

ARTIFICIAL INFINITY

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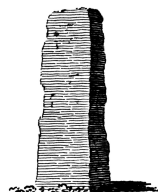
From Caspar David Friedrich to Notch



XAVIER BELANCHE

Translated by
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Nº 1.



AN EPIC FAIL

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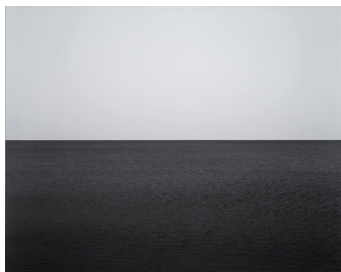
From Caspar David Friedrich to Notch

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a hypothetical continuity and the survival of romantic landscape in the context of a few video games primarily originates from how the videogame creators conceive and express Nature from a profoundly personal point of view. As a result, the demonstration of the possible coincidences and analogies between Caspar David Friedrich's painting and the representation of Nature in *Minecraft* has become such a fascinating issue which is impossible to ignore.

When I was giving shape to the concept, the reading of the essays Robert Rosenblum dedicated to the validity of romanticism in the works of those artists on the periphery of modern art such as Vincent Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko, helped me pinpoint some common references to those painters who share a romantic attraction to a Nature alienated from mankind. Although Rosenblum limits himself solely to the study of paintings from the 19th and mid-20th centuries, concepts such as the sublime, ruins, darkness and abysm have ended up being the reason for the reflection and expression of artists who, when using other mediums and interdisciplinary techniques such as photography, video, performance art and art installations, have significantly expanded Rosenblum's thesis.

The series of photographs Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto dedicates to the representation of the sea in the *Seascapes series* [1] strongly resemble Mark Rothko's work [2]. The iceberg paintings by Frederic Edwin Church [3] and the photographs by Olaf Otto Becker [4] show a surprisingly formal similarity to the theme as the artists express their passion for journeying to and exploring the bleak areas of Nature. In *Evaders* [5], Ori Gersht constructs a tale of the last days of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin during his



1. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Seascape: Baltic Sea, near Rügen*, 1996, Silver Gelatin Print



2. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969

escape from the Nazis through the Pyrenees in 1940. The visual reminiscence of German romanticism, especially Caspar David Friedrich's work, is present in *Evaders*. However, the representation of romanticism here is a fatal omen of incipient destruction and "butchering done with a small and meticulous brush-stroke"¹ which Nazism would end up masking behind German culture. Conceptual artists such as the ill-fated Bas Jan Ader approaches visual references from romantic culture though the construction of a dialogue between Art and the life of the artist. In *Farewell to Faraway Friends* [6], Ader portrays himself on the seashore motionlessly contemplating the sunset, imitating the composition of the landscape portraits by Caspar David Friedrich in which solitary figures appear with their backs to the spectator. Ader goes back to romantic themes found in the ecstatic contemplation of the landscape from the perspective of the creator himself, a perspective which, in the creation of the project *In Search of the Miraculous*, cost him his life.

These demonstrations of continuity and the survival of romantic sensitivity, halfway between attraction and rejection, resulted in the consolidation of the idea for the project and it

¹Azúa, *Diccionario de las Artes*, p. 159.



3. Frederic Edwin Church, *The iceberg*, 1891, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



4. Olaf Otto Becker, *Broken Line*, 06 Oquaatsut 2, 07/2003, 69°20'18" N, 51°00'18" W



5. Ori Gersht, *Evaders*, 2009.



6. Bas Jan Ader,
Farewell to Faraway Friends,
1971.

was approached through the observation of the most significant voices from nordic romanticism and their projection on unedited screens of video games. *The Artificial Infinity* is an unrestricted approach in the form of a concise abbreviated dictionary, through which I have attempted to confirm these worrying analogies between romantic scenery and divided Nature, infinite and crucial in video games like *Minecraft*, but also, successively, in *Proteus*, *A Slow Year*, *Dear Esther* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Again, both the player and the audience become aware of their insignificance and ostracism through the confrontation of the loss of centrality with Nature in infinite landscapes.

