

An aesthetic of vagueness

Excess of detail, vacuity, desertification or overload of natural elements, Edgar Martins' photographs have in common both the uncertainty of the space and time frame within which they were taken as well as spatio-temporal doubt surrounding their reception, such is the difficulty in projecting our lived experience of the moment on to the image. We lack the necessary markers to reclaim what we perceive. Forests, mountains, glaciers, beaches, fences, landing strips or houses are nevertheless recognizable, but so precise and so meticulously rendered in the photographic image that it becomes a visual paradox: so present that it becomes absent, elusive, even impossible. Do such places really exist? Are we not victims of an optical illusion, of some technical manipulation, of scalar games and trickery? Working with certain techniques of the photographic medium, in particular long exposures and wide angles, Martins composes strange natural and urban landscapes at once familiar and improbable, realistic and unreal, the nearly total absence of people helping to reinforce the artificial nature of a world that borders on the inhuman. Unlike what is called "the nobody point of view" in cinema, a sort of (supposedly) objective view from the camera and which springs to mind when we first see Martins' images, we have here more of an insistent scrutiny, certainly anonymous but penetrating, omnipresent, and, another paradox, so unrelenting that it acquires an autonomous status. It's definitely someone's viewpoint, but it is vague and produces vagueness, or more exactly an aesthetic of vagueness.

This vagueness is not nothingness, rather something imprecise, indefinite, and undetermined. As long as a state or a thing are not defined and delimited, they remain in this nether world where they can be specified without being completely identified. We encounter this vagueness of things every day, to the point where vagueness becomes the substance of reality itself and not just a perception or a deformed sense of reality. We are regularly confronted with blurred objects which we have great trouble in rendering sharp and precise, as we cannot, by nature, wear out the description. In our vision of the world there will always be an unexplained residue, undefined remains, an awareness or a vacillating memory, a vagueness nonetheless sensed and grasped but which remains deliciously vague. Vagueness is not an absent or negative quality in things, but on the contrary a manner of grasping their profound reality, their material matter in a manner of speaking, the way we think of a colour, the outline of a vase, the form of a flower or a cloud, a body or a house.

The undisputed theoretician of vagueness is the American pragmatist philosopher Charles S. Peirce (he was responsible for the 'vagueness' entry in the Dictionary of

Philosophy and Psychology in 1902), who managed to conceive a “semiotic of vagueness”, thereby showing the concreteness of ostensibly unattainable things and notions. Vagueness consists in recognizing that nothing is absolutely indeterminate and that nothing is absolutely determined; we can always see, detect, say or interpret otherwise. The perception of vagueness matters here as much on the philosophical level as on the aesthetic, as the intermediate state in the perception of a vague object, undefined but present, is intensified in a work of art: to perceive a vague object through a perception, itself vague.¹ Recognizing the implacable vagueness of feeling in the perception experience, Peirce wrote: “Direct experience is neither certain nor uncertain, because it affirms nothing — it just is. (...) It involves no error, because it testifies to nothing but its own appearance. For the same reason, it affords no certainty. It is not exact, because it leaves much vague; though it is not inexact either; that is, it has no false exactitude.” (1. 145) In art, it’s the role of the imagination to only render objects sufficiently precise to be considered by thought but sufficiently vague so that their authenticity be minimized without losing their fictional force. Our ability to form images (*Einbildungskraft*) is associated with a certain imprecision so that the works’ fiction can come into play. Producing vague images is therefore a truly human faculty, to which one must add the vagueness of the things themselves.

Phenomenology’s profound efforts to restore things’ being back into their reality inevitably integrates the vagueness of these things into its manoeuvrings, less because of our perceptive inabilities or the poverty of our language in relation to the world’s wealth, and more because of the reality itself of the vagueness which it possesses. The simple description of a tree seen from the window – a recurring example in Husserl’s texts – whose execution one would imagine banal, turns out to be more and more complex as we elaborate the description, especially if we take into account the day’s different levels of light, the seasons, the viewpoint, our psychophysical state, and the time which has elapsed between the now and the past hour. I still see the same tree, and yet another tree appears continuously in a way that is at once specific, unique, present and indeterminate, comprehensively elusive, so that this new, indefinable and intransmissible dimension is a quality itself of vagueness. Vagueness is not in my mind or in my senses, it is in the object.

