

Sitting on a
stone in a field
a while

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*Forming an image of the sublime and how it can exist
in designed space.*

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Contents

Introduction	7
Natural Eternity	15
The Forest	17
Environmental Mirrors	18
The Pendulum	19
The Essential Quality of Volumes	20
Oval House	22
My Exaggerated Universe	25
Spatial Signs	27
The Fire	30
Sitting on a stone in a field a while	32
The Whale	33
Deer in the Headlights	34
Granted Awareness	36
Snow	38
Emersion	40
The Highway	42
The Absent-minded Gaze	44
Oval House pt. 2	47
The Mundane Ritual	49
The Labyrinth	51
Endnotes	55

Introduction

On the sublime:

“Moments of mute encounter with all that exceeds our comprehension”

– Simon Morley.¹

“In broad terms, whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and point of comparison disappear, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime. As such, the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits.”

– Philip Shaw.²

“The feeling of the Sublime is, therefor, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain these is for us a law.”

– Kant.¹

Many philosophers, writers, artists and others have tried to define the sublime, from the beginning of our era up to this day. Many different definitions have been given. In my research I found that there are four approaches to the sublime that seem to still dominate the discourse today, originating from respectively Longinus, Burke, Kant and Schiller.

Longinus, a teacher of rhetoric in ancient Greece, is the writer of the first known source on the sublime in the first century AD: a treatise called *On the Sublime*. This work focused mainly on the sublime in spoken text – how could one evoke a feeling of the sublime within their audience? The focus lays on the heroic act, which could induce transcendence of reality. The heroic act of the writer and speaker that is: he should have “great thoughts, strong emotions” and should use “certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction and dignified word arrangement.” The writer was to discover true nobility in their art by confronting the unknown.^{1,3}

Edmund Burke, an Irish political theorist and philosopher, established the idea of the sublime as an experience of shock and awe and as a destabilising force. He applied this idea mostly to the concept of nature: nature so vast that it could not be just beautiful – it was

also thrilling, fear-inducing. To him the sublime could be found in these moments of fear and delight.^{1,4}

Immanuel Kant stated in his *Critique of Judgement* that the notion of the sublime reveals a reality that is fundamentally indeterminate, undecidable and unrepresentable. The feeling of the sublime comes from a lack of limits, and with that comes an inability to grasp that which we encounter. This awareness of lack causes an awareness of, or perhaps confrontation with, our own limitations.¹

Friedrich Schiller saw the sublime as ecstatic experience. He continues on Kant and Burke's theories on the sublime – the mix of terror and beauty, the lack of limits – but involves it more with the idea of the self: the absolute greatness we can sense in nature is within us.¹

The discourse has been continued in the 20th century, with Barnett Newman and Jean-Francois Lyotard as important figures. They put the focus more and more not just on the awe and wonder, but on the terror that is part of the sublime feeling. And – it is no longer about accurately depicting that which is normally associated with the feeling, which is natural scenery. It is rather about the feeling in itself and how it can be induced. Examples

of this are to be found in the abstract expressionism of Barnett Newman himself, Mark Rothko and later in the work of James Turrell.¹

After it had been quiet on the subject for a while, the discourse seems to have been kicked off again by Newman when he published an article called “The Sublime is Now” in 1948. In this article he discusses the struggle of artists between “notions of beauty and desire for sublimity”. In their attempts to reach exaltation – the sublime – they focus too much on perfect form. Although this happened more directly in ancient Greek and Renaissance art, in modern art this is still continued, although the value of beauty has shifted. According to Newman, the solution to this problem would be to completely deny that art has anything to do with beauty at all and to “reassert mans natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions.” The products of this should be self-evident images that are based on feelings instead of imagery.^{1,5,6} This article influenced Lyotard in his discussion of the post-modern sublime towards the end of the 20th century. He shifts “The sublime is now” to “Now the sublime is like this”, the “this” being the painting. He continues on the theories of Kant and Burke (although Burke is

too surrealistic for his taste) and redefines the sublime as the feeling that indicates the limits of reason and representation.^{7, 8} The sublime is not the presentation of the unrepresentable, but the presentation that the unrepresentable exists.⁹

While reading about the topic of the sublime, these are the views on the subject that struck me most. The view on what the sublime exactly is slowly developed and seems to have gotten more and more refined over the years. I hope this brief summary will give the reader an insight into the background of the sublime.

