

Signs of the Sky, Signs of the Times

Photography as Double Agent

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Abstract

From Alfred Stieglitz to Trevor Paglen, photographs of the sky have engaged with the relationship between abstraction and representation. This article argues that Stieglitz's attempt to convert the 'natural' abstraction of the sky into the 'cultural' abstraction of the modernist image opens a space through which recent photographers have moved to use the sky photograph as a means of interrogating issues of openness and concealment that are at once aesthetic and political. The invisibility of signs of military-industrial power embedded within airspace is, in Richard Misrach's and Paglen's photographs, registered but not exactly shown, since the capacity of the photograph to reveal the unseen is challenged by the effectiveness of contemporary modes of concealment. What is shown in these images, however, is the condition of hiddenness itself, which is encountered by Misrach and Paglen not only through the abstraction of the sky photographs but by situating those images within a discursive field – through the use of titles, captions and an explication of working methods – that regrounds the atmospheric as a spectacular function of power's open secret.

Key words

abstraction ■ airspace ■ concealment ■ photography ■ surveillance ■ visibility

The air rippled like camouflage. Behind it something else seemed to carry on in secret. At any moment the illusion they stood on would dissolve and they would fall to earth. (Pynchon, 1975: 409)

I HAVE done a good deal of skying', wrote John Constable to his friend John Fisher in 1821, referring to his recent efforts at drawing clouds, the most 'arduous' challenge for an artist but also the most important task to master since '[t]he sky is the *source of light* in nature – and governs everything' (quoted in Hawes, 1969: 344, emphasis in original). Any optical engagement with the world involves dealing with the governor, the medium through which all form is apprehended. For Jean-Luc Nancy, the image 'always comes from the sky' (2005: 5) and Constable's 'skying', turning a noun into a verb, describes an active relationship between looking and doing that produces something sky-like, atmospheric. Clouds, like drawings of clouds, appear as form but are intangible as objects; the sky looks colored but this is an effect of refracted light. The sky is what Nancy calls 'the distinct', that which is 'separate, what is set aside, removed, cut off' and cannot be touched (2005: 1). It is itself 'distinction and distance: extended clarity, at once distant and near, the source of a light that nothing illuminates in turn. . . but by which everything is illuminated and brought into distinction' (2005: 5). Nothing in the sky is quite as it appears; indeed, the act of skying, as the mind processes the retinal response, can turn the sky into anything it pleases. 'The clouds help us to dream of transformation', writes Gaston Bachelard, but the will to transform comes not from the cloud but from '[t]he *authoritarian* nature of reverie' that 'controls a changing phenomenon by giving it a command that has already been carried out or is being carried out' (1988: 185, emphasis in original). In this way, the sky is an enabler, providing the model for an element that 'governs everything', a shapeshifting non-form that seems to reveal form but in fact works as the 'natural' permission for the legitimation of a dreamlike authority.

Looking at clouds, Tyrone Slothrop, in Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, sees 'the jaws and teeth of some Creature, some Presence so large that nobody else can see it' (1975: 241). This is dismissed by others as idle reverie, but Slothrop insists that 'its visible claws and scales are being mistaken for clouds and other plausibilities'. Worse still, perhaps 'everyone has agreed to *call them other names* when Slothrop is listening' (1975: 241, emphasis in original). Slothrop's skying could mark the extent of his paranoid delusions about military-industrial forces governing every aspect of life or confirm his belief that there is such a monster so all-pervasive it has become the atmosphere within which existence is possible. The terror here is that the dream of transformation offered by the sky has been dreamed already and that we are in it. The sky is not open but what Nancy calls 'the firm vault from which the stars are hung' (2005: 5); it is the ceiling of power.

According to Louis Althusser, '[w]hat art makes us *see*. . . is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*' (1971: 223, emphasis in original). What

Pynchon makes Slothrop see in the sky is ideology, the abstract element that shows itself to him as forms his interlocutor insists are his alone: ‘That’s no monster, stupid’, chides Hilary Bounce, ‘that’s *clouds!*’ (1975: 241, emphasis in original). Slothrop’s suspicion, that self-evidence itself is an effect that presents ideology as nature, recognizes, like Constable, that the sky ‘governs everything’. If Althusser is right and art somehow enables us to perceive the ideology in which it bathes, art, as Stephen Paul Miller suggests, at its most effective, becomes ‘a kind of spy’. Abstract art in particular, Miller goes on, being ‘better camouflaged, can be a successful double agent’ (1999: 22–3). The sky, as screen upon which the authoritarian nature of reverie projects itself, and the medium through which everything is governed, has to be the place where abstraction – as obfuscation and as art – makes us see.

