FRAME IN FLUX

Juna Horstmans

As the pandemic has reduced my orbit to rooms and a street block, looking outside my windows has recently become a habitual part of my life. Their usual programming — cars piling up at an intersection, birds congregating on nearby trees — provide me with a sort of comfort; mitigating the sticky sensation of claustrophobia as my inner walls start to cave in and constrict; dulling the demands of the world's immediate pressures that bluster me in the background. The more I engage with my windows, the more I feel I can recede into them. In a way, they provide me with the equipment to excavate the contents of my own mind. As I climb down a window-escape-hatch of imagination, I can discover the unexplored and unused, seeking out the more tentative parts and perspectives of my deeper self that murmur in mysterious corners.

My windows have the power to extend my senses far beyond that of just observing. As a tower block looms in the drizzle across the street, I imagine my hands reaching out to touch and slip on its slick, silver surface. As the wind makes a plot of weeds whirl, I imagine I am with them, wrestling against the gale.

My windows are also a powerful existential tool. Arbitrarily framed patches of the world, from which I am physically isolated, make me confront the fundamental lack of control I have with windows. The only thing I can do is look. There will always be something happening before I come; that will always continue to happen after I go. Nothing that ensues beyond the wooden clad edges and glass depends on me, yet I am still inexorably linked to its existence every time my eyes meet a transparent surface. As energy continues to burst and gleam within the margins of my windows, I will continue to observe, noting their magnetism, learning from the lessons they teach me.

It offers uninterrupted views of the world, but no physical contact with it, acting as a threshold between here and there, near and far, inside and outside. It is both a surface and frame: holding a view in place within its edges and rendering the outside a two-dimensional plane. It can be a screen and interface: a reflective skin onto which an image is cast. Its flatness converses with depth, its transparency envelops its borders. It can change the material of built space by dissolving the boundaries that it simultaneously creates, extending the very conception of space and time.¹

There is a curious power to the window. It is ubiquitous. It also commands a certain reverence, marking a location, a destination within a place. Despite its transparency, a window separates us from the outside, characterising us as the observer and that which we see, the observed. Through this dislocation and distance, a sense of autonomy can be established. As independent viewers, we can dream and wonder, cohabitate and connect, identify and determine. As our optic urge increases, so too does our agency as an observer. From discrete domains, we can gaze at others with eyes of presupposed power, ultimately veering us down the path of voyeurism. Somewhat ethically strange yet innately present, the act of voyeurism is not only restricted to that of a physical window. It can also be directed to other pervasive portals: the virtual windows of our technological devices. When considering the duality of inside and outside, observer and observed, *yourself* and *others*, the window is the undeniable mediator between parallels, influencing our separation and connection, our inertness and interaction.

The following text aims to venture down similar means of mediation, examining how the window and its transparency becomes a metaphor for different ways of seeing and engaging, as well as

¹ Anne Friedberg and Heinrich Wölfflin, "Introduction: The Virtual Window," in *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p1.

how it spurs ethical relations between ourselves and others. In not only considering our autonomy and agency, it will also endeavour to highlight the agency of the window itself, acting on the viewer just as the viewer acts on it. These journeys will take us through portable holes into profound parts of the psyche, to the back courtyard of a pained peeping tom, the furthest fringes of cyberspace and deep into a new mystical moorland of premonitions and prophecy.



Lars Tunbjörk, Lars Tunbjörk (Agence VU', 2020)

LOST IN REVERIE

Gazing out my bedroom window, things that were once boring are now strange and intriguing. Clouds suspended above buildings take on multiple personas; trees begin to contort themselves in a time-lapsed contemporary dance; lone figures orchestrate a play of shadows on deserted sidewalks. The sensuous quality, colours and tones of the world outside captivate and beguile me. I imagine I am a part of them; the brisk air, burgundy-blotched and burnt orange leaves, the scintillating sun. I can smell and taste and hear it all, yet I am merely seeing. Hanging idly above my bookshelf, my rectangular window allows me to converse with nature. Its translucent molecules condense into cement, forming a bridge, arching over the cavernous chasm between my inside room and the outside world. Our interaction is unfettered; our relation, fetishised.