One conclusion that I have drawn from this discourse that spans two millennia, is that the notion of the sublime is a subjective matter. Here, I use the phrase “notion of” because when I talk about the sublime in the following text, I don’t directly refer to the discourse of the sublime – I rather talk about the sublime feeling. This is the feeling of being overwhelmed by something so vast and endless that we cannot fully comprehend what we see. This sublime can be encountered in nature, but also, for example, in monumental architecture or expressive painting. The feeling, when described, is definitely one that is recognizable, but what exactly constitutes that

feeling might differ from person to person.

In the following texts I will look at moments where I recognize the sublime in space – either through memory (within myself) or through reference (outside of myself). The moments within myself, I describe. The moments outside of myself, I reflect on. By looking at these moments, I try to form an image of how I define the feeling of the sublime, and how this feeling can exist within, or by means of (designed) space.

Sitting on a stone in a field a while

Natural Eternity

The elements have been on my mind. This meaning, the four classical natural elements: fire, water, earth and air. Architect Peter Zumthor talks about them in his book *Thinking Architecture*: *“I am convinced that real things do exist, however endangered they may be. There are earth and water, the light of the sun, landscapes and vegetation.”*¹ The fact that he calls these “real things” is indicative for me. These things are not man-made, hard to affect (without mechanical force) and seem like they have always been there, longer than humankind itself, the term “eternal” comes to mind. And therefore they are: real. They seem to form the original human habitat. And it is probably therefore that people feel a certain connection to these particular elements.

The words ‘eternal feel’ are often used to describe Zumthor’s architecture. This is ascribed to his use of materials: mostly ‘natural’ (stone or wood), and with a certain weight and volume to them. With materiality you can have a go at eternity. Thick, massive,

stone blocks will send a message: this structure will be here for centuries to come, only worn down by natural forces. This is what the material tells the visitor. A thin, wooden structure will tell the opposite: this structure will be taken down in a month, maybe a year. It can't stand the force of time.

Of course, these messages don't have to be true. A bulldozer could come by the next day and take the big stone blocks, not even leaving a trace. And the thin, wooden beams could be reinforced and stuck in a deep concrete foundation, steadily staying in place for years. All this unbeknownst to the spectator, who only knows what he sees.

Zumthors fascination with the "*real things*" shows in his material choices. It speaks to us: I am made out of 'real' things, so I am part of your natural habitat and the eternity that comes with it. Part of this eternity however, is being not man-made. This questioning of the eternity leads to a questioning of the reality. The form of eternal realness that Zumthor seeks is perhaps not achievable in the designed.

The Forest

I think I am in the middle of the forest. My way in is equal in length to my way out. I am alone but it is not quiet. I hear the wind rustling the leaves and branches of the trees. I hear leaves falling. It rained before; the drops are still clinging to the branches and occasionally make their way down. I think I hear birds moving through the low bushes but it could also be some small rodents.

I just got off of the main, paved road leading me through the dunes and am now following a winding path. I have walked this path many times before. It is not paved, the earth is muddy and now and then I have to step over a puddle. There is a height difference between the muddy path and the adjacent grass: people walked away the earth.

The trees that surround me are quite skinny and very tall. They seem to be dispersed equally, although not regularly. They all have their own little territory.

Between the trees smaller vegetation covers the ground, unevenly. Looking up, I see grey clouds through the remaining foliage. The brown, red, yellow and rare green leaves go well with this mix of greys. The air is chilly and humid. My nose and fingertips are numb from the breeze but the walk over here warmed my body. I let the cold air fill my lungs and make little clouds with my breath.

Environmental Mirrors

The movement that the natural elements possess attracts me. In nature one could find the meditative effects of rhythmical movement. The sea rises and lowers, the sun comes up and sets again, the moon and stars follow their set paths. There is non-rhythmical movement too. It can be found in the flames of a fire, the leaves of a tree rustling in the wind, erosion of rock by wind and water. Maybe we find this natural movement meditative because we can relate it to the movement of our body – rhythmical beating of the heart or breathing, non-

rhythmical voluntary muscle movement.

In *Eyes of the Skin*, architect Juhani Pallasmaa talks about the relationship men used to see between the body and the elements: “*The Renaissance system of the senses was related with the image of the cosmic body; vision was correlated to fire and light, hearing to air, smell to vapour, taste to water, and touch to earth.*”² Some of these connections still make sense to us with current scientific knowledge – light waves determining the colours we see, sound waves traveling through air. The other ones perhaps not so much, but we can imagine how our ancestors came to those conclusions. Although not directly related to movement, this fragment shows the tendency of men to seek a connection between their own bodies and their direct natural surroundings. The tendency to look to their natural surrounding for some kind of corporal recognition or explanation. Maybe finding this recognition brings forth a peace.

