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Limit and Utopia: Revisiting the Beach as a Threshold

ABSTRACT
Despite the illusionary training of the senses, the beach will always remain the line of tension which confronts the orchestrated order of the horizon and the audible imminence of chaos. Consequently, it is our goal to enlighten how the beach can be conceptualized as threshold, as a result of the correlation between its atmosphere and its material. Noronha da Costa emerges here as the secret expression of the beach and its auratic effect, revealing through his paintings the narrative dimension of the seashore.

An innocent reflection on the meanings the beach may have for those who have made of it a place for entertainment may lead to an obvious and careless conclusion: the beach is the place where earth and water meet. However, and although this first outcome seems to be too evident to be taken seriously, the truth is that this establishes the quintessential nature of the beach: its character as a border. And, among the personal cosmophilies that turn the beach into a calendar devoted to populations’ amusement, it is exactly this ‘border’ that stimulates its own questioning, being so movable and fragile. Nevertheless, it is a physical obstacle, which also operates as a punitive and strict threshold that separates the clamorous ductility of the substance from impossible total experience. Not surprisingly, it is not easy to establish symbolical parameters concerning the beach, nor is the need for doing so manifest (Eliade 1979; Durand 1989; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994; Bachelard 1989). The beach must always be thought as the object of a dialectic...
There are various examples that attest the symptomatic ambiguity of the symbolism of waters as origins, annihilation and regeneration, among them the beginning of the Book of Genesis, the Babylonian epic Gilgamesh or the Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus. The terror of the Deluge, which conditioned the secular split between man and the beach, becomes a benfic and purifying cure – prescribed by doctors. In fact, the salty water and the freshness, which could only be found at the beach, began to be considered the best medicine.

2. 'L’esthétique du parcours ou de l’itinéraire n’est pas fondamentale aux yeux du villégiateur – du bord de mer, en l’occurrence. Sur le chemin qui le mène au rivage, son projet n’est pas d’accomplir un « circuit » ou un « tour », mais d’arriver. La destination qu’il vise au bout de son voyage n’est pas une étape, un haut lieu ou un espace ouvert d’exploration. C’est un refuge, vécu comme définitif. Son plaisir est là, tout entier’ (Urbain 2002: 15).

3. It is not by chance that it is a photograph of Trouville, one of the most popular French beaches in the nineteenth century, that opens the fourth volume of the History of Private Life, dedicated to the period ‘From Revolution to Great War’. In fact, by the end of the century, the beach is a salon for families and friends – where, illusionly, there is no sea or sun (Perrot 1990: 6–7).

4. This will be the great motif of artistic that is subordinated to its constitutive elements. It can also be said that it is from the correlation between ambience and material that its meanings may (also) be inferred. This is why we may say that the beach has, above all, an atmosphere.

Thinking the beach, either from a metaphorical or historical point of view, is inseparable from a hermeneutics of the sea-ocean. And, although it is not our goal to proceed so, we should stress the prominence of water’s symbolism (Bachelard 1989; Corbin 1998; Corbin 2001; Urbain 2002), since the inscription of the Self in the landscape is necessarily implied in what the Subject sees and in the possible action on what he or she sees. Therefore, in the romantic phase of the nineteenth century, the man of spirit was said to tame the vestiges of the Deluge (Blain-Pinel 2003: 54). The domestication of the ocean – turning it into the ‘sea’ – corresponded to the metamorphosis the perspective of the beach also suffered, both anchored in the anthropocentric optimism and in the modern experience of time. When the water starts to be understood as a medical treatment and the beach becomes a rehabilitation and pleasure centre, the unknown that the ocean has always culturally represented1 becomes a horizon – disciplined itself. To a certain point, we may state that the ocean starts to be no more than a disquieting lake, whose margins are nothing but land and the horizontal line. Consequently, depth emerges and organizes itself as a water line, recreated to defeat the threatening deluge – or, even better, the chaos. It seems, then, that the conception we have of the beach results from its treatment as a spot of arrival, as a place of refuge2 and as a reorganizing and purifying stimulus – rearranging the world left behind.