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The tragic fascination of the romantic with deciphering the enigma of irrationality, the mysterious, the brevity of time as the fragile impermanence of human existence, the basis of a profound feeling of anguish which, fascinated and terrified by this heavy doubt, will force one to render to a desperate reconciliation with God or Nature.

The consecution and loss of “centrality in the Universe and its friendship with Nature”² will obligate the romantic to embark on an endless search for a spiritual refuge which alleviates “the weight of an overwhelming Weltschmerz”³⁴, a sensation which comes over the romantic when discovering the immense loss of the infinite, as the solitary monk from *The Monk by the Sea* [7] by Caspar David Friedrich who is brutally minimized between the horizons of earth, sea and air. Under the thick twilight mist of solitude, the romantic realises how he has accidentally come across the indifference of a Nature which is now illuminated, deranged by man. The landscape abandons an ordered scene, limited, conciliating, relaxing; and appears as the main protagonist in the romantic painting “which causes whoever observing it to have a double sensation of melancholy and terror”⁵. Heinrich Von Kleist

²Argullol, *La atracción del abismo*, p. 13.

³According to Wikipedia, Weltschmerz (from the German, meaning world-pain or world-weariness, is a term coined by the German author Jean Paul and denotes the kind of feeling experienced by someone who understands that physical reality can never satisfy the demands of the mind. This kind of world view was widespread among several romantic authors such as Lord Byron, Giacomo Leopardi, François-René de Chateaubriand, Alfred de Musset, Nikolaus Lenau, Hermann Hesse, and Heinrich Heine. It is also used to denote the feeling of sadness when thinking about the evils of the world—compare empathy, theodicy.

⁴Argullol, *La atracción del abismo*, p. 17.

⁵Ibid., p. 17.



7. Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the sea*, 1809-1810, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

confirmed in 1819, confused and fascinated, this dispossession of man in favour of Nature, when scrutinising Friedrich's painting:

[...] I myself turned into the monk, the painting became the beach; through the extension that I should have contemplated, the sea, was incomplete. Nothing in the world can be sadder and more annoying than this situation: a single twinkle of life in the extensive reigns of death, a solitary centre in the solitary circle.⁶

This tragic awareness of the minimization of man by Nature will force the romantic to venture outwards in search of comfort, into their cosmic misfortune. This predicts the trip as a liberation of one's "most intimate worries or desires and even the darkest side of their mind"⁷. Because the romantic, according to Argullol, "travels outwards to travel inwards and find himself"⁸, or in the same way, directs his attention to the depths of extensive natural regions, unwelcoming and deserted, viewing his subjectivity at its most profound, as Novalis notes:

⁶Kleist, *Sentimientos ante un paisaje marino de Friedrich*, p. 217.

⁷Guillén, *Naufrajos*, p. 71.

⁸Argullol, *La atracción del abismo*, p. 85.

[...] eternity, with its worlds, the past and the future, is either within us or nowhere.⁹

The majority of romantic painters, especially those coming from the north, expressed through their representation of landscapes the analogies between the outer world and the inside of man, between Nature and the human inconscience. Friedrich reveals in the sea the symbol of the melancholic side of the human soul; the vessels and warships symbolise the romantic traveller who leaves for the unknown, to unfathomable regions of nature, of the human soul. In *Mondaufgang über dem Meer* [8], Friedrich gives expression to the concern of the two feminine figures from the first world who are taking in the twilight horizon of the sea. Two small boats catch the attention of the two masculine figures, surely seduced by the image of the trip, the maritime adventure which will lead them to extend the map of their daily reality and to go deep into the potential infinite of their subconscious¹⁰, even if it costs them their lives.

This fatal attraction to travelling towards the infinite of the Inconscience which the masculine figures show with their backs to us in Friedrich's painting, lead us to the thoughts of the protagonist from the story by Edgar Allan Poe, *MS. Found in a Bottle*. The urgency and oppression felt from discovering what has never seen before by man produces a feverish state in him which will unite him with the awareness of perishing and the excitation of finding himself very close to an extraordinary discovery:

yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions, predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge --- some never-to-be-imparted secret whose attainment is destruction.¹¹

⁹Novalis, *Polen*, p. 148.