Since Constable’s time, the sky has ceased to be the unreachable ceiling of nature and instead has become intrinsic to the structuring of space by technologies of power. Aircraft and satellites have made the sky a different kind of medium through which the missiles and missives of domination pass seemingly untrammelled by earthly restraints and often undetected by human perception. Further, as John Ruskin knew when he spoke in 1884 of the ‘Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century’, the ‘dense manufacturing mist’ (1884: 38) of industry has produced new toxic opacities that have blocked access to the clear light of the sun. Technology has charged the atmosphere with its own vaporous trailings, merging itself with the air to the point where it is impossible to tell where nature leaves off and human modification of the environment begins. Clouds become cloud cover for surveillance and assault, the refraction of light that produces the blue sky screens the circulation of communications satellites in space or produces chromatic effects that may or may not be caused by industrial pollution. The sky’s openness has become the most effective mode of camouflage for agencies that seek dominion not only over the earth but over the air itself. Slothrop’s clouds may not be monsters but there are monsters up there, and Pynchon’s novel about the V2 rocket – a weapon that announces its arrival only after it has exploded – articulates the sense of powerless dread on the ground that airpower, and the air as a sign of power, has achieved.

‘Whether you can affect the signs of the sky or not’, wrote Ruskin, ‘you can the signs of the times’ (1884: 44). Images of the sky are signs of the times, and the relationship between the sky and abstraction in the 20th and 21st centuries is never a solely formal concern and is shaped by issues of exposure and concealment that are at root political. In the work of contemporary photographers like Richard Misrach and Trevor Paglen, Constable’s arduous attempts to grasp some form from the sky are directed toward a scrutiny of what the sky shows and hides, what it is being made to show and hide, and how ostensibly abstract atmospheric space functions

as a network of power relations that can, in the photograph, be apprehended. Nancy's sense of the sky as separate and untouchable, and of the image as 'contain[ing] the sky within itself' (2005: 5), is articulated in Misrach's and Paglen's work as a complex interrogation of how the unreachable can be shown. For Misrach and Paglen, the sky is a system of signs of the times, laden with toxicity, weapons and systems of surveillance that are barely detectable but not entirely invisible. Their images are abstract but, in Miller's term, use abstraction as a kind of double agent, drawing out of the history of abstraction in 20th-century art – with particular reference to the modernist sky photographs of Alfred Stieglitz – the possibility of form as a conveyor of material information about the world that is otherwise beyond appearance. In this way, Misrach and Paglen are addressing not just skies but previous images of skies and the ontology of the sky as image; their work is engaged in an examination of the way the sky became a medium for obfuscating abstraction and how this medium might be made to show itself.

Torn Curtain

During the 1920s and early 1930s, Alfred Stieglitz took over 200 photographs of clouds and skies which he called 'Equivalents.' Widely considered to be among the first examples of abstraction in photography, most of the images have no horizon or other discernible reference points, though a few include hills or trees. In the majority of cases, the clouds could be anywhere, and Stieglitz often mounted the images upside down or sideways. The images are also printed darkly, accentuating the clouds against a black or nearly black sky. The objective in these photographs is to get as far away from the pictorial function of photography as possible and to produce images that are closer to music in their lyrical abstraction. 'I have a vision of life', Stieglitz explained, 'and I try to find equivalents for it in the form of photographs' (quoted in Boxer, 2002). While Stieglitz dismissed critics who could not understand his images as 'blind' (1923: 255), the suspicion that, far from a 'vision of life', there is little in the 'Equivalents' to see has persisted, one critic noting that 'it is hard to tell what philosophy of life, if any, they express' (Thornton, 1976: 21). Despite their apparent self-evidence, the photographs purport to show something that cannot be seen. What can be seen, though, is hidden in plain sight even in Stieglitz's ostensibly oblique statement: the equivalent to Stieglitz's vision is the *form* of the photographs.

Stieglitz insisted that he wanted the photographs to look like photographs – mechanically produced visual data – but he embraces from symbolist thinking about the relationship between fact and interpretation the necessary and inevitable capacity of the latter to outstrip the former. In this way, as John Pultz argues, though the clouds had little meaning for Stieglitz as subject matter, 'the endless variations of their shapes and lighting could conjure countless associations' (1980: 28). As such, the term

‘equivalence’ speaks to the process of moving from object to interpretation that ‘make[s] visible the invisible’ and ‘give[s] photographic substance to attributes and essences that the camera could capture in no other way’ (Pultz, 1980: 28). The photograph here stands as evidence of the way ‘sensory data can be ripped out of the world and repositioned in another context’ so that the image of an object obtains ‘a plasticity absent from the object itself’ (1980: 29). Through this violent act of ripping and recontextualization, the ‘Equivalents’ enter an indeterminate space between nature and abstraction, object and information, visible and invisible, observation and appropriation.

