

## Reflections

## Bernard Plossu: The Science of the Imprecise

Our gaze is perturbed by clarity and it is Descartes and enlightenment which are responsible for this. Clear and distinct vision and thought, and the attempt to perceive precise contours behind the veil of appearance is a violation of the surrounding world. This prejudice of ours in favour of clearness and against fuzziness, in favour of precision and against inaccuracy has marked the whole of modern science. Science discusses exclusively that which may be defined clearly and distinctly and it covered the rest with silence. Plossu's photo on which this reflection is based is an attempt to counter such a vision.

Recently an important paper by Abraham Moles which bears the title "The Science of Imprecise" has been published. And the photo which is the subject of this essay owes its origin to the same spirit. Moles suggests that the scientific prejudice in favour of clarity and the distinction (*clara et distincta perceptio*) has led to that image of the world where everything in the foreground is clear and everything in the background unclear. For instance: The free fall of stones is clear but the background of that fall namely the geological formation where the stone came from is unclear. The consequence of this modern vision is that we concentrate upon the clear foreground and despite the obscure background and ~~xxxxxxxx~~ Moles suggests that we should try and invert our gaze in order to do justice to the world. That we should try to admit that backgrounds may be clear because they are distant and concern us little but that everything that concerns us must of necessity be unclear for the simple reason that it concerns us. Thus every science about that which concerns us must of necessity be a science of the imprecise. And the task of every honest intellectual is to handle the imprecise as precisely as possible.

Not so long ago we have acquired a mathematical insight in such a reversal of the gaze, from background to foreground, from clearness to unclearness. Namely theory of chaos and Mandelbrot sets. In fractal images for instance we may conceive and visualize how it is possible to manipulate imprecision precisely. As if all of a sudden we could perceive that so far science has discussed only such things that concern us little, like orbiting planets and falling stones because such things may be formulated clearly and distinctly. But that science speaks little about

cloud formation, about the weather, about the waves that advance against the beach, about the shapes of those beaches, about snow storms, about the feathery structure of leaves, about the down of newly born chickens because it was incapable of articulating this. We are on a treshold. We begin to understand that everything that is simple is a special case and we begin to learn that everything that concerns us must be admitted to be unclear. And that that admission must be formulated as clearly as possible

How we may do this is shown in the picture that is the subject of the present reflection. Plossu is a photographer which means that he ~~does~~ uses an apparatus called "camera obscura" and that he develops his pictures in a dark chamber. This is why, being a photographer, he can not partake in the prejudice of Cartesian and enlightened people in favour of clarity and distinction. But his attachment <sup>to</sup> of darkness and obscurity, his rootness <sup>ed</sup> in chemistry does not condemn him to be imprecise. On the contrary: It is because <sup>x</sup> he may posture himself so that everything that is in the foreground, everything that concerns him may be admitted to be unclear. It is for this reason that he is capable of focalising relatively clearly everything that lies on the horizon of the background. And this is the lesson we may gain from this reversion of vision: Everything near is unclear and misterious because we approach it. And that is why everything that is distant and does not concern us may be kept in clearness. This is not only an epistemological but chiefly an aesthetic disposition. Plossu's picture that is inbeded in this article may be used as an exercise in this new way to look at the world.

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