

The Accidental Theorist

'Les vrai paradis sont les paradis que nous avons perdu', Marcel Proust.

A visual image soon generates thought. The photographer produces something seen and something to *be* seen. The viewer reflects on what is shown and how it is pictured – on the quality of their own seeing. Independent of its maker, the photograph produces a new space for thinking, a space for thinking *through*, and a depicted *condition* to be comprehended: the Photographer – the Accidental Theorist.

The imagery of 'The Diminishing Present' is less a set of pictures than a series of moments in which spaces, mechanisms, signs, objects and events in the instrumentalist, modified landscape of the contemporary order have become independent of causation or function. It resembles a set of location shots for unmade films from lost scenarios. It constitutes a landscape without human figures, seen as though composed in the eye of the security camera - a seeing without a subject – of a landscape already arranged for surveillance. It evokes the coda completing Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*, with its new residential zones filled by autonomous machines and alien structures, or Doug Aitken's post-human video landscapes. But it is something more.

This landscape is actual, familiar, always there, and yet imaginary, unseen. It is the other place, which is always *this* place, in *these* things; it is there when our backs are turned, while we sleep, or as we drive past in the unconsciousness of speed, in the half-life of routine – it is the landscape that survives our absence. It is there in the geometry and darkness of empty motorways at night; in street lights illuminating only themselves; in a sleeping suburban street which the sleepers will never see; in the encounter with a quietly burning car abandoned among bushes, a rope of black smoke curling up into a white sky, as if part of some half-forgotten ceremony; in the prospect of a dark house with blind windows; of a soccer pitch devoid of players; in unvisited parks with their pearl coloured architectures of mist; in woods of trees from the other side of the planet.

'The Diminishing Present' is a photography of poised turbulence; full of stillness and silence yet haunted by mobility, by a passing that is not registered as speed but as intangibility and uncertainty, marked by referents that are forever

unreachable, never arrived at. It passes through a landscape arranged to be passed through.

The imagery is committed to the beauty of contingencies, to the unexplained occurrence, to small intensities and fortuitous transformations. It offers encounters with a time suspended before or after events; with crepuscular, in-between places and night spaces where things are freed from their daytime uses, when, caught out in the car headlights, functional objects metamorphose momentarily into poetic events. It floats, free of the need to weight itself with purpose or explanation and in this it displays a quality of 'lightness' described by Italo Calvino as the calm identification with the fragility and transience at the heart of things, with the recognition that the world continues without us and cannot ultimately be restrained by the meanings we give to it.ⁱ

This lightness may be a release from the weight of the world, but it reunites us with the world in other ways. While its imagery is poised on the edge of abstraction, 'The Diminishing Present' denotes the presence of something unsettling, a psychological presence in the work: agoraphobia, vulnerability, the possibility of danger, the actuality of solitude, the uncertainty over what is significant in things: that is, it reveals a world as seen by a stranger, an outsider – by Edgar Martins, perhaps, or an authorial position marked as 'edgar martins', the Portuguese photographer losing himself in the English midlands – and for Julia Kristeva, being 'lost' is the precondition for poetic production. Think of the similarity with the work of other recent émigré photographers of space: Josef Koudelka's bleak spaces, Humberto Rivas' abandoned streets and interiors, the uncanny nightscapes of Rut Blees Luxembour and Effie Paleologolou. I use the word 'uncanny'. Like Martins, all portray the territory of strangerhood, one struck by the psychic condition of *das Unheimlich*/ the uncanny, as much an interior domain as an external one: 'the uncanny object or narrative inspires dread not because it forces an encounter with the outside, but rather with the displaced representation of the inside. Hence the unhomey, (the *Unheimlich*), and the foreigner are the self's own others...' ⁱⁱ

There is a floating world quality in Martins' work, both here and in other of his projects. It lies not in the style or structure of the image but in the way 'it' looks at things. The delicate strangeness, the way objects and events are seen as if from the point of view of a subject both there and nowhere, a picturing that recalls certain concepts behind visual practices in Chinese and Japanese traditions, such as the

