

EXPOSURE: 48 VARIATIONS OF DARKNESS

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349

EXPOSURE

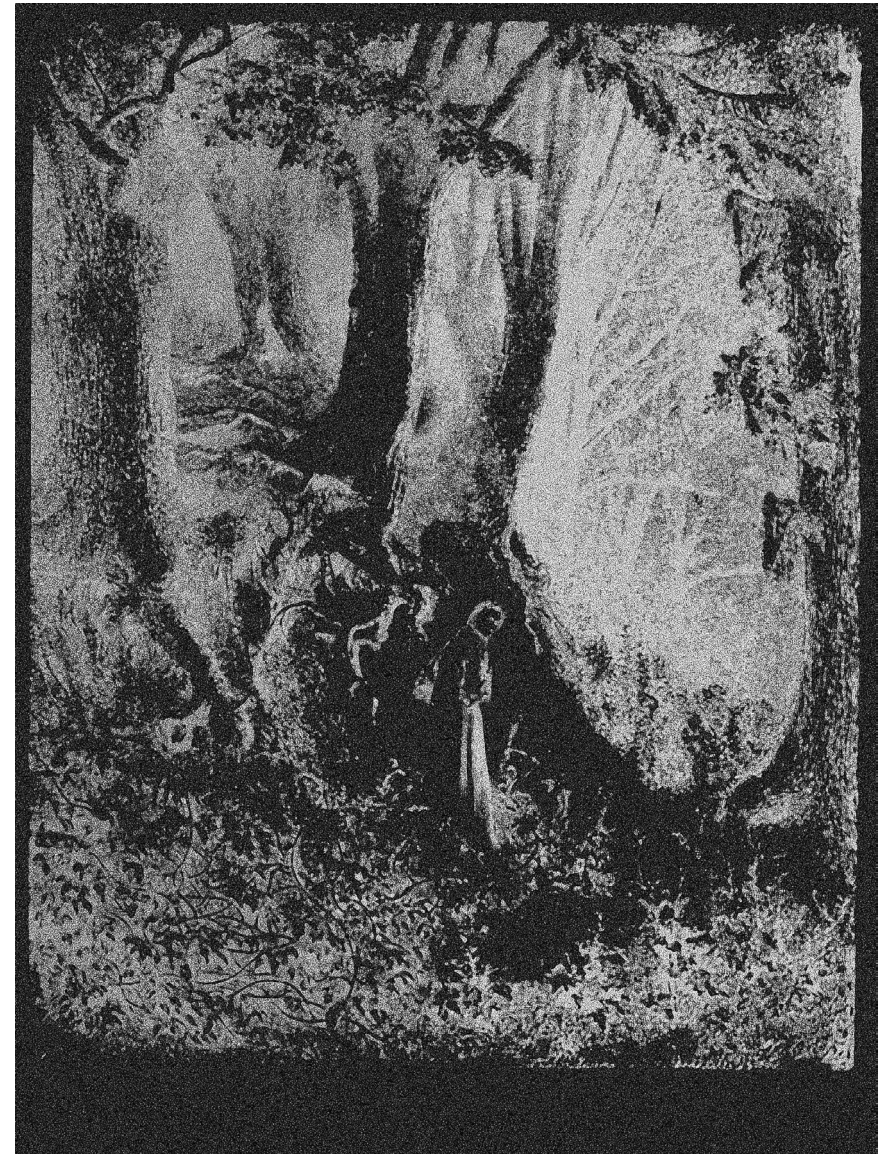
In VIA 48 Dante Variations, artist and author Caroline Bergvall collected forty-seven different English translations of Dante's first canto of the Inferno, documenting the attempt of describing the selva oscura condition✠:

1. Dark wood
2. Dark wood
3. Night-dark wood
4. Obscured in a great forest
5. Sunless wood
6. A wood
7. Dark wood
8. Gloomy wood
9. A forest in the darkness
10. Darksome wood
11. Darkling wood
12. Wood obscure
13. Dark forest
14. Dark wood
15. Dark wood
16. Dark wood
17. Dark wood
18. Darksome wood
19. Dusky wood
20. Gloomy wood
21. Dark wood
22. Shadowy wood
23. Dark woods
24. Dark wood
25. Dark wood
26. Dark wood
27. Dark forest
28. Dark woods
29. Darksome wood
30. Darkling wood
31. Dark wood
32. Gloom-dark wood
33. Wood so drear
34. Forest dark and deep
35. Forest dark
36. Forest dark
37. A wood so dark
38. Dark wood
39. Darksome wood
40. Dark wood

41. Darkened forests
42. Darkling wood
43. Gloomy wood
44. Dark wood
45. Darksome wood
46. Gloomy wood
47. Shadowed forest