When we 'look', our single eye is the centre of the visible world, turning the world into an object of our own observation. Our vision is always active, always kinetic, always holding things in an orbit around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are. This convention is called linear

perspective. Devised by the Italian Renaissance painter, Fillipo Brunelleschi in 1415, linear perspective enabled us to comprehend the analysis of vision, clarifying the mystery of the world's depth in its explanations. When codifying Brunelleshci's work in his famous *Della Pittura* in 1435,² Leon Battista Alberti further elaborated the idea of perspective through his focus on one's distant gaze behind a window. 'Alberti's window', an open frame gridded by perpendicular threads, allowed the viewer (and more specifically the painter) to accurately survey the outside world, quantifying it through means of measures, lines and orthogonals.³ As linear perspective found a favourable reception in the geometry of our eyes, it also extended our natural power of vision into a method, a way of knowing and understanding, which has defined for us the world with which we are so readily familiar.



Albrecht Dürer, *The Met Collection* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2020)

Although, linear perspective didn't always remain the sovereign metaphor through which truthful inferences of the world could be made. Subsequent to Johann Wolfgang van Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, published in the early 19th Century, a new kind of 'observer' was established.⁴ One that shifted its mooring from the scientific base that had once authorised the idea of perception, to a more subjective one. Presenting a "notion of vision," Goethe's work highlighted how the corporal subjectivity of the observer can in fact become an active producer of optical experience.⁵ One's physiological participation with the world; their sensual ties and romanticisms to it can affect their ways of perceiving, hence extending the composition of vision far beyond its quantitative measures of shadow, light and transmissions. This epistemological shift had great consequences, inferring that our vision is inexorably linked with whatever object or thing it beholds. Vision therefore not only became an object of observation, but also of knowledge, marking the shift into another apparatus – the human body – a fickle, temporal place where an interplay of forces and relations perpetually occurs.

Through lines and points, associations and familiarity, I am able to better understand the way I observe and perceive the world. However, this understanding is questioned when I am

² Naomi Blumberg, "Linear Perspective," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 2020)

³ Samuel Y. Edgerton, "Brunelleschi's Mirror, Alberti's Window, and Galileo's 'Perspective Tube'," SciELO, February 2006

⁴ Jonathan Crary, "Techniques of the Observer," in *Techniques of the Observer* (The MIT Press, 2010), p3-4.

⁵ Ibid, p4.

physically isolated from a world that I see. In spite of its historical function to better help me comprehend the outside, it is behind a window where a sense of estrangement can also occur. An estrangement that separates the self as a subjective reality from the self as an objective reality. It is where a distinction between the eye (the body) and the mind occurs, "Body and world belonged to matter while self belonged to mind, and in this difference between matter and mind our distance from the world has increased".

In this estrangement, my window becomes a membrane through which I pass in retreat from the world. A thinking, feeling membrane with great imaginative capacity. Freed of my body's dogged entanglements with the world, I can dream of an irrational one cleansed of quantities, a world devoid of numbers, a world in which, for example, colours usurp the metric system. These phantasms allow me to shift my focus and escape from the bounds that tie me to reality. They can provide a sense of relief and consolation. Ironically, a world dreamed cannot be an inhabited one, and my sense of self can only become a stranger in this world of my own creation. I can conjure up as many ideas of what it is like, however what I see out a window will always tend to contradict those assumptions, scribbling over my mental cartoons with the heavy red pen of reality. All I can do is observe; stuck in inactivity, ensconced behind a pane of glass. My intrinsic desire to attribute meaning and understanding to what I see out a window is never settled, further deepening my separation and alienation to it. Perhaps it is the acceptance of this absurd, gaping gorge, however, where a sense of freedom can be established; as is evidenced in Albert Camus', *The Myth of Sisyphus*.8

PEEPING TOMS

Winter is descending. It's only four-thirty in the afternoon and it's almost completely dark. Sitting at my desk in the spare room, I intermittently look out the window to the apartment block opposite me. As night casts its looming shadow, my neighbours' square-framed windows light up like colourful buttons on a remote control. My eyes scan from left to right, then left again as if I'm bored flicking through channels on a TV screen, dazzled by the one with greater special effects or a grander set design. One is pink bordered with dark purple; two women sit on a sofa drinking wine. Another, a warm white freckled with bright orange spots; a man prepares dinner in the kitchen. My neighbours' lights uncover the interiors of their private domains, while I stare intently from mine, cloaked in the darkness.

