"To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch."[1]

i

In a winter ten years ago, I stood in front of an original portrait sketch of Dr. Gachet, by Vincent Van Gogh. I almost forget what exactly the picture looks like, but I remember I stared at it for a long time, and shed a tear. At that time, I was 12 years old, like many other kids learning art, I was fascinated by Van Gogh's life story. Later, I realized that the quality of the exhibition which came to my hometown in China was actually not good, just a bunch of trivial sketches by artists. However, it was such an extraordinary experience for a child who first got the chance to see the original artwork— also my first experience of *aura*.

In high school, my love for Impressionism decreased. Instead, I started to be obsessed with Bernini's running Daphne, as well as Rembrandt's world rendered in a golden fog. While enjoying staring at these works, I aways felt as if there was a magic power in them, a power that I was unable to resist, but also hard to grasp. These memories are a little dramatic for me, like Madame Bovary in her childhood[2], which makes me feel somehow ashamed.

Then, I went to college to study art history. This was an accident, but one I appreciated.

"A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be."[3] Sitting in the library, on an ordinary day, the moment I read it, it just perfectly explains that tear and those inexplicable feelings.

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[1] Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1935

[2] "This nature, positive in the midst of its enthusiasms, that had loved the church for the sake of the flowers, and music for the words of the songs, and literature for its passional stimulus, rebelled against the mysteries of faith as it grew irritated by discipline, a thing antipathetic to her constitution." Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary, 1856

[3] Ibid. 1

The aura which Walter Benjamin described as "the unique existence in particular place"—the here and now of the work of art—stems from its authenticity. This effect can be dated back to the origin of art, to the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition and found expression in a cult, to its basis in ritual, to the Venus of Willendorf from 20,000 years ago.

Moreover, what fascinates me most is the description of distance in the definition. At the moment of stopping to watch, what can be far while near at the same time? What makes you want to get close but can never reach? What is your long time desire but also the awe in your heart? And what is that line between the mountain and the branch…

In the book *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* by T. J. Clark, the author describes going back and forth to the Getty Museum for three months to look at two paintings by Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* and *Landscape with a Calm.* As he did this, Clark wrote his shifting responses in a notebook. Rather than using traditional theoretical writing, his notes were more like a diary, in which he recorded subtle observations, personal feelings and sometimes thoughts about the wider politics of our present image-world. He wanted to tell the readers that no matter how many words and theories were used in his analysis, it seemed that they could not fully express the silence of the blue ripples and the man's glance back while running. At this moment, between the viewer and the painting, an invisible wall appeared. I feel like that's the aura.

In William Turner's picture, a train gallops in the rain and fog—the Industrial Revolution had broken out. Along with the invention of photography, the era of technological reproducibility had truly come. Then, the spread of all kinds of media: films, records, advertisings, books, etc, had caused the authenticity of art to increasingly fade away. Ancient people regard art as religious experience, and carefully keep it at a distance, respecting the distance of it. Modern people, conversely, want to strip the veil from the object, obliterate the sense of aura, to quickly get the perception whose "sense for all that is the same in the world" (Johannes V Jensen). The process of disappearing divinity and the rapid replacement of it with pop culture, brought out manifestos like "every man is an artist", which indicated that art became more and more involved with the society.

So, does the aura truly disappear?

Even though we are living in this "complex, overlapping, broken sequence" of postmodernism, and dealing with a pervasive fragmented culture; even though we are surrounded by technology and massive stores of information; even though I never have had the chance to go the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, or to stand in front of *The Night Watch*, I still think when I read certain words, hear a certain sound, see a certain picture and face certain landscape, the experience of divine moments and distance will capture my mind and become searingly clear.

In these situations, deep down in my heart, the unique experience of aura that exists between the real world and the work has not faded, but needs to be sought—through seeing. It can evoke people to touch, and to open a gate of metaphysical truth.

