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LIGHT TRAVELS ACROSS TIME

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Report

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to everything I left out of it, on behalf of everything I could include.

Acknowledgements

I do most of my thanking in person and in my work, but it seems important to thank the people who might read this paper while they're here reading it. I would like to thank my generous report readers, everyone I've TA'd for, and my entire committee, past and present. Your guidance – in and out of the studio – has been absolutely indispensable. I could never have made it here or made it through without an incredible network of family and friends, and if I had, I wouldn't have had anything interesting to share. I am sometimes so overwhelmed by gratitude that I want to put my own work on hold to write detailed and individualized thank you letters for all of the ways that you have all shaped my practice, but then I wouldn't be making anything, and that would more or less defeat the point.

I would also like to thank the state of Florida, for teaching me to expect the unexpected, and the state of Texas, for teaching me to drive at the speed limit.

Abstract

LIGHT TRAVELS ACROSS TIME

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This paper explores my relationship to light, time, and material through the lens of fiction in its varying forms, couched in personal narrative, which, although technically non-fiction, could just as easily be categorized as a construction, since writing is a process of choosing the information you find pertinent to your task, and excluding the rest. Consequently, the abstract of this paper may also be the most accurate part, which is not to say the truest.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	viii
LIGHT	1
TRAVELS	3
A DISTANCE	5
ACROSS TIME	11
TO BE REFLECTED	15
References	17

List of Figures

Figure 1: Property Line I.....	nn
Figure 2: Touch What He Sawnn
Figure 3: Roll Cage	nn

LIGHT

I pulled on a jacket and made my way over to the railing of my second-floor studio apartment to see the Super Blood Wolf Moon Eclipse – a lunar event I had never heard of, and only knew to observe due to an influx of forwarded texts. Outside, I could see my breath. I could see the red blinking lights on the nearby crane, protecting it from what I imagined to be impossibly low air traffic. The street was bathed in the amber light of the sodium street lamps, and the green of the fluorescent floodlights on my building spilled out from around me onto the parked cars as I took the too-low railing in my hands and leaned out to see the moon, smaller and flatter than I'd expected, and somewhat more orange than usual.

As I stood there in the green and orange and pink of our post-Edison world, it did not occur to me to wonder how long the image of each star had traveled before reaching me, how much of time I could see all at once as pricks of light in the velvet black of the sky, or mingled on my skin as a cool blue wash if I went far enough out of the city to see it.

I didn't think about anything, in fact, except that the moon seemed more well-water stained than bloodied. I called a few people hoping they would change

my mind and then went back inside to warm up. I'd go out to the railing every couple of minutes to watch the Earth's shadow slide across its face, wondering what it was about sky-related conversations that was supposed to be so intimate.

TRAVELS

I went to Kansas City to see the total solar eclipse, too. People planned and schemed for weeks. People bought and sold all kinds of eye protection. The state park hired a parking staff and we all parked in rows and wandered around and talked to strangers and stared at the sky for hours before anything happened. This was a very different event.

When I think about it, I can still feel the grass. I'm sitting in the same field, holding someone's hand and watching the sun slip behind the moon. It looks like twilight. I can still see my friends as they pass things back and forth. We are all really amazed. We are all falling in love with the silhouettes of each other. The cows don't know the sun will come back and they're crying and running to and from the fence.

I am sure the sun will come back because it's been coming and going for much longer than I can remember, and lots of people much more knowledgeable than I have done a lot of historical research, a lot of math and then relayed their research to, among others, a lot of NPR stations, preparing the legions of people with a vague enthusiasm for current events and fun facts to spread the news of the impending arrival of an event which perfectly satisfies both curiosities. If the sun were to write a letter addressed "To Whom It May Concern" about the

cigarette break it was planning to take that summer, it couldn't have been as effective in notifying US Citizens in the path of the eclipse as the effervescent megaphone of NPR listeners performing their nerdhood for all to see.

Cows, unfortunately, do not have the blessing of NPR-listening peers who can explain away the apocalyptic phenomenon of the sun's rapid and unprovoked departure from the sky in the middle of the day. As a result, their reactions to the total solar eclipse – a thing about which they had likely never heard – are arguably much more rational. We, instead, used our big brains to rationalize its disappearance and buy special equipment to protect our retinas while we watched it leave. Usually, the risk of totally blinding ourselves at the sight of certain doom is more metaphorical. As far as I can tell, the world is always coming to an end of some sort. I am committed to finding the joy in it.

