The moving image frame lays claim to a divided landscape

"Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception."

Brakhage, 1960, p. 120

In the past there was the horizon: a stable paradigm for orientation; a tool of modernity; a boundary to perception; and a constant reference point from which to hang ideas of time, space, subject and object. This was the stable worldview on which western perspective, painting, and later, the foundation of cinema was built. It was a model that centred on an imbedded anthropocentric vision. The horizon was not a physical space: it shifted its location in relationship to the figure who stood looking out, upright and on firm ground. Until recently, this relationship of gaze and distance was the cornerstone of orientation. It manifested as linear perspective, a system that sought to represent the pathway of light as it passed from a scene through an imaginary rectangle (the window of painting and drawing) to the viewer's eye. As an anchored graphical device, it folded the vertical (X) into a spatial relationship with the horizontal (Y) at a distance (Z) defined by the limits of human biological sight.

From out of this stability, cinematic language took shape. At first, film formats were squarer, more human, but as the 20th century went on the format grew wider: slicing a supine frame from a living field of vision. Film vernacular stepped away from grounded perspective, away from the primacy and subjectivity of anthropoid gaze, towards a new verticality that began to dismantle the integrity and singularity of established perspective.

The cinematic frame was referred to as a knife, but it never really lived up to the title as it wasn't it able to move past an indexical link between the camera and what was being filmed. At best it was a mask that covered the out-of-frame in a shadowy darkness: a redaction of information that created the conditions where montage (inside the frame) could enact meaning through juxtaposition. But that didn't last. Now, the post-cinematic actuality of daily events is an architectural plurality, spread out in multiple dimensions. A fragmented and branched path of mutated forms in which we float, ungrounded to any tangible notion of personal place. We (and our screens) are mobile, disembodied through an augmented and networked existence.

The once simple task of orientation has been piggybacked by an array of viewpoints. Cartesian logic has embedded itself into our construction of the world so that the filmic image cell fits inside a multi-dimensional framework, dissecting landscape into a series of interrelated frames. At minimum there are two primary sets of vision; one though the eyes in our head, pointing forward; the other at a considerable height from above, pointing downward. This second view, the vertical observance of topology and cartography, contains within its logic the division of space into a grid.

Through the ordered grid we find abstraction in the horrific reality of grand temporal and spatial scales; the Frankenstein patchwork of a fragmented gaze; and the disembodied movement or our corporeal form across intersecting perspectives. We are suddenly placed in the same category as the things around us: together inside a networked acceleration. We orient to fragments of information, glimpses of representational landscapes and pieces of data cut up inside moving screens. Abstract and grotesque in both dimension and form these displays are our post-human prostheses. As users, we actively manifest a post-cinematic landscape where the frame has become not the soft apparatus of pre-internet cinema and architecture, but finally lives up to the notion of the knife. We are simultaneously inside and out: endlessly amputated in a state of cinematic defenestration!

Sam Smith, September 2015

Brakhage, S. (1960) From Metaphors on Vision. In: Sitney, P. ed. (1978). The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism. Anthology Film Archives Series: 3. New York University Press. pp. 120-128.

Slow Fragmentation

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