

Chiquita Room

THE APPEARANCE OF A

DISTANCE

LOUIS PORTER
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IMMEASURABILITY BETWEEN US

Distance: between us and the stars, between you and me, us and nature, within ourselves, between 1900 and now, between here and there. Distance is a spatial quality – so far away – and a matter of time – so long ago. Long ago, light proceeded from a faraway star and hit photographic paper. Now that image is 100 years old and we are exchanging glances, imaginative or otherwise. Distance is negated but preserved too.

What is the great art of making things seem closer together? The first cameras pointed to skies – moon, sun, stars. Motionless, as an effect of distance, celestial bodies slowly deposited themselves as luminescent imprints. The far away, off-world was projected, thrillingly, into the nearness of a home photo album: moon placed on sideboard. Distance was overcome, but something unbreachable remained, strange and unsettling. The detailed camera-eye scan of a sun presented to a human eye overreaches. Stars, pinpricks of glitter, delineations of human fate or glimmers of existence beyond banal worldly concerns, are caught for reflection. Walter Benjamin said of early photography that it was auratic. The face of the loved one – as much as a sun – peering through a mist of imprecise registrations participates in playing a trick on spacetime, conjuring up something unfathomable.

What is aura, actually? In his first notes on aura, scribbled on a San Pellegrino branded café receipt, Benjamin describes aura as the perceived return of a look across a distance of time or space or between otherwise unrelated beings¹. Distance can be breached by the loving gaze of the collector, frequenter of flea markets and kerbside rejectamenta. Aura appears when a collector falls in love with a chunk of inanimacy, any object, pulling it out of the receding distance of time, re-placing it in another space. Such ‘anarchistic, destructive’ impulses, as Benjamin defines them in his review ‘In Praise of the Doll’, compel a collector’s dreamy eye towards something that has been rescued in a ‘wilfully subversive protest against the typical, classifiable’. Benjamin’s² dreaming eye dives into the cavernous distance encapsulated in an auratic object, ‘witness of its epoch’. Aura pulsates in widened eyes, ‘just as we still see the brightness of a long-extinguished star’, he writes in a final review³. Elsewhere, Benjamin argues that aura is remaindered in the modern age, expunged by technology. But it never disappears. This fuzz, this aureole – shimmer around a daguerretyped face, exclusion zone around an oil painting, confected and canned aura of a film star,

¹ Reproduced in *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, ed. Ursula Mann et al, Verso, London, 2007.

² *Walter Benjamin's Archive*, p. 5.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. III, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1982, pp. 591-595.

faked and fabulated charisma of a dictator – persists in various places and times. Benjamin's definition of aura is, after all, most famously articulated through the immemorial experience of sunlight on a summer's day in the countryside, eyes aware of perception's conditions, while tracing a horizon through atmospheric haze or discerning a branch's shadow on self.

Benjamin conjured aura too in drug experimentation. His hashish protocols detail his 'toe dance of reason'⁴. From the early 1920s, he sought to banish Newton's mechanistic, mathematical enlightenment physics, in which experience is reduced to a zero point⁵. Intoxicatory experiments flood language with warped experience, generating neologisms to express uncommon, unconventional textures. 'Eyebread' is Benjamin's word for cakes so perfect they need not be consumed and 'pate de Lyon' reformulates as 'lion paste'⁶. Such poetics of experience un-times and dis-places self, language and world.

Auratic distance, spanning times, spaces, possibilities held in expanded experience, cherishes polarities, far points, all that does not touch and without which there is only the positivism of scientific form, ruled lines, analytical modelling, measurement. Rational mantras un-see and un-know as they apprehend in preset ways. Meddled with by aura, overlaid, undercut, undermined by this vague quality, by a spacetime that is breached and maintained simultaneously, something unmeasurable and immeasurable looms into view.

When Michael Faraday undertook his experiments with a candle flame in 1848, it was still possible for a scientist to evade the protocols of rationalistic scientific investigation. He addressed the children at the Christmas Lectures at the Royal Institution as 'we philosophers', delighting them with explosions and flashing lights, as he explained combustion, carbon in the luminescent zone, the hidden role of hydrogen⁷. What science now forswears the typical and classifiable, in favour of something uncontained and immeasurable? Or measurable according to other scales and schema? Adorno speaks of a Cartesian ambition, in which 'items of knowledge' are 'pinned down and identified like things – photographable'⁸. But what is a photograph actually?

On 17 April 1912, a solar eclipse passed over Paris. Eugène Atget photographed spectators, faces illuminated in waning glow, an exposure to transitory light, just as photography is a brief exposure to light. Something connects them, sun and image, across time and space. This photograph, shrugged off by Atget as simply

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, Harvard, Cambridge, Mass, 2006, p. 20.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', *Selected Writings 1*, Harvard, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, p. 101.

⁶ Benjamin, *On Hashish*, p. 60/p.121.

⁷ Michael Faraday, *Course of Six Lectures on the Chemical History of a Candle*, Griffin, Bohn & Co, London 1861.

⁸ T.W. Adorno, Hegel: *Three Studies*, MIT, Cambridge, Mass., 1993, p. 100.

a document of a weather event, was used by Man Ray, in 1926, for the cover of *La Révolution surréaliste*. Something resonant emanated from this encounter between crowds and cosmos, rays transported through space, image through time. Klee saw this solar eclipse and reworked it as watercolour in 1918. His eclipse has aura – the sun is negated but its light appears as corona around the black hole of the sun's occlusion. What other encounters between immensity of world and smallness of self are possible? And what scale measures it? What traces of time to come are patterned in the stars or traced on the palm of hand, cipher languages we barely speak, but which dreams or doodles access? When do we see the face of the man in the moon? Was it ever photographed or only dreamt and animated? Does the sun have a face, or is it our face, touched by the rays that traverse immense distance and burn us?

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ACTIVITIES

Thursday 19 September, 6 p.m.

Opening of the exhibition at Chiquita Room.

Thursday 19 September, 4 p.m.

Friday 20 September, 12 p.m.

Saturday 26 October, 12 p.m.

Florilegium (Personal Anthologies)

Performance for which Louis Porter will produce a small collection of personalised artist books that invoke the idea of florilegium, the medieval tradition of combining fragments of material to form literary anthologies.

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