

A giant creeps out of a keyhole

1. Maria de los Angeles, sometimes known as Marie-Angeles, Angelines or even Angela, was born and raised in a small town situated in the Ebro Valley, Rioja, Northern Spain. The town itself was rather ordinary, a fact counterbalanced, to a certain extent, by the beauty of the surrounding mountainous landscape – the Sierra Cantabria beyond the river to the North, the Peñas de Iregua, Leza y Jubera to the South. Many of her most vivid childhood memories involved this landscape: like the time she was thrown into a pile of grain aged three and a half while visiting some cousins in a village set in the mountainside. On another occasion she remembers listening to the sound of cow bells from the ruins of Clavijo Castle as a herd of cattle moved across the valley below, and thinking that this sound was music, or something very close to it. Once even, she was followed around another village for what seemed like hours, by a friendly Pyrenean Mountain Dog that was as tall as her father. The memory though, was a hazy one no one could confirm, and that might even have been a dream.

2. By the time she was a teenager it was clear to Angelines that her home town bored her. Unable to afford to further her studies at the University in Zaragoza, she resolved to leave the stifling atmosphere of Franco's Spain entirely as soon as she was able to, and in 1957 in fact, she was recruited by a travelling representative of the National Health Service and invited to move to England to learn to be a nurse.

3. Though she'd enjoyed herself in London and made many new friends, Angelines chose to go back to Spain soon after completing her studies — eager to see the mountains again and exhausted by the demands of her nursing degree. After a year had gone by, however, the desire to leave returned, and she moved back to London, this time to try her hand at a vocation more suited to her temperament. She got herself a job as a waitress at the Prince of Wales Hotel in Kensington, and gradually, over a period of many years worked her way up to the position of reservations manager, a career she loved and excelled at. She eventually gave up her job though, rather surprisingly, for marriage and motherhood in Kingston-upon-Thames, a sleepy and mildly hilly suburb of South-West London. Family life was hard for Marie-Angeles, she adored her children, but she found being a housewife no more enjoyable than being a nurse. She searched for something to fill the space that her old career at the hotel had left and so she enrolled at a local community art college and started to paint.

4. One of her best works was her earliest, an oil painting rendered in reds, yellows and greens of the beloved mountain landscape from which she came. In the background you can see what is almost certainly a depiction of Peña de Lapoblación, more often referred to as El Leon Dormido, the sleeping lion, an oddly shaped mountain where, legend has it, the favourite horse of General Espartero fell during the First Carlist War trying to negotiate its strange and confusing terrain.

5. The painting remained on display in the family home for some decades and eventually, after her death, travelled abroad with her daughter to reside on the bedroom wall, forever a portal to the Spanish mountains, and a testament to the central contradiction of Angelines' life: caught as it were between the two opposing poles of wanderlust and homesickness. I know the colours are a little unnatural and the rendering highly stylized but there is a sense of depth and energy, if you can see past the brush strokes, that points to something real and solid. Can't you imagine yourself there, right now?

6. Significantly more famous than Marie-Angeles, was one of her own personal artistic heroes, the man born Edward James Muggeridge, later Muygridge and finally Edweard Muybridge: photographer, entrepreneur, almost inventor of cinema, and one-time murderer.

He was born 191 years ago in Kingston-upon-Thames, many years before Angelines moved there to raise a family, but I don't doubt that in 1830 it had been every bit as sleepy and mildly hilly as it was in 1979. He grew up in a house near the river, quite close to the "Kingstone" a small rock surrounded by metal railings that was the site of the coronation of seven Saxon Kings and the best the town could produce in terms of historical interest. Kingston wasn't yet that well connected to the livelier parts of the South-East, and although you could have undoubtedly found a boat to take you upriver to Hampton Court Palace, it would be decades before the railway line was built connecting it to central London.

7. It should come as no surprise then that Muybridge, much like Marie-Angeles at the same age, was keen to expand his horizons and so he left his home town at the first available opportunity. He sailed to America in 1852, working as a book salesman first in New York and then San Francisco, but returned to Kingston between 1860 and 1867 after a stagecoach accident that nearly cost him his life. Biographers have only a partial impression of what went on during his extended convalescence, but what is certain is that he used the time to immerse himself in the techniques of wet-plate photography and emerged as a reimagined version of himself, as Muybridge the artist.

8. The rest, as they say, is history: he was drawn back to the West Coast of the United States where he launched himself as a photographer. Later on, of course, the movement studies and his invention, the zoopraxiscope, would prove to be the most famous foreshadowing of the cinematic arts.

But that's not really what I want to talk about here: not about the breaking down of motion into a series of discrete steps (as fascinating as this may be) nor the knitting together of these steps again at a speed that would cause the illusion of locomotion. I'm interested in movement in a different sense and on a wider scale, in what it means to travel from one place to another in whatever manner you can possibly imagine.

