail – the position of the doors and windows, the arrangement of the furniture – for me to feel, more precisely still, the almost physical sensation of being once again in bed in that room.*³¹

Except from the fact that the bed is possibly the ultimate place for the re-occurrence of past events through memory, it is an exceptionally well-known place for events (also for those that move outside of reality), but is predominantly an event itself.

If we define places in terms of being an event, a becoming, we are defining them by their imperceptibility, since movement has an essential relation to the imperceptible (its destination is not prefixed); it is by nature imperceptible. Perception can grasp movement only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form. Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed

and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception. Does this in fact mean that the concept of place has today advanced itself to a form of imperceptibility? Is the bed in which I close my eyes to the world every night actually an invisible field itself? And if places are in this context related to the field of the imperceptible, then what does imperceptibility actually mean?

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari contemplate the relation between the (anorganic) imperceptible, the (asignifying) indiscernible, and the (asubjective) impersonal:

*One has 'to put everything in to it': eliminate everything that exceeds the moment, but put in everything that includes it - and the moment is not the instantaneous, it is the haecceity into which one slips and that slips into other haecceities by transparency. To be present at the dawn of the world. Such is the link between imperceptibility, indiscernibility, and impersonality - the three virtues. To reduce oneself to an abstract line, a trait, in order to find one's zone of indiscernibility with other traits, and in this way to enter the haecceity (the 'thisness') and impersonality of the creator. One is then like grass; one has made the world, everybody/everything, into a becoming, because one has suppressed in oneself everything that prevents us from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things. One has combined 'everything': the indefinite article, the infinite-becoming, and proper name to which one is reduced. Saturate, eliminate, put everything in.*³²

So, here, confusingly the ungraspable element of perception, invisibility, is defined by being an event into which one can emerge by putting everything into the moment. Wildly interpreting, this means that one slips into the haecceity of one's direct surrounding, becomes indiscernible with the place and becomes impersonal towards oneself, by which the bed suddenly turns into a horizontal field in which energies emerge and disappear, and where

connections are made and dismantled.

Edward Soja writes of the lived space as interrupting the distinction between perceived space and spatial practices. Lived space is not necessarily imperceptible, but it does exist at the threshold of what is perceivable and imperceptible. He uses the term 'thirdspace' to put this area in perspective to two other kinds of space. First space is the term he uses to describe empirically measurable and mappable phenomena. Second space is conceived space, space that is subjective and imagined, the domain of representations and image. This corresponds to many people's notion of place, as a felt and cared-for centre of meaning.

Thirdspace as Lived Space is portrayed as multi-sided and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, passionate and routine, knowable and unknowable. It is a space of radical openness, a site of resistance and struggle, a space of multiplicitous representations It is a meeting ground, a site of hybridity ... and moving beyond entrenched boundaries, a margin or edge where ties can be severed and also where new ties can be forged. It can be mapped but never captured in conventional cartographies; it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practiced and fully lived.³³

My neighbour's home has always felt a lot more like a home than the place where I live. She really spends time with her apartment, she lives it fully, and I must admit I regularly neglect my relationship with my own. My home is more like a dreamhouse, in the sense that I'm mostly asleep when I'm in it. Which also maybe explains why its interior is shaped by imagination rather than practicality. Soja underlines the idea that, rather than thinking about places as bounded and rooted, we can think of them as open and permeable – based on a politics of inclusion rather than exclusion. To think of place as an intersection – a particular configuration of happenings – is to think of place in a constant sense of becom-

ing through practice and practical knowledge. Place is both the context for practice – we act according to more or less stable schemes of perception – and a product of practice, something that only makes sense as it is lived. However difficult, I can try to picture my home without me, disintegrating into someone else's apartment or through time and erosion eventually becoming part of the wilderness. The empty apartment does not inhabit itself, but returns to its borderless grounds. And probably it's just a matter of time when those grounds are made into a place again, into a dwelling shaped by someone's presence, practice and liveliness. Or even by someone else's dreams and subconscious intentions, validating sleep as a proper spatial practice.