The Pendulum

A 28-kilogram iron ball is attached to the end of a 67-meter steel wire, suspended from the highest point of

the dome of the Pantheon in Paris. The ball is drawn to the side, off-centre, and released carefully. As the ball swings back and forth, it starts to move in a plane. It rotates in relation to Earth's surface, demonstrating the Earth's spin on its axis.³

A relatively simple construction shows us a complex natural force. One that we are normally not aware of. It makes this force visible, but, at the same time, stands on its own: natural force removed from nature. Even if we didn't know what it represented, we could still appreciate it as an independent object. It has a movement of its own, a specific aesthetic and is designed as a part of a powerful, ancient architecture.

The Essential Quality of Volumes

The 18th-century French architect Étienne-Louis Boullée had a predilection for regular volume: cubes, spheres and cones. We like regular volumes, he says, because we can grasp them, understand them. They represent order.⁴ These are the volumes he works with most in his architecture, which consists mostly of immense, never-build structures that were, at the time, impossible to

construct. The most famous one of his works is probably a cenotaph in honour of Isaac Newton: a gigantic sphere coming out of a flat cylinder, surrounded by cypresses, with an entrance at ground level. On the inside, the sphere recreates an inverse day and night: during the day the sun shines through little holes in the ceiling, creating an accurate star pattern, and during the night an armillary sphere that hangs in the centre radiates a glow, representing the sun.⁵

Of all the regular volumes, Boullée thought the sphere to be the one with the most “advantages”: “(...) *it combines strict symmetry with the most perfect regularity and the greatest possible variety; its form is developed to the fullest extent and is the simplest that exists; its shape is outlined by the most agreeable contour and finally, the light effects that it produces are so beautifully graduated that they could not possibly be softer, more agreeable or more varied.*”⁴

Boullée is convinced that these qualities, which are derived from nature, speak to our senses. He fails to explain how these qualities actually derive from nature. Should volumes derived from nature (and in this case we are talking about touchable, near nature, nature on a human scale) not be irregular, asymmetrical, un-

agreeable, and ungraceful? Where in nature do we find a perfect cube, a perfect sphere? Crooked and misshapen seem to be more accurate adjectives if we look at branches, rocks, even vegetables. To me, the qualities “perfection” and “order” seem entirely man-made. Boullée escapes this question by stating that men cannot create anything new – everything already exists, men just put things together. With this reasoning, everything must derive from nature.

Of course he does have a point – although his reasoning might be wrong. Regular volumes are very satisfying to look at, and it might well be because they are easy for us to grasp. They represent order, even if this order does not stem from nature.

Oval House

The receptionist steps out from behind her desk and gestures us to follow her. We do. She is not comfortable with speaking English, not many people we have met here are. She leads us through the halls of the museum,

to the back and up, and opens a small steel door. The door opens to a little platform. Next to it, a single small cabin on rails is waiting for us. The receptionist shows us the button to call for it, a small notice in Japanese signs indicates it too. We step into the cabin, with the four of us and her we just fit. She closes the door and pushes a button and with a jerk we start moving. First horizontal, then slowly more and more vertical up the mountain. We meander around trees and rocks. The further we go, the more of the view we get to see. We see part of the island: the road that goes down to the harbour, on it's way stopping in two small villages, all embedded in dry vegetation: brown trees with brown leafs. We see the sea with the neighbouring islands rising from it. Small, dark humps of earth break through the reflection of the sun on the water. The cabin comes to a halt, again with a jerk. We get out on an identical platform (square tiles, pebbles in concrete). We pass through a narrow concrete

hallway. Then there are two big windows, floor to ceiling, on both sides of us. On the left side we see a waterfall coming down, into a pond enclosed by concrete walls. I recognize it from pictures I have seen in my architecture books. The stream of water flows underneath us and we see it fall down a second time on our right side. We continue up three steps of stairs and turn a corner. The receptionist leads us into an oval courtyard. A pond, also oval, is situated in the middle of the courtyard. The water in it flows over the edge, continuously. The sound of clattering water reverberates on the walls. The front doors of the surrounding residencies open onto the space we are in and we enter one of them. The receptionist leaves us. We walk through the living room to the terrace. We now find out that the oval building is situated on a square platform on top of the mountain. The sea stretches out as far as we can see, mountainous islands pop out of the water here and there. Some bigger, some smaller, some

seem fertile, others desolate. The sun floats just above the water, visibly sinking.

