A Curved Line Seen Straight

Bas Blaasse

~

When faced with a multitude of unfamiliar images, I sometimes find myself selecting a few in a way that feels at once arbitrary and deliberate, hoping that spending more time with them might, consciously or not, reveal more of the paths along which my gaze can wander. I often call such choices random, though I doubt they ever are. What do my decisions say without my knowing? What do they see? What contours of an unspoken disposition emerge in the images I pause with?

Often my eye is caught by what lies most obviously on the surface. What draws me in first are the things that feel instantly familiar, things I can most easily name and place. But then, some detail in a photo—something that looks accidental, unplanned, yet feels inevitable, as if it had to be there—might unsettle that ease of recognition. A scarred watermelon. An inverted scan of something I can't quite categorise. Records of chance encounters along a road cutting through the forest. A stack of black-and-white military prints—some crisp, others frayed and fading—documenting the slow, deliberate claiming of a living land.

Whether the things that catch my eye are superficial or strange, or merely everyday, I find myself returning to what resists immediate consummation or seems to do so. Fragments that refuse the illusion of full transparency, pinches of reality that somehow frustrate the notion that one might look straight through them to some other side, some moment in history gone yet held in suspension. Perhaps the force of an image lies not always in its clarity, but sometimes in its opacity as its own obstruction, in the silent way it withholds what it appears to reveal.

But whatever seems to lie so plainly on a photograph's surface—its legible evidence—is, of course, not the surface itself, its literal testimo-

ny. What begins as a disturbance of perception can become a recognition of the photograph as photograph: its material presence, its resistance to being looked through. The true material surface—the paper, the emulsion, the layers of chemical residue—is never the same as what can be read within it. Naturally, the same holds for any image: the medium itself cannot solely dictate the meaning, let alone exhaust it. And composition too makes its claims: a cropped corner, a bounced flash, the mottled grain of a scan can highlight or obscure, pulling the gaze one way or another.

Appearance is never impartial. What is depicted can voice something quite different from the medium through which it appears, just as perspective can draw meaning into the light or let it slip from view. Yes—image, material and technique, subject and mode of depiction, gaze and method are never easily disentangled. The history of art bears this out. The French plein-air painters of the 1830s, stepping outside with their portable tubes of paint, could only do so thanks to the technologies of an industrialising society. The Impressionists found their conditions in the rhythms of a rising middle class. Bourgeois life financed their time and produced the pigments with which their paintings would later be canonised. Material and technique carry the imprint of the choices and constraints of a historical period whose consequences today feel irreversible.

~

Not long ago, I was sitting behind the wheel as my partner and I drove through what felt like an endless expanse—a forest pared down to uniformity, a continuous sea of pines and birches. The road curved gently, extending ahead and behind until it disappeared into the trees. Traffic was light, and cruise control held us to a steady pace.

Looking back, one image dominates my memory: the monotony of trees gliding past as though a fleeting frame had been stretched across hours, even days. The image has lodged itself as something made remarkable precisely by its unspectacular sameness. The entire journey condensed into a generic postcard of a forest. Even the diversity of tree species dissolves into that projected stillness, spanning the more than two thousand kilometres we crossed. The forest seemed unchanging, a world simply as it was, as it should be, as it had always been. I think of the green and red of my parents' living room, the blue coffee pot on their stove, the yellow sofa on which I watched National Geographic as a child, longing for those unfamiliar televised places—details born of chance, yet inseparable from the memory of home. It could not, in recollection, have been any other coffee pot. Growing older perhaps means recognising that what once seemed self-evident is bound to a particular environment, tethered to the perspective of a life, a body.

As we moved through the forest, technology deepened the spell. Cruise control, automatic distance keeping, subtle corrections whenever I drifted toward the edge of the lane—they seemed to relieve me of the ordinary acts of driving. My attention drifted outward to the rhythm of trees, water, and sky. Repetition soothes, or so it seemed. The comfort was seductive, almost irresistible. Yet at times I was jolted out of the trance: the car would brake abruptly. I was at the wheel, yet not in control.

Then the system failed. No distance keeping, no corrections, no GPS. All at once my own hands mattered again. I had to press the pedal, watch the mirrors, read the signs. It felt as though a matrix that had tacitly overlaid the world had been lifted, leaving the road bare. Until then, I had relied, almost without noticing, on navigation to disclose what lay ahead: whether the road would swing left or right, whether a line of traffic waited, or whether a sharp curve was imminent. Without it, each rise could hide a dangerous crossing, each gentle bend could harden into a sudden one. The landscape changed character: no longer a calm image sliding past but an exposed space—open, uncertain, potentially hostile. With technology, I drifted into the aesthetics of my surroundings; without it, I was alert to its dangers, and I had to act rather than observe.

Without a map, without those more or less usual technological aids, the world felt less "mine," yet suddenly much nearer. Did it therefore gain in meaning? The conclusion is tempting, but the temptation lies in the immediacy of perception itself, in the way everything appeared at once more unfamiliar: a surrounding I simply had to reckon with.

