

Circles: The Flâneur's Return is Also His Departure

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When we photograph nature, or paint or depict it, it becomes a landscape. When we give this picture or depiction a name, it becomes a place. The camera, like nature, has no historical memory, but its product, the photograph, is an object that is subjected to a gaze and through the gaze – an outcome of culture – landscape photographs become contents of memory. The memory charge is dual – the landscape is charged with the historical memory of the particular place, and the photograph is charged with the pictorial memory of the depictive traditions.

Many words have been written about the objectivity of photography, about its ability to convey a faithful depiction of nature. The motif of death inherent in photography is a recurrent theme as it is an act of memorialising, the quality of immortality accompanies it for the very same reason. The definitive testimony that it provides, the power to mislead the viewer and its elusive connection with the real world all lead to photography's reputation as the perfect fiction. The discussion of representation and the dynamics of signifiers, and the presence of the author, the image and the imagination have all made room for the politics of the gaze. Questions about identity and place, about blood, about man, about land and about memory all pour into this politic, not only of the gaze, but of the regime and the institution.

Ori Gersht sets out on his journeys, and it seems that all the above questions, both old and new, still engage him. The unknown element in his journey is the unpredictability with which he combines the questions he's asking with the journeys he's taking. He takes a question that is known from one place and asks it in another place. His photography shows that all places are appropriate to all questions. His journey becomes metaphysical and a tension resides – as in literature – between the inner journey and the physical one.

The traveller or nomad has no identity; he sees afar even when he looks from close by, he seems to be gazing from the mountaintop, from 'a place where perhaps,

1. From the song *One sees afar, one sees transparently*, words: Yaacov Rotblit; music: Shmulik Krauss

like from Mount Nebo, one sees afar, one sees transparently'.¹ In Gersht's Poland there are no fences or guard-towers, there are smears of green motion in photographs of forests through the window of a train travelling from Krakow to Auschwitz. There is a whiteness that almost vanishes in the whiteness of the photographic paper in the snow in Birkenau. There are 75,000 spectators in the stands of Wembley Stadium just before it was demolished. Thousands of seats sit empty in the Olympic Stadium in Munich thirty years after the 1972 Olympics and cranes rise over the stadium that Hitler erected in 1930s Berlin.

Strong colours dominate the empty skies of London. Faded primary colours exist among the balconies, the windows and the bullet holes in the high-rise buildings in Sarajevo, built after Second World War and then shelled in the Sarajevo war. Not unlike Sarajevo the English schools contain many colours and grids amongst the windows, doors and walls, these, also built post Second World War, are not pocked by even a single stray bullet in this war. In the Judean desert there are many colours, paths, plains, mountains and stones, along with a little sky. This expansive region, now part of Israel, is designated on the map as Area A, Area B, and Area C.

How Much Space Does an Image Weigh?

A cloudburst / is time bursting. / How much time can / a cloud hold / the water? / How much water / does a cloud weigh? / What is the weight of a fish? What attracts it? / How much time / does the water weigh? / How much time does the water weigh itself? / The waterfall is the fall / of time that stands.

2. Avot Yeshurun, 'How Much Does It Weigh', *Master of Rest*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv, 1990, p. 87

Avot Yeshurun, 'How much does it weigh', 2 August 1987²

75,000 spectators at Wembley or almost invisible tracks in the snow at Birkenau – Gersht crams the photograph with details or empties it to the point where the image almost collapses, explodes from its density or evaporates and vanishes into the paper.

When he examines the memory of photography, its ability to withstand density or to hold emptiness, he asks questions about representation, the eye and camera, and about vision, knowledge and perception. He does not ask whether nature remembers or what the landscape remembers; rather, he asks how nature is inscribed in the photograph and from what time and what place this inscription becomes memory.

Gersht's photography, and his captions, suggest that through the skies of England, the forests of Poland, the scars of Bosnia and the desert land – the hardest concept of all is home. And because the burden of home on one's back is so heavy, there is an illusion of lightness in travelling outside the shell, like a snail that has left its home behind. Even without a shell it is still identified as a snail, and therefore the journey without a home is like an alchemical voyage, the yearning to travel without weight, in its quintessence resembles the illusion of unloading the burden of the home from one's back. One has to lower one's gaze from the skies, through forests and wars and stadiums, to the place where one stands on the ground and sees what one has always heard, already in the skies of London, which are also the skies of the desert. It is at this point that one understands that the lightness one longed for is an illusion. *In Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Walter Benjamin writes that everyone has a fairy that enables him to express a wish, but many people forget what they asked for, and therefore in later life they do not recognise its fulfilment. Benjamin tells about his wish 'to get adequate sleep', a wish that had indeed been fulfilled at a later time,

*but much time passed until I recognized its fulfillment in the fact that the hope I had cultivated over and over again for an assured position and livelihood was a futile hope.*³

3. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, *The Flâneur*, (Hebrew translation), Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv, 1992, pp. 16–17

'That-Has-Been' – What Has Been There?