In the morning a thick haze has settled over the island. The islands in the distance have been reduced to shadows.

My exaggerated universe

In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard describes how we get connected to certain spaces by daydreaming in those spaces: the house allows one to dream in peace. The dwelling-places in which we daydream take, from that moment on, a place in our daydreams themselves, causing us to relive those places again and again. They remain with us.

Later in the book he states that the daydreams bring us “elsewhere”, while staying in the same place. This elsewhere could be, as described, based on a former home or dwelling-place. It could also be based on the grandeur of natural experiences: “*When this elsewhere is in natural surroundings, that is, when it is not lodged in the houses of the past, it is immense. (...) Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion*

*of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but that starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.”*⁶

Most of the spaces that I dream of are not real. I have never been in a real forest, yet the forest in my mind is huge, ancient and endless. I have been at the sea, but the sea in my mind exceeds reality. Every time I stand at the shore, overlooking the ocean, the view is spectacular, but not as spectacular as I imagined it to be. My sky is bluer and more infinite, my water is deeper and more dangerous. This is part of the exaggerated universe that I created for myself. In this universe attics shelter me, fields expose me, I gather in circles and swaying pendulums hypnotize me. It is an ideal world, constructed out of real experiences, and idolized memories of those same experiences.

Spatial Signs

Something that is left out (of a drawing, model or text) can trigger the imagination of the spectator (or, I could also say: user, looker, dweller, target). For example: scale, colour, borders, perspective or context could be left out, or not made explicit, in a drawing, model or text. When certain elements are left undefined, the spectator has to fill in these elements for themselves to get a complete image. They do this with information (image, sound, thought) that they gather from their own experience. The spectator finishes what you feed them with their own knowledge. They make use of the notion of signs. As Edward T. Hall puts it in *Hidden Dimensions*: “*Both the painter and the writer know that the essence of their craft is to provide the reader, the listener or the viewer with properly selected cues, that are not only congruent with the events depicted but consistent with the unspoken language and culture of their audience*”.⁷ We could say the same about the architect.

The definition of a sign: “*an object, quality or event whose presence or occurrence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else.*”⁸

The sign informs the viewer: this is what you see, but there is something more. A sign is an abstraction. Without mentioning or showing all the details, the spectator knows what this certain object, quality or presence means and what to expect next. Consequently, they finish what they see or hear with what they know by experience. The spectator is triggered to use their imagination, and therefore to use their own personal experience, memory and thoughts. This makes the entire happening (of seeing a sign and interpreting it) one that speaks to the spectator in a personal way.

Is there a way to apply this method of signing to the three-dimensional space? An abstraction of a space could trigger the spectator (or user of the space) to use their imagination in a way similar to how we described before. The spectator is unconsciously reminded of another space they have previously visited and have a similar experience in this one.

To give some examples: two slant walls coming together as a roof above our heads may remind us of a primitive form of shelter, or an attic we remember from our first home. An object in the middle of a circle tells us to focus on that object: this too could remind us of an ancient architecture: the house centred on the

hearth, temples centred on an object of worship. (This in relation to the theory of Gottfried Semper, who talks about the four elements of architecture in his book with the same name. At the start of all, there is the hearth. The fire brings people together: for the warmth, the food and the light. To protect this fire and this gathering, we need the other three elements: the roof, the enclosure and the mount.)⁹ Two slant walls leaning away from each other could evoke the feeling of standing in a valley, with rocky walls rising up on both sides, or perhaps of a stadium, with surrounding tribunes.

I think of these three-dimensional abstractions as spatial signs. They are abstractions of spaces people are familiar with by experience. All form of detail is left out; the spaces are presented as pure as possible, consisting only of solid volumes and planes. By not naming the different parts of the space after their possible function or the possible action the spectator/user of the space could perform with them, they are completely open for interpretation of the spectator/user. To give an example: I would not say “chairs are placed in a circle” but take the abstraction of this phenomenon and show a circular shape of which the outer circle is slightly heightened.

This method of spatial signs could be used to

evoke specific feelings through the method of designed space, feelings that the spectator experienced before elsewhere; also in non-designed space - perhaps we could even use it to evoke a memory of the sublime.

The Fire

This is the first night of the two weeks we will spend together. We are still a small group; the rest will arrive later tonight or in the following days. We don't know exactly who will join us and when. We meet up at the building that will be our residence for the duration of our time together, an old warehouse. It is mostly empty now. A concrete floor rests on concrete columns that, on their turn, rest on a concrete floor again. In the basement there are bricks: the floor, the walls, ending up in arches carrying the ceiling. The building breathes cold air.

