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THE PASSAGES BETWEEN FOUR ROOMS

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THE PASSAGES BETWEEN FOUR ROOMS

Light is a typical parergon. Both outside, in illuminating the object represented, and inside, constituting the very visibility of that object; it is marginal and yet centrally important; the final touch that makes the painting glow and the indispensable beginning; both necessary and irrelevant.

Mieke Bal¹

ROOM I

The picture space is divided into two, vertically, by a wall in the middle in *The Voice of Silence* by René Magritte; on the right half we see a room while the left half is left dark. This composition calls for an asymmetric symmetry: I imagine another room on the left side of the painting, a different room furnished differently, but the same essentially.

The light in the room right side seeps into the darkness of the room on the left side in a relatively unrealistic way, while the depiction of it is realistic. The room on the left could not be dark as such while the room on the right as light as such. And

what about the light source? There is one source of light, barely, must be the sun, percolating into the interior space through the window. The window is not depicted, nevertheless we see the curtain on the right edge of the painting. Therefore we *know* where the window is, and so the source of light . "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."² writes John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. Then what about the darkness which hinders our vision in this painting? How what we do not see relates to what we see and what we know?



The Voice of Silence, René Magritte, 1928

I hereby find it relevant to employ the concept *parergon* in my reading of *The Voice of Silence*, and in particular in the operation of the *two halves* of the painting with each other. The right side informs about the dark side, giving a clue of it. The sole outsider, the room visible, partakes in internal operation of the left side room in this way. On the other hand both the dark side informs about the possibility of the other possible rooms on the right side. Both rooms, outsiders to each other, are multiplied in the presence of each other swirling in possibilities. Derrida, in his essay *The Parergon*, characterizes parergon as follows: "A parergon is against, beside, and above and beyond the ergon, the work accomplished, the accomplishment of the work. But it is not incidental; it is connected to and cooperates in its operation from the outside."³

Every *inside*, literally, has been built in *the outside*, belongs to *the outside*. Everything outside *the inside* is *outside*, and everything in *an inside* is brought in from *the outside*. In the essay *Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting* from his book *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Benjamin remarks that he is filled with not thought but images and memories, memories of the cities he has found so many things, of the rooms those books has been housed, of his boyhood room. In relation to those remarks Benjamin notes "...the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner."⁴ This is a moment I find the most interesting of all. The presence of the owner of a collection delivers the possibility to access to all the stories and incidents around the items in a collection. The death of the collector is a closure of the possible openings towards anything the collector preserved in her/his mind regarding the collection. With the death of the collector the lights are turned off, and the experience of the witness of the mere presence of the collection turns out to be not far from the experience of the viewer of the left side of *The Voice of Silence*. By losing its personal owner, the space -as well as "the phenomenon of collecting"- gains another meaning: it turns into no *one's*, and

therefore can be *any one's*, in a way parallel with the multiplicity *The Voice of Silence* brings forth.

Through a painting by Magritte and an essay by Benjamin, I have been investigating the relations between light and dark, visibility and invisibility, and inside and outside. Before I present my idea for a work which deals with these oppositions by opening up space for the audience, I would like to write about *A Journey round My Room* by Xavier de Maistre, and later *La Chambre* by Chantal Akerman. With *A Journey round My Room* and *La Chambre*, I will explore the questions in kind with a focus on how the concept of subjectivity relates to space and how it operates in space. I believe, delving into both works will help me to develop my idea in depth, that I will present lastly.

ROOM II

In 1790, Count Xavier de Maistre, a twenty seven year old military officer was arrested and imprisoned at his home in Turin for forty two days. He was quite enthusiastic about sharing his experience of not leaving his home for forty two days, and during his imprisonment he has written his first book *a Journey around My Room*. Later he has become known in the literary circles of Savoy and Paris, surprisingly to himself. "I have undertaken and performed a thirty-two days' journey round my room. The interesting observations I have made, and the constant pleasure I have experienced all along the road, made me wish to publish my travels; the certainty of being useful decided the matter."⁵ writes de Maistre in the beginning of his book.

Written in a closed space, and driven by this closedness, de Maistre's *journey round his room* embraces experiences and observations regarding the *outside* as much as the *inside*. His experiences, observations, and contemplations in his room

during a certain period of time is embodied in a text; he used the medium of writing with an eye of a painter - It is known as well that de Maistre has been involved in painting since childhood, and he has been painting landscape and domestic scenes in particular. But this time he has chosen to accommodate his experiences and observations in a text. I believe, in writing, Maistre finds space to open up his sense of subjectivity. He draws attention to the difference between writing and picturing in the beginning of the chapter *Albert and Charlotte* along these lines: "The walls of my room are hang up with engravings and pictures, which adorn it greatly. I should much like to submit them to the reader's inspection, that they might amuse him along the road we have to traverse before we reach my bureau. But it is as impossible to describe a picture well, as to paint one from a description."⁶

Barely, Maistre is aware that writing allows him to pursue his enthusiasm over his experiences. Later on in the same chapter, instead of giving a formal description of the engraving, he tells about the cold-hearted Albert, "surrounded by bags of law papers and various old documents", who shows no interest to his friend next to him. Afterwards, Maistre expresses his desire to "break the glass that covers this engraving", and "tear Albert from the engraving, rend him to pieces, and trample him under foot"⁷.