¹⁰Guillén, *Naufraños*, p. 71.

¹¹Poe, *MS. found in a bottle*, p. 159.



8. Caspar David Friedrich, *Mondaufgang über dem Meer*, 1819, Hermitage Museum.



9. Caspar David Friedrich, *View of a harbour*, 1815-16, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin



10. Caspar David Friedrich, *Das Eismeer*, 1823-24, Hamburger Kunsthalle.

Abysm, thus, incarnates the prelude of the destruction of the desires of man in his attempt to cross the confinements of something which he can't know. If Nature seduces the romantic spirit with the promise of rekindling in his bosom the lost Golden Age, it will also be this very Nature which will destroy all hope of mankind in his eagerness to reveal the secrets hidden by Nature. If in *View of a harbour* [9] Friedrich exhorts to taking on a spiritual trip through the sea of life, *The Sea of Ice* [10] presents a tragic final to the journey. For the creation of this work, Friedrich was inspired by the tale of William Parry's expedition to the Arctic, during which one of the vessels, the HMS Griper, was trapped between blocks of ice for several months. *The Sea of Ice* gives of the uncomfortable privilege of taking in the sinking of the Griper but, instead of showing the horror and desperation of its crew, Friedrich shows us the indifference of Nature before human suffering: the landscape has definitely abandoned its condition of simple affable decoration and emerges as a mirror of a human sentiment which is profoundly pessimist; the truth of which, beyond death, we will only discover through the immensity of void, the absolute nothing. The end of the trip of Hope is the symbol of Abysm, the silent destruction of vanities and human aspirations when taking in the limits of the mystery of life.

This tragic icon of Friedrich's shipwreck is seen again, later on, in *Magdalenefjorden, vue prise de la presqu'île des tombeaux, au*



**11. François-Auguste Biard,
Magdalenefjorden, 1840, Musée du Louvre.**

nord du Spitzberg; effet d'aurore boréale [11] by François-Auguste Biard, and in *The Icebergs* [12] by Frederic Edwin Church. In the first, the brilliant boreal light which illuminates the darkness of the glacial landscape contrasts with the beaten bodies on the shores after the shipwreck. In *The Icebergs*, the chromatic beauty of the polar landscape presided by a majestic iceberg, dominates the attention of the spectator. But the presence, in the first instance, of the mutilated mast from a journey, the only relic from the shipwreck, transmits the symbolic value of the frozen landscape, very close “to the traditional issue of the vanitas”¹². In both paintings Nature is the protagonist, cold and insensitive to human suffering. The attraction which provokes immense creative capacity is inseparable from the terror provoked when fury and destructive violence are shown. The last words of the protagonist from the novel by Edgar Allan Poe, *The adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, show once more the fatal destiny which awaits those who venture to explore and desecrate the limits of Nature, or in the same way to infringe the confines of Infinity:

And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract,
where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But
there arose in our pathway a shrouded human fig-

¹²Guillén, *Naufregios*, p. 43.



12. Frederic Edwin Church, *The Icebergs*, 1861, Dallas Museum of Art

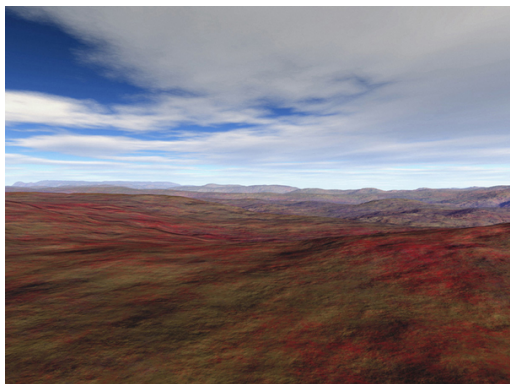
ure very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.¹³