The 48th variation composed by Ciaran Maheis is a fractal structure from the recording of the author's voice reading the 47 translations⁸. It is though useful, for the purpose of this investigation, to distinguish between two generative ways of intending darkness. The first one – the rhetorical and symbolic – of darkness as an absolute ontological notion: inscrutable black holes, the religious blindness, solemn Burke's *great privation*. Eventually, a very simple principle: darkness as absence of light. On the other end, though, translating *selva oscura* became ambiguous. The *oscura* forest is not a blind space (and does the forest still exist if you can't see it?), but an inventory of gloomy shadows and Guelphic fears. Bergvall's work alludes, through repetitions and variations, to vagueness and obscurity. Borrowing Mark Fisher's title of a chapter of his work *The Weird and the Eerie*, the dark wood is the ideal set for Something *Where There Should Be Nothing: Nothing Where There Should Be Something*. Expanding the *Unheimlich* notion, Fisher identifies in the weird and the eerie a common concern with the strange; while the weird describes the presence of something who doesn't belong, the eerie is a failure of presence. The *Unheimlich* is the strange within the familiar, the observation of something that doesn't fit the domestic environment; the weird and the eerie are related to external presences that don't belong to the known. Dante's dismay in the forest at night doesn't belong to the *Unheimlich*; it is the incipit of a wander that doesn't relate to the domestic and the familiar. If the house is the definitive set – by definition – for the unhomely, the dark forest presents potential manifestations of the weird and the eerie: fairy tales creatures, gigantic moving shadows, witches' secret meeting, animals speaking in tongues. The darkness of the forest at night is therefore a stage for opaque presences, not the absolute absence of light. Following Bergvall's exercise, we can try to translate the *selva oscura* notion into the spatial discourse, working with analogies for critically approaching the state of urgency of contemporary cities. Reading the article by Maya Nanitchkova Ozturk, "On Exposure, Dark Space, and Structures of Fear in the Context of Performance", I firstly thought that in the title the author referred to *camera-exposure*, as in the capability of con-

Gustave Doré's illustration of Dante's *Inferno*.
Graphic manipulation by the author.



trolling light in photography through time. Actually, being an article about the theatre, it meant exposure as in the act of making actors visible on stage. However, *exposure* – as I firstly understood it – could be a fitting container-word for few variations of darkness, without the symbolical rhetoric of the pure absence of light. Targeting darkness not as an unconditioned circumstance, but as a spectrum of opaque visibility: exposure as a variation of darkness rendering space. In the context of the theatre site, exposure is the autonomous property that, coupled with dark space, creates the conditions of experiential spatial organisation: “an unsettling quality that is strategically embedded in contemporary architecture through practices relying on subtle deception of visual perception, on generating illusionary spaces by blurring boundaries, mirroring, or artful manipulation of light”¹¹. As the *Unheimlich*, also the weird and the eerie manifestations in space display a condition of distress. The catalogue of space-phobias contributes in the description of contemporary architecture idiosyncrasies. Investigating psychopathologies of urban space, Anthony Vidler presents modern conditions of fear, anxiety and alienations linked to space¹². However, nyctophobia (i.e. fear of the dark) is not listed among the psychopathologies related to space. Fear of the dark is not a state of anxiety related to the perception of space, but the uncomfortable state of *non-perception* of space: it is the archaic anxiety of being lost in the woods at night, the spatial dismay of Dante, Little Red Riding Hood, Parsifal. An embedded state of nightmares, the condition of not being able to control and perceive space and, according to Freud, the children’s expression for articulating the feeling of loss of a person they love: children are afraid in the dark because they cannot see the person they love. The dark forest is the sampled fear of a binary classification of the environment that no longer exists in the urban environment: the safe, lit, domestic built space vs the gloomy shadows of a dark forest. Among the wide range of psychopathologies of space, is fear of the dark a state of urban anxiety? The anecdote of “Pascal’s abyss” tracks a discourse around the construction of fear into a critical architectural theme; allegedly, after an accident in 1654, Blaise Pascal kept seeing a horrific void on his side. From this obsession, reflection on the void developed into a theoretical address: late eighteenth-century architects like Etienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux embraced “Pascal’s resistance to the open transparency of rationalism [...] as a way of symbolically and affectively exploiting the ambiguities of shadow and limit, remaining a sign of potential disturbance beyond and within the apparently serene and stable structures of modern urbanism”¹³. Contemporary urban and architectural

practices’ desire is to prevent darkness: over-exposed forests illuminated by stage-lights. After the Modernist fetish for transparency, darkness is no longer a contemplated condition of design: transparency of contemporary buildings and cities enclosed a series of moral and symbolic values, in addition to functional contingencies of security and control. The range of visibility – so the level of darkness – of the built environment is not only related to eye-vision, but also to digital scrutiny: the virtual infrastructural gaze permeates physical space, rendering the darkness visible. The meaning of transparency and/or visibility, from corporate skyscrapers to digital surveillance, is a formal and political trope in contemporary architectural criticism. Also domestic space teases with the notion of transparency: immersed in an abstract nature, Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House is an hygienic and calvinist transparent body. Edith Farnsworth though, gave up on her modernist dream of retirement and moved to a thick and opaque walls villa in the countryside of Florence, probably not far away from Dante’s forest.