(a)

In Godard's movie *The Carabineers* (1963), two sluggish peasants are lured into joining the army by the promise that they will be able to loot, rape, kill or do whatever they want and get rich. A few years later, they haughtily return. However, the spoils and trophies they should have brought home to their wives turn out to be only a suitcase, filled with hundreds of postcards from all over the world. They, then, take out the postcards by category, and announce to their wives one by one: the monuments, methods of transport, department store, mammals, insects, wonders of nature, works of art—this is what they bring back home—the whole world. Godard satirically revealed the truth, predicting the reality of contemporary society: seeing the world through image.

Most theorists of the postmodern agree that one of its distinctive features is the dominance of the image. Although there are always intellectuals who assume that a culture dominated by the visual must be second-rate, it can not resist the influx into the modern era. Imagine yourself walking in Times Square, the most intuitive feeling is to be surrounded by huge advertising screens. More and more people are unknowingly caught in "a world picture"[4], and most of them only want to ingest information through the efficient viewing of the image.

However, it should not stop at that superficial level. In W.J.T. Mitchell's "picture theory", "the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc) and that 'visual experience' or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable in the model of textuality". Similarly, in the John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, not only did he make the connection between modern advertising and classical oil painting, but also believed it is advertising that inherits functionality of oil painting and develops a functionality of its own.

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[4] "A world picture…does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture…. The world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age" Heidegger, 1977

Considering the background of such an era of massive information, the main task of visual literacy should be to understand how these complex pictures come together, how they connect historical culture with the present and the future, and how to reinterpret it, regardless of their specific textual or visual form. Perhaps, the key point is not finding a new landscape, but possessing a new vision.

(b)

The construction of metaphor is an important part of the viewing practice.

I always thought it was paintings that first introduced me to metaphor, but when I think about it carefully, the earliest influence actually came from language. Going back to the sentence-making practice in elementary school: stars are eyes, leaves are butterflies, the ginkgo leaves are like small fans, and the elephant's nose is like a long water pipe, I got so much joy in these simplest imaginations, just like playing a romantic and poetic game.

The vehicle of the metaphor creates a way of perceiving the world, another reality that is invisible to eyes.

So, the metaphor is not just a figure of speech, but a mechanism of human thought addressing abstract concepts. It is also deeply internalized in our thinking structure, from the language in everyday life to public discussions, from political speech to the fields of science and mathematics. Some metaphors are connected to sociality, with their own long history, others tend to be more related to personal vision rather than conventional concepts. As Nietzsche said, "Whereas each perceptual metaphor is individual and without equals and is therefore able to elude all classification, the great edifice of concepts displays the rigid regularity of a Roman columbarium and exhales in logic that strength and coolness which is characteristic of mathematics."[5] A metaphor should not be a stubborn and rigid idea, but a form flowing from thought. They can be alogical, but cannot be separated from the true experience— "they employ an imaginative rationality"[6].

I believe it is these metaphors that forms the poetry—the infinite proximity to things—also about distance. Although Plato questioned poetry and rhetoric, Aristotle, on the other hand, saw their positive value: "It is a great thing, indeed, to make proper use of the poetic forms,…But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor"(*Poetics*); "ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh"(*Rhetoric*).

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[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense, 1873

[6] George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, 2003

(c)

"The characteristics of the film lie not only in the manner in which man presents himself to mechanical equipment but also in the manner in which, by means of this apparatus, man can represent his environment."[7] Even though film is moving image, compared to the plot and narrative, I often linger mostly on certain still pictures. They are like small clips in series, connecting the story together.

Happiness, (*Le Bonheur,* 1965) is about the love affair of a married man. Every frame of the film is just as beautiful as a painting, with warm and soft colors running through it. And from the sunflowers in the fields at the beginning, to the fresh flowers in the room, to the stamps printed with Marc Chagall's sweet drawing, these seemingly lovely objects all echo the question and contemplation of what is the earthly definition of happiness. Another short film, *( )* (2003) by Morgan Fisher only features the editing of details and props in ready-made clips: fiddling hands, clocks and hourglasses, a rolling screw, burning photos, guns, dice in the casino, daggers, a letter, banknotes, high-heeled shoes…each serving as the metaphorical clue in the original narrative, which outlines an adventure of desire for sex, violence and conspiracy.