We build a fire outside. Four bricks around a pile of scrap wood, some dry leaves underneath. It fires up quickly.

With five or six people, we gather around the fire. We are quite equally dispersed. We sit on the brick pavement, first on our knees, then with our legs to the side, finally with our feet towards the fire. The wind decides the direction of both the smoke and the heat, and as soon as the wind shifts, we shift. Either to get warmer or to get out of the heat or to get fresh air. Occasionally somebody rearranges the pieces of wood or throws in a nearby-laying branch from the tree growing behind us, the one we are nearly sitting under.

Time passes. Sometimes we talk, but mostly we are silent and watch the fire. Eventually, the fire dies on its own. We are getting sleepy and don't wait for the end. When the last pieces of wood, now charcoal, are still smouldering, we get up, one by one, and move inside. We prepare our sleeping bags.

Sitting on a stone in a field a while

There is something about sitting down and looking at something for a while that allows us to think. A painting, an object, a landscape. Why does, for example sitting by a fire and watching the flames dance around each other calm us? Or sitting at the edge of a beach, watching the waves crash into the sand over and over?

For one part, this is about taking the time to appreciate one single view or object: to look at all the separate parts, to not skip over any details. By taking the time to look, we might come closer to understanding what we're looking at. For another part, it is about not looking. Once the initial impression of the image has settled in and afterwards, all the details have been studied, one might forget to look actively. One looks (or stares), but does not consciously process what they see. This allows for their mind to float off. It wanders to other subjects that are either triggered by the view or already present in their thoughts. At this point, the brain does not receive any new visual impulses: the sight is familiar. This familiar sight, the initial point of focus, now only functions as a comfortable ocular distraction.

The abstract expressionist painter Agnes Martin said about her work: “*When people go to the ocean, they like to see it all day... Anyone who can sit on a stone in a field a while can see my painting.*”¹⁰ There is something intriguing about wanting your work to possess the same quality as the ocean or a field. Or perhaps it is about wanting the work to require the same form of appreciation: an amount of commitment is necessary to fully understand and enjoy it. Maybe the work requiring the same form/effort of appreciation as a natural phenomenon means that the work does possess the same quality. The quality is found in the method that is needed to conceive the work and the experience that comes with that method.

I am of course not sure if Martins thoughts about this sitting down and looking are similar to mine.

The Whale

I overhear a conversation in the metro. An older man sits next to a middle-aged man and tells him a story about fishermen crossing the sea. The further the fishermen

get away from the coast, the bigger the waves get (even though the weather is calm). Their ship is carried by the waves, up and down and up again. At one moment, the waves tower above them, on both sides as high as a building. The next moment they float on top of the wave and an infinite view stretches out before them. As they go down again one of the fishermen looks up, to see the sun shining through the wall of water. And in this wall, floating above the ship, the silhouette of a whale. The middle-aged man asks the older man if he used to be a fisherman, he was not.

Deer in the Headlights

Some animals, mainly rodents, show freezing behaviour when confronted with sudden fear. Instead of choosing to fight or flight, they freeze, in the hope that their predator, whatever it is, will only be triggered by motion. Except for the up-and-down movement caused by their breathing, they are completely still until the threat

disappears.¹¹

Kant says, on the Sublime: “*The feeling of the Sublime is, therefor, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain these is for us a law.*”¹²

According to Kant, when encountering infinity – a view over the sea, an enormous storm, being next to a mountain – the mind can’t entirely grasp what it is confronted with. We cannot relate to what we see, it is outside of our frame of reference, past the human scale. This inability to understand leads to both terror and pleasure. The seemingly infinite size and power of what we see makes us feel infinitely small – a fear of being insignificant, of being easily crushed, of death, arises. It is breath taking. Both because of the fright, as well as the beauty it emits. Maybe because we are amazed that what we see exists and simultaneously realize that we are, in a way, part of it. We are at the same time scared, surprised and in awe. And this range of emotions causes

us to freeze.

Maybe we could compare our reaction to what we call The Sublime to the reaction of a deer in the headlights. Caught by a sudden fear, unable to grasp what they see, they freeze. This is the third option: not to fight or to flight but to stay still, waiting for the moment and the predator to pass. The threat we see takes our breath away.