Vagueness also exists in and through our relation to things, created in part by our concepts and techniques, based as it is, however, on a reality which antedates us. I could

¹ Peircian theories of vagueness are also current in aesthetics as well as literary and cinematographic theory. Cf. *Cinéma: revue d'études cinématographiques / Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies*, vol, 17, n° 2-3, Spring 2007, *La théorie du cinéma enfin en crise*; Martin Lefebvre, « Théorie, mon beau souci », in particular « La Question du vague », p. 166-170. <http://www.erudit.org/revue/cine/2007/v17/n2-3/016754ar.pdf>.

Cf. also Claudine Tiercelin, « Le Vague de l’objet », *CRUZEIRO SEMIOTICO*, January 1991, n°14, p.29-42) <http://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/docs/00/05/33/38/HTML/index.html>

And the entry « Vagueness » *du Stanford Encyclopædia of philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vagueness/>

not entirely imagine Edgar Martins' images, not just because they relate to existing spaces, places and times – with their discrepancies, outrageousness, additions and subtractions which photographic technique now facilitates – but rather because they are a material foundation of vagueness. The black backgrounds to the beaches in *The Accidental Theorist* series is an experience which any of us could have had at that moment of the night when the horizon between sea and sky merge, throwing into sharp relief the bright whiteness of the sand with the respective blackness of the sea and sky. These ambiguous, imprecise experiences – where does the sky start or the sea finish? – are at once vague and specific, because the matter shown in the image is presented as such, is given as such, and, at the same time, it becomes ethereal as it appears to be dreamt.

That which Gaston Bachelard called “imagination of matter” becomes, for Martins, both a real material prop – such as place, landscape, existing dwellings – and the non-viability of this prop. Quite real, tangible and almost palpable, the matter which Martins taps and manipulates has the strength of its immanence and the power to create mental images in those who see it and let themselves be transported by it and let loose their imagination. If things and images were not themselves bearers of vagueness, we doubtless wouldn't be able to let vagueness be derived from our thoughts and visions. Sometimes the reverie is part of the image's composition, in the form of a scenography so bizarre that it needs interpreting, and of which the signification remains fairly improbable, like the young girl whose torso is surrounded by coloured balloons. A sort of humorous transposition of Caspar David Friedrich's *The Monk by the sea*, only here everything is inverted: it is a woman, the image is highly coloured in the centre, it is night-time, the confusion between sky and sea is total. In another photograph, something which vaguely resembles the full moon appears so strange that we dodge the obvious reference preferring to be carried away by other images, for example that of a big suspended, gelatinous ball, a deformation doubtless due to the long exposure. This contemplation of matter is certainly a bit feeble and open to all sorts of variations, but a basic logic prevails nonetheless in those passages which are linked to a reality outside of the image, or to a reality restored by the image (compared to the first one), or even to the matter itself of the image (which should not be confused with either the restoration or tangible reality).

But reality captured photographically is no more certain, or less certain, in this guise. We now know that our vision of reality is only a local vision of a world both near and faraway, known as the Euclidean topology, and that the structure of the matter that we perceive does not correspond, or hardly corresponds, to our everyday life, whether it be colours, shapes or even space and time. The philosophical notion of vagueness, as part of an epistemological

process, thus corroborates Heisenberg's famous "uncertainty principle" relating to quantum mechanics. Still called "principle of indeterminacy" because of the impossibility of determining simultaneously the location and the speed of particles; according to this theory, the scalar values of the elements which make up our everyday environment are indeterminate, therefore vague. Reality is, in the last instance, composed of vagueness. Which brings us to the realist side of Martins' photographs, those in the series *When Light Casts No Shadow*, which allow us a glimpse of this imperceptible vagueness with the naked eye? Not "realist" in the artistic sense, but in the epistemological meaning where the question of knowing whether the world is really such as we perceive it or if it is that which we perceive only through description, analysis and calculation (that's Heisenberg's position), has not yet been definitely decided. In one sense, this series is both a document on reality, as it updates the state of things impossible to see without technological help, and a fiction, because this vision of reality is a construction through and through, and that reality "in itself", beyond any perception, is inaccessible. That which we perceive in an image is a reality created by our act of looking.