Godard especially likes to shoot the actors but then suddenly switches the camera to frame the pictures hanging in the room: Renoir's young girl portrait from *Breathless* (1960), the abstract drawings of Picasso from *Pierrot Goes Wild* (1965), and in the *Band of Outsiders* (1964), when three people hand in hand run through the Louvre in the shortest time, the shot stops at *Oath of the Horatii.* The same method is also used in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky. In the classic scene from *Solaris* (1964)*,* a man and woman reach the spiritual apex while gazing at *The Hunters in the Snow.* And, at the end of the movie, the man returns home and kneels at his father's feet, mimicking the gesture from Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Those pictures in history, sometimes as metaphorical objects, sometimes as a symbolic reference, echo with the films from different perspectives and layers, with creating the dialogue that transcends time and space, becoming the stories in the story.

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[7] Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1935

Metaphors may also maintain the sentimental connection of vulnerability. Tarkovsky is good at using water as this kind of symbol element. In *Solaris*, the movie begins with the long shots of slowly moving plants in the water. This is followed by a scene of rain. Then it is the shot of the lake on the surface of Solaris that flashes many times. Different forms of water are reflections of the sensitive emotion through the whole story. In the *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987) by Abbas Kiarostami, a little boy crosses mountains simply to return a notebook to his deskmate. At end of the story, a yellow flower between the pages of the notebook perfectly symbolizes purity and friendship, evoking the sublimated empathy of the audience.

If you want to capture the breeze, it is better to shoot the ripples on the water. The inverted reflection—the metaphor, seems to be more attractive, more meaningful, and more real than the reality. Meanwhile, the appearance of aura occurs when the image coincides with memories, happening in the path of time that connects the history and the present, and happens a second time when the sentiments are being stirred.

But, to be honest, I still find it hard to put aura into words.

The only thing I'm sure of is that it's fleeting and endless. It was the moment when I read in Lessing's book that as he was looking at the ancient sculpture of *Laocoön and His Sons*, he realized that "the greatest art shows the moment before passion reaches its very point". It was this moment when the moment in reality overlapped with the moment he described in history. And then the next moment, I realized it was the perfect symbol of the sublime.

The experience of aura links to viewing and connecting in the mind. And I design through this lens.

Design is probably one of the disciplines that relies most on the age of mechanical reproduction. It is also very new to me. I continuously have a raw interest towards it, from typography, to font design, to the grid and tiny space between…like a child who just learned to walk, not confident, but excited. I remember when I suddenly got simple happiness in a typography workshop. That is an aura moment for me. Although there are still many times when makes me frustrated.

While listening to an online lecture given by Jim Jarmusch, he was asked about the happiest part in his art practice. And his answer was he found it in the composition of cinema, that is, the photography, editing, scene layout, and coordination from all aspects. For me, it is the same with design —building a system.

My favorite book recently would be James Wood's *How Fiction Works*. The writer deftly disassembles the components of the novel. I clearly feel the fascinating part of great literature is not how strange the story is, but how it tells the story—the flexibility of language. Here I want to quote Roland Barthes in 1966: "The function of narrative is not to 'represent', it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order . . . 'What takes place' in the narrative is, from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; 'what happens' is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming." I may not be able to comprehend Flaubert in French, but in the Chinese translation, I

still can taste the precision and simplicity of language from Madame Bovary. And beyond the forms, I also feel the the power of truth in realism.

Whether it is the aura, the metaphor or the use of language, the most important goal is to show truth in different layers. "Art is the nearest thing to life."[8] All the great artists fight for what they think is true in various ways. At this point, I am just getting started in this journey, and hope to find my own best ways to get close to it.

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