Granted Awareness

The writer Nescio (a pseudonym, Latin for “I don’t know”) gives us, in his book *Titaantjes*, a long description of all the small beautiful things he is aware of in the natural environment that surrounds him. The furze and the lilacs and the apple trees and the chestnuts are blossoming, the sun has been shining brightly. He continues to describe a paradise in his mind; perhaps it is his idea of a heaven. Immeasurable fields, gardens full of flowers, the landscape endlessly the same but never similar. Aimlessly he sits next to a wide river flowing slowly, and thinks that this aimlessness might be god’s goal. He is fully aware of the pointless beauty that surrounds him and that exists in his mind. He concludes

this paragraph: “But to keep this awareness always is granted to no man.”¹³

Even if we are constantly surrounded by (small parts of) nature, still in our daydreams, it is impossible to constantly notice this nature. The flower growing out of the cracks in the pavement, the deep blue of the sky, the tree changing colours outside of your window. Even more goes unnoticed. To wallow in this beauty constantly would be distracting, not to say tiring. If we would dwell too much on this beauty, it would lose its value (even as I am writing this, I wonder if these are not clichés).

True appreciation of natural beauty (or any beauty for that matter) is most intense when one is struck by it, when we are not looking for it but happening upon it, accidentally. Absently minded, during a boring meeting, we stare out of a window – at that moment the beauty of the tree changing colours hits us. Strongly in contrast with the boring room and infinitely more interesting. Waiting in our car for a traffic light, we see a clear blue sky with white sheepish clouds reflected in a puddle of rain water remaining on the street after a heavy storm. For a brief moment we almost feel like we left our car. These are the unexpected moments that distract us from the daily mundane.

So what would happen if this “awareness was granted to us always”? Can we speak of this being ‘granted’ to us? Or should we maybe use the word ‘burdened’? Because a constant awareness of nature would remove all the ‘strikingness’ from it, leaving a bland stand-in. That what makes it beautiful – the contrast with our daily environments, the specialness – would be lost. These qualities can only be kept when we are in contact with them on rare occasion.

Snow

I remember a cold day in January. I am eleven years old. When I wake up it is still dark, but a soft light seems to be shining through my white curtains. I get up out of my bed, slide my feet into my slippers and walk over to the window to open the curtains. I look out over the courtyard, my bedroom being on the second floor. The courtyard is typical for the housing blocks of the part of Amsterdam that we live in; it gives all the surrounding

homes a smaller or larger private garden. It is covered in a layer of snow; it emits a light white glow. On the windowsill I can see that the layer is about ten centimetres thick. The courtyard contains all the backyards of this housing block and is quite large. I can see quite far. I'm in the corner of the short side. From this angle I can't see the other short side, just the longer side on my right. All the individual branches of all the trees are covered in a solid layer of snow. It must have been a windless night.

An hour later, I walk to school. The sun is up now. The snow is still fresh and crisp. There are some traces of beings that woke up earlier than me: large footsteps, smaller footsteps, an excited dog's paws, tiny birds' feet. The sky is clear blue and the sun is shining on the snow. The brightness of the white almost blinds me. I cross a bridge and take a moment to look out over the water. Half-molten shards of ice are shattered over the surface, grey in the black water. A group of brown ducks

is huddled together at the waterside, beaks tucked into their feathers. I am tempted to stick out my tongue and taste the snow that is piled up in front of me on the railing of the bridge. Before I do, a car passes by and interrupts the moment.

Emersion

I'm going back to the Dutch classics – de Uitvreter (The Freeloader), written by the previously mentioned Nescio, first published in 1911.¹³ The Freeloader in the story is Japi, a man who does not want to be anything. He survives on the favours of friends and the occasional contribution of his father, who pushes him to find a decent office job. Japi is a friend of Bavink, a moderately successful landscape painter who does not care about his paintings after he has finished them: they never capture the exact beauty of his subject. Bavink enjoys Japi's company because of his ability to enjoy and admire pure nature: he likes the salty sea winds blowing through his clothes and body and to taste it on his lips, he is content

about the fields and the sky and the clouds, he does not notice when he gets wet in the rain. He trades his company for Bavinks paintings, which he sells. He falls in love with an older French woman and is devastated when she leaves him for another man. He takes on the boring office job. These consecutive events cause him to lose his joy in life. He moves to Nijmegen and spends his days standing on a bridge, looking out over the Waal. One day, he steps off of it. Before he does, he tells a bridge watch, who tries to intervene: “Don’t you worry, boy.” In a later story we learn that, a couple of years later, Bavink has gone “mad”. He has painted a masterpiece, a magnum opus, and destroys it when he realises that this work has made him rich and famous. He is admitted to an institution.