We can now understand better the absurdity of the controversy sparked by the publication of photographs commissioned from Edgar Martins by the New York Times, from the series *Ruins of The Gilded Age*, as the reproach centred on the fact that the perfect symmetry of some of the places and houses photographed were due to the artist's manipulations and that the images were therefore not real documents about real things. But the critics would really need to explain to us exactly what reality is when independent of and outside of all human influence, if only because any image, however realistic or documentary, is, through its framing, its lighting, its grain or its printing, already a product of this alleged reality which we are supposed to see directly. An airport runway seen at such and such hour of the night, with corresponding lighting, under this or that angle and distance will not be exactly the same bit of landing strip seen from the same viewpoint but in full sunlight. Determined and indeterminate, precise and imprecise, specific and general. To believe that film or photographic documents showing *The Reality* exist is pure naïvety. The link with reality is more one of degree and of quality than of a perfectly measurable quantity in the object or in the beholder. A relative objectivity is certainly obtainable through photographic technique; that total objectivity can be shown in a single image is a point of view of the mind. Examining the whole of Martins' work reveals how he gets to the heart of the indeterminate, the fleeting, the transient and the unstable. Even though the images have a disturbing obduracy about them, it is the fleeting temporality that we see. The finished image is short and immediate; its fabrication was long and very slow. Which make Martins' work more of a document on the possibilities and constraints of the photographic medium than a

documentary restoration of a ready-made reality, which Martins calls, in a larger context, “meta-photographs²”.

Although preferring a “constructionist” approach – reality is essentially of our own conception - , Martins is not a photographer who denies this reality or who goes along with the generalised simulacra. To be vague is not to be false, improbable, unseen or, even less, mystical. Not being able to completely explain or describe the universe, or even the functions of the human brain, is not the same as not understanding them at all. All the places and spaces that Martins photographed exist, can be found in space and time, but have been treated in such a way as to render them almost imaginary, products of the mind and the camera. It’s not the case, however, as any artificiality and photographic simulations have been rigorously removed. The factitious character is found rather in the things themselves, like the houses and terrain in *A Metaphysical Survey of British Dwellings* where, even if the title goes some way in explaining the pictures, we are dumbfounded when faced with what is a veritable décor (a military training terrain) of which the form of the photographic presentation rubs off on other series. In this context we can ponder over *Reluctant Monoliths*, *Ruins of the Gilded Age*, *The Rate of Convergence of Two Opposing System Trajectories*; are these not all part of an enormous scenography where nothing of what we call reality survives? Comparing *A Metaphysical Survey of British Dwellings* with certain from *Ruins of a Gilded Age*, including some of the landscapes, we can no longer clearly distinguish the décor facades from the real buildings. Just how far does reality extend in the form of décor, up until what point can we consider ourselves as decorative elements in this theatre of the world? Quoting Rem Koolhaas on the “non place spaces”, especially when he relates them to his own research on “wastelands”, Martins appears to empty reality of all those elements, structures or signs which allow us to find our bearings, keeping only space, not nothingness or the non-existent, but vagueness, this non place which has, however, space to spread out in. There’s not much, in fact practically nothing, but the point is that it can be shown and that we can be close to vanishing without totally disappearing.

