

A window is a noted paradoxical object, since it relies on the qualities of hole and surface combined. It is both conduit and barrier, which can be looked through and looked at, and so a woman would have to pass through both a signifying frame and a neutered lens to defenestrate herself properly.

This is simple stuff for a visual sophisticate of the early 21st century: you are no doubt used to talking about the circle on this page in one breath as a hole, in another as a frame, in yet another as an object or a representation of an object. A simple switch of perception, a twitch of gestalt, a modification of language and *viola* – a change of status is achieved. This might be temporary, for it may flip back at any moment; but just as birds can't fly backwards, there are some things that can't be unlearnt. At an epic pitch, the atom bomb famously obliterated all ideologies based on progress; more mundane moments of minor revelation – the etymology of a word, for instance – can minutely shuffle the aggregate of the universe and, consequently, our position within it. Incidentally, did you know that in Middle English a *burde* is a young maiden?

If a person were to point at a distant object, a dog would look at the hand that is pointing. But we humans know that to follow the path of the finger is the point, to the extent that if the finger itself were the intended subject of scrutiny we would have to use the other hand to point at it. In a recent perceptual swivel, however, we have learnt that when a camera is pointed at a scene we should not blithely look only at what is being documented, but also to the camera. The conventional claim of a photograph as objectifying has been eroded by a mounting awareness of the camera as galvanising, the lens acting as a mirror infused with a time lag, across which we feel an urge to perform to our future self and distant others. There was once the primitive who considered the camera as a means to capture the soul, and the technophile who rationalised it in terms of light, lenses and neurobiology; and now there is the bio-politician, who identifies a behavioural fusion of both in an apparatus that does not simply generate indexical records of actions, but also forces them into being through the volition of participants. It is called a photo shoot after all. Pull. They are snapshots, are they not? Pull.

The lens encourages the sort of verbs that scare nouns into flight, so that meaning becomes contingent, verifying or contradicting an opinion, depending on the language that chaperones it. In our relativist and pluralist society, where meaning shimmies or even migrates between poles, an explanatory nudge can shunt understanding from one extreme to another; but this does not negate the possibility of it coming home to roost once in a while. It is still possible to experience irreversible, epoch-changing realisations.

Such spectacular epiphanies appear to arrive from without, but day-to-day comprehension is often a matter of internalised intent, spurred by preconceptions or desires. Intentionality is not simply a binary question of whether a person intends to go to a pub or not, to fry or boil, to live or let live. It involves a broader set of questions predicated on rational structures that engulf beliefs, needs and desires, within which an individual performs complex gestures of intentionality through acts, whether physical or linguistic. In the case of the latter these might be orders, demonstrations or promises: ‘I do,’ whispers the man as he plunges into marriage; ‘Geronimo!’ cries the woman as she jumps through the window. Let’s photograph this pair and watch them play up to the camera, to posterity, to an audience, both present (temporally and spatially speaking) and future. Their utterances flag intention and provoke comprehension in perpetrator and witness, while the event that the words both produce and document unfolds within and around them, and the camera embodies technology that performs our knowledge, legitimising it through usefulness.

In the aviary of knowledge the invisibility of the obvious is one of the few means of camouflage left. A lone twitcher spots a specimen of a known species; he consults his book, identifies, contemplates and appreciates it. On the next excursion he discovers a new species; he calls in the specialists to analyse, verify and categorise it and the strange critter is soon absorbed into orthodoxy. Is there no escape from the twitcher’s lens or the scientist’s taxonomy? To truly disappear a specimen must be beyond contemplation, perhaps too far away or, more cunningly, too close. A bird under the nose is worth two in the sights.

Imagine, though, if this uncommonly common bird were suddenly noticed through some newfangled close-quarters lens: there would be some serious explaining and reconfiguring to be done. An inert shape re-identified as a living bird would need naming, a circle rediscovered as a hole would require fencing, an image re-construed as an object would need insuring for more. Altered values and adjusted expectations must be legislated, officiated, organised, accounted for, maintained and wagered on. They must go through the requisite processes of production, duplication, extension and refurbishment. Call in the surveyors with clipboards, the landscapers with vision, the workers with high-vis vests, the managers with an overview, the patrons in velvet and the all-weather audience in padded jackets. Were we to keep poking the undergrowth of assumptions and complacency, where the obvious likes to nest, confusion would fly up like flamingos from an English hedgerow. But are we ready for this perpetual work that a vibrant economy of uncertainty requires, or would we rather retire with our binoculars trained on the horizon muttering ‘there, got it; there, got it,’ as we tick off old favourites in a yellowing notebook?