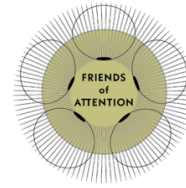


Friends of Attention

Gathering #8

Ekphrasis as an Attentional Mode

5 June 2020



After a discussion of the “Shield of Achilles” in the *Illiad*, the “Shield of Aeneas” in the *Aeneid*, and Sophie Calle’s work at the intersection of mnemonics and ekphrasis, we turned to an “ekphrastic exercise.” Len Nalencz and Anna Riley suggested that we look at images that might be construed as elements of the “shield of the United States,” and, keeping in mind the place of poetic ekphrasis in the work of empire (and the dynamics of political power), do a brief ekphrasis of our own. The image, and several of the 7-minute exercises, follow.

-DGB



The Shield of the Nation at War with its People

The shield is five-sided and at its center is a Garden surrounded by walls. On one panel, three fighter Planes fly in formation. On another, face-shrouded Soldiers are marshalled. A third depicts a Guard-tower over an angry fence. A fourth, Prisoners, and a guard. The fifth panel of the shield is blank and white. Its blankness is not the blank of nothing, rather the panel depicts the color white. These are the emblems of the Nation at war with its People: the walled Garden, and arrayed around it Planes, Soldiers, Guard Tower, Prisoners, and Whiteness. Nowhere on this shield is the life of the people. The life of the people is the Shield of the People.

(Sal Randolph)



There is a garden at the center, surrounded by flightless concentric wings; and so there must be soil, water, flowers, still air. With proper clearance you can walk across it, but everything is meant to be seen from above. Seen from above, by whom?

(Jeff Dolven)



To me, these are all the same image, even if they are different photographs. What they repeat are hard lines, opaque surfaces, a static status quo, and a capacity to inflict harm with indifference and impunity.

To stay within the images make it hard to breathe. I can also see how for some people, this image looks like the guarantor of the good life of the 'American dream.'

(Hatim El-Hibri)



Five images, a quincunx, five face of a die, the middle spot the pentagon as seen from above, all sides in intact (perhaps a sunny day), not dissimilar to the central part of the flower, but grey (unusual for the floral kingdom). Above it to the left, sitting on a small portion of the the middle image's top edge, a photograph of "Camp Delta", barbed wire, blue sky. To the right, the third image, three military planes, like very ordered birds but much heavier. Below this (bottom right of the centre), mysterious men in camo gear, a dull green, faces covered (and likely ID numbers too, though this is not evident from the photograph), on the steps of the Lincoln memorial, doric columns emerging from their gathered ranks, columns perpendicular (at an angle) to the receding stair lines. Also blue sky. To the left of this (bottom left of the central image), no blue sky visible, silhouetted image of what looks to be a woman before a series of fences of varying design and geometric divisions. In the background a group of robed figures in yellow.

(Adam Green)

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Masked, visored, armored warriors
guarding monuments, but to whom?
Five-sided domination. Dominate the skies, dominate the land.
Half a shield speaks of might.
Half speaks of imprisonment.
Guantanamo as Achilles heel? The Pentagon reminded on 9/11?

(EJQ)

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A pentagonal shield. The prison, and the sky, and the inmate, and the memorial, of what exactly? The pursuance of death and empire. The inmate and the soldier dance a pentagonal dance. They participate but cannot hear or acknowledge each other.
A shield, pentagonal, but without a person to protect. A shield immaterial but not ephemeral.
An omnipresent shield that pervades land, sky, and buildings, banks, and loans, and mortgages.
It shields but cannot protect anyone.

(Carlos Montemayor)

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(I am someone from the distant human past looking at these images.)

The high clouds in the sky mean the heat will break soon.
Stone flowers. Dead birds. Dust. Something too big and dry to swallow.
Something that doesn't listen.
Transparent lizardskin. Ghostly walls. Poorly formed mud idols.
And many things I don't recognize. The only human faces are the ones behind bars.

