

The Poetic Quality of Infinity

Spatial Dystopia

For the Mayan civilisation, time was cyclical. To count it, various calendars of different degrees of complexity were created: the TUN (a spiritual calendar comprising 18 20-day months, with a total of 360 days plus five days of particular religious significance); the HAAB (an annual or secular calendar linked to the seasons); the TZOLK'IN (a 260-day cycle, corresponding to the number of days in which Venus is visible as the morning and evening star; a calendar which allowed the Maya to follow the Pleiades cycle); the Calendar Round (which combined the HAAB and the TZOLK'IN cycles in a 52-year cycle) and the Long Count (a 5126-year cycle). Each of these calendars had a profound basis and one which was not only material; the spiritual dimension of events was as important as their concrete manifestation and it is perhaps this premise that leads to the greatest differences between the nature of the knowledge held by these peoples and that of modern-day science.

The Maya predicted the planetary alignment that occurred on 21 December 2012, a familiar event to every astronomer: a galactic synchronisation in which the solar system plane aligns exactly with that of our galaxy, the Milky Way. This alignment only happens once every 26,000 years and is associated with the precession of the equinoxes: the earth rotates around the sun and around itself; oscillating along the axis of the latter movement ensures it always maintains the same position in relation to the sun. However the constellations change position over the years, meaning that the earth's tilt changes slowly on the ecliptic plane and in relation to the constellations. The Maya realised that it would take around 26,000 years (astronomy today specifies 25,800 years) for a constellation seen from earth to return to the same place in the sky. The concept of five solar ages coincides with these 26,000 years, with the last solar age beginning in August 3114 BC and ending in December 2012 (a total of 5126 years), the point at which the winter solstice sun crossed the Milky Way along the dark rift at its

centre. The symbolic encounter of the 'First Father' (the solstice sun) with the 'First Mother' (the Milky Way) would, according to the Maya, signal not the end of the world, but the end of this world, with the possibility of the rebirth of a new era, with very different civilisational characteristics¹.

What did the Maya understand without the help of any machine that we have not been able to understand even with such resources? Or ancient Babylon? Or the even more ancient Egypt?

Clearly, we have lost something precious that was offered by a natural approach to knowledge. We cannot remain unmoved by the notion that today we are unable to imagine accessing either the infinitely large or the infinitely small without the help of technologies that augment our senses (particularly that of vision) and with the artificial extension of the space that is within the reach of our body, while other civilisations were able to understand the world, in all that really mattered to making sense of life, without such means.

Perhaps one of our problems stems from the very reasoning that drives our search – after all the world always answers the question we ask of it, giving a response that reflects the point of view presupposed by this question. What are we looking for in space and why do we wish to travel there? Do we think we are alone in this vast universe? Or do we have a great need to prove the contrary? Do we fear the limited lifespan that we have been given? Do we fear the irreversible destruction of the planet and feel the need for an expansionist fiction? Or do we simply want to decipher the laws of life and the universe? Are space agencies also sponsored by powerful military systems? Or are they motivated primarily by science and another type of pragmatism? Can we no longer live without the 'real time' of telecommunications?

Reflecting on such questions is important in questioning the kind of investment made in space exploration; it is also important for understanding

¹ See for example George Benedict, *Les secrets de la prophétie maya*, Éditions Trénadiel, 2010

² 'SCAPE' stands for Self-Contained Atmospheric Protection Ensemble and are

the nature of its collective impact and for contextualising the reasons it exerts such fascination – a fascination also linked to the enigma of the unknown and the distant and, on another level, to mechanical complexity and ‘organicity’, to the aesthetic and symbolic quality of the machines and devices involved.

We know that the mirage of progress was bound up with the utopia of space, yet we also know that the second half of the twentieth century, and postmodernity in particular, vigorously questioned the link between the idea of the future and progress, and we can also allow ourselves to think of the utopia of space as a dystopia, as the perversion of a (human) condition in its transcending of limitations and undertaking of possibly unjustifiable efforts.

The Invited Intruder

Edgar Martins’ work, on the other hand, compels us to consider a geopolitics of secrecy and (in)accessibility. At the ESA (European Space Agency) sites visited by Edgar Martins in nine different countries spread over three continents, according to a protocol that enthusiastically welcomed the project, negotiation was constant and access, though real, was not always totally obvious. This underlines the fact that, for the vast majority of us, these are places that are totally impenetrable (as in the case of NASA), which map out a network of loci of necessarily political and secret experimentation and decision-making at the highest level across the planet. The photographic ‘document’ is, or was, in this case, desired and feared, facilitated and avoided. The artist embodied the ambiguous figure of the invited intruder.