This reinvention of the seaside eludes the perception of the ocean, precisely as it was supposed to do when a new calendar of labours and leisure appeared (Corbin 1998; Thiesse 2001: 333–65).3 As an artifice, the beach transmuted into a public sidewalk, a harbour, a balcony, a terrace incorporating a bordering dimension, whose counterproof will always be the horizon. In fact, it will always remain an area that separates the orchestrated order of the horizon and the audible imminence of chaos,4 as we will see. And, if it is true that it has often been said that the sea is, par excellence, what marks the transit from chaos to cosmos, from the inform to form, from darkness to light, what should be the meaning of the seaside concerning a bordering experience, capable of agglutinating spatial and temporal axes?

THE SIGNS OF E-VIDENCE

The Portuguese word praia, the French plage, the Italian spiaggia and the Castilian playa, probably all originating from the Greek plagios (πλαγγος), denote a particular dimension of the beach: ‘which is not linear, which is transversal’. Thus, being oblique, the beach possesses a vertical dimension that invites a kind of dialectic between descending and ascending, a significance that can easily be grasped from one of the medieval meanings of the word: ‘celestial space’ (Houaiss et al. 2003: 2949; Machado 1977: 419). It can be conceived as a medial space since it is, potentially, a place of contemplation. Once again, let us invoke the routes of etymology: the beach is, consequently, the temple (templum, ‘the place where the augur examined the signals’), and thus the topos where the Self assumes itself as the one who contemplates.

If we reckon the cases of madness that occurred in the nineteenth century, precisely caused by contemplation in front of the almost unbearable extension of the horizon, we will soon infer to what extent the beach can be regarded as the place where a notion of a self is denied and surpassed. Because of this, one of the pieces of advice given to those madams who, for the first time,
arrived at the beach to escape the city, focused on the following: their perception of the sea should be slow, so that they could get used to its presence (Michelet 1875: 15). According to Michelet, the sea is not to blame when one goes insane: the beach is perfidious by itself, since it allows a dissimulated (im)mobility, while presenting the untouchable vastness.

In the context of the bathing season, the dominance of the ocean established a double relation with the original sign of the eye. Senses are educated to bear the presence of maritime vastness, which was pre-sensed without being seen so that contemplation could be consummated, by repressing the ‘hot sand’ and the ‘vertigo of the transparence’ (Corbin 1998: 171). On the other hand, contemplation of archetypical space (water) was made impracticable, in view of the fact that breaking the ocean implied its reduction to a horizon. The beach emerges, then, as the edge where vision is at risk, which turns it into a geodesic matrix – in a latent state. Disorientation, when experimented in correlation with the self that immensity denies, may be clearly understood if we take into account that, as a templum, the beach signals the mediation (but not the passage) between the sacred and the sacrificer, between the origin, finitude and the craving for the infinite. At the beach, transience, permanently delimited by the border of the land of sea, signifies a distance translated in absence – for that reason, in that intermediate universe, one contemplates what is revealed without being seen. The question of the Self at the beach derives from the constant advent of disorientation: the limits between the physical and the real become inarticulate. However, the threshold is never closed.

In fact, the world created by the beach expresses, in front of the human eye, the expansion of the universe. If the oceanic landscape is an example of an image that blends the evidence of the volume with the emptying of the substance (Didi-Huberman 1992: 17), it is from the beach that one may contemplate the progressive deterioration of what the seaside insinuates: the infinity and the infinitude. Accurately, when Merleau-Ponty endeavours to make explicit the meanings of vision and, above all, of the connection between the he who sees and what around him is seen, he uses the image of the beach (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 170). The link between the Subject and the visible resembles the existent relation between the beach and the sea: so close and yet so impossible to become a fusion without the perishing of one of the sides – in the moment of the consubstantiation of the passage. The ocean thus assumes an exemplary function in relation to the process of learning the world: it unveils the assumption that if to see is to touch, to see is to lose (Didi-Huberman 1992: 14) without possessing.

