

### Self-Reflexive Essay

This project, and my quick-growing enthusiasm for it, came from a small classroom exercise conducted on this module. The tutor handed us photocopies of portrait photographs, taken by August Sander, a German photographer, throughout the 1920s and 1930s. We were instructed to create an experimental narrative using just these photographs. As a group, we tried many approaches, including using the page numbers under the photographs to represent significant numbers in the lives of the photographed. However, as was pointed out to us, all our attempts produced a conventional narrative; the photographs did introduce some variation of form, but we were still creating a fictional narrative using fictional characters. As an experimental piece, the only difference between this and conventional realist fiction is the introduction of the photographs.

I have always been interested in photography as a medium; it is not something that I can confess to understand with any technical expertise, though many of my friends are photographers, and I am always keen to collaborate with them on projects which play to our individual strengths and create something unique. This project takes my interest in photography in a more esoteric direction. The narrative is without concrete characters, apart from an unknown narrator. However, the focus of the work are monochrome photographs of human beings. The deliberate irony of the title, "Landscapes", reinforces this distinction; for the purposes of the narrative these are desolate landscapes, devoid of human life, and yet the reader cannot help but see these as portrait photographs. The title page states that any resemblance to human features within the photographs is merely coincidental.

The coincidental arrangement of landscape to produce an image of an object or living being is a well-known photographic style, though I could find very little evidence of it on the internet or in the library; there is no official name for the style, nor any obvious examples of it. However, it was a style that I had encountered before, and I decided to utilise it for my own purposes. Though I wished to use original portraits by my photographer friends, I did not have enough time to organise and shoot the sixty plus photographs required to fulfil the word count for this project. I instead was forced to use Sander's original photographs, though this was not much of a burden; it was his close-shot, slightly strange style of photography that had inspired the project at first. I was recommended the American photographer Diane Arbus as a close comparison to Sander's work, and found that she also used stark, black and white photography to reveal a hidden, sad underbelly to her home country. However, the period in which Sander's photographs were taken lent itself to the fiction I was creating for the project; the town of Loss, and its strange relationship to the land around it, as

well as the mystery of why it was deserted.

The reader is assured that these are landscape photos; I used stylistic flourishes, such as the use of figure notation and the large title “Landscapes” to seat the reader in this illusion that they are reading a book of landscape photography. The descriptions do not bear hardly any conscious resemblance to the photos themselves. However, as the reader reads the description, and objects in the photos (that are not, in actuality, there) are pointed out to him, he begins to search for them, to search for shapes and recognisable attributes that these objects may have. I occasionally used very small components of the portrait photos to inform the landscape decisions, or referred to objects from the portraits a few descriptions later; examples of these two can be found in Figure 2, where the fur coat that the woman is wearing is referred to in the “walls... lined with grass and tufts of fur”, and in Figure 13, where the half-broken cello from Figure 8 can be seen, still whole.

Occasionally the photos will refer to colours, or objects that cannot be there. These reinforce to the reader that, while they must believe that they are looking at landscapes and must search for the landscapes behind the portraits, what they are doing borders on the absurd; these are people, and it is very hard to escape from this fact. From the earliest moments of formulating these ideas in class, my brain found it very difficult to correlate a large portrait photograph with an accompanying description of a landscape devoid of people. I believe that these conflicts inform and enrich the work, perhaps saying something about our subconscious conformity to formal stereotypes; when one looks at a portrait, and there is a description beneath, one immediately expects the description to be of a person. The project also is a comment on simile; in being told there are objects within the photos, the reader begins to search for them, convincing themselves that they see, for example, a violin in the curve of a neck in relation to a collar. New similes are created, depending on each reader's interpretation of what they believe they see. If a violin is described, it is not there, but in believing that they see the reader creates it for their own mind's eye.

Apart from the formal interests of this piece, the lack of character was not as restricting as I at first feared. I took pains to make sure that the narrator, the writer of the book and the describer of the scenes, remained anonymous and entirely removed from the scene; if anything is implied in the tone of the description it is an anthropological interest, and a photographer's eye for detail and beauty, concerns that I felt would be appropriate and not too informing for an anonymous narrator of a photography journal. As I used the photographs of Sander, an organic narrative began to emerge; these descriptions were describing the remnants of a formerly prosperous mountain town, of unknown nationality. That town is Loss, and has been abandoned by its residents for mysterious

reasons. This use of urban landscapes allowed me to include much more incidental detail in the detritus that would be left behind by a departing flock of people. It also made the use of portrait photographs much more poignant, as the reader begins to question whether these people he cannot help but see are the former residents; this is the conclusion that he must jump to, though it is never revealed within the narrative, and the descriptions maintain resolutely the illusion of landscape. I also found that I was inadvertently perverting the original photographs in poignant ways; a beautiful stage actress became a blood or oil-stained doorway to a casino, and a child on a rocking horse became a knife-sharpener's shop that had been the scene of a grisly fight between a mouse and a termite hive.

I began to research abandoned cities and towns online, and found it to be a much more common occurrence than at first I believed; photographs of these places, such as Chernobyl, the Gold Rush town of Bodie in Arizona (which I visited as a young boy, and soberly noted the dead, empty windows) and the walled city of Kowloon helped me place believable items and scenes in my descriptions. Several videogames also aided my figuring of a believable, empty space; the “Myst” series sets players in an deserted, naturally lush world and has them solve puzzles, whereas the more recent “Bioshock” has players survive in a crumbling Randian metropolis sunk beneath the Atlantic. Though I have mentioned it in other modules, the detailed landscape filming of Sigur Ros' “Heima” also provided me with an artistic mood suited to the desolation of Loss. I spent much of the time writing this alone in my flat in the days after Christmas, which indeed has helped the lonely feeling of the work; the sparing, elemental music of Sigur Ros and Olafur Arnalds were also an influence in this respect.

The town began to take on a truly unique style as I continued to describe its streets and buildings; it draws traditions and idiosyncrasies from all over the world. Its inhabitants farm and go to the cinema, and much of the town is typically early twentieth-century European in its style; however, hints and clues throughout the description point to a thoroughly Slavic mythology, the burning of the dead in a Hindi fashion, and the use of paper symbols and dolmens as in the ceremonies of Shinto Japan and Saxon ritual, respectively. This strange and at times frightening mix of influences and styles creates a truly unique space to describe, as well as providing suggestions and reasons for the towns sudden emptying. In fact, in my playing of the “Myst” series and other puzzle games, I felt that the reader should have hints as to what has occurred; stylistic motifs such as the consistent use of herbs and the strange paper symbols throughout the work. The placing of strange items such as the hunched statue in the dolmen field, as well as the pierced coin at the

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ch door, point to a complexity and puzzle that could eventually solve the riddle of Loss; even I  
not definitively decided what has happened in the town, though I have plans to make it  
tifiable and solvable in a literary format.

These plans extend to a full, novel-length collaboration, using all original portraits, but  
telling the story of town of Loss, and allowing the reader to delve into its odd, desolate  
thology, and perhaps solve all of its riddles. As a starting point this task has been invaluable, and  
an experimental piece I posit that it presents a believable narrative, without character, which  
es, and perhaps answers, some extremely interesting questions about the nature of narrative,  
racter, metaphor and vision.

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