The attraction the romantic feels to the fatal encounter with Abysm is only possible through the freedom encountered in the adventure of exploring great spaces, seeing extensive landscapes. Thus, the romantic idea of the Abysm is inseparable from the destructive vastness of Nature. Without the existence of this (Nature) the first is unthinkable. This representation of the romantic landscape, distant and vast, is found again, almost two centuries later, in the procedural and escindida Nature of *Minecraft*, *Proteus* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

What does it mean when we say Nature is procedural? A few years ago, the photographer Joan Fontcuberta created a series of images of several landscapes known as *Orogenesis* [13] which he included in the book *Landscapes without Memory*. These images of natural landscapes were not taken with a digital or analogical photographic camera, but rather designed and generated using a special computer program in the photorealistic visualization of virtual landscapes in 3D. Joan Fontcuberta, in an interview given to the specialised blog *Eyecurious*, explained the process of the creation of the images of *Orogénesis*:

These programs use two types of information in the process of the creation of artificial landscapes:

¹³Poe, *The narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, p. 174.



13. Joan Fontcuberta, *Orogenesis Turner*, 2003

cartography data (Fontcuberta used, instead, key works from the history of photography and painting) or even procedurals, or rather, the topographic information which is generated artificially through mathematical functions in which the treatment of randomness is a special protagonist. In them the landscape has to be believable and coherent if it aims to pursue a visual result which is not interpreted as a fictitious geography or belonging to a world which isn't ours. The images exhibited on the websites from these instruments show virtual geography which confuses and impresses the spectator for its high degree of realism. Artificial, fictitious Nature can't be distinguished from real, tangible Nature.¹⁴

In *Minecraft* [14], the Nature which surrounds the player is procedural. The world is created on the basis of these mathematical approximations with random behaviour. Every world generated in *Minecraft* is thus unique, unexplored, virgin. When we wake up for the first time in this new artificial world it invades us with a vague sensation of solitude and expectation: before us it extends a landscape whose immensity attracts us

¹⁴Fontcuberta, *Landscapes without memory*.



14. Markus Persson, *Minecraft*, 2011

thanks to the infinity of the creative potential of the procedural Nature. In the words of its creator, Markus Persson—*Notch*—the Nature in *Minecraft* isn't infinite, but neither is it limited to a map of reduced dimensions whose limits are reached easily:

First of all, let me clarify some things about the “infinite” maps: They're not infinite, but there's no hard limit either. It'll just get buggier and buggier the further out you are.¹⁵

In reality, the world in which we are born in *Minecraft* doesn't completely exist yet; we only see a small part. As we advance, the game motor generates a new landscape in the direction of our steps. This creative function of the territory warns us of the absence of a predetermined map of the world, of a prefabricated landscape. The world map is constructed according to how we tour everything. In other words, the progressive creation of the world is subject to how we see everything. Without our previous presence, the world does not exist, but it is potentially possible. This awareness of the invisible map of the world in *Minecraft* will exhort us to explore and walk through the extensive landscapes in search for a possible secret or mystery which procedural Nature hides.

It is not expected that some *Minecraft* players will forget the recreational experience and feel the need to share images

¹⁵Persson, *Terrain generation*, Part 1.



15. Ed Key & David Kanaga, *Proteus*, 2012.



16. Robert Briscoe, *Dear Esther* 2012.

of their discoveries, scenes which surprise us by the disturbing features of the landscape, as if they were to do with an actual life. The romantic escape towards the inner self in a one-way journey towards the beyond, where the romantic nomad looks for and finds the creative and destructive strength of nature, acquires from *Minecraft* a significant renewal: crossing the sea, expeditions to the arctic, the unpleasant surfaces of the map, inaccessible, impenetrable, abandon virtual itineraries for random logarhythms, on paths of an artificial Nature which emerges as the protagonist. The player, placed in the centre of the artificial Nature, protagonist, alone and definitely divided from the game and the player, once again senses the trip as the source which gives life to its “exceptionally hungry and unsatisfied subjectivity”¹⁶ although the journey ends in the fatality of Abysm, as it occurs, irreversibly, in *Proteus* [15] and *Dear Esther* [16].