According to sociologist George Simmel, one's eyes cannot give unless they receive at the same time, creating "a most perfect reciprocity." When engaged in the act of spectating behind a window, however, this reciprocity is lost. Bereft of interaction, a spectators gaze is singular, unilateral and private, facilitating a sense of power and dominion. Like a thin mist in a valley, this power is all but invisible when one is in it, but becomes visible when one can look back on it from a height or distance. "What one can see in the light of day is always less interesting than what happens behind a pane of glass." 10

⁶ Robert D. Romanyshyn, *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p68.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (United Kingdom: Penguin Books Limited, 2013).

⁹ Georg Simmel and Kurt H. Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, vol. 10 (New York: The Free Press, 1950), p10.

¹⁰ Charles Baudelaire, "Windows," in *Paris Spleen* (New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 1988), p77.

In Alfred Hitchcock's acclaimed film, *Rear Window*, we follow the protagonist, photographer L.B. "Jeff" Jefferies confined to his Manhattan apartment due to a broken leg.¹¹ Riddled with boredom, Jeff develops an increasing interest in observing his neighbours in the courtyard beyond his rear window. As domestic dramas unfold in the apartments, Jefferies becomes a voyeur armed with binoculars and a high-end telephoto lens, indifferent to his neighbours' plights. Stella, Jeff's nurse and the film's ostensible voice of sanity bares witness to his actions complaining, "We've become a race of peeping toms." But before long, she too falls at the whims of peeping temptation.

Not only does *Rear Window* underscore our voyeuristic tendencies, it also short-circuits voyeuristic involvement, making the audience aware of itself as audience and the film as artifice. By making "himself his own cinema," ¹² Jefferies adopts the dual role of protagonist and projector, and in doing so blurs the boundaries between the characters and ourselves. As cinema demands our retinal activity and enforced immobility, so too does Jefferies; fixed in the act of gazing, indulging his scopic drive. As remarked by Stella, we are both "Travelling but going nowhere."



Alfred Hitchcock, Jeff's Courtyard, 2020, The Take, 2020

In watching Hitchcock's film, I inevitably become an accomplice in Jefferies' prying pursuits. He carouses on the act of spying on his neighbours, intoxicated by the idea of having agency over his viewing subjects, spectating out of sight. And not much can be differentiated from my own disposition to snoop, as my neighbours private lives are transposed into a public spectacle

¹¹ Rear Window (Paramount Pictures, 1954).

¹² Marshall Deutelbaum, Leland A. Poague, and Alfred Hitchcock, "Hitchcock's Rear Window: Reflexivity and the Critique of Voyeurism," in *A Hitchcock Reader*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p199.

everytime I look beyond my window. Their actions turn into a visual cacophony of stimulating signs and signals, inspiring my imagined ideas of who they are. The old lady that carefully tends to her burgeoning orchids perhaps once dreamt of being a botanist, but settled on something more manageable. The pandemic stole the young couple's summer, relegating them to movie marathons and bread-making benders. Like Jeff's false assumptions of his neighbours, Miss Torso and Miss Lonelyheart, I too have made several false assumptions of the people that live adjacent and opposite me. It is the power and enchantment of voyeurism that fuels these false theories. Although it feels somewhat morally dubious, I can't deny the deeply-rooted curiosity within me. From three stories up, I am granted an agency akin to being a warden in a private panopticon prison. With my knee-jerk judgements and distantly formed clichès, I can relieve the burden of introspection and allay the consequences associated with secret scrutinisation.

The act of spying can also be freeing. As my prying eyes surreptitiously enter private spaces, I can compare my life and sense of self to others, feel connected to their social spheres, and even reassure myself of my own fidelity and friendship; all bolstering my own social and psychological development. Through peeping tommery I can settle into an easier state of psychic activity: a state of regression in which desire is satisfied, where the feeling of relative narcissism is bliss, and my inner-fantasies are satiated.

OUR WINDOWS ARE SHRINKING

Languid on my couch, I spy on birds nestled in the small alcoves of a tree beyond my living room window. A buzz and subsequent flash steals my attention. I reach out my arm to grab that pocket square of chips and circuits that is the artificial extension of my will. My skin is glued to its sticky surface. Aluminium and glass are fleshy; lithium oxide, arterial. As my eyes probe at its screen my retina widens, becoming long and angular in shape. My face is suffused with its electronic glow, my brain brimming with bubbles of information it feeds me. It spreads a murky aura around me like a heady smell, and everything begins to deliquesce away. I am impassive, mute, still, caught in a paradoxical tangle of mobility and immobility.

