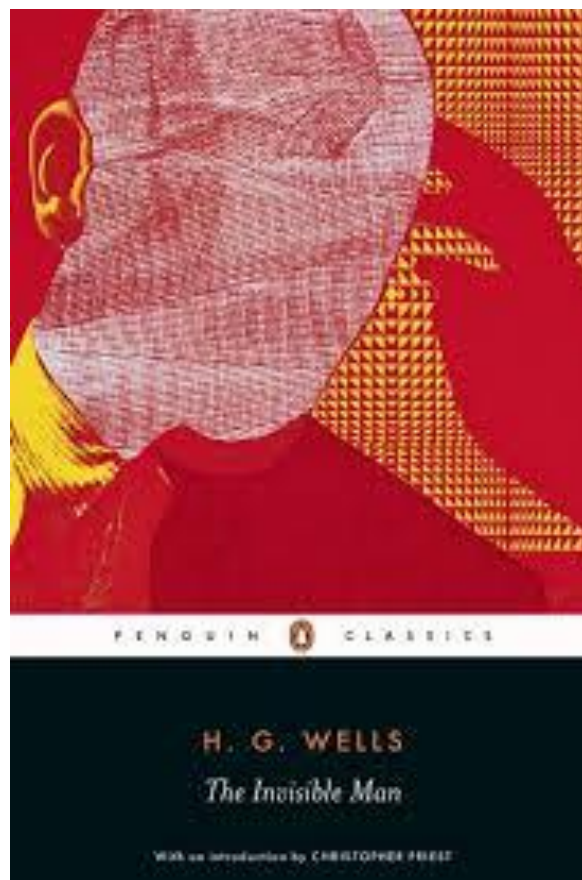


Welcome to Picturing the Invisible

Paul Coldwell, 29 March 2019

Last summer I had re-read H.G. Wells' novella, 'The Invisible Man'. First published in 1897, it's the story of a man whose experiments in altering states of being goes wrong and despite his efforts to reverse the process, he ends up permanently invisible. As a consequence, he becomes the outsider, the other. There is one passage in the book whereby the invisible man, wanting nothing more than to be left alone, is so hounded by the mob that he unleashes what he refers to as the terror. The terror being, that under the cloak of invisibility, he could strike anywhere and it would only be through the aftermath of his actions that his presence would be revealed.



There is nothing for it, but to start the terror. This announces the first day of the terror. Port Burdock is no longer under the Queen, tell your colonel of police, and the rest of them; it is under me- the Terror! This is day one of year one of the new epoch, - the epoch of the invisible man. he may lock himself away, hide himself away, get guards around him, put on armour if he likes; death, the unseen death, is coming.

- **H G Wells**, The Invisible Man

In the light of issues around security post 9/11, this struck me as such a vivid description of the condition of fear that terrorism induces and the problems for society as it attempts to guard itself against an invisible enemy. Relating this to my co-applicant Professor Ruth Morgan's specialism, forensic science, I began to thinking about how in that discipline, the invisible is gradually made visible through clues, material evidence and assorted data. So here is literature crossing over into material science and social politics.

In 2006, I curated an exhibition 'Morandi's Legacy-Influences on British Art,' which focused on the Italian metaphysical painter Giorgio Morandi, known for his intimate compositions of still lives. I was particularly drawn to his etchings (a group of which can be seen at the Estorick Museum of Italian Art, London) and have written about one of his prints for our special edition of Art in Print edited by Susan Tallman. I write about how the objects in the print are rendered as absences coalescing into a form in which shadow, substance and interval are given equal weight. The invisible or unsubstantial is given a role as prominent as the objects themselves. If I were to project this onto a concept of society it would suggest that the proposition is that the strength of a society is the manner in which everyone can find a place. Here's an extract from my piece for Art in Print.

Morandi teases the viewer, inviting us to either draw back as if on a promise that the image will come into sharp focus, or to be drawn in close with the expectation of a secret that will be revealed. Both thwart our attempts at a fixed resolution. The image remains in a state of flux, alternating between absence and presence, each patch of tone tempting us into configuring it into a pot, a vase or a bottle while all the time refusing such definitions.

- Paul Coldwell

I also recall, working with an Irish artist, Kathy Prendergast who was working with map data. Taking data from a map of North American, she stripped away all names barring those with the prefix lost. As a result, the map featured those small incidental places with names such as 'Lost Spring', 'Lost Creek', 'Lost Trail', 'Lost Hills', 'Lost Cabin', 'Lost Valley' or 'Lost Man Hollow'.

What emerged was an emotional palimpsest of America revealing areas of intensity as would be associated with gold strikes and new settlements, places lost or made invisible by the standard map. Here through a collaboration between arts, computer data and geography a new way of revealing what was otherwise invisible is revealed.

Finally, whilst I have been a lifelong admirer of the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti, I had struggled to understand why this work made such a profound impact on me and in particular the manner in which the work fixes the viewer, much like Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner.' Then, by chance I read Jean Paul Sartre's 'Essays in Existentialism' and came across this extraordinary passage of writing about Giacometti which suddenly clarified and found expression for the feelings I had.

The figure when it leaves his fingers is 'ten steps away' and no matter what we do, it remains there. The statue itself determines the distance from which it must be viewed, just as courtly manners determine the distance from which the king must be addressed. The situation engenders the surrounding no man's land. Each of his figures is Giacometti himself produces his little local vacuum. Yet all these slight absences that are as much a part of us as our names, as our shadows, are not enough to make a world. There is also the void, the universal distance between all things. The street is empty, drinking in the sun; suddenly, in this empty space a human being appears.

- **Jean Paul Sartre**, Essays in Existentialism

So here literature, philosophy and sculpture have come together to bring a new understanding of that invisible space between the viewer and the object.