Japanese notion of *s'unyata*, meaning 'impermanence', 'blankness', 'nihility'.ⁱⁱⁱ This quality can, I think, be associated with a form of homelessness that does not seek to return home - a dissident type of nostalgia. In the seventeenth century a Swiss doctor dealing with a condition once called, *la maladie du pays* (homesickness), invented the word *nostalgia* from two Greek words, *nostos* (home) and *algia* (longing). Svetlana Boym proposes that while there is the longing for the return to the absent mythical place, *nostos*, there is also the longing for longing itself, *algia* – it is, she says, citing, Susan Stewart, “enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself”.^{iv} It is this kind of desire that is expressed in Martins' photography through the sense of permanent mobility, the forever distant referent, and the lightness of touch and presence – finally at home nowhere else than in itself and in the process of its own making.

'The Diminishing Present' might additionally be regarded as a form of documentation which purchases on a particular location, an undervalued, overlooked and by-passed part of England, a blank region between major cities but not deeply rural, and not exactly suburban and lacking much promotable natural scenery. Yet, criss-crossed by major highways, a million slip roads, covered with light industry, landscaped industrial parks, out of town corporate head offices, new towns and residential estates, out-of-town shopping centres, and scraps of besieged countryside, it exemplifies the global park many of us increasingly live in: the diffused city, formed of stretched in-between-spaces, nature modified by states and corporations, places formed of non-places, terminals rather than centres, interchangeable with so many other places, where there is geography but no history, where place seems to attract no memory, no depth of being – at once provincial and transnational.

But, it goes further than some kind of visual cultural geography. 'The Diminishing Present' reveals the condition these places at once embody and symbolise. It is a photographic poetics of space. It refuses to condemn its subject matter, escaping the commonplace dystopic voice by intensifying our engagement in these new environments, which as a consequence requires us to *notice*, to engage aesthetically and, potentially, morally, in this 'underimagined'^v world with its estranging and contradictory beauty.

CARS

In Bogotá, Colombia, a friend of mine attended a private school run by North American priests. One day his year teacher, a Father Gerhard from North Dakota, showed the class a photograph of a car crash in the USA. Inside the mangled wreckage the dead forms of four teenagers, two boys and two girls, were clearly visible. The priest asked them to look long and hard at the picture. Then he told them that these young people had been drinking and perhaps worse when they crashed; and that, although he could not know the mind of God, these four youngsters had most probably died in mortal sin and if so must now be in hell. This then, he said, is almost certainly a photograph of the damned. After the class was over and everybody had gone to lunch my friend walked up to the priest's desk and looked again at the picture he'd left lying there. After some time peering closely into the photograph he realised that, just faintly but undeniably, all four dead American teenagers were smiling.

THE PARK

The English urban park, a secure public space, a Victorian emblem of civic calm, well-being and certainty. In Antonioni's 1966 portrait of London, *Blow Up*, it becomes *park sinister* - an uncertain place, a place of illusion, where the meaning of what is seen has become unclear. The park was a fragment of a bosky English Eden, a redemptive space in the town. The language of Eden is transparent, needs no translation - what is heard there, what is seen there, is the truth. But this park, the park in *Blow Up*, *park sinister*, is a wood full of secrets and furtive assignations where, *eros* is, unless appearances deceive, undone by *thanatos*, a place where you are watched, stalked, betrayed, even murdered - a crime scene, where photography, instead of establishing truth, manufactures uncertainty.

HOME

Home defines and encloses an interior spatial and cultural order; it puts a boundary around itself, but as Heidegger, writes, boundaries are places "from which something begins its presencing". The exterior world, the very thing the home defines itself against, is present within it, haunting it, shaping it; home is in effect preoccupied and in some sense *occupied* by the outside.

Home is idealised as stable, independent of the tumultuous mobility beyond it. Yet as the routes that travellers construct end and begin in a home, the home is in principle and in reality a point on a journey, it's the idea and the actuality of home that make it

possible to define most kinds of travel at all. In this sense the home is always on the "threshold of travel" ^{vi} it has part of its being beyond itself as part of travelling. Home, therefore, is a contingency, an effect of the outside; it is a transparent and permeable construction as much as it is an essential and private enclosure.

'Philosophy is really homesickness', says Novalis, 'it is the urge to be at home everywhere', Gyorgy Luckacs, The Theory of the Novel.