A DISTANCE

When I was nineteen, a boy I'd known in high school confessed his love for me on Christmas Eve, and gave me a signed and leatherbound copy of *the Galapagos*, by Kurt Vonnegut. It was cheaper than a signed copy of *Slaughterhouse Five* (a book we'd both read), but still too expensive. This did not, as intended, give way to a passionate, complicated long-distance love story.¹ Much more befitting of Vonnegut's legacy, it instead triggered in me a lifelong and gleeful nihilism, perfectly suited to my manic and insatiable search for THE RIGHT COMBINATION OF SOLUTIONS. Much like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, I was sure that if I could just identify THE PROBLEM – the source of the most immediate agony -- then I could also be rid of it. *Madame Bovary*, in the book of her same name, tries it all: she considers the convent, she marries a simple doctor in the country, she studies art and music and has affairs and goes to the opera and then, most romantic of choices, visits the apothecary to take her own life.² Flaubert is making the case that, although it's bound to come up short of one's expectations, there is joy and pride and excitement to be found in resisting

¹ Perhaps he ought to have considered Flaubert, or chosen a holiday I actually celebrated.

² This does not go as elegantly as planned.

the “tide of shit” which makes up the world outside of the corrupting Romantic fantasy espoused by art and literature. He sees himself in Madame Bovary, stating “Madame Bovary c’est moi!” but, as Madame Bovary teaches us, refusing to embrace a tide of shit is not the same as escaping it.³

Vonnegut, on the other hand, manages to make a novel about the eradication of human life as we know it into a playful and incisive portrait of the absurdity of modern human behavior. People do and say unforgivable things to each other and themselves in pursuit of something which falls outside, and too often, overshadows the fulfillment of basic biological imperatives like finding food and reproducing. He reminds us, rather casually, that on our otherwise moist and fruitful planet, economically-induced famine is as much a product of our oversized brains as Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.⁴ A biology teacher in the book later likens the arguable impracticality of the human mind to the ballroom-chandelier-sized antlers of the then-extinct Irish Elk, “fascinating examples... of how tolerant nature could be of clearly ridiculous mistakes in evolution. Irish elk survived for two and a half million years, in spite of the fact that their antlers were

³ Berlatsky, Eric, ““Madame Bovary, c’Est Moi!”: Julian Barnes’s Flaubert’s Parrot and Sexual “Perversion”, *Twentieth Century Literature Vol. 55, No. 2*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 190

⁴ Vonnegut, Kurt, *Galápagos*, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1985), 24

too unwieldy for fighting or self-defense, and kept them from seeking food in thick forests and heavy brush.”⁵

In the wake of Auschwitz, Theodor Adorno famously speculates about the functions and obligations of the poetry that our roughly three-kilogram brains had evolved to craft. Over the course of his life and in the wake of the war, he continues to develop his position on the role of art and scholarship in reacting to and combatting additional mass-extinction events of our own creation – concluding, toward the end of his life, that there is no room for lighthearted art,⁶ and sixteen years after Adorno’s death, Vonnegut’s *Galapagos* argues that there can be no room for three-kilogram brains altogether. We will evolve away from this overblown development and wind up, a million years down the line, to be a species much more like seals. Simple, furry mammals with a fondness for raw fish we catch in our mouths at sea.⁷

That is a very long term solution, though. Until we are a species living entirely for the pleasure of raw fish, biannual reproduction, and a chance to bask

⁵ Vonnegut, *Galápagos*, 26

⁶ Adorno, T.W. *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 251–3, Although he does make room for absurd humor, as in the work of Samuel Beckett, of which he explains, “Humor is salvaged in Beckett’s plays because they infect the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair” and goes on to state that “the genres are becoming blurred, that the tragic gesture seems comic and the comic dejected ... The art that moves ahead into the unknown, the only art now possible, is neither lighthearted nor serious; the third possibility, however, is cloaked in obscurity, as though embedded in a void the figures of which are traced by advanced works of art.”

⁷ Vonnegut, *Galápagos*, 290

in the sun, how are we to navigate the very made up, but still very urgent, threats of social and economic instability, nuclear warfare, climate change, and data security, for example, and how does our personal comfort and safety factor in? If, as I suspect, we can't actually protect ourselves from the threat posed by all of these big brains, how can we go about using them to bask in the moonlight even when it drifts behind our shadow, to be grateful for the sunlight even when it's gone?

That, I think, is the strength of being an Emma Bovary today. For all of our science and math, all of our politics, our plans for utopias, and actionable solutions, there is an underlying romantic blueprint. The way that the Hudson River School framed the American relationship to landscape was later fundamental to the structure of modern environmentalism and the establishment of public lands.⁸ Stills from science-fiction films like *The Martian* and *Mad Max* recall the paintings of Western Expansionists like Thomas Moran. No amount of Darwinian reasoning can undo centuries of paintings and poems and literature, and the impact of all of those things on the landscape, on the organisms who occupy it (including human beings), and the invisible social structures our big brains made up to mediate the relationships between the two. Engaging directly with one's own romantic streak – which is to say, relinquishing the veneer of total

⁸ Schuyler, David. 2012. *Sanctified Landscape*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Press), 151

objectivity employed by realism to embrace the role of affect in our assessment of the world around us – can enable us to form a more complete understanding of what we’re experiencing and why.⁹

As an artist, I have turned my Romantic eye to the world as I know it – both the physical features of it and the abstract systems which organize our relationship with it – in order to make them both tangible and visible; things with which we can have a personal relationship.