(Catherine Hansen)

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Center of a star
Housing uniforms
A machine taking orders
Prison like institution
Erasing Identity through
A monologic gray
It's heart is green, bloodless
It's North a killer
The east falls in line
Southernly fortress
Western barracks offer no comfort

(Steven Duval)

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A door, a tomb, a portal. A frozen army, identical, faceless, impenetrable, hard, in formation.
A veil, a perforation, a container, allowing light and air to flow, but not people. Thinner, lighter,
wires, grids, spaces, constructed and delineated, order.

A riddle, the beginning or the end, the apex of power, a tomb.

(William Lamson)

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Metal

Expanding, radiating out, radiating isn't the right word, jutting in concentric pentagons,
Providing non-everyday views, of things which structure are everyday

Maze

Claustrophobia

OK, let's get a handle on this: 5-image sections

One centered and one in each of the rectangle's 4 corners

Bottom two corners have humans, single in profile before a jumble of standing, yellow-garbed figures seen through wire grids on left, rows of repetitive humans on right blocking in their regularity visual access to some neo-Grecian monument on the right; masked, helmeted, fatigue-wearing, military men

Upper two corners are human-made forms of dominance-making: one for controlling bodies on left (sign says camp Delta, prison life, tower and walls style, piercing jutting "knives" (damn words don't work for me) atop fence; barren, dark brown, dark grey, no internal light, signage posted all over but impossible to read beyond name; obsessiveness of signage; foreboding, ominous, with blue nearly cloudless sky above, inaccessible, or reassuring?) right: three military aircraft in as regularized tempo as the soldiers guarding below it, grey but tipped with white, dark grey underbellies, pointy noses, back fins, doubled which indicates some kind of symmetry, remind me of electric rays, flying through skies not water, vaporous cloud poses nothing against them

At center aerial shot of metal-like concentric pentagons centered on drab grey-green sections, inside a lush green – looks obscene, guarded like a tree of life.¹

(Kirsten Scheid)

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¹ My commentary (by K.S.): Ekphrasis gets me excited, offers a way to reverse-engineers something that has seemingly natural and insurmountable affect, a way not to be bowled over (but also not to stand myself up as a super-human alone against it – which is what I appreciated about Sophie Calle's counter-ekphrasis). So much of the talk these days, "Defund the police," the prison abolition movement, the history of policing in the US, seems all to me to conduct an **ekphrasis of the police**, which I find expansive, positively infectious, imagination-enriching.

I see the reverberations out from the pentagon in the middle
It is symmetrical
Metallic, Rigid
It pulses war, it creates a rumbling
a crumbling
It destroys everything, it destroys itself
Now it crumbles all around us
It is so obvious that it is all a sign of weakness, of desperation
I see not strength but a metal hysteria
Defenses, aggression, "MINE!"
it cannot hold
It is the last couple of scenes in a film
Where the bombers become birds
and the girl at Guantanamo comes out of silhouette, into color
The yellow uniforms, tossed off, become flames, all the walls crumble and burn
The people melt, beat, reshape all that metal into a big rad movie theater with amazing
acoustics
Showing movies that all the characters are making together ²

(Kristen Lawler)

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The shield was struck from the hardest grey. Its escutcheons were five in number, the center also being a shape with five sides. A blind, grey eye – unblinking. As blind, it sees all. And it sees nothing. One emblem looks like the kind of yard old cars are taken to be crushed. Except it is not for cars, but for people. The walls look flimsy, and are thus confident that the security lies elsewhere. Barbed wire sprouts above its industrial zone banality like a quarantine haircut. Another emblem is a glimpse of the inside of such places. Men in yellow uniforms mingle among the grey, under surveillance. The third insignia shows rows upon rows of toy soldiers, not yet recalled for being fabricated with a fatal flaw. (The flaw of being fatal.) The last emblem shows the faceless grimace of hard metallic grey, when it takes flight in a flock of such fatal unblinking unthinkingness.