Through a window of a house in a city, in the country where Gersht lives but was not born, he photographs the sky. At times a thin horizon line of roofs of buildings is visible

at the bottom of the photograph, at times even this subtle intimation of a city vanishes, and a moon or clouds appear. These photographs are landless, they contain only sky – and it is green, red, blue or grey. Despite appearing like monochrome painting this is documentary photography that captures the city as it is reflected in the sky and registered on the celluloid, and with its directness emphasises the a priori difference between the eye and the camera. The camera has no common seeing patterns, nor a conceptual perception of sky. A long exposure is not a technical manipulation, but nonetheless it expresses itself in the photograph as an unconventional image, as an unconventional form of seeing, and this is the case too in the panoramic view and of photography in motion. In optical terms, mechanical seeing (the camera's) operates like physiological seeing (the eye's). In chemical terms the process is different because the retina transmits the visual information continuously, to be translated by the brain, while the celluloid accumulates this information as a cumulative chemical reaction for the entire duration of the exposure on a limited surface of photographic film.

The London sky was opposite the camera for a span of time and in particular environmental conditions, and was registered as bold colours on the photographic film. The series *Rear Window* does not look at the city and expose a suspense story beyond other windows; it looks at the sky and discovers there a drama of colours that makes prominent the delusory character of both sensory and mechanical perception. Again it evokes reflections on the alchemical yearning to see the light, not the light that is reflected from objects or from particles in the air, but the light itself.

Photographing from the home that is not in the homeland reveals itself as a journey that is not geographical. 'What has been there' was not only the spectacle registered by the camera but also what was there before, once, in a time before the camera. In *One-Way Street* Benjamin writes:

just as all things, in an irreversible process of mingling and contamination, are losing their intrinsic character while ambiguity displaces authenticity, so is the city. Great cities ... are seen to be breached at all points by the invading countryside. Not by the landscape, but by what is bitterest in untrammelled

4. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. I, 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. and London, 1996, p. 454

5. Walter Benjamin, *The Flâneur*, (see note 3), pp. 9–10

*nature: ploughed land, highways, night sky that the veil of vibrant redness no longer conceals.*⁴

In *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* Benjamin describes pictures that were painted as panoramic landscapes on the wall of the 'Imperial Panorama'. He says that it makes no difference with which picture one starts the circle, and adds that for him one of the great charms of the panorama was the transition from one picture to the next, in which an interval of windows that looked out over the city's views became mixed up alternately with the exotic paintings that were painted on the wall.⁵ Through these panoramas, writes Benjamin, 'the children made friends with the entire globe', and the strange thing, he writes, was

that the remote world [of the 'panoramas'] was not always foreign, and that the yearnings it aroused in me did not always seduce to the unknown, but were sometimes the softer yearnings, for a return home: when it rained, the light that revealed itself on the painted fiords and coconut pines in the panorama was the same as the light that shone on the desk at home in the evening; moreover, it may be that it was a flaw in the lighting that suddenly created that rare twilight, in which the colour departed from the landscape. Then the landscape rested silent beneath the dome of the sky and was the colour of ash; it seemed as though I could still have just heard wind and bells, had I only been more attentive.

Landscape photographers have employed panoramic cameras in order to achieve a broad angle of vision without distorting the form of the area, and to obtain a view that is closer to the gaze in the open landscape. Gersht photographs the circular buildings of the football stadiums with a panoramic camera that scans 360 degrees and presents them as narrow and elongated photographs. Using a cultural icon, an architectural monument in the city's topography, a sight that reflects a socio-economic condition and an expression of national identity in the era of globalisation, Gersht demonstrates paradoxes of representations. Through the abstraction of the expanse (in