This twist towards artificiality which Martins gives to his photographs spreads contagiously over the simple objects which make up our environment, so that if we accept the true vagueness of reality, and then project even more vagueness with our scrutiny, everything can appear distorted, yet however well built and constructed it cannot be real. Yet none of this is a simulacrum or a substitute for reality. If we abandon the theory of simulacra and the virtual for that of vagueness, then in the end things turn out more ... precise. For

² Cf. Edgar Martins, *How can I see what I see, until I know what I know?*
http://www.edgarmartins.com/html/09_07_19_how_i_can_see_01.html

vagueness is, so to speak, the antithesis of simulacra and falsehood, as it claims a philosophical realism where things are themselves vague outside of our representation. The question is to find out whether vagueness is inherent, or not, in beings and things. This is what the series *Dwarf Exoplanets and other Sophisms* explores, placing us at the centre of a dialectic between document and fiction, the objects which we see being both scientific presentations and transformations of objects (e.g. colours, filters, enlargements) so that they become precisely objects of observation for us. There are numerous objects in our environment which we cannot see; if we did not have certain instruments we could not hear whales sing or the lower frequencies of an elephant's trumpeting, nor could we see certain light like ultraviolet rays or even certain shapes in intergalactic space. Astronomers know that images of the cosmos are not realistic but, at least, sufficient to relate to the reality as described by physics, or that very often those magnificent colours seen in interstellar space are invisible from another viewpoint. We know a lot of very precise things about the universe but this precision remains, nevertheless, vague.

Certain pictures in Martins' series resemble little animals, tiny organisms, filaments or cosmic fragments, but we're not quite sure what it is all about. Martins' photographs have often been compared to abstract constructivist works, rather like De Stijl or the Minimalists, and we could establish a connection with Kandinsky's canvases here, all the more so as the painter is known to have sought inspiration from scientific photographs of the universe and images taken with a microscope. Nevertheless, Kandinsky's written aesthetics tries to render invisible that which cannot be perceived by the body's eyes. Martins, on the other hand, tries to convey the underside of the visible, or better, that which surrounds the visible, that in which it is wrapped and wound around in, that which creates a halo of vagueness, that which indicates the presence of the visible. If we need a metaphor or a Bachelardian reverie which develops out of matter, then the series *The Diminishing Present* shows certain images dominated by clouds and mist, a thick *sfumato* which nearly obliterates all shape and reminds us of the critic William Hazlitt's famous comment on J.W.M. Turner's last paintings: "Paintings of nothing, and very like." In this sense, Martins' vision of vagueness, like Peirce's, depends on the absence of context and an established use, in this case an already established and/or predetermined aesthetic use and context. A work of art, to be considered as such, should be interpreted by aiming for the profoundest possible understanding of its vagueness, and even if the understanding/interpretation remains incomplete (indeterminate), it will contain enough elements and sense to be understood (determined). Martins plunges us into a seemingly contradictory multitude of details, information and meanings as to dilute the contexts and aesthetic uses. We are lost in vagueness.

The distortion that he applies to his pictures' space-time is the most striking example of the voluntary loss of our normal cultural and psychophysical markers. We very often have the impression of being in another space-time, no less real as it is photographed in its own places and situations, thus extending the "non place space" by "non duration time". According to this series, and to the photographs in the series, space seems to absorb time, and sometimes time swallows up space like a black hole, but we only see the external repercussions without having access to the process. The external ramifications are present in the different matter: sand, stone, soil, walls, light and deepest black. Their haptical aspect is the key to their apprehension, especially when optical aids are no longer able to hold their scrutiny, to explore or visually understand what it is all about. The ingurgitation of these photographs and of their content is transformed by the sensation of actually touching their matter, a haptical feeling which impacts on the space-time of the things in the images and on the space-time of our own aesthetic experience. Touching space and time is quite different to seeing or hearing them. It might seem strange to be able to touch this immaterial thing or notion that we call time, but being ourselves temporal beings conscious of the flux within and around us, by examining Martins' photographs which succeed in keeping a certain haptical dimension, we appear to be able to touch, feel and weigh up the temporal fabric of the picture. More exactly – given that every photographic or film image is objectively the acquisition of a portion of space-time -, to touch the time that it took to obtain the final image that we have before us. It is as if the time needed to take the shot had been condensed into a single slice of time now rendered visible. Duration, by nature, vanishes continuously but we know that that which is present in the picture is no longer and yet it is there, captured by the camera, as if expressed in layers, in thicknesses, in superimposed strata of time that we could stroke with our hand. Time's material matter seems at once extremely near and distant, escaping our grasp as we approach it, indicating an itinerary through the vagueness of our propinquity to things.

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