THE ROAD

"Art is the desire to be elsewhere", Friedrich Nietzsche.

The road is part of instrumental space, part of the economic order that conveys us, and contains us, liberates us and determines us. The road and the journey are at the same time part of the imaginary - metaphors.

"...the metaphor is homeless, a wanderer. It gathers its strength in a continual process of displacement and transference (*metapherein*), in always finding its message from without and above...Perpetually alive, incomplete, manifold and alive, the metaphor not only characterizes a movement of thought, it also stands as an analogue for what exists. The metaphor is an analogical expression for the dynamic flow of appearances themselves – what Nietzsche calls the Will to Power". David B.Allison in, Allison (ed), The New Nietzsche, MIT Press, 1985

FOREST

'The whole of nature is a metaphor for the human mind', Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The forest carries opposing meanings. The Germanic and Celtic peoples resisted the Romans in the forest and the Romans cleared them without sentiment. In Teutonic/Anglo-Saxon traditions the forest was wilderness, a refuge for outlaws and dangerous animals, a place where one might become lost, find only confusion. And yet early on it was thought to most embody natural beauty and vigour. Mythical Merry England was a lost near-pagan forest utopia held in common but besieged by mythical Norman landowners and later by the entirely real and cold calculations of the early modern state and economy. Soon after the wilderness was more commonly pictured as a 'treeless wasteland'. Later the Puritans feared wild, uncultivated nature, then the Romantics revered its 'wild sublimity' and saw in it a domain of spiritual redemption. All leave their traces in the mentality of the present.

The woodland is supposedly part of England's national patrimony; yet England is a country of vanished forests, its trees depleted for centuries to service naval

power, building and industry – England unmade itself to make itself. There is no unmodified nature remaining.

Our view of nature may now be ironic, dystopic, anguished. We might prefer to call it post-nature. These trees are Eucalyptus, native to Australia and as common as Australian soaps - global trees, they grow easily, suck up the moisture and permit little forest floor life. And yet even in these stretches of planned woodland the very loss of meaning attached to nature, and nature's indifference to human projects, are what makes the forest again a place of refuge where things for a time are free from the burdens of meaning or purpose.

SUBURBIA

1. The city is subdued in the suburb; the country urbanised.
2. Suburbs contain outcrops of nature, a few remnants of the rural world they overtook and absorbed: a lane with a country name, an old church, the landscapes that lie beneath the golf courses.
3. Gradually each suburb is encircled by the city. It moves further out. It fears crime. It craves space and new locks for the door.
4. Of course there is a social history of the suburbs, but they seem to have none; even suburbs 50 years old feel as if suspended in an unchanging present. 'Machines for the abolition of time'.
5. Suburbs have strong associations with sleeping: the 'sleepy suburb', 'dormitory towns' and so on.
6. They have strong associations with dreams, dreams of consumerism, dreams of leaving, dreams of sexual affairs. They tend towards solipsism.
7. Suburbs are haunted not by the dead but the invisible living.
8. Suburbs and seriality: serial dwellings, serial products, serials on TV, serial monogamy, films about suburban serial killers. They also tend towards conformism.
9. The suburb has triumphed; the suburban shopping mall, cinema multiplex, leisure and sports complexes means the suburb has become its own centre – the city is becoming suburbanised.
10.

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ⁱ Italo Calvino, Six Memos for the Next Millennium, Cape, London, 1996.

ⁱⁱ Syed Manzurul Islam, The Ethics of Travel: From Marco Polo to Kafka, Manchester UP, 1996. 86

ⁱⁱⁱ Norman Bryson, 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field', in Hal Foster, ed. Vision and Visuality, Bay Press, Seattle, 1988.

^{iv} Svetlana Boym, 'Estrangement as a Lifestyle...' in S. Rubin Suleiman, ed, Exile and Creativity, Duke UP, Durham, 1996; Susan Stewart, On Longing, Duke UP, 1993. 241.

^v The 'underimagined' is a term taken from Will Self's short story, 'Tough, tough toys for tough, tough boys'.

^{vi} Syed Manzurul Islam, The Ethics of Travel: From Marco Polo to Kafka, Manchester UP, 1996