There's nobody out there, it's just the noise of the wind

Place can be understood as an embodied relationship with the world. Places are constructed by people doing things and in this sense are never finished but constantly being performed. In this sense it becomes an event rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic. Place as an event is marked in openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence. Still, there remains the question: if to understand place is to disappear into it, what do we become then? At the core of our presence in a place is the realisation that it is something other than us, it is alien to us, for its form of existence is different from ours. Still, as I have pointed out above, the state of the places we are in is entirely dependent on the status of our own presence and vice versa. Maybe the inherent otherness that lies within the external world is covered up by our conventions of it. So, what would happen if those borders set by conventional perception disappear? In *My Life Without Me* Rilke writes:

[S]uddenly, a room with its lamp appeared to me, was almost palpable in me. I was already a corner in it, but the shutters had sensed me and closed.³⁴

If a person walking in the street where I live would look up to the right at number 22, he or she would be able to see my apartment, but not me. Because I would be in the back of the room, seated on a moss green chair, back towards the balcony window, my hands on the dinner table. I put myself, so to speak, amongst these things. Or more accurately, I put my hands among the things on my table. And just by the act of placing my hands on the dinner table, among those few things on it, I had configured my hands to be part of their world, the world of things. My hands are touchable things and contain the capacity to touch at the same time; a phenomenon very beautifully described by Merleau Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*.³⁵

Touching one hand with the other hand is a phenomenon, Merleau Ponty suggests, that reveals to us the two dimensions of our 'flesh', that is both a form of experience (tactile experience) and something that can be touched. It is both 'touching' and 'tangible'. Furthermore, the relationship is reversible: the hand that touches can be felt as touched, and vice versa, though never both at the same time, and it is this 'reversibility' that he picks out as the essence of flesh (*être sauvage*). It shows us the ambiguous status of our bodies as both subject and object.³⁶ This insight has consequences for the truth of all perception, including vision. It is based on an account of touch, which needs to be understood not as substitute for vision –as another way of measuring the same distances– but rather as the fundamental dimension of visuality itself, contributing to its texture, depth, and thickness. If vision is modeled on the tactile experience that the hand that touches is also tangible, then seeing, implying being seen, necessarily involves the incorporation of the seer into the flesh of the world.³⁷

While we humans, through our corporality, are involved in the dialogue between the seer and the seen, it is precisely the characteristic of the inhuman, the thing, to exist in itself --not for itself--, which

brings forth the understanding of our human position and also the melancholy of being different than the things we are surrounded with. In *The Tears of Things*, Peter Schwenger follows this line of thought and shows through many examples from varying disciplines the connection we have with things. Already in the introduction he describes a state of being a thing, which is an indifference to the self and often accompanied by a foretaste of eternity, an eternity experienced without the tediousness of personality.³⁸ The indifferent character of things is beautifully expressed in Wislawa Szymborska's 'View with a Grain of Sand', a litany that concludes as follows:

*The Window has a wonderful view on the lake,
But the view doesn't view itself.
It exists in this world colourless, shapeless,
Soundless, odourless, and painless.
The lake's floor exists floorlessly, and its shore
shorelessly.
Its water feels itself neither wet nor dry
And its waves to themselves are neither singular
nor plural.
They splash deaf to their own noise
On pebbles neither large nor small.
And all this beneath a sky by nature skyless
In which the sun sets without setting at all
And hides without hiding behind an unminding
cloud.
The wind ruffles it, its only reason being that it
blows.
A second passes. A second second. A third.
But they're three seconds only for us.
Time has passed like a courier with urgent news.
But that's just our simile.
The character is invented, his haste is make
believe.
His news inhuman.* ³⁹

Schwenger concludes that the world is one in which at the heart of objects is something inhuman, alien, other. Yet at the heart of what is human is something

no less inhuman. There may be a drive, a desire for this darkness, but it is always accompanied by a sense of loss. In Freud's terms, there is a loss in every evolution of consciousness, which splits in two what was once one and thus evokes a kind of nostalgia for the prior state. The drive toward this state is enacted at intervals, but it can never find more than momentary rest: 'One group of instincts (the death drive) moves forward so as to reach the final aim of life as quickly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group (the life instincts) jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey.'⁴⁰ Thus the death drive repeatedly enacts a dynamic of loss. What is lost is not the object but our prior state of object-hood, and perception can only stress the ways in which this is so.

The object, as in Merleau Ponty's philosophy, is necessary in order for the subject to be constituted, as a conscious self that becomes aware of its consciousness by contrast with that which is not conscious; as Sartre puts it: 'The (subject) for itself constitutes itself as not being the thing'. And symmetrically: 'The thing, before all comparison, before all construction, is that which is present to consciousness as not being conscious'. This would seem to set up the mutual dependence, but the object's indifference makes the dependence entirely ours. We seek to apprehend an object's being, and realise at some level that that connection can never be made.