**NARCISSUS IN THE SEARCH FOR THE LOOKING GLASS**

It is well known how the evolution of the bathing concept of the beach represents in body and in body language the barometer of the history of sexual expressiveness. Nonetheless, the advent of what has already been called ‘conscious nude’ (Laurent 1979: 183; Urbain 2002: 389), which has at the beach a kind of democratized and socially accepted exponent, reinforces the role of ‘seeing’ as a collective force that organizes bathing sociabilities – and what could be denominated an art of evading. In fact, the discreet eye that characterizes the individual at the beach will be directed, radically, towards himself. There, where physis (nature) and cosmos (order; disposition; ornament) reunite, the hypocrisy of the ‘natural’ ends in a bare signic content, exhibited by the individual so that the reading of the Other allows him the representations that focus on the beach and on the line of the horizon, especially in what concerns the Portuguese case: António Carneiro (Contemplação – 1911, Praia com barcos – 1911, Praia da Boa Nova – 1912), José Malhoa (Praia das Macãs – 1918), João Vaz (A Praia – s/d), Mário Cesanne (Sem título (linha de água) s/d), António Dacosta (Paisagem da Terceira, 1975). Armando Alves (Paisagem, 1982), Cruz Filipe (Mar, 1983), Noronha da Costa (série Magritte após Polanski, 1969), Viera da Silva (Praia) and Paula Rego (Uvando – 1991). See also Bernardo Pinto de Almeida Linha do Horizonte o motivo da paisagem na arte portuguesa contemporânea, in coordination with Nuno Ferreira de Carvalho, and the photography of José Manuel Costa Alves, Lisboa, Ministério da Cultura, Direcção Geral das Artes, 2008.


6. ‘Au plus haut de Saint-Michel, on vous montre une plate-forme qu’on appelle celle des Fous. Je ne connais aucun lieu plus propre à en faire que cette maison de vertige Représentez-vous tout autour une grande plaine comme cendre blanche, qui est toujours solitaire, sable équivoque dont la fausse douceur est le piège le plus dangereux. C’est et ce n’est pas la terre, c’est et ce n’est pas la mer, l’eau douce non plus, quoi qu’en dessous des ruisseaux travaille le sol incessamment’.

7. The beach may be seen, then, as an intermediate space,
reading of the Self. We look at the other in order to see ourselves, as this is a form of ravaging the frontier our body represents. And this contemplative eroticization of the Self through the Other will break out in the agony of alterity – the commutation of Eros in Thanatos, even before being it.

One could say that the instability of sea waters, diminishing the mirroring properties of still and fresh water, impels the search for other mirrors. And, if this tolerates the contemplation of other objects (from any order felt as superhuman, as we will see), since it propels the individual to the con-frontation with the horizon and to the exteriorization, unequivocally, of the inevitable splitting of the Subject towards what is in front of him (expression, in space, of its temporality?), it also masks its repressed belonging to the natural world. To a certain extent, this explains how ‘dressed nudity’ usually becomes at the beach a question of attitude, synthesis of a series of practices that tend to erase the traces of animality and to present a fictionalized body.12

THE HIDDEN PRESENCE OF TIME

In this light, the unsustainability of nature at the beach approaches the initial confusion that daguerreotypes provoked when they appeared (Benjamin 1992: 120). Since the beach materializes a threshold, the optic distance dug by the horizon is not only capable of reproducing its own tactile metamorphosis, it also provides the synthesis (haptic because corporeal) of a border. And we say border as that synthesis that involves the clash of two facies: that of who contemplates and that of the eye of cosmos. Hence, the beach is, finally, an atmosphere of auratic contemplation,13 from the moment a clear dominance of the seen over he who looks surpasses the mere mirroring relation. Only from the seashore can be found the continuous ‘back and forth’ that dialectically interweaves contradictory distances (Didi-Huberman 1992: 104; Bruno 1998: 100). On the other hand, he who looks gives up the power of seeing to what is seen, which strengthens the singularity of the beach in a symbolical and perceptive context – and its frontal position. And, because it is distance that con-sents contemplation, what is seen from the beach emerges as a halo (which is not necessarily the ocean): the disorientation and the étrangement are explained. Therefore, in a description of the concept of ‘aura’ (Benjamin 1992: 127), the action of looking concerns a phenomenology of time – more than space.