Like Pultz, Rosalind Krauss reads Stieglitz’s sky photographs as ‘works that are most radically and nakedly dependent on cutting, on the effect of punching the image. . . out of the continuous fabric of the sky at large’ (1979: 134). Krauss suggests that what is driving Stieglitz’s practice in the ‘Equivalents’ is in fact contingent upon something in the nature of the sky itself, or at least something that Stieglitz’s photographs make apparent: that is, ‘that the sky is essentially not composed’ (1979: 134). The sky, Krauss argues, resists ‘internal arrangement’ and posits ‘the irrelevance of composition’ (1979: 134); Stieglitz’s images ‘stake everything in the single act of cutting something out’ and the ‘impact of that cut, that dislocation and detachment [resonates] through every internal point of the work’ (1979: 135). This ripping or cutting produces ‘an extraordinary sense of disorientation’ because there is no up or down and images so clearly ‘of the world’ are nevertheless bereft of ‘that most primitive component of our own relationship to it, which is our firm orientation to the ground’ (1979: 135). By punching the image out of the sky, what Stieglitz manages to achieve is a dislocation of visual data from the world from which it derives; the photograph is, Krauss concludes, ‘no longer the possible extension of our experience of our own physical occupation of the world that photographs had always seemed, dependably, to be’ (1979: 135). The image is not just ‘cut loose from its moorings’ (1979: 135), it is about the condition of being cut loose: natural signs – clouds as a visible trace of the invisible atmosphere – are transformed into ‘unnatural signs, into the cultural language of the photograph’ (1979: 135). The cut makes the image and in doing so reveals the photograph as ‘an absolute transposition of reality’ (1979: 140).

Pultz and Krauss make clear that with ‘Equivalents’ Stieglitz removes the photograph from the realm of correspondences and places it as an ungrounded signifier. Nevertheless, Krauss’s point that it is the sky that provides the condition for such a dislocation is crucial since it resituates the photograph as dependent upon, and responsive to, the world it records even as the photograph is cut free from it. However much Stieglitz wanted his images to stand as equivalents for his vision, the groundlessness of the photographs leads back to their condition of possibility; that is to say, to the sky. What is important about ‘Equivalents’ is that the images show the doubleness of the photograph: it is both a thing in itself and a piece of the world, calling attention to its form as a photograph while being incapable

of shaking off the fact of the sky. The 'Equivalents' are data disguised as abstraction and in this sense the term 'equivalent' takes on the added valence of referring to the function of camouflage as one thing substituting or passing as something else.

What Stieglitz's 'Equivalents' are really about is the relationship between technology and airspace, the way the camera can capture and regulate through exposure and framing a patch of sky that is given form by the image. This may be what all photographs do, but in choosing to photograph the sky, Stieglitz brings the formlessness of the atmosphere to bear upon photography, undermining the medium's capacity to compose the world into pictures. In doing so, Stieglitz's images manage to hold together in tension the camera's power to punch form out of whatever is in front of it with the sky's resistance to any formal containment. Through this collision of technology and airspace Stieglitz both confirms and denies the camera's power to frame and know the world and posits a disorienting vertigo as the most likely outcome of a meeting between photography and the sky. In this way the 'Equivalents' stand in critical relation to the use of the airborne camera as a means of information gathering, strategic planning and targeting. As photography from the air became an integral part of the apparatus of military and other state agencies in the years following the First World War, Stieglitz's images, refusing the elevated perspective of aerial surveillance, register the disorientation experienced from the ground when faced with a sky increasingly full of invisible eyes. Here, the abstract image that refuses to be converted into intelligence stands as a challenge to the full spectrum dominance of the camera as an instrument of control. On the other hand, this very abstraction – the sky as beyond definition – remains a vital aspect of airpower's hegemony. In the end, the danger of the 'Equivalents' is that they reproduce the obfuscating abstraction of the atmosphere so useful to spy planes and bombers. In the work of sky photographers after Stieglitz, what the camera must interrogate and somehow show is how power converts signs of the times into signs of the sky.

Hidden on High

When Stieglitz showed the 'Equivalents' it was as individual prints or in short sequences but he never pursued the sequence form as extensively as later photographers would go on to do. The significance of Stieglitz's sky photographs and the capacity of the sequence to generate a cumulative affective force, however, come together in the work of a contemporary photographer like Richard Misrach. During the 1980s and 1990s, as part of his ongoing interrogation of the material uses and cultural connotations of the Western American desert landscape, Misrach added four sets of images to the *Desert Cantos* that focused on atmospheric: 'Canto XII Clouds (Non-Equivalents)', 'Canto XVIII Skies', 'Canto XXI Heavenly Bodies (Sic)' and 'Canto XXII Night Clouds'. Borrowing the organizing principle of the canto form from Dante (for the infernal resonances) and Ezra Pound

(the open-ended epic ‘poem including history’), Misrach’s series relies upon a proliferating network of colliding associations of tone and content to produce a layered account of Western history and politics that moves through, in a series of twists and jolts, natural and manmade catastrophe and spectacle that includes but is not limited to images of fires, flood, drought, bomb craters, space launches, urban sprawl and wilderness contamination (for the best survey of the *Desert Cantos*, see Misrach, 1996; see also Beck, 2000; Davis, 1993).