Which part of a territory resists being captured by a map? We say that a map is only a representation, never the territory itself, because it helps me navigate but cannot replace the thickness of experience. But what happens when my very experience of a place is shaped by the way it has been mapped? And when a territory is drawn into limits and signs, whose judgment aligns with what counts as beautiful? Which eyes are granted authority when a land is rendered legible? Who chooses what is safe, what is traversable, what is worthy of notice? And what, in the process, is allowed to vanish?

~

Such experiences bring me to the notion of landscape. When we speak of landscape today, we quickly think of a view: a scene laid out before the eye, or the painted likeness of a stretch of land. Yet the word carries a longer and more complex history. The English *landscape* derives from the German *Landschaft*, a term with a double meaning: a bounded territory and the visible appearance of a place. But whereas *Landschaft* had referred to the fabric of community, in England it came to signify an aesthetic stage, a way of rendering order and authority as if they were natural.

One of the earliest English uses of landscape belonged to the theatre. Stage scenery, drawn by the lines of perspective, turned nature into illusion—orderly, harmonious, seemingly eternal. Perspective made the world appear as if it unfolded from a single eye. It was a vision shaped as much by geometry and surveying as by art: the art of perspective was inseparable from the new science of mapping. Land became not only a scene but also a space that could be divided, measured, and exchanged.

In this process the very idea of land shifted. Where custom and landmarks had once set its boundaries, surveying recast it into geometric parcels, ready for trade. And where estates and gardens seemed to present timeless nature, they were in fact carefully staged displays affirming the taste and power of the elite. Villages were dismantled, communal rights erased, and what remained was a landscape that suggested harmony while obscuring the communities it had displaced.

The western landscape tradition that flourished in the early nineteenth century—its canvases now filling museums funded by wealth extracted from land and lives—was both symptom and engine of this shift. It signalled a new role for art, new expectations of what images could do. One could say that the landscape gaze loosened art from its representational compulsion: no longer obliged to heroic themes or moral lessons, it turned instead to the shimmer of light on water, the way trees both withhold and exhibit space. Art became less a matter of what was shown than of how it appeared, of the experience of seeing itself. Painting did not invent the power relations that shaped land, but it aestheticised them, teaching the eye to read dispossession as harmony, to take enclosure for beauty.

To draw or paint a landscape is, at first, an exercise: a training of the eye. Artists and scientists may differ in aim, yet both must cultivate a familiarity that turns what lies before them into something perceptible, thinkable—an object. A geographer studies altitude, wind, and soil; a painter traces the contour of a rock, the shadow of a tree, the flow of a stream. Different orders of reality, yet both converge in what we call landscape—always shaped by the approach through which it is seen.

Landscape and map share this logic. Both transform the world into an image that can be viewed from a distance. The landscape frames nature in an aesthetic window; the map frames the earth in a geometric one. Both are instruments in which seeing, ordering, and possessing converge. The emergence of landscape painting coincided with the refinement of cartography in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—an age of colonial expansion, new property regimes, and the rise of the perspectival gaze.

If landscape and cartographic maps helped shape the modern belief that the world could be rendered visible and knowable, photography was the designated heir to this logic and certainly did not disappoint in its intensification. From the very beginning, the photographic process proved itself useful to the further systematic division of time and space, even as its advocates insisted on the poetic quality of this new ability to arrest what always flows.

~

What we see differs across periods. The picturesque or the photogenic are modes that shape our eye by allowing relationships between elements to appear as memorable, worth retelling, recording, and sharing—even of a ravaged field or a felled forest. They shape by imposing selection in a world of scarcity. People say that to see is to be equipped with the interplay of mental and bodily functions characteristic of the culture of an age. In what ways have disciplines such as art history or the scientification of modern life schooled my gaze? What aesthetic desires surface once I have learned to look through the lens of those histories?

It is tempting to trace what and how we see back to some form of cosmology or metaphysics. But can any practice be simply reduced to the worldview in which it is set? Worldviews are not isolated. The history of photography, for instance, is too vast, too layered, too multiple to be confined within a single frame of thought. More often, studies suggest, our ways of seeing are less the offspring of grand conviction than of the daily routines that quietly train what and how I see.

In this light, there may be some truth to the claim that photographs cling to reality—not because they tell "the" truth, but because they help shape what can count as truth in the first place. But in what way? What kind of reality do they reveal? And to whom? Today, theory tends to approach the truthfulness of photography with suspicion, let alone its bolder claims to objectivity. Yet such doubts have done little to narrow the distance between the ease with which we rely on photographs and the reminder that no image is ever neutral.

The history of photography is often told through a handful of decisive moments that seem to draw everything else into their wake. One of them is the promise of automation: You press the button, we do the rest. Today even that gesture feels almost superfluous. Not because we no longer wish to photograph, or because virtual technology will soon free us from devices, but because something of the photographic act seems hard, if not impossible, to eradicate from our perception. In a way, the button no longer sits on the apparatus, but in our attention itself, in the tight anticipation of what might become an image. One does not need a camera or device to inhabit a photographic logic.