Consequently, the space of the aura, turned into time, contains the mechanisms of a configuration of the remembered. This memorial dimension, based on a particular potentiality (making the visible able to overcome the imagetic), is clear in the given definition of aura: ‘a peculiar tissue of space and time: unique appearance of a distance, no matter how close it is’ (Benjamin 1992: 127). And, since we found there the ‘archives of the earth’ (Corbin 1998: 115), the trope of the beach is characterized by repression of chaos and apocalypse; it is thus a reincarnation of the figure of the lost paradise. The beach operates as an organized memory, a natural proof that the ocean is the beginning and the end of everything. Nonetheless, the most relevant issue is not the hunt for origins, which has in the water a source or even an almost ‘Neptunian paleontology’ (known since the development of sciences since XVII century). What is subliminal and decisive about thinking the beach is the following: if the ocean – or, if we prefer, the sea – is the mother, the beach contains the vestiges of a pre-figuration, close, in terms of structure, of origin myths, and in terms of epistemology, of what has already been called ‘First Mimesis’ (Ricœur 2006: 108).
Furthermore, water (namely the ocean) may be seen as the *absent referent* that is the object of remembering – and so the circle that turns the contemplated into an aural ‘reality’. From its fluidity to its chimerical consistency (for those who contemplate), the ocean seems to share with remembrance a certain ability to simulate a present inside the present, drawing a thick veil on the past and propelling imagination to act as memory – or to flow into *remembrance*. As a result, it invites a progressive march: the dialectical mechanics of coming and going, always along the line (Costa 1999: 397–411) that separates earth and water. The other ‘corridor’, only in the horizon – where sea ends and the ocean begins – has a chance of experiencing the sacred (Berdiaev 1943: 173; Ryke 2000: 66). Hence, the beach can only be perceived as the suspended dimension of the void in favour of a poetics of distance, fulfilled by the eye of the *Subject*, in which evasion is also the synonym of imprisonment.

**THE HORIZON OR THE CONCAVE LINE OF WATER**

As in an anamnetic narrative, only part of *representification* of what is gone can be recalled. As a result, accepting that the ocean is the genesis (or its manifestation), the beach may inevitably represent a perspective on a *landscape* that is nothing but a *homeland*: the land of our ancestors. So, we may state that it is a place of the memorial construction of the *Self* and, for that reason, of narrative identity. Being a delimitating and selective threshold (and because of this, also expansive), the beach accumulates a summary of characteristics that confirm the *land of sea* as a border. Memorial latency, narrative *pro-tension* and physical irregularity realize an identity mark and an exceptional profile (Martins 2007: 54), both convergent to a bordering space, where material impediment, or the incommensurability of daydreaming, characterizes the margin of the beach (not only from a geodesic perspective) as unidirectional.

Conceding to *what is seen*, the ability of requiting the sense of vision, the beach, as an archive and as a border, is the dim fringe that separates chaos and order. The instability will blossom not only from the concealed and press- ing possibility of *de-composition* of the landscape and of the frame – which is all we grasp with the eyes. And, taking into account the aural perception of marine landscape, we may appeal to the Freudian notion of ‘inquiétante étrangeté’, concerning the beach as past and origin, and thus, as a homeland, it is important to consider the following: being a line, the beach presupposes an *in lineam* based on the materialization of a distance (which may justify the contemplative ecstasy) (Heidegger 2006: 200; Costa 1999: 401); it is in that line that the *Subject* is located and positioned and, because of that, it generates another effect: that of the *trans lineam* (not immune to instability). Hence, being threshold, the beach contains the germ of alterity and transgression. When the sea suddenly becomes the ocean, the violence of spring tide during the equinox, tempests, seakease, show an activity that escapes human control and that, if a contribution to the sublimation of the space (as a threat of death and a hypothesis of salvation), they embody the extreme disorder – yet, they stress hospitality/hostility as an experience inherent to the beach. Under the apparent joy of being at the seashore, there is always the fear of drowning. Which means that, paradoxically, the place of contemporary leisure is also a *watched* place, since beaches are supervised by its own guards.

Nineteenth-century domestication of the beach answered to ancient traditions depicting sea catastrophes that, from the Deluge, conditioned human presence there. However, we may also claim that the sea’s metamorphoses the perspective of the sea and that of the corpse of a beloved being. In both cases, it is the contemplation (or its impossibility) of the loss of the Other and of the future of the *Self*. That is why the vision is intolerable, whether of the superior emptiness of the sea or of the minimalization, illusorily hidden, of the body (see Didi-Huberman 1992: 27).