There are a couple more characters in the stories, but Bavink and Japi and their friendship strike me most. Both are consumed by the beauty they see in nature, in the landscapes that surround them. However, for both this obsession exists in a different way. Bavink is bound on capturing this beauty with his painting. He is frustrated when he can’t, but when he finally does, it drives him mad. Japi is content with just being in nature: for days on end, with no particular goal but to just be.

When this pleasure is taken away from him he loses his will to live. Bavink wants to grasp nature, Japi wants to emerge in nature. In the end, they both do exactly this and it means their end – also in the stories: they never re-appear.

The stories of Bavink and Japi might try to tell us some wise lessons – about obtaining those things you've always wanted and treasuring that what makes you happy – but I prefer to not see them in that way. I like to think of them as stories about people who are aware of their natural surroundings and try to relate to them, because they have to, even if it takes some effort. Even if these natural surroundings are just limited to the outskirts of Amsterdam.

The Highway

I'm rolling down the bridge. The streetlights illuminate my path and I see some lights in the distance, in between it is pitch-dark. The wind in my back together with the downhill road make that I don't have to pedal at all.

Some parts of my bike are squeaking – I think it's my front fender lightly pushing against my wheel. Maybe it is my saddle, maybe both. Except for the squeaking and the occasional car passing by, it is quiet.

The bridge crosses two bodies of water that, in my mind, signify the end of the habited world. The first one is a river that forms a big thoroughfare between the IJmuiden harbour and the inner lands. A lot of small freighters pass back and forth. The second body of water is divided from the first by a dike. On my left side it is quite small and contained, houseboats line the edges. I recall this – in the dark I do not see it. On the right side is a bigger body of water that leads, after going under another bridge and around an island, to the Markermeer. This island was not there when I was younger.

The highway passes over this other bridge. From here, I can only see its lights: a row of static orange dots with bright, white lights moving in between. The

lights reflect on the black water in long stripes. The stripes break through the darkness that is in between the two roads and seem to reach out to the lights on my bridge. They form a third road on the water, connecting the two sides.

The Absent-minded Gaze

Continuing on the thought of daydreaming in dwelling places and the mention of a deer in the headlights, the following fragment might be an interesting addition. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa talks about the significance of shadow in his book *Eyes of the Skin*: “*The imagination and daydreaming are stimulated by dim light and shadow. In order to think clearly, the sharpness of vision has to be suppressed, for thoughts travel with an absent-minded and unfocused gaze. Homogenous bright light paralyses the imagination in the same way that homogenisation of space weakens the experience of being, and wipes away the sense of place. The human eye is most perfectly tuned for twilight rather than bright daylight.*”²

I am not aware if this last statement is scientifically provable or not, but in a way it rings truth. A walk in bright daylight might be a good suggestion for clearing the mind, while lying awake in a dark room at night is known to spark (often unsolicited) thoughts. The lack of visual input forces us (or allows us) to get our thoughts provoked by other impulses – perhaps they are not even provoked by anything outside of ourselves (sounds or smells in our bedroom) but by something within ourselves (memory, dreams, previous thoughts). Or thoughts are allowed to roam freely, without distraction.

Pallasmaa does not talk about complete pitch-black darkness but about the in between. Shimmer, shadows, dim lighting. The kind of lighting that makes a composition and brings variety to our view. The difference between the dark and the light creates a tension in the space. These shadows could be seen as the ultimate visual stimulus. The eyes cannot give the brain the answer to what it sees – it has to fill this in. The darkness contains a mystery, an unknown. In dim light, some of this mystery might be given away, but a lot remains to be guessed. The use of the word absent-minded is a nice addition in this text. *“Thoughts travel*

with an absent-minded gaze.” If the gaze is absent-minded, the mind is fully present.

In *Eyes of the Skin* Pallasmaa pleads for a less ocular-centred approach to architecture. This leads me to believe that he understands the experience of light as something that might be more than purely visual (it might also be why the lack of light is so important to him – it gives the other senses a chance). Somebody who might have this in common is artist James Turrell. Turrell talks about light as others would about wind or perhaps electricity or gravity: as a force that flows, that you can feel. “(...) *like a breeze, so you can feel you can touch it. Just because we haven't named a sense doesn't mean we don't have it.*”¹⁴ He proposes a relation to light that is not purely visual, but is actually more physical. This way of thinking drastically changes the impact of light and shadows and their composition in a room. Stepping in and out of the light would be like stepping into another space, a space where the physical conditions are different than in the previous one. As if the temperature had dropped ten degrees and the floor had changed from soft carpet to smooth parquet. The light influences our level of comfort, our mood and our flow of thought.