Misrach’s work is part of a broad tendency in contemporary landscape photography that is concerned with the effects of militarization, industrialization, and globalization. Alongside photographers such as Peter Goin, Edward Burtynsky, Lewis Baltz, Terry Evans, David Hansen, Mitch Epstein, and Emmet Gowin, Misrach has, since the 1980s, been at the forefront of a politicized landscape photography that addresses issues of land use, despoliation, and what Burtynsky has called the ‘manufactured landscapes’ of late capitalism. The power of much of this work lies in its utilization of the visual codes and subject matter of the sublime that are at the same time scrambled and troubled by the documentary evidence of willful violence and destruction.

If Stieglitz is at pains to shake off the pictorial and representational constraints of the medium, Misrach’s sky photographs, not least because they are embedded within the broader context of the *Desert Cantos*, squarely address the perils of abstraction thrown up by Stieglitz’s work. Misrach’s images of clouds and skies deliberately and unavoidably trigger deep cultural memories of their romantic and modern precursors, with explicit reference in Canto XII to Stieglitz himself. ‘Clouds (Non-Equivalents)’ announces itself clearly as a corrective to the symbolist tendency of Stieglitz’s vision and as a commentary on the earlier work. Misrach’s pictures refuse equivalence and remain alien, distant, and impossible to read. As Krauss’s analysis of Stieglitz shows, however, the removal of the horizon and the disorienting impact of the photograph punched out of the sky unmoors the ‘Equivalents’ to an degree that challenges the very idea of correspondence to the artist’s ‘vision’. In this way, even as Misrach’s reply to Stieglitz refuses the possibility of ‘expression’, the later photographs preserve the condition of being cut loose from representation that the abstraction of the ‘Equivalents’ achieves. Emanating from the other side of the 20th-century’s engagement with abstract form and dubious of its dehistoricizing legacies, Misrach’s sky and cloud images confront the way Stieglitz’s images turn, as Krauss argues, natural signs into cultural signs but also insists, through situating the atmospheric photographs within the environmental and military-industrial contexts of the *Desert Cantos* as a whole, on the always already cultural and political implications of abstraction as camouflage.

Misrach originally planned to include short texts ‘about ozone depletion and pollution’ with the sky photographs before realizing that ‘in this historical moment you don’t have to tell anyone’ because ‘[w]e all know now’

(Caponigro, 1998). Photographing clouds for their natural beauty is something, he concedes, ‘you can’t do . . . anymore’, not least because ‘[s]ome of the clouds out there are completely man made’ (Caponigro, 1998). Clouds like the ones Misrach describes are not just cultural signs disguised as natural signs, but cultural signs of a toxic nature, often chromatically alluring but potentially lethal. By activating the history of photographic abstraction inaugurated by Stieglitz’s ‘Equivalents’ but cancelling their dehistoricizing impulse, Misrach positions abstraction itself as a function of concealment, whereby culture masquerading as nature (pollution as sublime spectacle) is held in view and placed alongside a documentary record of industrial and military despoliation it is not allowed to transcend. If part of abstraction’s history is about cutting the image free from servitude to the object, Misrach feeds photographic abstraction back through the medium’s data accumulation function to produce visual evidence that records abstraction as an aspect of military-industrial power’s concealment in plain sight.

The ‘straight’ recording of visual data is crucial because any manipulation of the image, either through the lens or through processing, would destabilize the carefully calibrated balance established between document and painterly image; as Misrach explains, ‘you know photography is the tool for realism and yet what I’ve got is extreme abstraction.’ The images ‘bring up notions of field painting and yet they’re real’ (Caponigro, 1998). The insistence on the image’s fidelity to what is out there is what gives authority to the photographs since the vivid colors must stand ‘as seen’ as the effect manufactured by a culture that has recoded the very sky. ‘In this age of the sudden pollution of the atmosphere,’ warns Paul Virilio, ‘it is about time we revised our perception of appearances . . . A secret perspective is, in fact, hidden *on high*’ (1997: 2, emphasis in original). What Misrach shows in his sky and cloud images is hiddenness as something that can be seen, literally through recording the atmospheric particles that comprise toxic airspace, and formally through the deployment of Stieglitz’s strategies of photographic abstraction.