the real world) into a plane (the picture), an additional abstraction is carried out – of the infinite oval form (the stadium) into a finite linear form (the photograph). In the two-dimensional extension of the photograph that was photographed from the centre of the playing-field – *Mass Culture*, Berlin 2001 – the radius, which is the axis of circular symmetry, turns into a vertical that is an axis of rectangular symmetry. The result is a new form possessing different proportions that do not maintain uniformity of angle or equal distance between the mid-point and the points that in the abstraction represent the circumference of the circle. The circular principle is preserved when the camera is positioned on the circumference (not in the centre, for example *Mass Culture*, Cologne 2001), but the form pattern changes. At a hypothetical angle of vision, every point on the circumference contains all the others point on the circumference, and therefore in a movement of 360 degrees points are likely to recur in different positions. In the abstraction of the expanse into a plane, a simultaneous flattening of the time-space dimension is produced. In the photography there is no distinction between what is in front and what is behind, nor between before and after. Theoretically, the broadest angle of vision with both eyes without the use of mirrors can encompass 180 degrees, a semi-circle. The elongated photograph adds the remaining 180 degrees onto the same surface, to complete the circle ('what is behind') and the additional time for complementing the gaze (of the second/late gaze).

What is the Place on Which You Stand?

6. From the song *Caravan in the Desert*, words: Yeacov Fichman;
music: David Zehavi

Why of all places has the desert, which is 'only sand and sand' (in Hebrew, the word for 'sand' also means 'profane'),⁶ become the domain of the sacred? In his photographs of the desert Gersht directs the gaze towards the earth. In this 'land not home' he travels like a flâneur, not like a nomad; he seeks to come across random ways on the earth, not the four 'winds of the sky' (the Hebrew term for the four cardinal directions). Benjamin distinguishes between 'learning' and 'investigating':

experience always seeks the unique and the sensation; experiment always

7. Walter Benjamin, *The Flâneur*, (see note 3), p. 104

*seeks the similar ... in this way the flâneur conjures up memories like a child, in this way he digs in, like old age, into what he has learned.*⁷

In the desert, as in the photographs of apartment blocks in Sarajevo that were shelled during the war, an opaque surface of material covers almost the entire photograph. Except that in Sarajevo the material is residential buildings in the modernist style, which manifested itself in 1950s Yugoslavian architecture, perhaps as a remonstrance against socialist realism and as an expression of a stage in the secession from the Soviet bloc. In the Judean desert and the Negev the 'material' is earth, soil, sand, stones, even plants; and the stones recount that continents and masses of material were involved in a great earthquake here long before the rise and fall of the Soviet bloc. On the land of the desert, the traveller's feet touch the earth's crust – but in Sarajevo, Tel Aviv or London the feel of this contact is forgotten. Is this perhaps where the sense of place connects to its sacredness?

Since that great earthquake the desert's stillness has been broken by trumpet blasts, and by the whistling of shells and airplanes. Has not a romantic desert mystique enveloped so many wars? From the walls of Jericho, through Lawrence of Arabia, to the hallucinatory pursuit, by the forces of light and enlightenment, in heatwave and in snow, in caves and on the Internet, of the millionaire prophet of wrath who embodies the forces of darkness that threaten extermination from the wilderness. And perhaps, too, because of its sacredness? People have martyred themselves for the sacredness of this place ever since the sanctification of the Name was first connected with it. Except that the interpretations of the place are not only the name or the idea involved in religion and in territory and in a formulation that is a representative of an ideology. Here the interpretation is anchored first of all in a linguistic genealogy: in the Hebrew that is written in the Torah, the land area on the globe's surface is called earth, *aretz*, the earth that was created 'in the beginning' and is written about in the first sentence of Genesis. All humans lived there as one nation with one language until Chapter 11 where, as a punishment for their endeavour to build a city and a tower with its top in the sky, they were divided into different nations with different languages and dispersed

throughout the entire world, which then was still called 'all the earth', at least in the Hebrew subsequent to the Tower of Babel.

In the Sarajevo series Gersht has created a tension between modernist aesthetics and its socio-political roots. The ramifications of the encounter between the aesthetic and the political are made visible through the dominating uniformity of the shape-colour model that pushes the individual and his needs into a serial pattern of residential units. Even the formal effect of temporary acts of rehabilitation carried out by the tenants, such as sealing damaged windows and balconies with nylon sheets, wooden beams or patches of fabric, is assimilated into the model of the building and remains subject to the rigid logic of the grid.