Still, the internalisation of a photographic sensibility does not necessarily bring us closer to understanding how photography shapes meaning. It may, instead, draw attention to a deeper tension. Photography never simply asserted its own objectivity; it helped to fashion a particular idea of it: the sense that what can be captured, registered, and repeated might, for that reason alone, speak with a certain authority. Once that notion began to circulate, one could say, this logic slipped beyond the image, encouraging us to imagine the world itself as something that might yield its truth through similar acts of capture, however indirect.

This may help explain why the gap between our theoretical scepticism about unmediated access to reality and our daily habits remains so steady. We move among photographs as though they were immediate conduits to what once occurred before the lens, even while knowing that every image is the outcome of an encounter: between what is photographed and whoever is operating the camera, and the technical mediations that join them. None of these elements can be cleanly removed, and yet they rarely settle into anything resembling reconciliation.

Is that a weakness of the will? Or does it speak to the power and allure of a technical invention whose mechanical components draw both photographer and viewer into a world that lends purity, impartiality, and self-discipline a sharper appearance?

~

Two centuries of visualising technologies have not left our experience untouched. One may still insist, as Sontag did, that no photograph can definitively seize an event—that whatever meaning it acquires arises in the hands and eyes of the viewer, that its subject depends on what we are able to bring to it. But what we bring surely rests on what we can recognise, indeed on those things our perceptual and conceptual habits allow us to readily name and place. Meaning grows within these inherited frameworks.

Once this insight is set against the broader history of modernity, however, it begins to drift: the photograph no longer appears as a surface

awaiting interpretation, but as something that has helped to shape the very conditions under which interpretation becomes possible. For the aesthetic effects of these technologies lie not only in the sense that the world can be held, in miniature, within us. They have also altered what presents itself to us, and how. Not simply because everything now appears as a potential image, but because our ideas of what is meaningful, what is worth attending to, and consequently our situational awareness have been subtly redirected. We are often told that camera technologies show us ever more of reality. This is true. But the companion truth is that such devices produce not only images but hierarchies of the visible, a serpentine road that appears to run straight—through a forest gliding past.

Every worldview discloses a reality in a way that seems to close off another. The world ushered in by the camera, and by the broad family of technologies that inherit its logic—from surveillance to medical imaging, from ecological monitoring to automation and the vast digital image-culture—shapes our attention not simply by privileging what can be framed, stored, processed, or generated, but by channelling the very pathways along which we seek meaning, and making those pathways feel natural. Interpretation remains indispensable; yet how can we account for the terms on which we interpret when those terms have already been arranged by the very logic that now asks to be interpreted? Does a technology harbour its own longing? And how could I resist its influence if I have not yet discerned the shape of that influence?

To say that photographs have "no outside" is only to note that every image is an interplay of gaze, choice, position, subject, and machine. Photography excludes whatever lies beyond the frame. But what, then, remains as a vantage from which to compare what I think I see? How am I to grasp what takes place at the edges when, from the centre where I stand, I can only name them periphery? How am I to know what I have not registered, if all I ever see is what I take myself to be seeing?

These blind spots, of course, are never mine alone. They are ways of looking sedimented over time. They raise the question of which possibilities emerged through specific decisions, and which of those decisions were themselves shaped by earlier ones. What does it mean that the tools of perception are shaped by the very logic they set out to disclose? And how might I loosen the hold of what I have inherited? This is not to indulge the tendency to value erased histories for their supposed purity—as if they belonged to another temporal register altogether, untouched by the demands of utility. That idealising tendency was itself born of the same historical momentum that armed anthropologists, soldiers, and cartographers with instruments for measuring, classifying, and acquiring the world.

~

Chemistry, industrial replication, rationalisation—photography belongs unmistakably to the history of modernisation. The fixing of an optical impression onto a surface was not merely a technical feat; it was part of a broader reordering of life through procedures of control, verification, and accumulation. Yet if the camera satisfies a rational desire for clarity, it also confirms the irretrievability of what it captures.

There was, from the beginning, a striking intimacy between the romantic refusal to reduce life to accuracy and transparency and the emerging faith in exact repeatability, technical frameworks, and mechanical execution. The rise of photography coincides with the intensification of that other great longing of the nineteenth century: the impulse to preserve the ineffable at the very moment an increasingly rationalised universe threatened to efface it. Romanticism took seriously what slips the governable grid, as a counterpoise that emerged from within the very conditions that made modern governability possible.

The urge to idealise what seems on the verge of disappearance is not separate from the tools that hastened that disappearance; it is one of their aftereffects. It is in this sense that the photographic gaze carries nostalgia within it from the start: not only because whatever is photographed is instantly ordered into the past, but because the technology that made such images possible was itself part of a project that altered, displaced, and often erased the very worlds it set out to record.

Photography's nostalgic structure then is less a matter of sentiment than a structural effect of

its historical position. The wish to hold the world still arises from the same conditions that awaken the sense of what cannot be held. What photography fixes, it also declares lost.