Framing the discourse on transparency, in the structure of this text, we can classify it as *over-exposure*; panopticon control rooms, Silicon Valley HQ, Olympic swimming pools, mass weddings in stadiums¹⁴: optimal level of visibility for comfort and control. Considering over-exposure as the ideal condition of a safe, healthy, adequate and decorous architecture, some *junk-space* cut-out from urban planning has, anyway, a character of variable exposition. The aim of this research is to investigate the imaginary of *under-exposed* space: a set of codified sites of contemporary cities – flooded underpasses, black-out lifts, dark-glass limousine, automatic gas-stations, office dwellings on a Sunday – reproducing the anxiety condition of the dark forest dismay. Parking lots are a sample of built urban environments that is overlooked by the hyper-control of over-exposure. Similarly to many infrastructural shreds of contemporary cities, they don’t accommodate any design requirements apart from function. Any attempt to add any formal or aesthetic features – trees, flooring, lighting – doesn’t belong to the discourse of a critical interpretation of architecture. Let alone, parking lots cannot, by typological definition, assume any value of *transparency*. At night, the use of parking lots is a recurring set of perceptions: *something where there should be nothing* (moving shadows, unknown sounds, feeling of being observed), *nothing where there should be something* (no phone signal, no recollection of where the car is). Parking lots at night belong to the framework of the weird and the eerie: the user is moving in a condition of discomfort for reaching the state of safety of the domestic environment (i.e. being inside the car);



the state of temporary and delimited anxiety can be bound to the fear of the dark in a forest at night. Both woods and parking lots are a setting for liminality. Liminality is the threshold passage-way between two separate places, the ritual transition crossing individual or collective states as death, war, status*.

Dante's crossing into the forest is the perfect example for studies on liminality: a threshold toward the discovery of a ritual journey. Similarly, the informal interest for liminal urban space developed into *backrooms*, abstract mazes of randomly generated standard environments like offices, car garages, corridors, emergency exits. Interrogated about the issue of an uncomfortable liminal space such as the parking lot at night, standardised architectural practice would suggest a design solution to adjust the exposure of the dark environment. Physical exposure: day-lighting devices; digital exposure; surveillance camera system. Visibility is the intrinsic aim to avoid fear of the unknown darkness. Conversely, the Cultural Center in Saint Herblain, designed by Jean Nouvel in the late '80s, makes a statement about parking lot exposure; presenting the project, the architect publishes pictures of the parking lot at night. "The context: On one side, a parking lot, slightly sloped towards the lake. [...] There is no rupture between the parking lot and the lake; but a superimposition. The parking lot is itself a landscaped element, bearing the signs of urbanity and of artificiality"¶. The autonomy of the parking lot is designed in the distress condition of darkness, rendered into a precise aesthetic language. In the conversation between Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, transparency is a keyword^.

If the architect is tempted by the possibility of revealing and controlling architecture, the philosopher expresses how transparency is a tool of power, the elimination of secrets to reveal the visible. Jean Nouvel's parking lot is a testing ground for adjusting the exposure of space through design. As a high-functional anxiety process, the fear of the dark in urban environments is manipulated and digested into a deliberate use of the constituting elements: gloomy lights, soft digital devices, twitchy shadows, blank background. Introducing conditions of contemporary anxiety in the architectural discourse, opens up wide new possibilities of representation. Detailing the role of exposure on stage, "Dark space succeeds in imparting a vibrant limitless void that is experienced as matter, touching, enveloping, even permeating the body, and thus invokes an imminence: the possibility of danger"*¶. As stated in Vidler's research, the contingency of architectural design could manifest a state of discomfort; the emancipation of darkness through transparency eventually led to the distressing nudity of contemporary cities. Jean Nouvel designed the conditions for turning a

Jean Nouvel, Onyx Cultural Center, Saint-Herblain, France, 1987-1988.
Courtesy of Atelier Jean Nouvel.



neutral space setting into an interpretative architecture, through the manipulation of the characters of an upsetting shred of urban environment. The superposition between the inventory of dark forests' tales and the under-exposed fragments of cities performs the same vocabulary of liminal rituals, unintelligible bodies, defective compasses. Through variations and repetitions – as different translations of the same brief – architecture is able to render the coping mechanisms of space distress.



<https://carolinebergvall.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/VIA.pdf>, accessed 5 September 2022.



<https://soundcloud.com/carolinebergvall/via-48-dante-translations-mix>, accessed 5 September 2022.



M.N. Öztürk, *An uncanny site/side: On exposure, dark space, and structures of fear in the context of performance*, in "Contemporary Theatre Review," vol. 20, 3, 2010, pp. 296-315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2010.488840>.



A. Vidler, *Warped space: Art, architecture, and anxiety in modern culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2002.



Ibid.



D. DeLillo, *Mao Li*, Leonardo, Milano 1992.



A. van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage*, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1969, or. ed. E. Nourry, Paris 1909.



<http://www.jeannouvel.com/en/projects/onyx>, accessed 5 September 2022.



J. Baudrillard, J. Nouvel, *The singular objects of architecture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2002.



M.N. Öztürk, *op. cit.*