10 ‘Le visible autour de nous semble reposer en lui-même. C’est comme si notre vision se formait en son cœur, ou comme s’il y avait de lui à nous une accointance aussi étroite que celle de la mer et de la plage. Et, pourtant, il n’est pas possible que nous nous fondions en lui, ni qu’il passe en nous, car alors la vision s’évanouirait au moment de se faire, par disparition ou du voyant ou du visible’

11 Jean-Didier Urbain: “Avant cela, préfigurant cette ultime invention, le transparent, le court et l’ouvert ont préparé le terrain. Mais d’autres innovations encore, détours en forme de détournements cette fois, annoncent aussi à leur manière l’inversion. Par exemple l’usage du pyjama sur la plage: un vêtement de nuit et d’intérieur recyclé ici en costume de jour et d’extérieur’ Evidently, it is not just a question of identifying the behaviour at the beach as the antipode of private sphere, once the habituation to it implied (and implies) a transposition of domestic habits to the seashore – not even of subordinating the progressive invasion of public space by the intimate atmosphere to the process of secularization. The greatest difference
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lies in the social agreement implicit to the metamorphosis of remedy into pleasure


14 In view of the impossible straight line of the beach as a threshold, the Subject projects to the horizon the dominance of space, provoking the emergence of a dialogue in which the beach will always be an infinite interlocutor.

15 The definition of daydreaming that concerned Bachelard took into account a poetic point of view, which means that it is in the field of a poetic language that the author seeks its meanings. However, it is he who warns (high tide, low tide, etc.) weaken the beach and violate the border – thus representing permanent risk. The dialogical propensity that appeals to a contemplative placity of the horizon makes no sense, and the quotidian actualization of the line and its limits comes to the surface – lastingly.

THE CONTEMPLATION OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

In the cosmogony of Thomas Burnet, Paradise did not contain water, since the only existence was that of a homogeneous continent – a uniformity that fitted the pacific Age of Gold that it located. And, even though Gaston Bachelard relates spring and still water to an oneric dimension and salty water to a narrative one, the stillness the same author presents as a sine qua non condition to the accomplishment of daydreaming is accumulated in the marine horizon, which is felt as familiar mostly when it becomes ‘sea’. In fact, the passage to daydreaming (Bachelard 2006: 166) state corresponds to a kind of poetics of capitalization. The question is to articulate the subjective dimension of the Self with a Greatness only cosmic pulse may convert in a representative image. And, although this synthesis of the world is the trade of the poet, the truth is that ‘in his lonely daydreaming, the dreamer of cosmic daydreaming is the true Subject of the verb “to contemplate”, the first testimony of the power of contemplating’ (Bachelard 2006: 167). If, as it has been stated, the beach is the space of this contemplative action, it is also because, as a result of the im-perfect experience of the Subject and the ambivalence Self/Other; the bordering effect defies the relation the Self establishes with time. The beach, aural and vertiginous (from the Latin vertigo, ‘rotation; whirlpool’), space of refuge, arrival and evasion, provokes, ironically, the horror of chaos, confronting the Self with the terror of definition (Lévinas 2001). Thus, of all dialectics that ravage the seashore, perhaps the paradox that resumes all of them lies on the beach as a supreme geography of escape: by the questioning of the intimate harmony of the Subject within himself, escape proves, through an appetite for the unlimited, not only the limits of the being, but also – mostly – the finitude of humans.

Escape now becomes clearer. The beach synthesizes the human condition, seasonally marking the rhythm of personal vacations – and the conscience of the tragic. The contemplation of the sea, understood as an origin, and of the horizon, sensed as the calling voice of the unknown, minimizes the Subject inside the cosmos so that the cosmos may welcome him, which means that it is in the moment when to see is to lose that one attains the impotency in face of the consummated fact (Lévinas 2001: 84) – fortune and misfortune of the unconscious man. We would say that in such experience, human being is not allowed to feel like a microcosm. In opposition to the operative daydreaming (which results in opera poietica), cosmic daydreaming redistributes places and to the Subject there is no other place – and role – apart from that of the opus (as a creature) and never that of the demieurge: it is above him – and not for him – that the interstellar vault glows.

UTOPIA: THE MI(Y)ST(TERY) OF THE INVISIBLE

However, the other appealing aspect of this dialectic between the beach and the sea, interconnecting will and immobility, simultaneously feeds another state of spirit (not always in harmony with contemplation): hope. As a theological virtue, hope is represented by an anchor, which is a symbol of stability but also of the discrepancies between land and water, as well as by a prow,
which indicates impulse and movement. Symptomatically, the definition given by Aristotle enclosed the same principles: hope, while a dream man has when awake, seems to fit into the beach as a place for daydreaming, where one may sleep and dream. Nonetheless, this dream is less the regressive nocturnal dream at home than the waking dream (Tagtraum), psycho-anthropological foundation of an alternative and anticipating conscience. And if this occurs, it is because the contemplation of origins, although an evidence of the limit, reintegrates the Subject in the ‘yet not being’ (Bloch 1976).

