

Linear Perspective, Fences & Nature's Glory

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Linear perspective is a way of seeing things. Things closer to us are large, it tells us; things farther away get smaller and smaller as they recede toward a singular dot in the distance. The vantage point, from slightly above the scene, is that of a “bird’s eye view”

Many Westerners accept this way of seeing as a complete description of reality. Let’s look again. As psychologist Robert Romanyshyn describes in *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, seeing creation with the mathematical precision of linear perspective means seeing it from a very particular stance—and one with grievous implications for human psychology and the Earth’s creatures: detachment.

Science appears but what in truth she is,
Not as our glory and our absolute boast,
But as a succedaneum, and a prop
To our infirmity.

—William Wordsworth, “The Prelude”

The sickness that Wordsworth was referring to in 1801 is not so far off from what Romanyshyn brought up again in 1989. It’s a psycho-spiritual ailment: dissociation-of mind from body, intellect from feeling, human from natural world.

The emergence of this infirmity had been a long time coming, in slow and continual evolution ever since the initiation of a psychic and ecological development some 10,000 years ago. The Neolith Era was an occurrence that began penetrating and altering the human mind the moment we purposefully isolated domestic plants from natural ones, the moment we captured animal-creatures from their homes in the wild and corralled them in human-built enclosures.

Previously, humans had participated whole-heartedly in the evolution of the natural world—carrying, dropping, and scattering seeds, returning later to harvest the fruit; scavenging animals left by others’ raids or later building branch and rock obstructions to hunt them; catching fish and insects; constructing temporary shelters out of rock, trees, ice; befriending wolves around the campfire.

But this new step was unprecedented. This was the purposeful separation of human existence from the rest of life: the domestication of the human species. To biologist Paul Shepherd, the original dualism—the tame/wild dichotomy—came into being, and with it the integrity of the world was dipped.

The fence is the ultimate symbol of this development.

What came to reside within its confines—domesticated cereals, cultivated flowers, oxen, permanent housing structures—was said to be tame: to be valued, controlled, identified with. What existed outside was wild—“weeds,” weather, wind, the woods—perennially threatening human survival: to be feared, scorned, kept at bay.

“Separation,” writes feminist philosopher Susan Griffin in *Woman and Nature*. “The clean from the unclean. The decaying, the putrid, the polluted, the fetid, the eroded, waste, defecation, from the unchanging... The prison. The witch house. The underworld. The underground. The sewer. The space divided. The inch. The foot. The mile. The boundary.”

The dichotomy has since crystallized to define our lives with myriads of fences separating humans from each other and the natural world, with myriads of fence-like artifacts and practices defining “the way things are”: economic individualism, private property, social hierarchies, exclusive rights, check-points, nation-states, resource wars, nuclear missiles, Facebook-until at last civilization has succeeded at domesticating the entire planet and is looking to enclose both the outer space of other planets and the inner space of minds, genes, and molecules.

In the psychotherapeutic process, one assumption mental-health professionals make is that whatever behavior, feeling, or state of consciousness a person experiences, expresses, or presents exists for a reason. If you and I were given the task of acting as therapists for this domesticated world, we might focus our attention on the “presenting symptom” of separation, boundaries, and resulting divisiveness.

We might wonder if the overwhelming success of linear perspective as the sole definition of visual reality isn’t a symptom of some deeper condition seeking expression. And, we might ask: why did some humans create-and then rationalize with elaborate devices, ideologies, and defenses-an unprecedented way of seeing the world based on distancing and detachment?

Let’s look to survivors of post-traumatic stress for clues: Vietnam veterans, rape victims and survivors of childhood abuse, sufferers of both natural and technology-induced disasters. One of the most common symptoms to manifest itself after the experience of trauma is the neuro-physiological response of disembodiment—“leaving one’s body” to escape from pain that is literally too overwhelming to bear.

Some people who have endured trauma tell of a sensation of “lifting out of their bodies” and watching the scene from above, a vantage point not unlike that of linear perspective. Others tell of escaping into a post-trauma state of mental activity devoid of feeling or body awareness, not unlike that which is considered normal, taught in schools and universities, and reinforced by the computer screen.

Could it be that the very culture of mass-technological empire splits mind from body, intellect from feeling, because we as individuals are suffering from a form of post-traumatic stress?

Could it be that we as individuals are dissociated because we inhabit a culture that is founded on and perpetrates traumatic stress?

Or, that the linear perspective that infuses our vision—from the much-heralded glorification of intellectual distancing to the debunking of the earthier realms of feeling and intuition; to the relentless lifting upward with skyscrapers, space shuttles, and sky gods; to the ultimate techno-utopian vision of downloading human knowledge into self-perpetuating computers to make embodied life obsolete—that such a vantage point results from some traumatic violation that occurred in our past?

Mythologies describing pre-agricultural times from cultures as divergent as African, Native American, and Hebraic tell of human beings at one time living in balance on the Earth. The Hebrew Garden of Eden. The Sumerian Dilum. The Iranian Garden of Yima. The Egyptian Tep Zepi. The Greek Golden Age.

Most of these myths go on to tell of a Fall consistently depicted as a lowering of the quality of human character and culture. The Bantu of southern Africa say that the spirits were driven away from the Earth by humanity’s insensitivity to nature. The Yurok of northern California talk of a moment in history when people disrupted nature’s balance with greed.

In his work with survivors of post-traumatic stress, psychotherapist Terry Kellogg emphasizes that abusive behaviors are not natural to human beings. People enact them because something unnatural has happened to them and they have become damaged. With this insight we might consider that the Fall described in myths around the world actually took place and that it was not a preordained event destined to occur in the unfolding of human consciousness.

Nor was it the result of what the Bible terms original sin, which carries an onus of blame and guilt. We might consider that this historic alteration in our nature, or at least in how we express our nature, came about as the result of something unnatural that happened to us.

What could this “something” be?

You and I are creatures who were born to live in vital participation with the natural world. Our original trauma could be the systemic removal of our lives from previously assumed embedding in nature's world—from the tendrils of earthy textures, the seasons of the sun and stars, carrying our babies across rivers, forging herbs and hunting the sacred game. In essence, the power of the life force.

It is a severance that was initiated slowly and subtly at first with the domestication of plants and animals, grew in intensity with the emergence of large-scale civilizations, and has developed to pathological proportion with mass technological global society—until today you and I might live for a week or a month without smelling a tree, witnessing the passage of the moon, or meeting an animal in the wild, much less knowing the spirits of these beings or fathoming the interconnections between their destinies and our own.

Original trauma is the disorientation we experience, however consciously or unconsciously, because we do not live in the natural world. It is the psychic displacement, the exile, that is inherent to civilized life.

It is our homelessness.

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