Yet every moment when this lack of connection is realised creates an emotional connection. This emotional connection is very different from those produced by narratives with which we overlay the indifferent object, and which make us feel that objects understand us, in a sense are us. The connection of which Schwenger is speaking is at the same time a sense of surrendering, of loss at the very moment of apprehension. And the emotion that it produces is melancholy. Emotion as the psychic

equivalent of motion in the material world.⁴¹ On the other hand, as soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of the motionless man.⁴²

So, apart from being moved by the material world, there might be a state of mind that is open to the presence of the world; a state of mind that is open to this presence and stays open to it while losing one's personality (since it is not understood as an emotion or a personal feeling); a state of mind often described as being unoccupied, being empty and still. Then, nature might present itself not only as the objects constituting it, but also as a living presence. The inherent quality of an external object can be sensed and becomes one's sense of self. A range of high, rocky mountains can then be felt as an immensity, a solidity, an immovability, that is alive, that is there. This immensity and immovability seems sometimes to confront us, to affect us, not as an inanimate object but as a clear and pure presence. It seems to contact us. And if we are open and sensitive, we may participate in its immensity. We may then feel ourselves as one with the immensity, the immovability, the vastness.⁴³

Here the presence of the external world is something we can participate in. Not only by being among it, but also being included in it and including it in one's own sense of presence. The dynamic of representation instead involves loss, as Kristeva states: 'it implies an absent object preceding its replication (...). If this object is not always physical –as for instance art's object may be a concept of the work being executed– it is no less lost in the process of the very labor by which it is found, transformed into a concrete representation. Art perceives and attempts to represent an object that must always to some degree be lost in perception and lost again in representation'.⁴⁴ This is not a loss that can be mourned, that can be gotten past so one can live one's life: it *is* that life.

Furthermore both mourning and the unrepresentable seem to take place outside of discourse, that is, in silence. Lyotard suggests that 'silence indicates inevitable gaps in our comprehension, gaps that should be respected, rather than bridged'.⁴⁵ It is not only silence that suggests the unrepresentable, but any formulation of absence, as Lyotard also observes a similar thread within abstract painting: 'The current of abstract painting has its source, from 1912, in this requirement for indirect and all but ungraspable allusion to the invisible in the visible'.⁴⁶ In Lyotard's experience, the moment of contact with the silence of the world of things is defined as a moment of terror: 'One feels that it is possible that soon nothing more will take place. What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere 'here', the most minimal occurrence'.⁴⁷

One can still imagine though, a nothingness, at the threshold of the invisible and the inaudible, that is sensible and alive, by which one can say that:

*I can almost hear myself close my eyes, then open them.*⁴⁸

The world without me

There is merely one cause for all of human suffering: 'The fact that he is not capable of restfully remaining in a room'.⁴⁹

In the spring of 1790, Xavier Maistre, a twenty-seven-year-old Frenchman, set about for a journey through his bedroom and named the report of what he had seen *Voyage autour de ma chambre* ('journey through my bedroom'). Pleased by his experiences he engaged himself in a second travel in 1798. This time he was determined to go all the way to the windowpane, of which he made a report under the title *Expedition nocturne autour de ma chambre* ('nocturnal expedition through my

bedroom').⁵⁰ Like most people who read Maistre's encouraging suggestions to rediscover the stunning beauty of our most regular everyday environment, I felt the need to follow his advice, though I consider my expeditions not as successful as Maistre's. Ever since, I frequently take much pleasure in transforming my experience of my bedroom into a vast landscape. It seems then to develop an experiential expansion in space, which is desirable considering its disappointing actual measurements. Unlike Maistre, I do not physically move within the newly arisen landscape. I rather lay still or sit upright on the bed, occasionally following the curiosity of my restless eye. In this mode, piles of clothes become little mountains, my wooden wardrobe changes back into a thick dark forest and looking over the edge of my bed is like looking down a plateau shaped by millions of years of erosion (like the Grand Canyon, though I've never seen it in real). Apart from all the exciting new experiences to take notice of, there is one that keeps returning and is incredibly frightful, one obtained by a desire to really see. Obtained by an utterly willful concentration within the focus of my sight. It is the gigantically overwhelming realisation that this landscape is geographically designed by forces that I'll never be able to comprehend. Moreover, its design is brought to appearance by a whole universe of invisibility, a complete cosmos consisting of nothingness, of void. The difficult part is noticing the eagerness to explore this unknown territory, and at the same time knowing that to do so, to put everything in, would include the end of everything. One of Georges Perec's exercises has a similar direction and is, I feel, because of its radicalism, one of his most intriguing:

