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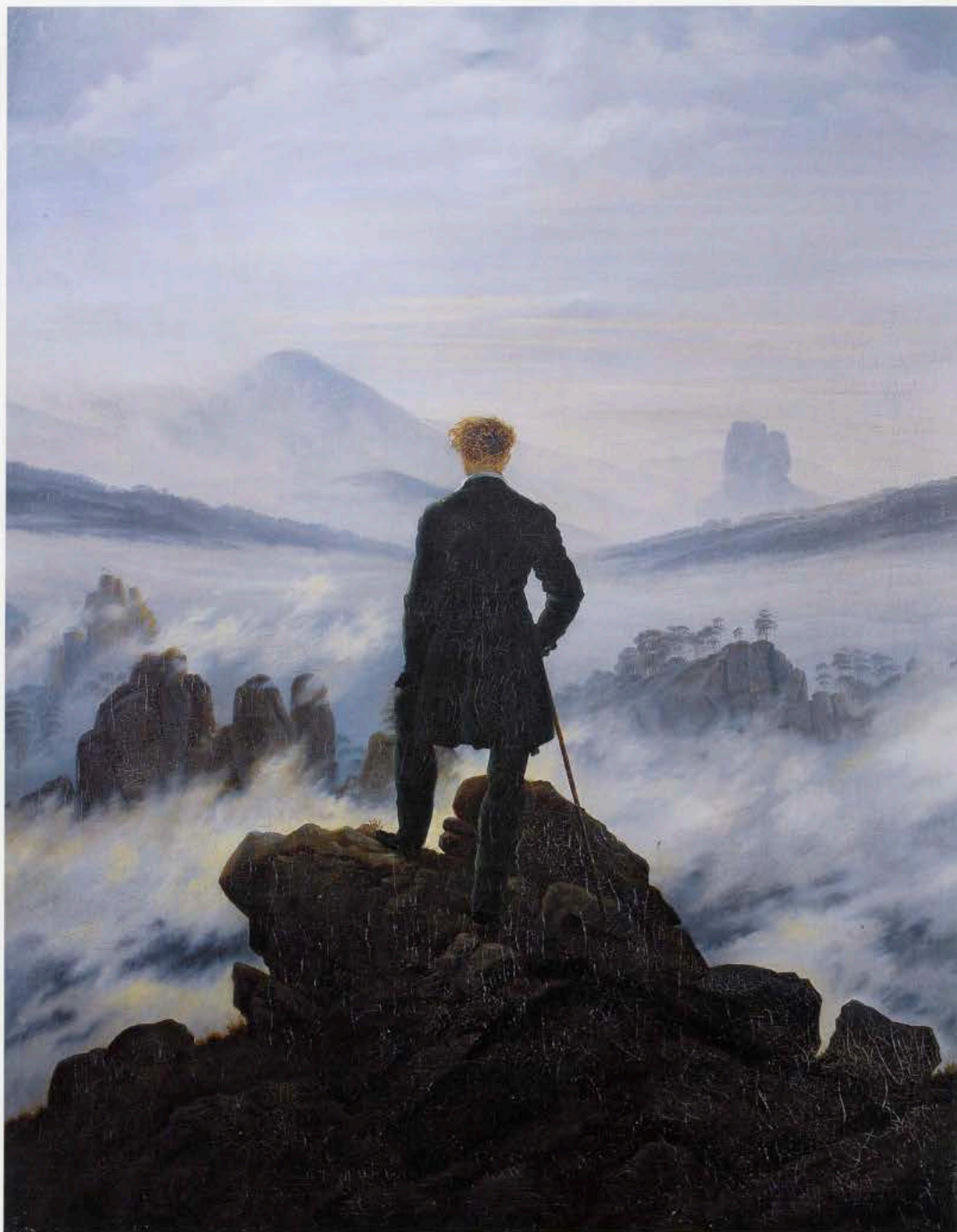
# STEVEN HENRY MADOFF