⁹ Comaroff, Joshua and Ong-Ker Sheng. *Horror in Architecture*. (ORO Press, 2013)



FIGURE 1: Property Line I

ACROSS TIME

I have spent a lot of time trying to make portraits of the people who shape me by making the things that they see, the way they've seen them. People are full of coexistent contradictions. It's difficult to make a comprehensive portrait of someone by showing you their body, when their body is out of reach. Their influence doesn't necessarily end at the surface of their skin.

I arrived at this way of making portraits by trying to make a portrait of the most difficult man I had ever known. He was bursting with contradictions. He was never wrong, but divorced three times. He would order a three-course meal, and barely finish the soup. He finished with a coffee, but only ever decaf. He wanted to live forever and biked across the state of Maine in his late 60's, but most meals he took at home went as follows: a light beer and half a sheet of matzah with margarine, eaten over the sink¹⁰. He was too soft to make his third wife take her dog when she left, and too stubborn to apologize under any circumstance. He was so set on stoicism that he only watched CNN and the History Channel, only read the news, and only listened to classical music, but was so enraged by anything threatening the life he wanted that on his deathbed, when asked, "Who

¹⁰ Not a recommended diet for a diabetic.

is the president?” to assess the progress of his dementia, he flung his middle finger towards the news footage of Donald Trump arriving at Mar-a-Lago on the screen behind the doctor. He was a very funny man, for one who’s too serious to tell jokes.

It seemed a much better way to share a man like that would be to share what he saw fit to capture. He passed away last December, and as we were going through his things – notes from a psychic about his first divorce, letters from his cousin while they were in the Navy, etc. – we found a stack of photographs, largely from vacations, largely developed in the early 80’s at some point. Nobody complained when I offered to take all of the landscapes out of the stack.

I took them back to Austin with me and started drawing from them. They were either bisected by a broad horizon, or lacking one entirely. Several were taken from the top of a trail, attempting to capture the grade of it and the way his son had to scramble up to meet him. Some framed impressive buildings and the much less ambitious parking lots which accompanied them. Still others were “scenic overlooks,” inclusive of the railings over which one might have to look to see the scenery.

The most important things in these photographs were the qualities they shared with him. They were thin and direct and full of contradictions. Of course

the world's most matter-of-fact and aggressive atheist should be found in the matter-of-fact pictures he took; of course he would be just as matter-of-fact about his belief in reincarnation and his UFO encounter in Hershey Park, PA; of course he never saw any of these beliefs as being at odds with each other; and as I learned looking at it, maybe making an equally matter-of-fact drawing misses the chance to hold all of these things in tension with one another on a single surface



FIGURE 2: Touch What He Saw

TO BE REFLECTED

I'm more focused, now, on drawing as a way to reach across time and distance. It becomes a glue trap, collecting all of the notes and plans and images and qualities of light and space and surface which might have passed over it, and it becomes a map, modeling spatial and temporal relationships between all of the pieces of information it contains.

Most recently, the drawings have come to reflect the planning process for a hypothetical roadtrip. It involves a very real Baja Bug which I am helping to fix up, and a vague plan to take it to Baja California, in Mexico. The first one started with a tracing of the front footwells, diagrams and notes about the work the car needs, and plans for possible routes and trip provisions.

It came out of an overwhelming desire to have a physical understanding of how much space the interior of a 1960 Volkswagen Beetle really gives you to live in for an indefinite period of travel, but soon gave way to an exploration of notions of home, of security, and of post-apocalyptic survival. As information about different moments in time accumulated on the surface – tracings and diagrams and text and paint – the parameters of the drawing loosened. As the drawing loosened, I found that making it was a lot like driving. I was changing speed and changing gears, cruising through soft and open spaces, struggling to decipher all kinds of text, acting on some, letting the rest of it slip past and jumble up, talking

back to it with my own little notes and objections and pulling over here and there to spend a little more time absorbing the details of a world which, in motion, is otherwise reduced to a general impression of color, the edge of the sky as it clings to the earth, and the changing quality of light.

It allows me to travel without leaving. It allows me to make something softer and easier to share. History accumulates on surfaces like dust and silt, and with just the right amount of the right information, it may come to be something as uncanny as twilight in the middle of the day.



FIGURE 3: Roll Cage

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