My gaze isn't always framed by a window in a building. It can also be directed inward, in a space roughly the size of a playing card or A4 sheet of paper: the rectangle of my phone and computer screen. As my vision narrows and narrows, so too do my windows. From out onto the world I turn within, down a digital depth over which control, knowledge and connectivity is explored. If I want to see a cute kitten, I can see a cute kitten. If I want to know the weight of clouds, I can know that. If I want to Skype a stranger in the Sahara, I can do that. Our devices provide us with cavernous pools of information and perceptual stimuli. They contain ubiquitous portals like wormholes, giving us access to pasts and futures. Their overwhelming capacity implies a continuum of space, lingering beyond the edges of their screens to a new invisible landscape – an "elsewhere." ¹³

The electronic wall dividing the online sphere and our real one can also act as a mask. Through our virtual avatars, we can enter any space under any guise, waxing lyrical about anything our pseudo-identities are 'interested' in. For some, the masquerade of the virtual world is a preferred place of inhabitance. Anonymity is therapeutic relief in an environment free of prejudices and preconceived ideas. The body, from one single being can also disperse into many; a multiplicity of beings with several quasi-independent personalities. Take Allucquère

¹³ Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway, *Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway* (Duke University Press, 2011), p10.

Rosanne Stone's case study of the cross-dressing psychiatrist, Sanford Lewin, for instance. Following his urge to interact with women as a woman, Lewin decided to enter an online chat platform under a new pseudo-identity. Her name was Julie Graham, a neuropsychologist who, despite her physical impairments due to a severe motorcycle accident, maintained a strong online presence and impetus to support women, "Here's a terrific opportunity to help people, by catching them when their normal defenses are down and they're more able to hear what they need to hear." Lewin routinely journeyed free of his own body into the virtual one of Julie's, thriving with unequivocal expression. *She* enjoyed attacking organised religion, was bisexual, smoked dope, and would occassionaly stay online late at night, quite stoned. *He* however was quiet, reserved and struggled with social interaction. Lewin's parallel identity could only flourish in the online sphere behind blips on a screen.

Where this fable is one of the inexpungible human desire for sociality and love, it is also one of the loss of embodiment to self and transparency. As those that Julie befriended began to suspect deceit, their trust progressively started to dwindle, pulling away the opaque veil that Lewin concealed himself in. This disguised self, finding solace in retreat from the real world represents a new kind of human, a 'posthuman' stripped of any sensual association to the corporeal realm. Probing at distant screens can not only invoke a sense of detachment and dissolution, but also a sense of power and freedom.

The online world can be a scary place too. The edges of otherwise innocuous pages are crammed with clotted clusters of terrible trolls and sagging mounds of spam. Just as our neural pathways are coaxed open, we can be ambushed, forced into an online museum of humiliation, sadism, selfishness, bleak news or bad faith. One minute you will be doting on cute animal videos, then all of a sudden, you're caught in an algorithm of severe sports injury clips or conspiracy mongers cajoling you in an online chat room. The internet's sanctuary of simulations can easily become a festering horrorscape of electronic landfill. We have put faith in our device's cathodic shadows that in turn leave us lost in information silos, polarising our perceptions, stripping us of the control we once felt. And this doesn't happen involuntarily. By means of manipulation, our devices are programmed to bypass vision in order to work directly on the nervous system and psyche; a characteristic almost antithetical to that of an actual window. As we are dragged into a cybernated cloud at the hand of persuasive algorithms and compelling communication chains, our very identities have the potential to be extended as well.

"We make up extensions to your being, like remote eyes and ears (webcams and mobile phones) an expanded memory (the world of details you can search for online). These become the structures by which you connect to the world and other people. These structures in turn can change the way you conceive of yourself and the world. We tinker with your philosophy by direct manipulation of your cognitive experience, not indirectly, through argument." ¹⁶

Social media is another issue associated with our devices. Engineered to plow our social interactions into crops of quantitative clicks and aggregated data, it can hinder the nuances and complexities of communication. Despite its ability to foster real connections, social media feels as if it is aggressively engineered to prevent us from getting any closer. We are online constantly, looking for each other; and yet we are so rarely there to be seen. Thus the internet

¹⁴ Stone, Allucquère Rosanne, "In Novel Conditions: The Cross-Dressing Psychiatrist," in *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Jaron Lanier, "Missing Persons," in You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto (London: Penguin, 2011), p4.

as the great connector could paradoxically atrophy our most basic connective skill: that imaginative leap into another mind, the attempt to understand what it comprehends and believes, why it moves the way it moves. It has made Spock's of all of us, favouring logic as a form of serenity that humans once seldom experienced.