¹⁶Argullol, *La atracción del abismo*, p. 86.

[...] Treading the mosses of the forest my attention has often been attracted by the appearance of action and expression of surrounding objects especially of trees I have been led to reflect upon the fine effects they produce and to look into the causes. They spring from some resemblance to the human form. There is an expression of affection in intertwining branches of despondency in the drooping willow.¹⁷

The search for a new way to represent Nature conforms to the esthetic concerns of Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich, John Constable and William Turner with abandoning most of what was inherited from landscape artists from the 18th century. Instead of copying the visual artefacts from the rococo style of François Boucher or the bucolic scenes from Francesco Zuccarelli, romantic painters find in the direct experimentation of Nature the necessary inspiration which helps them completely renew the transition of landscape painting. In 1809 Carl Grass published an article titled *Some Observations of Landscape Painting* in which he criticised the lack of revival of the landscape genre due to the little knowledge of artists “about this branch of painting, highly academically limited to copying genre maestros”¹⁸. Grass’ words were not too far from those of Friedrich when he stated that young landscape artists “must study nature from nature and not from paintings”. The romantic slogan on landscape painting would end up being about leaving museums behind and painting directly from nature, without any other filter besides

¹⁷Cole, *The life and works of Thomas Cole*, p. 65.

¹⁸Carus, *Cartas y anotaciones sobre la pintura de paisaje*.



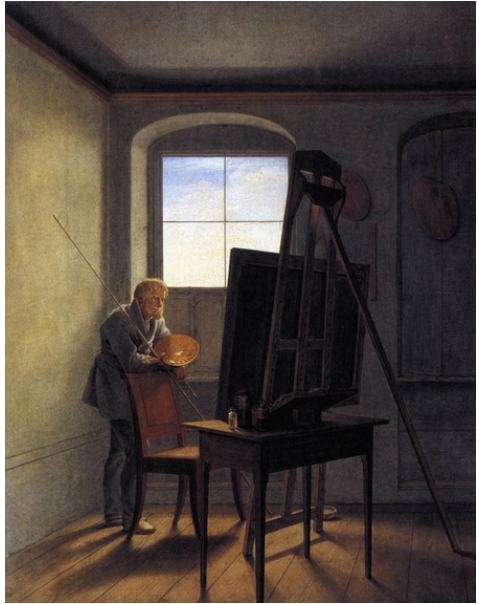
17. Pierre Henri de Valenciennes, *Study of clouds*, 1785, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

what the artist sees. This vision would be strongly influenced by the scientific spirit from the romantic epoch: the romantic artist would not underestimate scientific progress or forget the important advances in disciplines such as topography, geology and botanics. Constable even went so far as to defend painting as:

a science, and should be pursued as an enquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, should not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments.¹⁹

Constable would go on to recognise the influence of Alexander Cozens' landscapes or the cloud studies from Pierre Henri de Valenciennes **[17]** in representing the new vision in mind of Nature. But this scientific sieve does not absolutely exclude the importance of subjectivity in the romantic artist. Empirical observations in the form of notes, studies and sketches of natural phenomena would be changed, from within the artist's study, in a profound reflection on the relations between man and Nature. Painting **[18]**, which G.F. Kersting dedicated to Caspar David Friedrich in his study, demonstrates this alchemical process in painting. In one of the two paintings we see the artist with a palette and paint brushes in his hands, studying the canvas which is resting on the easel. Nothing

¹⁹Honour, *Romanticism*, p. 63.



18. Georg Friedrich Kersting, *Caspar David Friedrich in seinem Atelier*, 1819, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

else. The studio ends up being an empty space, bare of any possible distraction which could interfere in the work of the artist. For Friedrich, Constable and Turner, the journey towards Nature would be the vehicle, in the silence of the studio, which would lead them to the conquest of their own subjectivity.

