

From the Opaque (After Calvino)

Hidden in a wrinkle of the universe must be another Earth-like planet. As distant from the speculative hypotheses of the ancient Greeks gazing at the night skies, sophisticated satellite technology has been positioned in outer space to track hundreds of known planetary systems, borne of the detritus of stars. Using light sources from close-by celestial bodies and transmitting images at regular intervals via a 95-megapixel detector, scientists film a stop-motion sequence, recorded in the largest photographic studio in the cosmos. This behind-the-scenes-of-the-solar-system footage provides an insight into the discoveries and potentialities of the process. The purpose of the study: to observe the movement and behaviour of other systems, to discover a terrestrial twin that will expand the scope of imagination, to mess with the natural laws of evolution.

In 2011, supernova PTF 11kly will present a once-in-a-lifetime spectacle of self-destruction visible from the Earth. Monitoring astrologists have detected the phenomenon many light years away hurling matter into space, knocking Atlas from the mountaintop as he held up the great dome of the heavens on which the constellations were fixed and sending shockwaves throughout the ever-expanding galaxy. *Our revels now are begun. / The great globe itself / Yea, all which it inherit, shall assemble. / This is such stuff as planets are made on.* For about a month, stargazers will have the chance to observe the brightest explosion of the century - a bluish-white blip in the twilight sky.

If they had asked me then what the shape of the world is,

and likewise if they ask me now what shape the world is,

Space Invaders

For a thousand years, men in search of heavenly headspace have traveled to the Holy Peninsula of Northern Greece, cut off from the rest of the world by a rugged terrain, a natural barrier against the outside influences of contemporary experience. Removed from society and earthly distractions (women), they lead a low-tech, cloistered existence - the monotony of a quiet life stimulating a desired state of mind. These monks (from the Greek *monos* meaning single) live alone in rustic cells or collectively but detached from one and other, like specters digesting death before it digests them. There are varying degrees of resistance and refuge on this spiritual path to timelessness but modernity is seeping through the once-impenetrable walls of the monasteries, catching those who have dropped out of life.

Despite the explicit rejection, the outside world has become inescapable, slowly invading this dislocated jut of land, with roads and telephones and the Internet. Even people. The governing body must grapple with the contradictions of self-imposed isolation and communicating beyond their closed community, which has caused a split with a faction of renegade monks hell-bent on protecting their radical choice of solitude and independence. The compromise they must equate with conformity. They will not be seduced by the thought of a more comfortable life. And all this for a connection to a

collapsed God.

And yet the sacrifice is understandable. Among these monks are painters, musicians, writers, researchers - creative practitioners with a commitment to something lost, to meditations on the unknown, to the non-existent seminar or the “holy of holies, the room (...) where mystery dwells.” These are artists and scholars who have dedicated their lives to work that were never made, to lessons never taught, to images or sounds only imagined. And as democracy slowly loses meaning, we must remember to protect these minorities lest *Our little life / Be rounded with a sleep*. Is the disobedient monk any more unusual than the man in the city, plugged in and spazzed out? Or the scientist searching for another Earth? As Rilke warns the young poet: “A man taken out of his room and, almost without preparation or transition, placed on the heights of a great mountain range, would feel something like that: an unequalled insecurity, an abandonment to the nameless, would almost annihilate him. He would feel he was falling or think he was being catapulted out into space or exploded into a thousand pieces”

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Perec’s Apartment

“I put a picture up on a wall. Then I forget there is a wall. I no longer know what there is behind this wall, I no longer know there is a wall, I no longer know this wall is a wall, I no longer know what a wall is. I no longer know that in my apartment there are walls, and that if there weren’t any walls, there would be no apartment. The wall is no longer what delimits and defines the place where I live, that which separates it from the other places where other people live, it is nothing more than a support for the picture. But I also forget the picture, I no longer look at it, I no longer know how to look at it. I have put the picture on the wall so as to forget the wall, but in forgetting the wall, I forget the picture too. There are pictures because there are walls. We have to be able to forget there are walls, and have found no better way to do that than pictures. Pictures efface walls. But walls kill pictures. So we need continually to be changing, either the wall or the picture, to be forever putting either pictures up on the walls, or else constantly moving the picture from one wall to another.”

In a prominent university, the newly appointed curator *surveilles* the historic art collection dispersed throughout the campus. A recent insurance evaluation has estimated a considerable increase in the value of a particular painting. Inadequate records tracking the movement of the painting end abruptly twelve years earlier and no-one in the department is quite sure where it is or when they last saw it. A quiet investigation begins retracing the journey of the work through the network of buildings, room-by-room, wall-by-wall. Resident researchers and long-serving lecturers recall sightings with uncertainty, but memory is a curious thing.

At the far end of the complex, the path goes cold. The building once housed the library before it was moved to a larger, custom-built space to facilitate the growing student body. Long ago the centre of activity, the old library is now a peripheral structure, its former glory vaguely acknowledged as an example of period architecture. In the corridors, the curator and her team review the situation as the caretaker walking by overhears the conversation. He leads them down a discreet passageway to a small room where he goes every day to eat his lunch. A chair is tucked in under a square table and there on the wall above, hangs the painting. Then *our actors / As I foretold you, were all spirits, and / Are melted into air, into thin air*. The forgotten painting is removed and returned to storage.

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Bumf A note on the text

In *The Hero with Four Faces*, Daniel Miller proposes an ekphrastic approach to art writing: “The unconventional shape of this text reflects an effort to develop strategic techniques beyond the theoretical disposition that I believe is now exhausted. What {precedes} is an experimental report, recording a series of partially explored possibilities. The ambition was (and remains) to create a form of hybrid-writing, somewhere between philosophy and fiction.” He includes a typological sketch in which he does not believe, but which came to him one night, in the interests of balance. So, poesis and praxis are parallel lines in the Euclidian tradition, running side by side but never meeting. In September 1985, Italo Calvino published an ekphrastic text on painting in *Artforum* describing the arrows in his mind indicating the mechanism of meaning. The shape of his world was so many broken and oblique lines pointing to ideas and outlining thought processes.

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In his Harvard lectures, Calvino explains how did not yet consider theoretical questions when he began to write fantastic stories; the only thing he knew was that there was a visual image at the source of all his stories. One of these images was a man cut in two halves, each of which went on living independently. Can we accept that theoretical questions and creativity mutually exclusive? Could an attempt to separate them merely be the result of Western metaphysical logic, which dictates that everything must be interpreted in terms of binary oppositions? Like a man cut in two halves.

Later in life Calvino would re-edit his work, cutting from earlier texts and adding to the more recent. The reader activates the “lazy text” either interpreting the stories or simply reading them for enjoyment. He agreed to the work being read as existential or as structural, as Marxist or neo-Kantian, Freudianly or Jungianly, satisfied that no single key would turn all the locks. We are not fooled into believing that works of art are ‘reality’ but recognize elements of our own experience that cause the representation to seem ‘real’. Without them we are like the caretaker who lost his window onto the world.

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Mary Conlon, Limerick, 2011.