Revising the perception of appearances to account for the hidden is not simply about revealing that which is concealed, not least because ‘openness’ has become a defining performative gesture of democracies proficient in the rhetoric of ‘transparency’. Apprehending hiddenness requires moving away from the depth model of perception that promises to lift what is hidden into the open: instead, surface must be seen as a manifestation of hiddenness itself. Making a distinction between Latin and Greek epistemology, Michel Serres claims that the former tends toward ‘implication’ – ‘of burying, of concealing, of hiding, of placing something in the shadows in order to conserve it’ – as opposed to the Greek preference for explication or ‘bringing things into the light’ (Serres and Latour, 1995: 147). While Western culture tends to privilege explication, Serres wonders whether the protective dimension of keeping things in the shadows ought not to receive more consideration: ‘We should invent a theory of obscure, confused, dark, nonevident knowledge – a theory [able to account for] something that is

hidden and does not reveal itself” (1995: 148). While this reads like an articulation of secret service procedure, what Serres is after, I think, is a dialectical insistence on the capacity of shadow to give form to its object by negation, much as analysis of aerial photographs seeks to decipher the shape of things by reading the dark spots around them. ‘A certain light,’ Serres explains, ‘strong and focused, dazzles the eyes, whereas placing an object in light and shadow allows us to see it.’ In the ‘real atmosphere’ this is how ‘we always see’ since the ‘pure light of the sun would burn our eyes, and we would die of cold in the darkness’ (1995: 148). Hiddenness here is part of the condition of seeing and part of what is seen is the obscure, confused, dark and nonevident.

By punching the image, as Krauss puts it, out of the continuous fabric of the sky, photographs like Stieglitz’s and Misrach’s refuse to ground perception in relation to an earth-bound angle of vision, producing the unmoored sense of what Virilio calls a ‘fall upwards’ (1997: 2). For Virilio this reverse vertigo is the negative effect of the way communications technologies have degraded the depth of field and left humanity ‘deprived of [a] horizon’ (1997: 40) from which to conceive of a beyond: looking to the sky no longer offers the possibility of transcendence from earthly constraints but is more likely to produce ‘helplessness or exasperation’ (1997: 2). This is what Misrach means, I think, when he recognizes the impossibility of photographing the natural beauty of clouds and skies: the atmosphere is now a sign of the limit of what we can know through seeing as well as evidence of what we ‘all know now’ (Caponigro, 1998) about what is up there, what Virilio calls ‘contaminated distance’ (1997: 40). A loss of depth demands an engagement with its absence, a need registered in Virilio’s call for a revised ‘perception of appearances’ and Serres’ proposed theory of the hidden that is not concealed behind or beyond, but is a condition of, the apparent. In a similar vein, Peter Sloterdijk has argued that a new critical vocabulary of ‘lightness and relations’ (Sloterdijk and Funke, 2005) must replace a no longer viable language of weight and solid substances in order to address the increasingly dematerialized conditions of contemporary power relations. The conventional metaphor of seeking to “‘expose” the lightness of appearance in the name of the heaviness of the real’ is no longer adequate because, Sloterdijk suggests, ‘the heavy has turned into appearance and the “essential” now dwells in lightness, in the air, in the atmosphere’ (Sloterdijk and Funke, 2005). Taken together, these arguments for an engagement with a weightless, depthless, horizonless, nonevident condition provide an index of atmospheric politics that, rather than merely delivering a lament at the loss of the real, of the deep, heavy, substantive and knowable world, instead begins to articulate airspace as the proper medium for an interrogation of the contemporary. In photographing skies and clouds that can no longer be pictured in the way they once were, while simultaneously calling up the history of previous atmospheric images and their connotations by negation – *non*-equivalents – Misrach manages to give form to the complex and troubling miasma of forces at work in the air.

One of the reasons Misrach's ostensibly straightforward images of skies and clouds are so complicated is because they call attention both to something and nothing. The difficulty of apprehending air – of it seemingly being there and not there – makes air, as Steven Connor has written, 'unique among the elements in having this affinity with nothingness' (2010: 31); air 'encompasses its own negation, indeed perhaps even negativity itself. Take away the air, and the empty space you have left still seems to retain most of the qualities of air' (2010: 30–1). Because air is conventionally associated with the 'space of thought' (2010: 31) – skywatching and stargazing as Bachelard's space of reverie; the unmoored space of expressive possibility in Stieglitz's 'Equivalents' – it is, Connor argues, the 'favoured element or state of matter through which to body forth the thought of thought' (2010: 31). However, as science increasingly materialized air, it became not just the medium but also the object of thought, 'an image of the mediate matter of thought', the element of 'our inextricability from the outside world' (2010: 31). In short, 'air has become mediation itself' (2010: 31). The air carries and embodies what Connor sees as 'our own image', not only because 'we communicate through our (largely airborne) media' but also because we are 'the throughput of those mediations' (2010: 31). This sense of the sky in all its inscrutable unfathomability (unreadable, immeasurable), as the most visible sign of what is invisibly going on, is precisely what I think Misrach's, and as I will go on to argue, Trevor Paglen's, sky photographs are committed to showing. The sky, as Tyrone Slothrop knows, is the medium and the object of hiddenness and also the element through which thinking about, even looking at, hiddenness as a function of transparency must be undertaken.

