

Perceiving the Invisible

In 1993, I saw the newly released motion picture *Memoirs of an Invisible Man*, starring Chevy Chase, who becomes invisible after a nuclear accident. As an eight-year-old, I was mesmerized by the visual relation between the invisible man and the visible objects he interacted with. A pink bubble gum molded between his teeth, his lungs filled with smoke, a floating hat, fabric moving freely, and an unconscious office worker sliding into a cab. You knew where he was when the objects no longer seemed to obey the laws of physics.

In Hokusai's woodblock print *Ejiri in Suruga Province* (1830), objects like sheets of paper, leaves, clothes, and a hat are blown away by a strong wind and the people in the image are hunched over as if they are about to lose their balance. We can find a similar posture in the painting *Retreat From the Storm* (1846) by Jean Francois Millet, where a woman is struggling to move forward with a young boy in her hand. The invisible force is violently dragging their clothes and pushing them backwards. Their faces are blue, noses red, and I can feel the struggle of breathing in the headwind.

As explained by Charles S. Peirce the indexical sign relation is based on a direct physical or causal connection, for example: smoke as a sign of fire and thunder as a sign of lightning. The indexical sign signifies something other than themselves; they indicate a state of affairs and the existence of a thing, an event, or a condition in the past, present, or future.

I believe we all experienced the *plastic bag scene* in *American Beauty*, where one of the characters plays a video sequence of a featherweight white plastic bag "... dancing ... for 15 minutes". The wind, as an invisible force, is dependent on the indexical relation to be perceived visually. The plastic bag in motion signifies the speed and direction of the wind in the present. But, while the plastic bag in motion is a sign of the wind, the plastic bag itself is not.

In the still images by Hokusai and Millet, one could argue that, without motion, the sheets of paper, the clothes, and the people, do not signify anything other than themselves. Still, we perceive the wind, its speed and direction. The position and form of the objects challenge our notion of gravity: the woman's headscarf in a straight horizontal line and the bended sheets of paper in the sky are accepted as signs of the invisible wind.

In all the above examples, the invisible entity is the center of our focus, while the visible objects can be considered as *translators*, communicating the unseen. But that is not all. In the indexical relation the objects become defenseless by the force and surrender to the smallest shift in speed and direction while their *raison d'être* evaporates. The wind is inescapable, soft and brutal, it makes me want to put my hair up, use the lowest gear when cycling in the headwind, and adjust my center of gravity in order not to lose my balance. In the world of the wind, we are all reduced to its signifier.

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August 2022, Malmö