Oval House pt. 2

I have reached the top of the stairs. I made all the stops on the way. I dropped of my baggage at the door, took of my shoes, changed into my clean clothes, and brushed my teeth. The stairs spiral upwards into an oval space, an ellipsoid on its side. I walk to the centre of the oval, down into a low bowl. I sit down on the floor and cross my legs, my right foot under my left upper leg, my left foot under my right upper leg, my back straight. I get comfortable with my surroundings. The floor has the texture of a smoothed concrete but has a warmer touch, as if a plastic has been mixed in. The entire space looks to be coated in this same material, making it seem monolithic. As soon as I am comfortable I lean backward and lay down, my legs still crossed. My back rests on the curved part of the bowl. I look up at the ceiling. An oval shape has been cut out of it. It is open, in direct contact with the outside world. In the edges I can see

the thickness of the ceiling. The edges are in the same material and part of the same monolith. I think I feel a breeze lightly blowing through the space.

Now that I have seen the opening, I also see the light that casts through it. It hits the vertical surface opposite of me. This is just left of where I came up the stairs. It is not a very strong light and the edges are not too defined but it is noticeable. I look up. I look at the clouds passing by; it is a grey day today. For a moment I close my eyes.

When I open them again it must be about an hour later, judging from how much the spot of light on the wall has moved. It is slightly brighter now, the edges a bit sharper. I get up, stretch, and exit the ellipsoid. I move down the stairs and make all the stops on the way. I have a glass of water, dress up in my outside clothes and tie my shoes. I sling my bag over my shoulder and walk through the door.

The Mundane Ritual

A ritual or repeating process can create an emotional attachment to a place or object. A bond between the actor of the ritual and the subject of that ritual is established. The actor develops a feeling of responsibility towards the subject, because they take care of it. An example: Tadao Ando talks about the floors in his Church of Light: *“Instead of the usual synthetic material we gave the church a wooden floor, which requires maintenance. The maintenance is conducted by us and by the parish. This creates an emotional bond between us and the building.”*¹⁵

The designer and user both take care of the building. Because of them, the building keeps its intended quality. And the same is true in reverse: as soon as they stop the ritual, the building will start to decay. Other than the maintenance of a wooden floor, we could also think about watering plants, cooking food or even sweeping the floor. All seemingly mundane tasks that, at the same time, ask for a level of devotion and care of the one performing them.

Additionally, the rituals represent order. They

are reoccurring events that have to be acted out at a precise, given moment, over and over again. They could almost be used as a way of telling time: we have to wax the floor again, a year has passed – or: we have to cook another meal and another day has passed. Rituals make order, and therefor make rest. We give care to the subject of the ritual and get a feeling of rest in return.

This order could of course also be seen as a chain to ones leg, as a prison. There is no freedom in the ritual: it has to be done, as it has to be done. The epidemic of depression among housewives in the fifties may be proof of this. The days, consisting of compulsory tasks, repeat themselves over and over again and peace was ultimately not found in the cycle of rituals but with the help of tranquilizers.

Where do we find the line between a tedious task and an enlightening ritual? Is it in frequency? In urgency? Is it maybe the difference in what we do for ourselves and what we do for others? Or is it maybe simply the freedom to independently make the choice to participate in the ritual?

The Labyrinth

A monastery in Friesland, the 14th century, the monks honoured a peculiar ritual. They used this ritual when they had to resolve any kind of problem – mental struggles, issues with devotion, somebody else’s dilemmas, a herd of sheep ran off, anything else you can think of. The ritual always took place in the courtyard. The courtyard was constructed especially for this purpose: a square labyrinth is drawn out in tiles, long grass growing in between. This labyrinth consists of wide, square tiles placed in a line. At equal intervals these square tiles are interrupted by circular tiles, each with a different symbol depicted onto them. Every circle has a different symbol. The first circle is the same as the last: the labyrinth is a loop. There are nine circular tiles in total. The actual ritual consists of the monk walking the line of the labyrinth. He starts at the rise of dawn. Every time he encounters a circular tile – and a symbol – he stops, stands in the circle and thinks.

There is no prescribed time for how long this thinking should last, it could be five minutes, it could just as well be three hours. The subject of contemplation is not given either. It may be influenced by the symbol at that spot, but it does not have to be. It is said that, after the monk has completed the nine steps of the labyrinth, a solution to the given problem would have presented itself to him. If not, repetition was needed, and the monk would continue this process until the problem was solved, for days on end.

Notes

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