Atmospheric Language

While Slothrop reads evidence of power's presence in the clouds others see merely clouds; he also hears 'quote marks in the speech of others', what Pynchon calls 'a bookish kind of reflex' (1975: 241) that might be a hypersensitivity to hidden meanings that are not there or, less pathologically, a capacity for interpretive rigor that grasps the latent signals carried in seemingly innocent forms and phrases. For Slothrop, everything is a sign, nothing is self-evident, and even the most abstract forms are bound to a system of signification even if the syntax is camouflaged as nature. In 'The Author as Producer', Walter Benjamin takes to task the documentary photographers of the New Objectivity, charging them with having 'succeeded in making misery itself an object of pleasure, by treating it stylishly and with technical perfection' (1970: 5). This is an accusation often leveled at landscape photographers, including Misrach, where the image is technically professional, visually seductive and pristinely presented while the subject matter may be bombed-out terrain, toxic landfill or irradiated atmosphere. Benjamin's point that contemporary society's 'self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic

pleasure of the first order' (1999: 235) might seem worryingly confirmed in Misrach's sleek, high resolution, abstract sky and cloud photographs, where the immediacy of retinal impact appears to have achieved for the image a complete emancipation from history. However, this assessment ignores the extent to which the contradiction Benjamin identifies is deliberately written into Misrach's practice; he insists that 'beauty can be a very powerful conveyor of difficult ideas' (quoted in Lippard, 1997: 180), and the most substantial print survey of the *Desert Cantos* is pointedly titled *Crimes and Splendors* (Misrach, 1996). In her contribution to that book, Rebecca Solnit makes clear that it is precisely the 'lavishly, engagingly visual' quality of the work that functions as the main driver for an interrogation of the self-evident: visual beauty veils the 'principal subject' of the photographs, which 'more often than not [is] what remains unseen' (1996: 53). Yet if visual splendor is the primary camouflaging agent, the danger is that the invisible remains not only unseen but beyond awareness and the image merely, as Benjamin warns, 'pass[es] on an apparatus of production without transforming it' (1970: 5). The solution, for Benjamin, lies in the caption which should work to 'tear [the photograph] away from fashionable clichés and give it a revolutionary use value' (1970: 5).

Stieglitz did not title his abstract sky photographs since the point was to uncouple the image from fixed associations, but Misrach's photographs, especially the three cantos – 'Skies', 'Heavenly Bodies (Sic)' and 'Night Clouds' – collected in *The Sky Book* (2000), are directly engaged with the relationship between word and image. In 'Skies', each image is labeled with location, date and time. In 'Heavenly Bodies (Sic)', the title of the canto self-reflexively points toward its own cultural specificity and the locations for the photographs are chosen from names on the map, the classical names of stars and planets placed in dialogue with Native American sites to draw out the culture clash and imperial overlay of irreconcilable sign systems: the point, Misrach explains, is to 'photograph, say, Ursa Major, next to Polaris over Gu Oidak on the Tohono O'Odham reservation, in Arizona' (Misrach, 1997: 70). In 'Night Clouds', the meteorological term for each cloud is given, followed by location, date and time. In all three cantos, when long exposures have been used, the precise time of the opening and closing of the shutter is given. At the back of *The Sky Book*, Misrach provides etymologies of place-names, sky names and cloud classifications. Solnit notes that the titles tether the images 'to earthly problems of meaning and political history' (2000: 21). While visually Misrach follows Stieglitz by punching the image from the fabric of the sky, the sensation of falling upward produced by the horizonless, depthless field is regrounded by making visible the classificatory systems – names, locations, types, dates, duration – that regulate and historicize even the blankest sky. The conventions of documentary practice in these cantos fly in the face of the obfuscating camouflage of the abstract image, even though the limits of what this factual information can offer are underlined by the retinal stimulation of the image itself.