In this revival of landscapes by romantic painters, the tree stands out as a symbol and mirror of the concerns and desires of man before the divinity embodied in the vastness of Nature. Constable painted the trunk of an elm [19] with such scruples and reverence that he managed to transmit, besides the veracity of the representation of the tree, a sensation of calm and eternity of the live forces of Nature. The tree is present in the majority of the works of Constable and Friedrich. However, while on Constable's canvases the tree personifies the spirit and transcendence of life behind the veil of the empirical representation of Nature, Friedrich expresses the spiritual root-



19. John Constable, *Study of an Elm Tree*, 1821, Victoria & Albert Museum, London

lessness of man in the immensity of his existential uncertainty.

Friedrich's tree is personified and, as an analogy of the human being, transmits feelings found in sadness, suffering or loneliness. In the words of Robert Rosenblum, Friedrich's painting [20] of an isolated tree "centralised to receive our maximum attention and further humanized by the presence, under its sheltering branches, of a lone shepherd leaning against its trunk"²⁰, belongs to this spiritual empathy of the romantic painters for trees as a medium of experimentation and expression of the divinity such as of the uncertainty of man before his own place in the Universe.

Under this emotional light of the romantic tradition, painters such as Vincent Van Gogh, Piet Mondrian and Edvard Munch [22] found in the representation of a tree with twisted and naked branches "the protagonist of some drama more human than botanical, and the conveyor of sensations more emotional than physical"²¹. Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo:

²⁰Rosenblum, *Modern painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition. Friedrich to Rothko*, p. 37.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 184.



20. Casper David Friedrich, *Landscape with Solitary Tree*, 1822, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

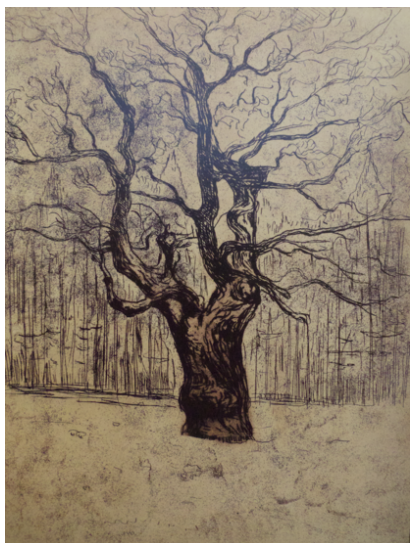


21. Andrew Shouldice, *Hide*, 2012

Sometimes I long so much to do landscape, just as one would for a long walk to refresh oneself, and in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were. A row of pollard willows sometimes resembles a procession of orphan men.²²

The tree according to Van Gogh is full of spirit, enthusiastic, an eloquent demonstration of the divine in the world, but also a tortuous reflection of the melancholic conscience of the artist. This ambivalence of meanings of the romantic sym-

²²Gogh, *Letters to Théo van Gogh*.



22. Edvard Munch, *Die Eiche*, 1903, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabine, Berlin

bol of the tree is found in the works of non-romantic artists. While the drawing of an oak tree by Munch presents, in the tortuous forms of tree branches, the emotion of exhaustion of man with his own solitude, in *The Red Tree* [23], Mondrian pursues the rise of the human conscience through the nervous vision of a lone tree standing out of an intense blue background, forcefully penetrating with the colour red, in the subconscious parts of the Universe.

These intermittent demonstrations of continuity of the romantic tradition are not limited to a few isolated cases of artists who sympathise with romantic emotions and sensations. The diffusion of romantic motifs in the 19th and 20th centuries would be higher in the works of different artists coming from a variety of disciplines such as the mass media. But this indiscriminated proliferation of romantic icons in contemporary art museums as well as in the cinema and advertising did not mean that its creators would be aware of the sources of them and, even less, of the meaning which led romantic painters to



23. Piet Mondrian, *Red Tree*, 1908, Haags Gemeentemuseum, the Hague

use these rather than other icons, as warned by Robert Rosenblum:

The question is the same in dealing with many twentieth-century artists, some of whom are thoroughly aware that they are paying homage to the great Romantic masters, but most of whom perpetuate Romantic motifs, and emotions without any awareness of historical precedent.²³

The ancient warning of Rosenblum of false positives of the continuity of the romantic tradition in the works of artists or creators is still followed nowadays. The opening screen of *Ruins* [24] is a clear example of false positive: its creator refers to the ruins and trees of Friedrich [25] and places them in an uninviting place which, in perspective, with the projection highlighted from the shadows of the elements of the scene and the nudity of the landscape, vaguely evokes the metaphysical painting of Giorgio de Chirico.

