

ASYMPTOTE: an infinite *retour* and a felicitous encounter¹

INT: 27 June, 2023



I carry my laptop from room to room. The mirror scene from *The Lady of Shanghai* plays at quarter speed, sound off.² I edit my gaze and focus only on Rita's face, the gestures and movements of arms and legs, the frames and geometries constructed by the regress of the mirror. An encounter of 'infinite *retour*'.³ A glamour. I glance sideways through the window. Sunny, warm, and fine. Blue, brick, and green.

1 If you are holding this text in your hand you are at EUCA ANNEX for the exhibition *A Felicitous Encounter*, a discursive curation by TC McCormack of work by the artists Dorit Margreiter and Fay Nicolson. Perhaps you inhabit the space of the annex looking around and out, perhaps you are on the other side of the window, in the garden, looking around and in. Move between the two and sit a while in each. Stay as long as you can. Drink wine. Be aware of duration, movement, and stillness. (I've checked the weather forecast for you—sunny, warm and fine.)

2 Image: screengrab of *The Lady from Shanghai* (dir. Orson Wells, USA 1947), which stars Wells's estranged wife Rita Hayworth as Elsa. Wells cast her in the hope of reversing their rift. She was having none of it. Embracing break. Refusing direction. Scattering gaze.

3 Adrian Rifkin, *Ingres Then, and Now* (2000).

The prompt to return to *The Lady of Shanghai* was provided by a visit to *A Felicitous Encounter*. Felicitous or not, an encounter is not the same as a meeting, a merging, a coming together.⁴ An encounter contains its own passing. It is mobile, agent, a fleeting ‘now’ that persists in the duration of the ‘after’. Here is where I should write of the materiality of the ‘then’, describe, consider in artful, hifalutin terms the two artists’ works. Spell it out while forgoing the spell that is a glamour (and perhaps it was with that sense of glamour I went to Rita). But I won’t. Because I can’t. Of course, I could, and there would be nothing wrong with that. Nicolson’s work is a dynamic stage-set: printings and acts of painting that dance the architecture (and there is something of the showgirl in the work, as if *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* had been directed by Busby Berkley (‘the film image must become graphic art’, said Hermann Warm, one of the production designers on *Caligari*).⁵



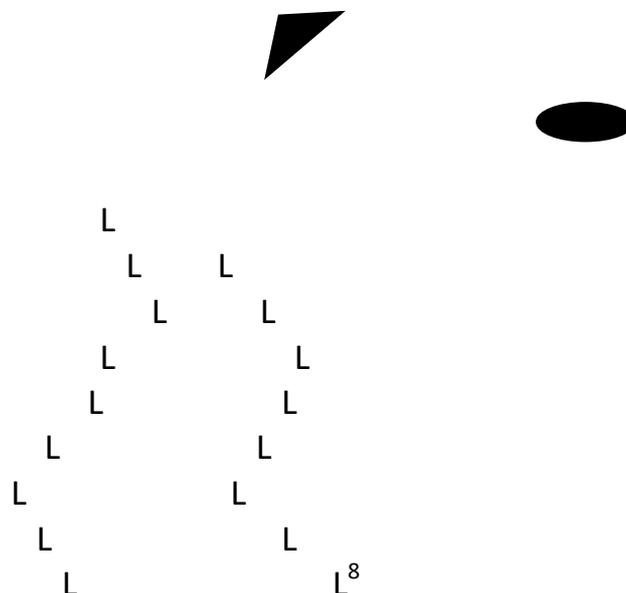
4 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri employed the term ‘the felicitous encounter’ to describe a moment when individuals come together to exchange knowledge and form something new. I am both agreeing and disagreeing: in relation to art it is the ‘almost touching’ of encounter as asymptote in which thoughtfulness is produced by the ‘after’ of the *audience*. This is the xenogenesis of agency.

5 Image: screengrab of *Gold Diggers* of 1935 (dir. Busby Berkeley, USA 1935). Other reference: *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, Germany 1920). Originally, *Caligari* was credited to the main writer, Carl Mayer, rather than to Wiene. In some European films of the time, screenwriters were often referred to as ‘film-poets’, and considered more important than directors.

Magreiter's work is a camera—both with shutter up and shutter down, screen encountering, screen refusing (a mirror and its image only *appear* to meet)—the *affect* is asymptotic.⁶ Each animates the other. The hanging glass doubles the windows, bringing the outside in. In the space, in the garden, our restful / restless gaze directs.⁷

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Frames (frame of mirror, frame of painting, frame of architecture, frame of window), frame.
Gestures (in blue, on metal, in mirror, of dark, through glass) ascend and descend the staggers (soft, hard). Gazes (in blue, on metal, in mirror, of dark, through glass) wink and pass. Accent. Ascent.



I sit for a long time, on the low, wide ledges that step each end of the annex. The acts of painting, the acts of construction, the acts of seeing, both produce a language (the painterly, the architectural, the cinematic) and defy it. I look across to the pewter frames and marks of the prints (refusing flatness, absorbing light), and through and to the glass and the mirrors (slo-mo), and up to the diacritics and glyphs whose surfaces are neither transparent nor reflective. The 'Claude glass' oval of the 'tittle' doubles down on refusal; admitting nothing. Smoke and mirrors. Play. Later, in the Tube station, the escalators glide upwards past empty advertisement frames. I stretch out my hand in a gesture of almost touching. Space awaiting image.

6 In analytical geometry an asymptote is a line and a curve in motion that continuously approach but never quite touch, as if both their trajectories are sliding. Perhaps this is akin to an unrequited desire—the brief encounter of the film of the same name: *Brief Encounter* (dir. David Lean, UK 1945).

7 It's only now I look at the titles: Nicolson's include *The Dance of Future Past*, and *Tableau (I), (II), and (III)*. Magreiter's is an iteration of their work *Cinéma*. I am smug. Yes, yes I am.

8 Typography author's own.