Assuming that the line of the horizon should not exhibit any traces of ruin, the experience of expecting turns the beach into a latent oneiric journey (conforming to its narrative nature) and, consequently, is able to signify a space of future and choice (which is always a succession, and thus an anticipated mark of posterity). Like a past permanently unfolded in desire, the beach receives the Tagtraum since it possesses two fundamental conditions for it: the appellative ‘there/where’, which stimulates the anticipation, and the archives of the earth (let us not forget how sand is a decanter and, for that – like in Ancient Egypt – able to preserve the traces of the past) that provide prefigurative elements. At the placent shore, this conserved memory will dictate the safeguard of the integrity of the Being, necessary to rêverie, contrary to the nocturnal dream (Bloch 1976: 111). If the pulsing may be seen being taken into account its dependence on a corporeal support, it ends by (cor)responding to a waving gesture that, coming from the line of the horizon, dispenses its material condition so that the dreaming wide awake may attain a state of excess – an ingenious manner of accompanying the universal expansion and the subliming of the Subject’s dissatisfaction. And it is this scenery that gives to this type of dream an ironic dimension, as, in front of the present and from it, it edifies a future space: Utopia.

It is understandable that hope erupts at the beach in a plentiful manner and in dialogue with desire and, consequently, with exteriority. Only such a bordering space may comport not only the waking dream but, mostly, the contemplation of an aura. This, ineffable and sacred, deprives the individual of the regressive atrophy of subjectivity (which is brought by nocturnal dreams) in order to convoke the floating alterity: daydreaming offers a creative possession of land – contrasting with the ambiguous solitude of the Self. Externity is, then, perfected; its projection, in the axe of the other-world, attains a deep distance – deep enough not to see anymore – so that, for the first time, not seeing is the (un)real condition of seeing. Superiority and perfection, dear to utopia, found in the liquid beyond the beach the necessary imago-material raw material to the beginning of the utopian narrative. This means that the enlargement – the enlightenment – that characterizes what utopias bring to reality (which conceives them) is a way of fulfilling an infinity that mitigates the world’s decadence, or, as a result, the ontic and chronologic broadness of a pristine unity.

And this may be the specificity of the so-called utopian extra-territoriality (Ricœur 1997: 13): its idealization translates, more than an escape, the return to a primary story. Utopia is imbued with the desire to suspend ordinary time that punctuates the biological rhythm of the labour and the days. The geographic matrix of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries attests that projection. The idealized city commonly appears in a maritime context – as an aquatic isolation (Baczko 2001: 151) – where water symbolizes chaos, and, by contrast, the island is the cosmos that substantiates a simultaneously perfecta and perfecting happiness. We would say that the praising of Progress daydreaming is an escape to an out of the real, where conscience distends and, consequently, becomes obscured. That is why daydreaming is not compatible with phenomenology (Bachelard 2006: 5).

16. ‘J’ai pensé quelques fois assez profondément, mais rarement avec plaisir, presque toujours contre mon gré et comme par force: la rêverie me délasse et m’amuse, la réflexion me fatigue et m’attriste, penser fut toujours pour moi une occupation pénible et sans charme. Quelquefois mes rêveries finissent par la rêverie; et, durant ces égarements, mon âme erra et plane sur les ailes de l’imagination, dans des extases qui passent toute autre jouissance’ (Rousseau 1996: 122).

17. In Morus’ Utopia, narration is the task of Raphael Hythloday, who has already navigated – not as Palnurus – but as Ulysses and even Plato (Morus 2003: 5).
and Humanism demonstrates the necessary historicization of the paradise lost and the temporal mechanics of non-places. Like the waterline, time becomes suspended in non-places, and makes recourse to a nostalgia that has for its object a deduced or elaborated experience of the beach as a whole, a beach that is general, so to speak. Or, to put it somewhat differently, hope becomes its summit expression and depends on the openness of the human to desire and expectation.

