

Do You See What I See?

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*Welcome. Make yourself comfortable and relax. Let your gaze sweep over the general view without focusing on anything in particular.**

Someone once said that every situation which evokes a thought or a response is an example of communication. That goes for the simplest process of stimulus and response. In which case there are very few times we do not communicate. Most of what we see in our surroundings says something to us (we do of course use words such as “say” and “appeal”): a landscape, how the light slants through a window, how a room is furnished, a person’s hands, the look in someone’s eyes, objects, colours, sound, a pile of cones. If it says nothing to me, that does not mean the surroundings do not say anything; it’s just that I don’t like what my senses are experiencing.

But what happens to be there by chance? There is surely a difference, one might believe, when the intention is to communicate with the help of all these non-verbal expressions. When someone out there has intended to target just me.

We live in a constant state of communicative readiness: signals from our environment, other people, our own bodies – conscious, unconscious and unforeseen – in a never-ending stream. Seen from this perspective we have always lived in a society of information, a society full of expression.

Plants direct their leaves to the light at an angle to catch the sun’s rays. Their whole antenna system is activated. The light particles pass through the organism and are incorporated in that organism’s own chemical makeup – only 400,000 generations are needed to convert light-sensitive tissue into an eye.

Photosynthesis and photography. Man produces images the way plants produce sugar. Memorised pictures for pouring out stored energy.

The French painter Claude Lorrain enjoyed enormous popularity in England during the 18th century. He painted grand landscapes in soft tones, often with castles and ruins forming part of the composition. His depictions of landscape contained something of the magnificent and heroic. Claude’s style of painting became so popular that travellers and amateur painters even took to using a Claude glass in order to see and perhaps reproduce landscape the way the great master had done. A Claude glass, or rather a Claude mirror, was a small box containing a convex coloured glass within its lid, usually blue or sepia toned. To see the desired view, you had to turn your back on it and hold up the little box. The convex glass acted as a wide-angle lens, and a section of the landscape – framed and clear – was reflected in the lid.

These days we often choose the camera when seeking out a pleasing scene, a picturesque view or a representative viewpoint. An attempt to store experiences in moving or static form. The fascination lies in it being an extension of reality; the pictures link us to a form of reality. Some pictures exert a stronger hold than others: they have us travel the world in search of those experiences they claim to represent; they make us undergo plastic surgery to live up to the ideals they claim to advocate. The picture allows us to view it in its own right, but it also demands that we experience it for ourselves. “I want to go there too!” “I want that as well!”

We have had enough of second-hand experiences and we long for the direct, the instantaneous, the real. The landscape painter has been replaced by travel magazines and other mass media as a creator of images for the experience-hungry traveller. The travel destination must be attractive and reasonably accessible as well as unexplored, identical in fact to the perfect woman portrayed by the same mass media.

We have two eyes in order to see things from two viewpoints at the same time. From within and from without. This double view helps us to determine distance and proximity, to determine the distance we wish to keep.

I collect stories, anecdotes which have either been related to me or which I have read somewhere. Our need for stories is greater than our need for facts. It may seem a trivial assertion, but I do not believe that we are such seekers of truth as we make ourselves out to be. We are seekers of context. We try on occasion to grasp

the whole picture, to gain an overall view, in order to put space between the various contexts we find ourselves caught in.

Certain stories, or situations we might witness, speak to us in a special way. They are able to encapsulate in a nutshell exactly what we ourselves are after, just when we cannot put our finger on what that is. All we have is an experience, and the knowledge that this is far too multifaceted to be grasped in an instant. When words won't adequately express the world, we try pointing that out: "Look, that's what I mean, actually!" Other stories have the capacity to manipulate. Instead of feeling addressed, we feel we're being deceived, being induced to react and think in a particular way, and we shake that off. Hollywood drivel, Trier's emotional pornography, late night news bulletins. It can be hard to find oneself when enveloped in all these impressions and external pressures. Somewhat deformed, we need to screen ourselves off.

What do we take in and on whose terms? Where do we get our images from and which eyes have registered them? Where do we draw the line between the fictitious and the real? Which internal and external factors should we take into account?

An underlying theme in my collection of stories and circumstances is my interest in how we attempt to communicate with our surroundings and also in the borderland between the areas of inner and outer representation. Those times when marked boundaries disintegrate or when reality suddenly becomes fiction. Those times when the relationship of dependency between oneself and the world is made briefly visible or is short-circuited.

We find ourselves, in my opinion, neither "inside" ourselves nor "outside" in the world but in that borderland. This borderland comprises one huge leakage.

Translated from Swedish by Janet French

* The sections in italics are extracts from three different stories narrated as part of the exhibition "Receiver-modules", Gallery 60, Umeå, Sweden, 2003.