



Windowphilia

Description

Windowphilia is a fondness for windows â?? or *fenestraphilia*, or *parathyrophilia*. A Google search doesnâ??t reveal much about either term, but *biophilia* is in common usage, and in the OED. Iâ??ve been reading the book by Sue Thomas called *Technobiophilia: Nature and Cyberspace*. (*Technobiophilia* hasnâ??t yet made it to the OED.)

Her book endorses the role of digital technologies in expanding our affinity with nature, rather than upsetting the human-nature relationship â?? a common warning amongst *technophobic* advocates for a return to a slow, mindful and stress-free life. See [Nature deficiency disorder](#).

Nearby nature

Windows pop up in Thomasâ?? book in discussions about the therapeutic and restorative benefits of being in natural environments, a theme that Iâ??ve explored elsewhere under the heading [Soft fascination](#). She picks up on the value of windows as a means of enhanced contact with â??nearby nature.â?•

These are not plate glass windows with barely visible frames merging inside and outside, but windows that render conspicuous the threshold between the world within and what we choose to identify as the natural without â?? trees, grass, clouds, sparrows. Her archetypical window experience is that of the home working academic with desk and laptop affording glances out through the window of a country cottage.

Calling on architectural insights from Kent Bloomer she advocates thickening the threshold with patterned curtains or blinds, transfers and window ornaments. Mullions, astragals, sills and deep reveals enhance the boundary condition. Bloomer cites Frank Lloyd Wrightâ??s ornamental window treatments, and states, â??the moment of divide is the most charged, ambivalent, and negotiable for belonging to both sides of the psychological boundary that informs our reaction to the environment.â?•



Window substitutes

Thomas outlines Stephen and Rachel Kaplan's arguments for [the benefits of being in natural environments](#), and translates these to the online world. In particular she draws on studies into people's responses to the presence or absence of windows. Apparently hospital patients recover quicker, and people in waiting rooms are less anxious, when there's a view of green space from a window. But pictures on the wall provide a similar benefit, as do still and video images of nature scenes: "Whether indoors, outdoors or online, it is clear that nearby nature has a profound effect on well-being" (loc921).

She refers to the book *Technological Nature* by Peter Kahn who studied people working in environments with no windows, rooms with actual windows to an outside world, and wall-mounted computer displays of outdoor scenes. Kahn concludes, "technological nature is better than no nature but not as good as actual nature" (xvi). Window substitutes are ok if there's no better option.

But irrespective of the evidence about recovery and well-being, these authors seem uneasy about the idea that we could fill our environments with window substitutes. I don't need to catalogue all the ways that an actual window differs from a picture or screen on a wall. I take from Thomas's book a challenge to the sanctity of some mythical idea of our authentic experience of nature. That similar benefits might be achieved by other (digital) means adds weight to this challenge.

Picture windows

These authors deal with our experience of nature, but not really of pictures. Looking through a window and at a picture of a scene through a window both involve interpretation, but to talk about *pictures* of what we might see through a window invokes debate about signs and meanings. Like a series of words in a book, a picture makes reference to something. In Roland Barthes's terms it *denotes* something (perhaps a meadow) and *connotes* something (perhaps a summer holiday, *The Sound of Music*, life on a farm, intensive agriculture, other pictures).

Some of these picture references may or may not impinge on our sense of well being. Memories and culturally influenced preferences come into play. Above the fireplace in my dentist's waiting room is a gilt-framed sugary print of a scene in the Swiss Alps. I don't think that reduces my anxiety about what may follow, but fortunately there's a big transomed Georgian window in the surgery room that

arrests my gaze and suggests a means of escape.

References

- Barthes, Roland. 1973. *Mythologies*. Trans. A. Lavers. London: Paladin
- Bloomer, Kent. 2011. The picture window: The problem of viewing nature through glass. In S. R. Kellert, J. Heerwagen, and M. Mador (eds.), *Biophilic Design: The Theory, Science and Practice of Bringing Buildings to Life*: 253-262. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Kahn, Peter H. 2011. *Technological Nature: Adaptation and the Future of Human Life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Thomas, Sue. 2013. *Technobiophilia: Nature and Cyberspace*. London: Bloomsbury

Note

- Image above is a photograph successively re-rendered with the Waterlogue app on an iPhone. At what point does an image of a window view cease to be recognised as such?
- Also see blog posts on [nature](#), [image realism](#) and [photography](#).
- See Sue Thomas's blog site: <https://suethomasnet.wordpress.com/>
- Peter Kahn's book *Technological Nature* raises interesting questions about design. The book contains several pictures of the screen arrangements intended to simulate a view through a window. But the screens are mounted higher than is usual for windows, they are positioned typically as wall mounted flat screen monitors on brackets a few centimetres proud of the wall surface. In other words they have none of the architectural attributes ascribed to windows in the chapter by Kent Bloomer. There's no recess, reveal, partial occlusion or a sense that the office worker is looking *through* a surface to something beyond. Kahn makes much of the parallax problem, that the relationships between objects in the visual field doesn't change as you move your head around relative to the screen. I would add that flat screens don't offer depth of field cues. The eyes can't settle on infinite distance, or the horizon, which some think adds to mental recovery. The problems come into consideration in VR and stereoscopy (including 3D displays on flat screens).

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. nature
2. photography
3. representation

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