The images in this series have this dual quality of approachability and distance. Looking, for example, at the shape of a hand without seeing a hand is an unsettling experience. It is not a sculpture or a drawn or painted representation: bereft of an associated arm or body, the fabric astronauts’ glove that Martins photographed, camouflaged and inflated, is placed against a black background like an animated puppet and introduces us in an

ambiguous (seductive and frightening) way to the world of technical artificiality.

We have a similar sensation in front of the helmet of a SCAPE suit² and the astronauts' wardrobe: they are containers which are empty but highly indexical. This disquiet becomes more complex with the simulation using a pressurised suit, or with the ergolier suit, false 'corporeal' presences that are put in place and given volume.

These are the only indicators, the most direct indicators, of human reality. There is no one in these images (with one very distant and anonymous exception), and the 'body' of the machine imposes its magnitude and all-encompassing nature on the photographed spaces. And then we encounter the circular chasm of deep 'wells', of machines seen face on or from a low angle, restrictive, claustrophobic; their densely filled interiors proliferating with wires, hoses, cables, electric and electronic devices, articulated arms, batteries, containers, diagrams, simulators, buttons, modules, accelerators, generators, antennas, computers, rockets, satellites, maquettes, parts, robots... Laboratory components and objects from a science museum. We also see images of microsections, images of acoustic simulators (reminiscent of works by Anish Kapoor – white surfaces which curve down into smooth depressions), and even a moon rock owned by NASA, exhibited in Holland: a piece of mineral lit by a white light, drawing attention both to its similarity to any number of minerals found on earth, and to the great strangeness of its presence here, given its origin. And yet, in a broad sense, its origin is in fact very commonplace: the matter of which the universe is made.

The aseptic nature of these places excludes us: they have an almost inhuman quality, yet we are inexplicably drawn towards the 'inhumanity' of what seems to have surpassed us. If mechanical complexity and strangeness

² 'SCAPE' stands for Self-Contained Atmospheric Protection Ensemble and are designed to protect those who carry out fuel maintenance of satellites and come into contact with corrosive liquids or hostile environments during space missions.

lead to enigmas, our distance in relation to them leads to uncomfortable reverence.

The spaces are sometimes grasped in terms of their multiple profusion in contrast to the vast planes of the isolated pieces. As Geoff Dyer says in relation to another series, 'there is sometimes no sense of scale' (The Time Machine, 2011). We are invited and expelled, attracted and betrayed by what is (not) revealed to us. The hand that the glove does not hide exemplifies this dual movement. And if, as Edgar Martins states, it is the places that are closest to us that we have least knowledge of (interview with Sandra Jürgens, *Arq./a*, 2009), ESA's secret objects and places only become close, in an initial inversion of their inaccessible state, to then immediately become unreadable. Furthermore, they are numerous stages for a vast simulation, places of rehearsal which the real space intruders are invited to occupy.

Witjout Gravity

Recently, Alfonso Cuarón's film *Gravity*, starring Sandra Bullock, offered its audience an eloquent portrayal of the possible human, emotional and technological dimensions of space exploration. Six hundred kilometres up, beyond the earth's atmosphere and without gravity, a number of satellites and large amounts of orbital debris pollute the planetary system and threaten the life of the characters until (almost from the beginning) the scientist is left completely alone in the dark immensity of space, face to face with the machines that will perhaps take her back home.

Running out of oxygen is one of the most terrifying obstacles that Bullock faces at the beginning, the end and at various points throughout the film. The alteration of mobility and propulsion by lack of gravity is another constant. Emotions and the connection with life back on earth weave occasional moments of interspersed human narrative through a labyrinthine stage of the most advanced technology and absolute solitude.

The film leads us back to two issues in this work by Edgar Martins. One of them concerns the dimension brought to this series by the photographs that record various personal objects, the few things that the astronauts are allowed to take with them,. These objects are the tenuous yet vital thread which stretches between earth and the (in)human place occupied by the astronauts when they are on a mission. The second is the questioning of this (in)humanity: is it really worth the effort? Is its blatantly unnatural dimension comprehensible?

Photography and film can be as perverse in generating astonishment as they can be effective in raising questions. Reading this duality requires a critical distance – the distance which in the film referred to and in Edgar Martins' photographic series ensures that a constant and unavoidable sense of disquiet is maintained.