(Dominic Pettman)

² Something I wrote two days ago because my phone died and the scene was so extraordinarily cinematic that I had to burn it onto my memory and write it when i got home (part of why this exercise was so powerfully resonant for me today, because it is what I have been trying to do with all these cinematic moments): Here is an image I will never forget. The police helicopter in the air, loud as fuck. Every single stopped car a trumpet, blasting solidarity. The people all around Barclays, in the streets in every direction. Watching the Brooklyn clock tower, the hands lit up in neon red, move toward curfew time. The chants grow louder, the cops shift from foot to foot. The people, as far as the eye can see, all take a knee, fist in the air. The orange sunset ball emerges from behind the clouds, low in the sky, bathing the people and the whole scene in warm orange light. This moment will never stop existing.

•

Men stand at attention. The military protects itself. There is a bit of sky filled with three fighter jets. Still, they're going somewhere...or they're going to fly over our cities to show their support of healthcare workers. Prison is the left side of things--chained, fenced, obscured bodies in yellow. Bodies to be located. The heart in the middle: a building seen from above. Orders move from the middle out, top down, from the air to the ground. Bodies are concealed and marked. You're military or prisoner, seen or invisible, hidden behind walls. The endless fight continues. Power flies, walks, looks out of dark glasses. There are so many soldiers, prisoners, planes, prisons. The center stands. The center is unmovable. A structure, a fact without bodies.

(Zach McClane)

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From the ethereal clouds, moving at the barrier of sound, metal birds surveil.
Eden hides behind pentagonal pickets.
Camouflaged sentry guard white pillars.
Muted prisoners become apparitions.
A Gorgon reaches its imperial tentacles.

The dominion of Hephaestus of Orange and Aphrodite, Slovenian-born.
Where is the end of this empire?
We watch the Apprentice, a fascist and racist underling, distort words and melt worlds,
striking cool, black alloys. We witness this forgery of power.
The malleability of myth allows it to persist.
Where is the end of this empire?
Perhaps it's in oblivion.
"You're Fired!" Democracy.

(Molly Orbon)

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Possession
Air
Neglect
Order
Pentagon
Tale
Isolation
Camp
Outing
Not

(Alexandru Balgiu)

•

In the centre, a fine tempietto, a pavilion surrounded by its monastic garden. Green herbs, mostly medicinal, are tended to by the silent celibates who walk these shaded avenues.

The silence of the centre is absolute. The walls of this garden are thicker than the garden is wide. And outside its walls, in the tumult out there, there is only an endless, full, interior to be administered, or ministered to. The last remaining outside is in here, around this little pavilion, surrounded by the nodding krauts, that will heal you if you eat a leaf, but poison you if you eat three.

(Adam Jasper)

•

In the center of the shield, a hole, a park, a five-sided crypt
And the center is the playpen where
uncivil servants remember all the things they're not permitted to tell themselves, their families, their lovers.

In the center of the shield, a bin full of toys and plastics and fabrics, for the insects and bees, that will die and die, for the glory of goods and services.

(John Muse)

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The sad boldness of institutionalized defense. Its anonymity, its modularity, make difficult to point to its vulnerability. It is impossible to hear any sound.

(Chiara Cappelletto)

•

The lovers had arranged to meet each other in a glade at the center of a five-sided forest.

(Larry Berger)

•

Gates and walls of men
In cages and shapes of order
Watch vigilance and see
How they'll close your border

Faces unseen to us
In shadows and silks they made
Study and hold the science
Perfect geometry

Picture a galloping horse
Frozen in stride
3 Pegasus of war
An unbridled air ride

But caged no less
Tombed-soul captains

Hide your face
All lines are the same

(Casey Affleck)

•

What is the "boss" of "embossed?"
Cut or carved
The layers,
And —
High, this...
Not "automatic," but
The mind is there.
Which is the great
Swerve. It dows what it
 Will —
 looped and looped like
what can fly.

But also that which,
Like a slinky clipped
With countless stingers,
Is called
 "Barbed Wire."

(D. Graham Burnett)