Remonstration

Made in response to the names of things, Misrach's sky photographs position the abstract atmosphere within a network of often conflicting signifying systems. In being guided to places by their names, the photographer links the images to their process of production, indicating that 'out there' is already governed by existing matrices of knowledge and interpretation. The resulting images feed back through the systems of classification as complex mediations that outstrip yet are grounded by the partial knowledge that produces them. Malcolm Bull argues that '[i]f something hidden must be both potentially knowable and at least partially experienced by someone', hiddenness is 'not a quality independent of knowledge, but rather a function of it' (1999: 18). Misrach's sky images and the research that generates them confirms this sense of the interplay between the 'potentially knowable' and the 'partially experienced' as a working through of hiddenness that becomes manifest in the photograph. What knowledge there is that can be shown is achieved not through bringing to light that which was hidden but by, as it were, bringing to darkness that which is only potentially and partially accessible. In terms reminiscent of Serres' argument about the co-dependency of light and shadow, Solnit reminds us that it is 'in the dark that faint light shines'; that photography as a medium 'depends on perfect darkness within the camera to capture the image.' No light let into the camera produces merely unexposed paper, while 'an image of boundless light would be purely black' (2007: 171). Instead of the dream of transparency offered by 'open' government which, promising illumination, like a dilated aperture results in an impenetrable blackness, the camera takes light into the darkness; it is through darkness itself that what might be known of that 'faint light shines'. As such, Misrach's night sky images in particular speak not only to the way in which space is exposed to sight by the absence of sunlight but also to photography as a medium that shows how darkness can be put to work.

In recent years the ways in which political openness can serve to generate obfuscating blackness have been all too apparent. Hiddenness as a function of knowledge has driven, to cite merely three examples from what has become the dominant epistemological chiaroscuro, the interpretive over-determination of aerial photographs 'showing' weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; Osama bin Laden (eventually found 'hiding in plain sight', as the media observed) working a spectral influence over domestic and international affairs; and so-called 'black operations' becoming, to borrow Donald Rumsfeld's overused but irresistible phrase, widely 'known unknowns'. As awareness of hiddenness has risen, so too has the determination, already evident in Misrach's sky and cloud photographs, to show where hiddenness is and how it is put to use. Bull's emphasis on hiddenness as, by definition, 'potentially knowable' and 'at least partially experienced by someone' is powerfully reiterated in the work of geographer and photographer Trevor Paglen, who explains his investigations into the US military's 'black' sites

and operations in similar terms. Since all ‘human undertakings . . . are spatial’, argues Paglen, ‘even though classified programs are organized in such a way as to maximize their invisibility, they have to happen somewhere’ (2010: 145). Hiddenness, then, presupposes a space of the hidden, and as a function of knowledge, as Bull writes, a thing’s degree of hiddenness is ‘the difference between how it might be known and how it is known’ (1999: 19). Paglen’s work is precisely concerned with measuring degrees of hiddenness and extending the limits of how it might be known; it shows that hiddenness is there, that it occupies space. At the same time, Paglen is at pains to emphasize the process of information gathering, the networks of sources, and the adaptation of technologies that lead, eventually, to photographs of hidden spaces.

In producing the photographs for *The Other Night Sky* (2008), Paglen collaborated with a team of software developers to design a program able to track classified spacecraft using data sets compiled by amateur satellite observers. With the stars as reference points, a computer-controlled mount calibrated to offset the Earth’s rotation enabled Paglen to track and photograph the movement of the satellites. Since the earth’s movement is compensated by the mechanism of the mount, the resulting images hold the stars in place while the path of the satellite scratches across the surface of the sky like a sharp tear in the fabric. While visually these images are not dissimilar to some of Misrach’s night skies, especially the photographs in ‘Heavenly Bodies (Sic)’ like ‘Moon Over Black Rock Desert 8.29.96 9.22–10.24 pm’, where Misrach’s long exposure turns the moon into an almost neon-like strip of hard-edged white with a glowing tail, Paglen’s titles tell another story. A cobalt haze bleeds down into an almost impenetrable blackness punctuated by pinpricks: ‘P35-13 Near Alpha Persei (Military Meteorological Spacecraft; OPS 8389), 2007’. A cauldron of lava-orange clouds dissipates into a black ceiling; a fine, dead straight line cuts through the center of the picture: ‘Keyhold/Improved Crystal near Scorpio (Optical Reconnaissance Satellite; USA 129), 2007’. In addition to these deadpan labels, Paglen also often includes detailed explanations of satellite types and their significance.