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VERTIGINOUS  
EXHILARATION

Rut Blee Luxemburg, *Vertiginous Exhilaration*, 1995





Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818

## A CERTAIN KIND OF ARITHMETIC IS ERODING IN THE WAY WE LOOK AT THINGS, IN THE WAY WE SEE.

What do I mean by eroding? Is it the particularity, the details, our attention to the *number* of items that fill our spaces, items we used to count even unconsciously (cars, people, shop windows, things)—a scanning now disappearing from our sense of lateral distances, of horizons and that feeling of beyond-ness, a beyond our beyond? Now all is compression. Now what we see is framed by screens (laptop, desktop, tablet, phone), and we look into surfaces, knowing them as surfaces we're looking into, the uncontrollable feeling of depth, of distances, now curtailed, swallowed whole, devoured. Could we be any farther from a painting like Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) or, for that matter, his *Moonrise Over the Sea* (1822) or *The Stages of Life* (1835)? Each deep landscape expresses that 19th-century Romantic dream of depth as sublimity, depth so far beyond us that we can only guess at the essence of life. In the sublime are dreams of sacred terror and wonder, freaked out, humbled. And then comes the shift from sublimity, populating depth with profane constructions—a depth of human habits, of urban domesticity, say, in Gustave Caillebotte's *Paris Street, Rainy Day* (1877), a space still open but changed. Or an image

yet more profane, its time right on top of us, this photo by Lee Friedlander from the series titled *Walk the Line*, shot for *The New York Times* in 2015, stuffed with people, technologies, the chemistry of combustion filling the air. When I think about that image in comparison with Friedlander's own *George Washington Bridge, New Jersey*, made 42 years earlier, I see the acceleration, the increase of congestion and compression that's seeped into contemporary consciousness, from those past notions of humanity's mortal tininess under the sky of divinity's power to the human bridge lifting us up so we might think ourselves of equal majesty, and then to the sheer roar of our selfhood, obliterating mystery's depth and depth's mysteries.

But let me make a slight digression, because this transition in which humanized space has lost what I might call the depth of depth makes me think of an essay from 1935 by Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," in which the French writer notes a mental condition he describes as "a disturbance in the perception of space." What a strange psychosis. It's since been debunked as sheer literary imagination, but what Caillois described was a trembling fear in people who thought they'd lost the difference between themselves and the space around them, that they *leaked* into space, that their personality *dissolved*



Caspar David Friedrich, *Moonrise Over the Sea*, 1822



Caspar David Friedrich, *The Stages of Life*, 1835

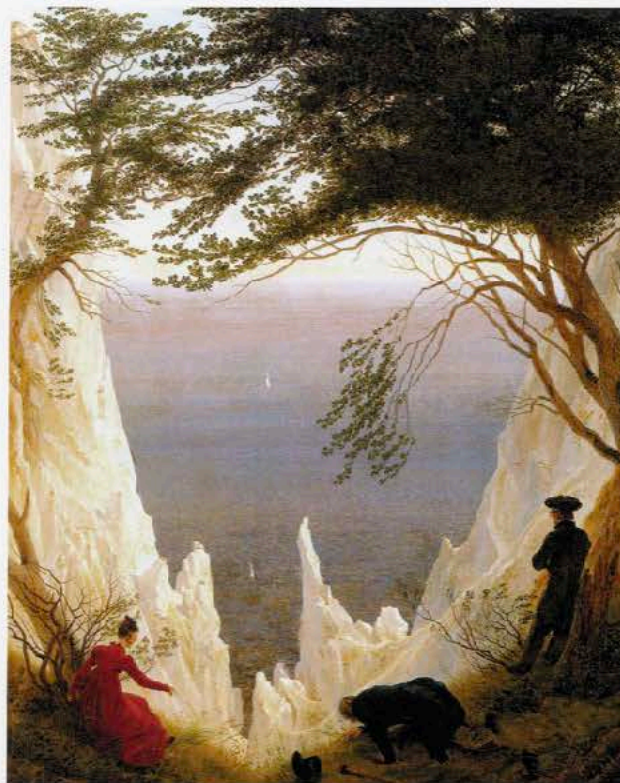


into the environment—like an insect taking on the protective colorings of foliage, but nonetheless is eaten by its prey. And this is what I mean about an eroding mathematics, because that sense of counting one thing and then another goes away for the psychasthenic. For that leaking soul, the condition of distinctness is gone. There is no addition of things, no adding up, no difference. In its place is a new, disorienting sense of seamlessness, similar in this way to vertigo—a dizzying rush and compression, everything becoming diffuse. How close this is to contemporary space losing the depth of depth and what I'll call a compressionary addiction to immersive flatness: to have space without space, to merge with the immersiveness of screens, which is also, by the way, the aspirational condition of the space of surveillance, the particular optical regime of space under which we live. And so, I come to this image by the German photographer Rut Blees Luxemburg, *Vertiginous Exhilaration*, made in 1995.