In this context, the ‘motherly’ seashore becomes a human device for hope, acquitting the testimonial nature of experiencing a possible world because, if it is during the reverie that he who dreams in daytime dislocates the real according to narrative empowerment, it is also true that his story cannot be woven under the logic of the événement. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the responsibility of a global representation, as only a work that is able to edify a system of the new (like the New City – frequently placed in an island), so, in face of the hidden sphericity of the horizon, another assumption of the rêve éveillé should be carried out: it must be covered until the end (Bloch 1976: 31).

As a source of narrations and a wrapper of narratives, the beach, the intimate friend of expectation, extends itself in front of the Subject – like a book. Because of its memorial, projective and imagetic character, it arms discursive possibilities that present a mythology of the origins, but also a utopic ontology: on the one hand, it assures the beginning of an ensured vividness, and, on the other, a multiplicity of futures.

Ancient world and new world rejoin at the beach, space of the invisibility where, like the utopians of T. Morus (Marin 1973: 74), the Subject recognizes himself as a child of an ancestor world, but also as a holder of possibilities – a bearer of the New. In this context, and comprehensibly, the bathing season may be seen as a possibility of regeneration and its ending, dreaded since it means the ending of the abbreviation of labour, and desired since it shelters an opportunity for the New to come, shares with optimistic conceptions of the end of history their most genuine expectation: the rebirth of the new man. A new youth awaits the Subject on the other side of life – which is suspended when the season starts and the exceptionality of behaviour becomes the daily order. The paradigmatic annual return to the beach seems to simulate the cozy circularity of an also new time, optimistically assisted more by hot seas than the cold ones.

As if each year is meant to end at the beach, the horizon is assumed as the presence of a divine ending representing salvation, able to not only return to a lost age, but especially, by activating expectancy, to guarantee a pre-vision and a commencement. However, as in certain conceptions of history, the anxiety caused by the apocalyptic spectre of horizon is fictionalized: time’s maneuver is the postponement of the end; therefore the beach, excluded from the contemplative possibility, is reduced to a human return, offering a provisory and circular triumph of virtue – or, better, of hope. At the beach, the winner is the old tempus fugit: always on the verge of a past without being able to present it literally, always facing the calling of the future but perpetually placed before it.

Only the regressus ad uterum detemporalizes the beach so that the revelation of the Being of all things may appear. It is not surprising, then, that we have kept the essence of such an origin. Quoting Michelet, ‘the water is the rule, the earth, the exception; even out of water our blood and our tears are still salty’, which makes us walking aquariums. In this bizarre circumstance, the beach shelters a universal memory as well as its most intimate companion,
forgetfulness. And, on the border that confuses both, who dares to deny that the beach, as selective as memory (an active decanter of the past), is the place where nostalgia nourishes daydreaming – which is the primordial root of utopia? In other words, we may question: to what extent can humankind be seen as a fish in exile, since at the beach the individual has the chance of being present at his own re-creation?

THE ILLUSION OF THE PRESENCE – OR HOW THE AIR BECOMES A TRACE

The art of Luís Noronha da Costa (1942–), partly focused on the marine line of the horizon, brings us to a particular aesthetics: the visual ambivalence of the halo as a desperate manifestation of the absent referent. Or, and it is not an exaggeration to say, an aesthetics that dwells in the apparition of the presence – repeatedly.

In this creation of the horizon, the beach emerges not only as the place of expectancy, but, mostly, as a piece of the horizon. Thus, the threshold is, first, he who sees, and the horizon becomes so explicitly unattainable that a second threshold appears – and the diffusion of the contours no longer synthesizes the distance (necessary to the aura effect) but rather the emersion of the Subject in what he sees. Seeing is, then, the measure of the horizon and a hypothesis of relocating the limit outside the Subject, since what is depicted in sfumatto distends, broadly, the borders between the object and the seer. And this draws the Subject in-side what is depicted, as if a peaceful sense of belonging could temporally elude the exclusion.

The eye, then, would be the surface of what is seen: the apparition of the horizon as trace of a halo. Consequently, the phenomenon as a sign cannot be a manifestation of something that does not manifest itself; concerning this particular case, the evasion of the line through a sensible invisibility (the aura) has, indeed, in one’s eye its major manifestation (Didi-Huberman 1998: 102). Therefore, Noronha’s horizon is not a levelling of possibilities, abridged in the easiness of a ‘yet not being’, hidden in a far beyond. Nor has it an oblique disposition of space. The horizon is the direction of he who sees, which means it is an overture, not just the presentation of chances. This marks the singularity of his horizon, since it allows its framing – which, on the contrary, never represents a restriction. The frame doubles, not reality, but its apparition, replenishing the eye of the beholder, as if granting an evidence of meaning – and a path to escape.