The dramatism of Friedrich's trees is also recognisable in the oppressive winter atmosphere found in *Hide*. The strong pixelation of the monochrome and jagged silhouettes of the trees [21], unrecognisable from a certain distance, highlights

²³Rosenblum, *Modern painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition. Friedrich to Rothko*, p. 149.



24. Jake Elliot, *Ruins*, 2012



25. Caspar David Friedrich, *Die Jahreszeiten: Der Winter*, 1803, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin

the expression of hostility in the landscape, the trees in *Hide* possess a threatening attitude and are defiant to the eyes of those who observe them, but also suggests the unavoidable form of the tombstone of a cemetery right when the presence of the steeple of a church crowned with a cross is recognised [26]. It's difficult to venture if the recreation of the raw winter landscape as the violent and naked representation of the trees in *Hide* belongs to the same emotional world of Friedrich, but there's no doubt that, thanks to these expressions of romanticism, they transmit an emotion of existential suffocation which exceeds their own limits of recreational experience.

Ruins and *Hide* are examples of a voluntary yet uncon-



26. Andrew Shouldice, *Hide* , 2012

scious appropriation of romantic iconography (the tree, ruins, churches, isolated landscapes) in the creation of an hallucinatory atmosphere (*Ruins*) or anxiety (*Hide*). These approximations are common in the majority of creations in which history, the characters or the stages form a part, for instance, of the genre of gothic terror, indistinctively of whether the action takes place in the dark chambers of a gothic abbey or in the deserted streets of a post-apocalypse, the constant connotations and references to the romantic symbols are evident, but void of their original meaning. In none of the cases are they voluntary heirs of the belief in a romantic pantheism capable of creating in the forms of nature the demonstration of transcendence and spirit. The same can't be said about *Proteus* [28] and *A Slow Year*, which both recover, intuitively or semi-consciously, the romantic emotion in the mysteries of nature, but deliberately molded to a graphic language based on a reduced scale of highly saturated colours and a very low graphic resolution, characteristics which evoke images from the first video games.

A Slow Year is a personal creation by Ian Bogost as the result of a research project done with Nick Montfort on the popular console Atari 2600²⁴. In *A Slow Year* , Ian Bogost highlights his solitary experience in the slow process of his development and programming due to the complexity of programming with hardware from 1977:

²⁴Bogost, Ian & Monfort, Nick. *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System (Platform Studies)*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.

You have to program right up against the metal, somehow creating your game by means micro-processor instructions and register writes on a very weird graphics and sound chip. It's quiet there, just you and the circuits – no development team, no middleware, no Internet pundits.²⁵

A Slow Year is a set of four games which represent the four seasons of the year. The action of each one of these seasonal games occurs, bit by bit, from the point of view of the narrator: having a coffee in the winter, sleeping in the summer, the brilliant flashes of lightning from a spring storm or watching the free fall of a leaf from the autumn wind. The changes are immediately audible or occur between large intervals of inactivity. This slowness is, of course, intentional and aims to retain the observation of the player in the poetic exploration of each season of the year. On the other hand, and due to the graphic limitations of the hardware of the Atari console, the shapes of the represented objects (the mug, the tree, the rain, the window) are derived from an abstraction which levels the characteristic spatial perspective as the only possible interaction with the game. Only this attentive solitary observation of what occurs in each one of the four scenes will permit the player-spectator to successfully complete the recreational experience of *A Slow Year*.