In spite of their ability to make us feel connected, real and resolute, virtual windows are also devoid of depth and interiority. They can be both comforting and contradicting: floating with the soothing ebb and flow of the internet's current while simultaneously treading against its tempestuous tides. Caught in the hold of its images, nose to glass, framed in display, our vision through virtual windows is always rigid and rarely direct. They provide an aperture into a delimited virtuality. That is unlike real windows, that facilitate veridical, unmediated vision with transparency.

CRYSTAL BALL

The sun intermittently flashes at the windows adjacent to my dining room table. The dissimulating glare catches my attention, interrupting the mindless scroll routine on my phone screen. The glass repels its surroundings, producing temporary aberrations, cloning and warping the appearance of nearby trees. Leaves with round symmetrical edges skew and sawtooth. Straight branches meander and serpentine. Colours, shapes and textures coalesce together into a fictionalised, fragmented world. These windows provide new perspectives: depth is concealed by flatness, reality by apparitions.

Colourless, odourless and permeable to light, glass revolutionised the window and shaped its atmospheric capacity. Enabling observers to view their surroundings in clear sight, the window has been naturalised and idealised as a fundamental part of human nature. Complementary to the other transparent things we find in daily life – clear beverages that we relate to pureness and health; translucent cleaning products that we associate with hygiene – we place trust in a window's transparent qualities. Providing a crystal view, it stands as a metaphor for society's social and cultural expectations of how to behave, *with* transparency.

In spite of its affiliation to the pristine quality of goods, spaces and people, the window or more specifically the act of looking out of one, has also shifted the notion of the individual social role. It can both connect and separate, marking a distinction and relation between viewer and viewee, public and private. Although transparent, the window is impenetrable. This interplay of roles has prompted a negotiation between the security of knowing what is behind a window and the consequences of being analysed under one; as was outlined in the above peeping toms section. An outsider's gaze carries just as much responsibility to that of the insider's, marking an ethical relation between the two, bridging the abyss of anonymity that stands between them.

However, one's gaze is not the only thing in question. As a spectator behind a window can obtain autonomy, agency and an affinity with whatever they observe, so too can the window, standing autonomously as its own subject, having agency over whatever it beholds, and establishing an affinity between inside and outside. The metaphor of the window's transparency can therefore be meddled with, manipulating the very parameters that define its typically idle position.

While glass can act as an aperture, it can also act as a proscenium. Its clarity can be clouded; its transparent quality can equally be one of opaqueness. Just like that of our phone and computer screens, windows can produce images and impressions. Nonetheless, this

information is not as easy to decipher. It is in fact all but invisible and underrepresented until carefully read. As the natural phenomena of the world shines and glistens in planes that are almost inconceivable, a window can mimic the same. It can bounce and flare light, producing temporary visual alterations in a choreography of duplicating, scrambling and blurring. It is through recognising the existence of this phenomena when a window can morph into something completely different again. Something that has the potential to expand our sensorium to new, projected dimensions. When we shift our gaze from looking *through* to *at* a window, we are enabled a better chance of looking beyond it, or rather behind it, into possible pasts and potential futures that dramatically deviate from the present.¹⁷ Bearing a somewhat mystic reality, a window can become a crystal ball; our own projections and imagination incarnate. As it contorts and inverts things around it, we stare at the crystalline window in a pleasurable act of anticipation, where the future-under-construction can be of great assurance.

To hold the window's transparency and enigmatic qualities to be true is to envision a future of contrast. Just as it mediates between the outside world and our inner domains, between our dreams and reality, our impulses and inhibitions, mobility and immobility, the window can also represent a distinction between lightness and darkness. It is perpetually playing between paradoxes, seeking the perfect balance. Consequently, the window will forever be in a state of flux, no matter how fixed it may seem.



Crystal Ball: The Dowager Empress (The Penn Museum, 2020)

¹⁷ Reinhold Martin, "Materiality: Mirrors," in *Utopias Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p114.

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