I have several times tried to think of an apartment in which there would be a useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless.... It would be a functionless space. It would serve for nothing, relate to nothing. For all my efforts, I found it impossible to follow this idea through to the end. Language itself, it seems, proved unsuited to describe this nothing, this void,

*as if we could only speak of what is full, useful and functional. ... how to think of nothing without automatically putting something round that nothing, so turning it into a hole, into which one will hasten to put something.... The effort producing something that might be a statue of the inhabitable.*⁵¹

Perec tries to imagine a space 'without a function', a space unlike any other previously conceived; not a domestic space, co-opted into the principle of 'dwelling', but a space of otherness, which is neither here nor there, that is simultaneously physical and mental; a purely heterotopian space. For example, Perec writes that a staircase is a 'neutral place that belongs to all and none' and is 'an anonymous, cold, and almost hostile place', but even this is a space of transit, not a null-space.⁵² Although a staircase and landing are utterly distinct from where the inhabitants of the apartment-building 'entrench themselves in their domestic space', it is still a space with a function. The inhabitable is therefore a space in which absence is brought within the limits of the conceptual.

Having travelled from the formation of place, through our relation towards it, we end at its immense emptiness. At the end of everything, we have come to reside in a place of those things seemingly without meaning.

*Now in the little lounge what is left is what remains when there's nothing left: Flies, for instance, or advertising bump slipped under the door by students, proclaiming the benefits of a new tooth-paste or offering twenty-five centimes reduction to every buyer of three packets of washing powder, or old issues of Le Jouet Francais, the review he took all his life and to which his subscription didn't run out until a few months after his death, or those things without meaning that lie around on floors and in cupboard corners.*⁵³

Perec shows that 'those things without meaning'

actually have a meaning based upon their relation to the space in which they reside, instead of the character that owned them. While what is left is deemed insignificant, it has become significant because it had remained while there was nothing left. And so it seems that not only our corporality, but also the absence of it, gives room for a development of meaning in intimate spatial settings. Maybe this is so because we cannot conceive of that which does not exist without somehow incorporating it into being.

In both cases above, Perec questions our habitual behaviour in relation to space and points to its unavoidable otherness. In our incapacity to conquer it completely, we can only take hold of the appearance of our attempts that take place within its (spatial) realm. In result I feel my own presence diminish in relation to its immensity and come to the conclusion, as expressed by Jules Valles, that: 'Space has always reduced me to silence'.⁵⁴

Postlude of a night scene

When seen from the inside of the place where I live, the process of writing this paper has been as much about constructing a theoretical place as about constructing a narrative, so too is the act of reading. By inhabiting the text, both the reader and I are involved in the construction of its meaning. The way we inhabit the text is not the nostalgic harmony of the domestic sphere, but the experience of being both a stranger and a friend to this place. This realisation has affected my relationship with the place where I write this from as well. My home is built on a foundation of nothingness and imbued with silence. Structurally, both the text and my house take place upon a blank space and are involved with the notion of containing, destroying, and eradicating, through the presence of my conventions, any sense of the silence that exists at its heart. The desire to re-enter this place is the desire to read it and understand it, to appropriate it and contain the radical otherness that fills its corners. We wish to read something in

the house because we cannot tolerate its absence. Though, as I have tried to point out, it is not necessary to turn to nomadic or ascetic forms of living to be able to dwell in absence, to escape from this sense of being limited by the way we fill it with concepts.

A thief, who breaks out of jail in the night, overwhelmed by the immensity and boundlessness of the outside world, not knowing where he is and where to go, can become aware of his location by either asking the policemen that want to re-capture him, or by silently waiting for the dawn. The dawn of the world.

[I]n the silence, we are seized with the sensation of something vast and deep and boundless. It took complete hold of me and, for several moments, I was overwhelmed by the grandeur of this shadowy peace. This peace had a body. It was caught up in the night, made of night. A real, a motionless body.⁵⁵

Notes

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Biography

Jasper Coppes (1983) graduated in Fine Arts (2008) at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. In his visual work and writing he focuses on areas between architecture and visual arts, where he investigates the latent layers of meaning in our daily spatial settings.