As in Misrach’s captioning, Paglen’s text deliberately arrests the cosmic drift of the images, anchoring the sky and its objects to a real world of locatable, measurable space. Secrecy here is explicitly stripped of any sense of mystery: as Paglen explains, ‘though they aren’t supposed to be officially “there,” these spacecraft have to obey the same basic laws of physics that everything else in the known universe has to obey’ (Paglen 2009). Since, as orbiting objects, Kepler’s laws of planetary motion cannot be transcended, with two reliable observations Paglen can model the object’s orbit and predict where it will be. Part of the point of Paglen’s resolutely straightforward explanations of procedure is, I think, to distance the images from the expressivist legacy that continues to haunt the abstract image. In this, Paglen is wisely following Misrach and using photography’s recording function as a counterweight to the all-too-obviously sublime baggage of night

sky images. There is a sense, though, that Paglen sees the process of information gathering and technical problem-solving not as subordinate to the final image but as an integral part of the work as such. It is suggestive that Paglen more often than not describes himself as a geographer and not as an artist, helping to position the work as a research project rather than an artwork. In this way, he is able to lay out the images as evidence arrived at in an appropriately empirical fashion.

What complicates this no-nonsense approach is the fact that the images do not provide much in the way of evidence. The streaks in the sky show that it is possible to locate and photograph a 'secret' satellite. However ingenious the method used to catch it, though, what are we supposed to do with this information other than look at it? The detective work is compelling and the images, like Misrach's, are almost aggressively seductive as compositions, but they give little away, even with the detailed captions. As Pamela Lee writes, what 'might seem like an unalloyed gesture of visual disclosure' in the images is, in fact, only 'the most graspable' part of a 'conflicted visual economy [that] troubles the self-evidence and immediacy of appearances, taking on the ideology of communicational transparency through steady recourse to the genealogies and aesthetics of photographic media' (Lee, 2011). One of these genealogies leads back through Misrach to Stieglitz and the complex relationship between sky and photograph, object and abstraction. The unmooring of the image from the object world achieved in Stieglitz's 'Equivalents' is resisted by Paglen using every tool at his disposal (titles, research credentials, politics) but the photographs in 'The Other Night Sky' and the luminous clouds in the recent series 'Untitled (Predators)' (2010) are, at the same time, as ethereal and as adrift as Stieglitz's upside down 1920s clouds. Secret spacecraft and robot spyplanes and bombers may be captured in these images but, like the scraps off the studio floor that found their way onto the surface of Jackson Pollock's 'all over' paintings, they are subordinate to the overall effect.

The presence of bits of the real in Pollock's abstractions is crucial, though, because it collapses the distance, and the distinction, between pure form and the world of objects and agents. In Misrach's toxic atmospheres it is light itself that is the carrier of visibly invisible information. In Paglen's photographs it is the hard-to-read streaks and smudges that could just as easily be, as Helen Chang (2011) observes in a recent review of the Predator images, black flies in honey. It is not, in the end, the photograph that provides plausible information – the Predators are no more verifiable than Saddam's chemical weapons' facilities – but the positioning of the images within the context of photographic abstraction (and abstract skies in particular) that insists that these smudges have to be real drones if the project is to make any sense at all.

Nancy argues that '[v]iolence and truth have in common a self-showing act' and that 'the core of this act and its realization take place in the image' (2005: 21). The image, for Nancy, is only an imitation of a thing in the sense that it 'emulates' and 'rivals' the thing in a 'competition

for presence' (2005: 21). Through this competition the image 'disputes the presence of the thing', taking the thing out of its 'simple presence' to show 'that the thing is and how it is' (2005: 21, emphasis in original). In this way the image is, as Nancy says, 'a monstrance (or pattern)' (2005: 21) and is 'of the order of the monster; the *monstrum* is a prodigious sign, which warns (*moneo*, *monstrum*) of a divine threat' (2005: 22). Understood in this context, Misrach's and Paglen's sky photographs are engaged in a dispute that seeks to show what the secret forces in the sky are and how they operate, to show how the signs of the sky are signs of the times. Sublime chromatic fields, streaks among the stars, flies in honey: these are the signs of toxicity, surveillance and weapons systems that the image tears out of the sky, not as representation but, as Nancy explains, as 'the manifestation of presence, not as appearance, but as exhibiting, as bringing to light and setting forth' (2005: 22). When Slothrop sees monsters in the clouds he is reading against the grain of appearances, as if appearance itself were a sign or monstrance of something else. To show 'The Other Night Sky' is likewise to see within appearances another order of objects camouflaged by the naturalizing order of the same. The titles and captions always matter; 'Untitled (Predators)' is both untitled and titled, the refusal of naming compromised by the parenthesis that does, in fact, emphatically name and situate the image. Photographs of skies are always, for Stieglitz, Misrach and Paglen, in different ways, signs taken for wonders; they are also, in Misrach and Paglen, signs taken of wonders, of the condition of wonderment, of the sky as camouflaging screen or curtain out of which small pieces have been torn and labeled. The label gives a name to the jaws and teeth of some creature.

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