Radically, the horizon becomes closer to the Subject, since it is detached from its visibility in order to become – not a copy – but a figure. The closeness is such that it may identify the viewer with the horizon – as if the Subject could do without the beach, once he is the threshold. In this eschatology of the diaphanous, the sfumatto disseminates the immensity – that the colossal verticalizes (Derrida 1993: 138) – smudging hierarchies and refusing the swallowing of the real model. As a result, the double is not an imitation, nor a duplication of a form. Instead, it is the product of an intersection – as if what is contemplated, finally, could contemplate the viewer, since he is, also, an apparition.

As a result, the blurred sequence erupts as a symptom of the viewer, which means that the auristic effect of the horizon cannot project an empty halo – since the Subject becomes, himself, a horizon. The mirroring surface invites him to an imitative performance, as if he was the conscience of what
The progressive experience of man at the beach and, consequently, his contact with water, is inseparable from the evolution of leisure and of hygienic practices but also of various historical appropriations of shame, as we may read from a diary of a young woman spending her bathing season with the Rothschilds in Scarborough, Summer of 1858: ‘Here [Scarborough] is complete absence of costume as in the garden of Eden before the fall of the man, and hundreds of ladies and gentleman look on, while the bathers plunge in the foaming waters, or emerge from them. I really think the police should interfere’ (Gay 1984: 338).

Let us not forget that clepsydras and hourglasses are almost metonymies since, through a minimal dominance of the elements – water and sand – man pretends to manipulate time. So, beyond a narrative duration – patent on the superimposition of plans and on the narrative statement of the work of art – we are invited to face a temporal pre-occupation, as if each painting could be a tribute to philosophy. And maybe this means more than the insistence of the always emerging mysteries, as, quoting Heidegger, Bernardo Pinto de Almeida, points out (Almeida 2006: 12). In fact, the viewer becomes himself a part of the halo. The sfumatto, blurring the physicality of the border, attracts the viewer, hallucinating him to a state of pre-figuring a presence, allowing him to inhabit what he sees. It abolishes the limits – to erect the contours, but not those of the image. The image is its contours, so the viewer is not in front of an image, but rather in front of the disappearance of the screen (da Costa 1979: 18).

Thus, the feminine figure appears as a permanence, as what the artist would define as the romantic landscape as the remainder that comes towards us (Noronha da Costa 1979: 18). That is why these illuminated (and nocturnal) profiles come into sight by disappearing. Their body is the transcendence, then, that de-materializes our own experience – transcendentalizing the Subject through his eyes. Temporally featured – as their nineteenth-century manner suggests – they are a-temporal, provoking the time and the narrative as the motives of the painting of Noronha da Costa. Implicitly claiming that where there is history (and a story), there is death (Almeida 2006: 10), this is the voice within the dense silence of Noronha da Costa. A concrete phantasmagoria – if such is possible – where clarity appears not as the halo – but as the body – since the viewer no more focuses on the painted light, but on the face, and, this way, on the possible presence. As the place for contemplation, the beach becomes a house, the last one, since the feminine presence simulates the arrival of the Subject – and the expectancy of the figure. It is he who reaches the threshold, just to perceive familiarity and tenderness (Lévinas 2009: 165). The threshold is, then, intimacy. In fact, from the moment we agree familiarity is, as Lévinas would say, the en-ergeia of separation, the vanishing of the screen becomes an act of welcoming – perhaps, first of all, for the painter himself.

Painting would be, afterwards, re-entering home in a perpetual one more time. The face depicted – diffusely – is what has been called ‘total exteriority’ (Lévinas 2009: 285). And if the sfumatto technique potentializes the ambiguity of form, it also expresses, undoubtedly, another ambiguity: that of the beloved and of the possibility of seeing her through a moment of visual touching that goes beyond her. It is the ‘obscure lumière venant d’au-delà du visage, de ce qui n’est pas encore, d’un futur jamais assez future, plus lointain que le possible’ (Lévinas 2009: 285).

Consequently, the screen houses the absent referent and shelters the threshold – guarding, instigating and forbidding the works of love of the eye.20

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