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FRAMING THE TREE –
A TRUNCATED REALITY

Christophe Girot

The image of the tree that we carry in our minds seldom appears in reality. We have the tree of life, the tree of knowledge, the tree of justice, the tree of Christ, but does this heritage contribute to a better sentiment about nature, or rather a sentiment about our own humanity?

Although its representations have changed considerably between different cultures, the tree remains a reassuring constant in our daily and yearly cycles. The fact that we can never stand in its place unless we chop it down makes the tree quite different from us. Although we sometimes evoke the ancient times when we lived up in the trees, no one except a child or idealistic tourist could think of spending more than a few hours living in its branches. The tree is sometimes seen as a green man, personified by limbs reaching for the sky which tell us of their age as they crack and squeak in the wind. But how does all of this lore relate to the city? The lone tree standing thunder struck on the moors or weathering heights has changed to the solitary tree standing at the corner of a street or yard. The tree is indeed there, but nothing around it is the same. How can it be understood in an urban context? How do we feel and what do we think about it as we walk by it each day? The image of the tree that we try to convey today has little to do with the old legends we carry within us. It is very hard to catch a spirit that has escaped us and is not here.

The video exercise about the tree that we have been carrying out with small groups of architectural students at the Chair of Landscape Architecture reveals the inherent dichotomy that we hold between the idea that we have of a tree and the image which emanates from it, and it is precisely at this interface between subject, object and context that the mystery lies. What has been achieved by this project is a new and critical look at the place of the tree in our cities.

It is only when we attempt to frame a tree through the eye of a camera that its form rebels against the laws of perspective and the rules of the frame. It often feels as though the essential spatial realm of the tree were truncated, as if it were trying to escape from the corners of the frame. Moving the camera changes our relationship to the frame, but only displaces the problem of representation. The next frame shows only another part of the whole. Standing farther back in order to show the whole tree doesn't necessarily help, because we only see it from afar. The entire inner cosmos of a tree is almost impossible

to flatten on a screen. It so happens that trees are strange and awkward to handle through the picture frame; how many times does one try to capture the inner realm of this green and luminous sphere without success? Although the tree has been a recurrent theme in photography and cinematography for over a century, outpacing painting and drawing as a mode of representation, it still escapes clear definition. Emblematic films such as *Rashomon* (1950) by Akira Kurosawa manage to capture the moving scintillating gaze of a person looking upwards under the slender bending limbs of trees, catching a fleeting glimpse of some heavenly dappled light, but this remains a reduction, an extract, a metonym of the forest and our emotional relationship with it.

The tree is first and foremost a living expression of light, which is why its representation in the city is so difficult to frame and hold. Are we really able to understand and convey a new expression of “treeness” in the city? Some of the videos from the elective course “LandscapeVideo” that we have made accessible online (www.landscape-pamphlet.net) in order to accompany this publication hint at that with great poetic bravado; however we are left with the awkward feeling that something about the trees has run astray and been misunderstood, not so much by the students who shot them with great success, but rather by the designers who placed them in the city.

More often than not, the tree becomes the bare expression of an unbelievably meagre nature that contrasts with the surrounding urban maze. In this case we are no longer immersed in “treeness” itself, but enter a desacralized juxtaposition of the tree with its surroundings. Video has become a tool which we use in order to comment on the way we care or rather don’t care about this condition. The position given to the tree jumps to the forefront of the screen with great irony. We see a tree tucked away behind bins on the side of a street, a scraggly tree in a crummy courtyard, a tree visited by all the dogs of the neighbourhood, a trunk that peels the paint off the cars that park nearby. What then is the place and role of “treeness” in all of this urban confusion? There is nothing more difficult than retrieving a sense of dignity about trees in our epoch, particularly those in the city as seen through a set of truncated frames, in the hope that it will help us to recover the essential.