However, observation of the transgression of the recreational experience in *A Slow Year* goes further than the simple aesthetic gratification gained from a lo-fi video game “as mere hipster nostalgia”²⁶. This is sufficiently demonstrated with the following affirmation from Bogost which convinces us that *A Slow Year* belongs to a level of experience which is profoundly different from “retro” aesthetics:

I wanted to explore naturalism, in both the ordinary and artistic senses of that world, Imagism and haiku already suggest certain themes, thanks to their common concern for the meeting points between nature and human.²⁷

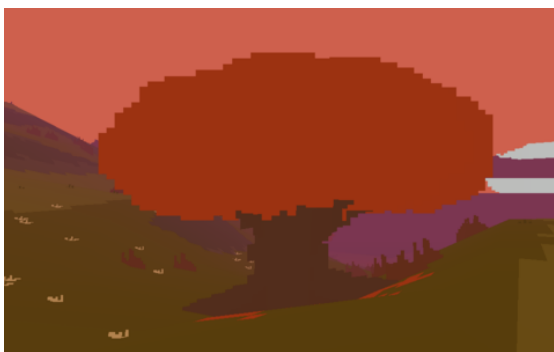
²⁵Bogost, *A Slow Year*, p. 9.

²⁶Ibid., p. 15.

²⁷Ibid., p. 12.



27. Ian Bogost, *Autumn, A Slow Year*, 2012



28. Ed Key & David Kanaga, *Proteus*, 2012

Bogost's naturalism, although inspired by the poetic works of Ezra Pound and the Imagismo movement, acts as a bridge to the romantic feeling of organic unity between man and nature. In *Autumn* [27], Bogost seems to recover this romantic empathy for trees as symbols which radiate the energy of a supernatural reality. As opposed to the objective naturalism of romantic painters, Bogost finds in the reduced graphic palette of the Atari console a minimal graphic vocabulary which helps create an iconic representation of a perfectly symmetrical tree which, as in the case of Constable's study of an elm, Friedrich's trees and Mondrian's red tree, invites the examination of natural forms beyond the aesthetic surface.

Ian Bogost's feeling for minimalist naturalism from the first

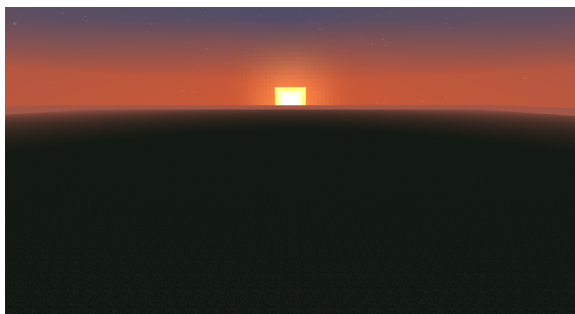


29. David Crane, *detail of Pitfall*, 1982



30. Steve Cartwright, *detail of Barnstorming*, 1982

Atari games, such as the representation of a forest in *Pitfall* [29] or a sunset in *Barnstorming* [30], is found, unclear whether it's voluntary or not, in the representation of nature in *Proteus* in which, as in *A Slow Year*, the structure of the game is divided into four parts which correspond to the four seasons of the year. In *Proteus*, Ed Key and David Kanaga invite the player to explore the wild landscape of an island where they venture to discover a presence of strange processes which alter the static behaviour of the elements of nature. As in *A Slow Year*, *Proteus* requires the player to slowly observe the topography of the landscape, of the restless behaviour of the trees or the rapid movement of the sky in favour of a more spiritual than recreational experience.



31. Markus Persson, *Minecraft (Flat Mode)*, 2011



**32. Caspar David Friedrich, *Sunset*,
Hermitage Museum, Saint
Petersburg, 1835**

This minimalist naturalism which fascinates both Bogost and Ed Key is, in some ways, a translation of the graphic lexicon of primitive videogames from this cult of the mysteries of Nature which was built up by landscape artists from Nordic Romanticism, as well as their followers from the 19th and 20th centuries. Even the views of expansive virgin land in *Minecraft* [31] are framed by this feeling of immensity and primitive illimitation so representative of the romantic landscapes in which, equal to the two enigmatic figures of Friedrich [32], put us on the edge of a symmetrical abysm.

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