Theoretical Incidents

I like the idea that any given space changes for you and for you only, every time you observe it. And if you slow down time for long enough you may just be able to capture this.

Edgar Martins, in conversation with Gerry Badger, 2009

The Accidental Theorist is the title of a series from 2007. John Beardsley ('Topologies of Place', 2008)³ draws attention to Edgar Martins' theoretical awareness of his own work as a factor which leads to the power and success of his images. The photographer as accidental theorist is, in fact, a condition endorsed by Edgar Martins who understands that as well as deciding and making (and the importance he ascribes to the conceptual dimension of the work) there is also a spontaneous and intuitive dimension. This encounter, according to him is intensified by the way that 'the technical inadequacies' of photography lead him towards the resolution of the image.

³ This and all subsequent articles referred to in this text, can be found at www.edgarmartins.com in a list organized by year (date) and author.

When he states, for example, with respect to a 2009 series, that 'The black hole functioned as a metaphor for reason at the point of exhaustion' (Arq./a, 2009) he is describing to us that moment of collapse in which creation gives way to the forces of another intelligence. In addition to this possibility there is the possibility of nostalgia, of the inscription of archetypes and of evidence of a vague incomprehension of the void in phrases such as: 'without artifice, without premeditation, my landscapes raise the question of the complexity of the collective unconscious. The landscapes represented in my photographs are the deserts of our circumstances. They are the landscapes that survive our absence' (ibidem).

Edgar Martins knows that the absence of humans of these places is unsettling and says himself that 'the observer longs for signs and evidence of life to increase the visual volume and give (the) place its social identity' (ibidem). Couldn't we extend this idea to the confrontation with interstellar space, with all the problems that this transposition raises and intensifies?

The statement 'I am frequently attracted to spaces where I can prioritise poetic memory over concrete topographies' (Arq./a, and Gerry Badger, 2009) is suggestive of part of the title of the current series: *The poetic impossibility of managing the infinite*. Poetry and memory do not have the time-space of topography, architecture and astronomy.

Sérgio Mah is referring to the series *Dwarf Exoplanets & Other Sophisms*, 2007, when he writes that in Edgar Martins there is 'a necessarily contradictory domain between the presence of a representation and the illusion of recognition' (2010). Margarida Medeiros (2010) underlines this very point, saying: 'Thus, what Edgar Martins presents us with is not reality through photography (...) what he brings is photography in itself, through reality'. The thematic reference could link the 'exoplanet' series with the series in this exhibition... Their visual proposals, however, are very different. The current series is closer to *The Time Machine* (2011) – a project created in

collaboration with The EDP Foundation about the dams, sites and machines involved in producing electricity. Geoff Dyer, in the catalogue text, highlights the 'silent power' and the effect of absence (of people, of narrative) in these images. The negation of movement in Edgar Martins' photographs, the ghostliness and artificiality of the image (João Pinharanda, 2011) find their flipside in the benefits of quietude in the capturing of the silence and the essence of places. Referring to a 2001 series, **Beasley** claims to recognise in this work the principles of the *Vanitas*, the *memento mori* and of *pathos*.

In a note by Edgar Martins in the same publication we read: 'It was always my intention to be able to bring a documentary and conceptual facet to an emotive and realistic body of work, framed within a reflective analysis on the photographic medium and on different modes of visual representation'. This use of adjectives is interesting: emotive and realistic, documentary and conceptual. It is the first of these that that we struggle with most. Emotions are not obvious in Edgar Martins' work. They are apparently negated by the aseptic or minimal nature of the places, by the absence of the human figure, by the cold nature of the technology that is present in so many of them. And neither is realism an immediately evident characteristic: night, the manipulation of light, the timelessness and spatial abstraction of many works more immediately put us in mind of a dream world, as Jacinto Lageira writes in 2010: 'it becomes ethereal as it appears to be dreamt'. The documentary nature of the images is relatively easy to accept, though we soon begin to doubt the efficacy of these 'documents' as a means of understanding the reality in question. The conceptual nature of the work is evident, despite the immediate 'simplicity' of the images. There is evidence and illusionism, fascination and horror in many of Edgar Martins' images, according to John Beardsley (2008).

Another note by the artist in the same publication talks of the 'paradox of our finitude'. Some will prefer to think about the beauty of our infinity, alongside the infinity of the universe, as evoked by the title of this series. The

choice between these two possibilities is intimately linked to our individual natures and to the nature of these photographs.

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