The architecture's aesthetic language is part of a style, and a style expresses an idea, an ideology. The aesthetic language of the soil of the desert is not part of a style that is reflected in a model and expresses an idea. If the surface of the soil is subject to a logic it is a cosmic logic, the logic of nature, and if this logic can be formulated, most of its definitions point to disorder, discontinuity, and relativity; they emphasise the difficulty of formulating a logic, if this is at all possible, on the bass phenomena that have laws but no meta-order, and this is the distance of method from randomness, also the distance of culture from nature.

In Gersht's photographs of the desert there are always paths, there are signs of a wide road in which the years, the heavy tyres, the softness of the soil or the quantity of travellers have 'firmed' their tracks; there are miniscule signs which the hard earth refuses to bear; there are delicate signs which almost blend in with the texture of the mountain. There are no photographs here of dunes, which are popular in iconic photography of desert landscapes that seeks to create a lasting image of the wind's and the sand's capacity for rapid erasure. The paths, like the stones and the mountains and the sky, are not subject to any order, apart from the order of the picture. And in this order, the path is not a transient fact when compared to the rock; it is an established fact, like the sand and the mountains and the sky. The patches of rehabilitation of the shelling damage on the buildings in Bosnia are indeed assimilated into the architectural model, but they add a layer to the tension between the aesthetics and the political

roots of the style. In one of the Bosnia photographs, the firing holes seen on a wall without patterning create a texture that lacks any logic. They do not blend in with the concrete but are scattered randomly over the surface like the paths that are scattered over the land of the desert and refuse to get into an order according to an aesthetics.

If the Night is Not Bright and No Traveller Passes By

Time is one of the dimensions of nature that is measurable, but only in relation to a space that can be mapped. A map formulates the logic of the surface without recourse to a pattern, it contains no recurrent module that can be reproduced infinitely. In contrast, the model that exists for formulating time is modular, it contains a unit of measurement, but one that only relates to a map, an area the description of which is not methodical but empirical. It is impossible to map an area that is not in the present and it is possible to measure future time because there is a model and a system, except that the logic is nonetheless limited because one cannot imagine time without relating to distance. Since the perception of space is expressed by means of material, one cannot measure time outside a map, in a place where the area is not yet visible or in a space the concepts of which are anti-matter and 'anti-time'.

In a photograph that depicts a desert road at night, the road ends at the point where the lighting no longer illuminates it, and this point, which is a point on the time axis, becomes in the photograph a line that divides the picture plane into two horizontal areas. Is this the horizon line that, as in another photograph in Gersht's series, depicts a road in daytime, divides earth from sky? Or perhaps in this photograph there is no sky, and the line separates only darkness from light in the act of photography? Is there no difference between the two? The earth, in a place where no light is reflected from it, turns into black sky in the photograph. On the partly lit road beneath the black sky, the earth is sometimes black. Is this ash, like the ash frozen in the black lake of ice in the photograph from Birkenau? Or perhaps, both in the desert and in Birkenau, this is black earth? Does the difference matter? This question confused me when I visited Treblinka in July 2001, when I already knew Gersht's photographs from Poland, and I was

appalled because I was fascinated by the enchanting sound of the wind in the leaves of the tall trees that had grown from the earth, once a mound of ash. Even more confusing was my curiosity which did not let go of the black that was scattered on the soil of the forest / the soil of the memorial. My disbelief blamed nature both for an absolute absence of memory, an absence that erases all history and brings forth life from a place where life became dust and ashes, and for a harsh memory that attests for ever and proves to the trees that despite the silence of the sky, the earth beneath it will never forget.

In Gersht's desert photographs there is very little sky, it appears in a different colour in each photograph, as in his sky photographs from London (where there is almost no earth), but its character is different. Although in the desert photographs there is coloured sky, and even though their darkness is perhaps dark earth, it does not ask about the differences between vision and the camera, between the retina and the celluloid's memory. The lights that rise from the bustling city fill its sky with coloured noise, and when they rise from the soil that fills the earth with stillness, they arrange themselves into a thin stillness of sky. About divine revelation ('take the shoes from your feet for the place you are standing on is holy ground', Exodus 3:5) and about the birth of religions, the desert can bear witness; and from the dark path, from the outspread plains and the sunrise that is illuminated like a burning bush. In Gersht's photographs, an experience (that in a different discourse would certainly be called a revelation) reveals itself, one that blurs the division into dimensions and conceptions, and the division among formulating models and mapped and measured material and a consciousness that interprets and again formulates, because this experience is simultaneously in cognition and in the senses and it transects dimensions and models. The colour and the sound here also depict time, and the silence becomes slowness.

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