The work was taken from the 16th floor of a social housing block in Shoreditch, in the east end of London. The camera used is large-format, a 4 x 5, and the picture is from a series titled "London—A Modern Project," which you'll find in Luxemburg's 2009 book, *Commonsensual*. In a note to me, Luxemburg explains that "the urban gaze of the 1990s is no longer contemplative or panoramic but vertiginous, destabilizing, exciting... in a hallucinogenic hue." 1995. The year that a new company called Amazon opened its virtual doors and the first network wiretap was authorized, while two graduate students at Stanford University, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, began work on what they called BackRub, a search engine employing PageRank that would soon enough become Google. And therefore, our photographer's *exhilaration* can be understood in relation to its Latin origin, *hilarare*, to gladden, here meant as a technological giddiness falling through space, on the brink of finding through the counter-gravitational delirium of computation that what is below is above: at once a material condition of space and an optical psychasthenia that bleed into one another—giddy, yes, but roller-coaster giddy: terrifying, blurred, leaking again, rushing as the body rushes toward its indistinctness, its seamlessness.

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Gustave Caillebotte, *Paris Street, Rainy Day*, 1877



Casper David Friedrich, *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*, 1818

Luxemburg cites as her inspiration another painting by Friedrich, *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*, which happens to be another landscape with staring figures from 1818, one in which, she says, "the middle character creeps to the edge and dares to look down, barely holding on." But something so interesting to me in her photograph is the way one fluted wall and the top of another in the upper part of the image serve as a framing device, tilting the picture up on its side, as if it were a screen in which we perceive the appearance of foreshortened depth, simultaneously the vertiginous rush of converging space and the illusion of a *mise en abyme*, an endless reflection-within-reflection of a strangely distorted mirror, and akin to the CGI illusions in Christopher Nolan's film *Inception*, with its streets of Paris suddenly folding over one another, horizon and ground hypnotically reversed. This very notion is captured by the art historian Hubert Damisch in summarizing Paul Valéry's writing about the dance studio paintings of Edgar Degas (and Degas was, of course, a wonderful photographer, too, looking through the ground-glass screen of his camera), in which "the notion

of form is changed—if not cast in doubt altogether—by the projection onto the vertical plane of the canvas of the horizontal plane of the floor."<sup>1</sup> Luxemburg reverses this, with vertical depth presented as a compressed horizontal, reformulating space in her own way.

So it is that the past is always the path to come, and to return to Friedrich, his daring character may still believe in a glorious, unseeable God who breathes into this human world a mighty power witnessed in the form of depth itself. But his character's vantage point is also Luxemburg's and now our own, gazing down through a car park in Shoreditch in 1995. There, the contemporary world was already rushing toward technologies of compressed spatiality, of everything once separate in the very idea of distance accelerating into virtual reach. In this nocturnal London scene, whose vertigo is temporal as well as spatial, there is already the spectral tracing of *un*-depth, of a flattening out of perspectival lines that reach all the way back to the Renaissance and zoom forward toward a present whose more abstract patterns hint at the life to come.

What it means to exchange depth for nearness no doubt has to do with the past, with our increasingly common uninterest in the past and the sacred conventions of memory. In their place we now prefer all forms of brevity, technologies of closeness, global realizations of panoptical principles of the immense flattening out of individuality, nested spaces, and modernist celebrations of opacity, whether in the inversions of irony or the layers of the psychanalyzed mind. Here is the image, *Vertiginous Exhilaration*, whose compressions of horizontal and vertical, far and close, shadow and sulfurous light upend that train of vastness. Even the solidity of the present is falling away, exactly as Luxemburg described the way space as part of the modern project is experienced: vertiginous, destabilizing, exciting. And it's no longer a matter of daring to look down—as if down were fearful, as if rushing forward and immersion aren't signs of our contemporary lives. Down is now into, and into is now what we know, what we use, what we are as we fuse ourselves with the seamless streams of everything else on the other side of the frame and screen. Into is the exhilarated rush of our being. Into is now through. \*

1 See Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 254.