In *A Journey round my Room*, de Maistre wonders around different subjects of the day and the past, but he avoids visual representation in sharing about his *journey*. He puts up a dark room for the reader. It is then the role of the reader to reconstruct the room through the medium of text, to visualize the room in all its possible scenes, and to multiply the stories told by de Maistre. Reading de Maistre's book, I imagine de Maistre as the absent human figure in Magritte's painting, passing from one room to the other.

ROOM III

The third room here I present is *La Chambre* by Chantal Akerman. *La Chambre* is an 11 min. film from 1972, shot in Akerman's studio apartment in New York. In the film, camera is placed somewhere in the middle of her apartment, and it spans around the room 360 degrees - the movement of the camera is only horizontal. Until towards the end of the film, the camera moves only in the same direction, slowly, recording the same objects in the room and Akerman herself in each rotation. It completes four rotations until it changes the direction. In the film, the room appears to be quite messy, almost everything in it seems to be in use actively on daily basis: red chair placed awkwardly next to the bed, fruits on the table jumbled with probably unwashed coffee mugs and a teapot, another teapot on the stove, dishes piled in the kitchen sink, socks hanged up on a wall, etc. Simply, we encounter a subject in the apartment she inhabits. Nevertheless I remark no hierarchy among what is captured by the camera; Akerman herself acquires no attention from the camera, as if her presence in the room is coincidental and she is perceived only just part of the room like any other object in the room.

With this flatness led by the way the camera moves, in some way, Akerman seems to have distanced herself from the space, and this highly personal space reveals itself rather impersonal. This impersonalisation is investigated in depth in relation to cinematic space by Steven Jacobs who is an art historian specialized in the relations between film and the visual arts. In his 2012 essay *Semiotics of the Living Room: Domestic Interiors in Chantal Akerman's Cinema*, from the book *Chantal Akerman: Too Far, Too Close*, edited by Anders Kreuger, he writes with *La Chambre* "the limits of cinematic space are explicitly explored. Space acquires some degree of autonomy: although the "architecture" is still created by means of cinematic techniques (camera positions, editing, camera movements), the whole nonetheless suggests that the space represented exists independent of the camera.

With their self-imposed visual restrictions, the stories of Akerman's single-set films depend highly on the dialectics between interior and exterior spaces."⁸

Akerman portrays a room with its inhabitant in *La Chambre*. In contrast to the personal setting, the room and the inhabitant is represented in isolation and dislocation as discussed above. The more the isolation and dislocation is discernable, the more there is space for the viewer herself/himself, I contend. Accordingly, Jacobs later quotes from Peter Wollen, noting Wollen's fascination for single-set films regarding to the use of space "in these films we become gradually familiar with a place, building up our own set of memories, associations and expectations, creating our own symbolizations, our own mental maps."⁹

On the other hand I find the asymmetric relation between the camera and Akerman vital to investigate. Whereas the camera is indifferent to Akerman, Akerman responds to it in a certain way. She takes repetitive action each time she is in sight of the camera; she moves her head diagonally staring at the camera, makes small circles with her wrist holding an apple, moves back and forth under the quilt, etc. Conversely, she is always at the same place, in the bed, like any other object in the room. As the camera spans round the room, it makes some parts of the room visible while some other part invisible to our eyes continuously. It excites me to think that the horizontal move of the camera functions similar to the vertical division in *The Voice of Silence*; it makes the invisible visible and the visible invisible. The outside becomes inside and inside becomes outside, both literally and metaphorically.



Stills from La Chambre, Chantal Akerman

ROOM IV

The fourth room is a room informed and inspired by the rooms/works discussed above. Along with the other three rooms, this room has been part of my exploration about how certain oppositions, such as light and dark, visibility and invisibility, inside and outside, work together and be part of each other, but not really oppose each other, and how the invisible relates to the visible and search for different ways of representing the invisible. Accordingly, my idea for a room echoes the patterns of meanings produced by those three rooms, while standing as a room for its own right.

De Maistre is in his room, writing about his room and himself; Akerman is in her room, making a film about her room and herself. Both of them are interested in everyday experiences, however their interest seems to be driven by very different approaches, almost opposing, I suppose. De Maistre has a loud voice of himself, he speaks to us in a distinctly self-confident and daring tone; he is the subject of his work. He measures his room with *his own paces*, while Akerman is just part of her room. Unlike Maistre, Akerman flattens her presence in the space, she does not seem to be interested in herself more than anything else. On the contrary, she presents herself as an anonymous person, so that her room is anonymous as well.

She can be anyone. I would like my work to follow Akerman in this respect. I want the work not speak *to* others, but offer audience a space where they are themselves and anonymous persons at the same time.

In this respect, I plan to make a work which consists of a dark room with sound installation. The sound will be a voice, describing rooms one after another. There will be 6-10 rooms described; the rooms described will be ordinary rooms of private persons. Each description will be of a real or fictional space, or a combination of both. The descriptions will be made in an objective manner; no stories, memories or narratives will be involved. On the other hand there will not be a specific structure for descriptions, thus the descriptions will not form a pattern when reviewed together. Following the path of de Maistre "I will be crossing it frequently lengthwise, or else diagonally, without any rule or method. I will even follow a zigzag path, and I will trace out every possible geometrical trajectory if need be... when I travel through my room, I rarely follow a straight line..."

With this work, I will be building the left side of *The Voice of Silence* in real space. The text in the form of speech, from my point of view, facilitates a passage between the rooms in *The Voice of Silence*, de Maistre's room and his *journey*, and the room of Akerman. I imagine the viewer of the work passing between all these spaces as well as their own rooms, the rooms they inhabited at one time, and all the possible spaces they could converge.

Emel Bayat

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