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In the Shade

By-products of Narration

When I was a child and I got really bored – this happened often, since I lived in the countryside, and even the library was several kilometers away – I used to wander in the woods, map out the bush and make paths in the nondescript growth along the brook. As a teenager, I bought my first camera and often focused it at abandoned houses, industrial areas, fracture points of the man-made world. After high school I went to study psychology, because I was interested in the subconscious, dreams, and all kinds of strange depths of the human mind. It was only much later – after I had become a writer – that I realized I was both photographing and writing places that had been neglected. Left in the shade.

For me, shades are first and foremost something beyond the normal, everyday faculty of seeing. Shades have no proper names. They are explained by names belonging to other places, or by descriptive words, defined by talking about what is around them and borders them. Among others, such shady areas can be stony or grassy fields between motorway junctions; stretches of road wiped out from official maps but still in existence, defined by what they used to be or by what some day will be where they are now; scrubs outside untrimmed parks where there is neither park nor forest and where a swamped brook runs; uncoded areas in a computer simulation, where you cannot step or drive without the program complaining; waste lands. Shades are cracks in the structure under the painted surface. Side alleys behind high streets. They don’t define themselves; they get defined. They are hard to pay attention to, or even notice in a built-up world.

But what is the world built like? How are they building it?

While writing my latest novel, I took an enormous multitude of photographs, and I also started publishing them on Instagram as a visual notebook. At some stage I noticed I was being egocentric as a photographer: I was angry at a bystander who ruined my photo by having their elbow in it, or just by obstructing the view when I was taking my snapshot; or then I cropped my shot so that a random passer-by – non-recognizable, I’ll say to my defense – was seen within a meaning of my own choice. I stopped, turned off my camera, put the lens cover on, and started to ponder about externality in pictures. I wondered what it would feel like to be a carrier of other people’s meanings in them, when you land in their pictures involuntarily, even unwillingly – what kind of visual biography would emerge, if photographs of myself, for instance, taken by random people, were put together – and, finally, the other way around: who were the outsiders in my own photos? What kind of pictures would they have taken of themselves? What would be the story they would have told?

I started to pay more attention to the backgrounds of my photos. I found out that what had accidentally ended up in them was often much more interesting than what was intended. Try to think of a home in set-up Instagram pictures, and then of the same place in photos taken by a four-year-old child with a first digital camera: Piles of dirty dishes. Wide open cabinet doors. Someone yawning. Even among my own photos, the most interesting ones seemed to be those taken when I had looked past the target. Almost accidentally. Somewhere I usually didn’t look.

It’s the same way with text. Also with words, you involuntarily create reality in everyday life as well as in stories. When, by writing, you create a person, a group of people, or a whole historical narrative, either fictional or purporting to be factual, very often this kind of narration takes the form of a story. And when reality is cast into a story-like mold, what is left out reflects a whole world with all its presuppositions. Extraneous things, details not suited for a coherent narrative, uncomfortably abrasive reminders, proof of other realities all keep squirting and splashing between the lines.

The world is dynamic, and no human being is self-sufficient. That is why every person in a narrative needs other people, side characters who are like mirrors, the “yous” for the “mes”, and form the background. It is very difficult to talk about yourself without ever mentioning anyone else. Parents, friends, teachers, ex-lovers. While telling the story of ourselves we end up telling others. In those very words. We actively create (even if we don’t notice it) other people as side characters in our reality. And others do the same to us. There is nothing out of the ordinary in that. We are social beings; we need each other and are attached to each other with invisible threads. It becomes problematic only when the factor of power is added. Some people have the power to get themselves heard and define the social reality, others are left in the shade.

Reality is fragmentary, elastic and contradictory. It is said that fragmentary narration full of holes is the one that leaves most room for interpretation. On the other hand, the more unimaginative, stiff, and non-contradictory a narrative is, the more various voices break out and speak between the lines. There is a source of a new way of seeing between the lines. What is left in the shade can both give voice to something that has no name and tell something that arises without the author having intended it. The stories of side characters, their versions of themselves drift where they belong in the larger narrative, between the lines. But they are there. They can be imagined, if not read. There will be new kinds of shady areas between the lines. They bubble with other kinds of voices, rebellious side products of storytelling.

And here, the readers steps onto the stage. They see what the writer has produced without necessarily even knowing it.

In his book *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes writes about “punctum”. In my free interpretation, it means any detail in a photograph that causes a slash in a spectator, a recognition that is hard to pass by. It differs from the picture’s “stadium”*,* which is the apparent and culturally recognizable content intended by the photographer. The photographer doesn’t necessarily even know about the punctum, being an outsider, not included in what is happening between the spectator and the picture.

If one takes the punctum and sets it into the world of words, I imagine it could be something arising between the lines. The writer cannot govern it, it happens between the text and the reader. Our connections, our backgrounds, and our “others” are hidden between the lines – sometimes intentionally, but often without the writer really trying to hide them there. As a side product of a narrative a whole universe comes into being without anything being said straight out. The reader complements what is left unsaid, knowingly, or unknowingly. The act of reading completes the literary work. What is left between the lines leaves room for the reader’s own interpretations.

A photograph is something one does not have to understand. It does not have to be explained. Very few people seriously pause to worry about not understanding a picture the way the photographer wanted. Literature, however, is haunted by a need to understand the intentions of its author. One thinks a text can somehow be read in a wrong way. Or even that one is stupid if one does not *understand.*

What if we should look at literature like we do at the art of photography: let the text open up the way a photograph does, without trying to control it by understanding (in the sense of grasping, apprehending, and thus shrinking in a way). A work of literature should not really be understood, but experienced.

The line spaces are non-places, just like the grassy areas between railroad tracks, they are a wild and untethered no-man’s land that just is there, *is*, like being is an act in itself, and grows its own kinds of flowers from everything that the world with names produces. The line spaces are not silence. They are communication which doesn’t have a voice (yet), or doesn’t have words (yet), but which gives rise to new kinds of expressions. At best, words are just approximations, but one can only talk about things that have been named and are not surrounded by silence. Between the lines, there is the possibility of encounter and different kinds of interpretations. Between the lines, there is inner space.

So, let us welcome texts that are brave enough to let the reader between their lines, and give the chance to wander freely around. When a work of literature does not explain, does not try to convert anyone or be correct, it leaves fissures through which realities flow into each other, and something genuinely new can be born.