9. Yosemite's dazzling beauty was an idyllic green landscape of mountains, lakes, trees and sky, and it seems somehow that on his two trips there, Muybridge managed to capture every square inch of its terrain on film, as if wishing to create an exact photo-duplicate. There are hundreds of pictures of scenes from the valley, often taken from remote and precarious positions, most of them infused with an exaggerated sense of depth and perspective shaped by choice of view and the manipulation of photographic exposure.

10. Some of the photographs were taken on mammoth plates measuring over half a metre wide that allowed the image to be crammed with immersive detail, many of the others were stereoscopic pictures, double photographs of the same scene taken from slightly different angles and designed to be viewed by one person at a time, using a special apparatus. The market for these types of images had grown extremely large by the last decades of the 19th century — it seemed as if the whole world was full of people wishing to vicariously experience places they had never been to. The American writer Oliver Wendell Holmes describes the experience of the stereoscope:

The shutting out of surrounding objects and the concentration of the whole attention, which is a consequence of this, produce a dream-like exaltation... in which we seem to leave the body behind us and sail away into one strange scene after another, like disembodied spirits.

11. The impression of three-dimensionality, solidity, has of course always been a central goal of representational art and entertainment. In both image and sound it is the key to immersion, of carrying away a spectator to another place or time.

While recorded sound is easily three-dimensional — sound fills the room regardless of its quality, and even a mono signal becomes ‘solid’ simply by being played back through a speaker in a space, creating complex patterns of reflection — the history of stereoscopically mediated images is a more complex one. The popularity of the stereograph eventually died out, in part because of its lurid associations with Victorian pornography, but also perhaps because of problems with the experience of the illusion itself. This experience is immersive of course, how can it be otherwise when it fills up the whole of the visual field? Its solidity however possesses an artificial quality: objects appear as a series of papery planes situated in an undefined space, an effect that has been compared to the flatness of stage scenery or of a children’s pop-up book.

12. If we go a little further into the matter we will discover that both stereo seeing and hearing are based on the comparison of two things, a principle that underlines much of our experience of the world whether we are conscious of it or not. It is the small differences between the information reaching our left and right eyes and ears, that is, disparities in angles, loudness or phase, that helps us to create a unified, solid world for ourselves.

Maybe we should spare a thought for the rabbit with eyes on either side of its head that must deal with two almost discrete views, a sort of rabbit panorama designed to protect him from predators approaching from any angle.

13. The cross-comparison of two similar things permeates our mental processes as well as our senses. Gaston Bachelard, for instance believed that we all possess within us a primal landscape, a baseline, formed in childhood and to which each subsequent landscape we encounter is measured. People experience this when they read a novel: a house or a street will often in the mind’s eye be derived from the same house or street that the reader grew up in, subtly modified by the details of the text. I would even go further and hypothesize that we accumulate many ‘baselines’ over the course of our lifetimes, including the environment that we currently call home. To give an example, have you ever had a feeling of unease and newness on returning to your apartment after a long journey or a visit to a place you’ve never been before? It’s a feeling I can’t quite put my finger on (but of course those are my favourite kinds of feelings). I guess it’s a kind of sensitivity to difference, as if the location you’ve just been to conjures up a unique lens through which to see a familiar environment strangely, changing it in a way that is hard to quantify. In the end every place is always doubled somehow.

14. Twoness is everywhere. It’s governing your perceptual experience right now. Every time I show you a photograph or film of someplace else, or play a recording over the speakers, you are experiencing two places at the same time: the depicted environment and your current physical one, the first nested inside the second, its qualities altered by its new home.

15. Looking at it in another way, when we view a picture of a location, doesn't part of us travel willingly to that place, if only momentarily?

16. The state of bilocation, of being in two places at the same time, could be thought of as a kind of continuum, with actual bilocation (as practiced by mystics and saints) at one end, through lucid dreams, out of body experiences, day dreams and then on into mediated experiences of "being where you are not". A list of these mediated experience in a descending scale of immersiveness might look like this: modern virtual reality with 360 degree video and ambisonic sound, zoom chats, the stereoscope, field recordings and all stereo sound, film at a cinema, television, a transistor radio, a photograph, a painting. It's asking a lot of a viewer of course to try to 'be there', in a painting, but perhaps it's just a question of the right kind of attention and a willingness to suspend belief.

17. And let's not forget that over the past centuries the bar had been raised in terms of what might be considered to be an immersive medium. The anecdote about an audience jumping out of their seats while watching the Lumieres' train film is a well-known one but I could imagine similar stories: a visitor to a 17th century picture gallery being so astonished by the life-like quality of a vanitas painting that they try to reach out and grab a half-peeled lemon from a table; a 19th century viewer of a Daguerreotype convinced that that the image held within its margins is a fully-preserved version of that thing, be it a deceased loved one, or a view of an empty Paris street; me as a very small child believing that both the radio and television are full of miniature people performing all manner of entertainments precisely for my enjoyment.

18. I have a recurring dream in which I exist simultaneously in two places, usually the starting point of a journey and its destination. Sometimes I'm, say, at home packing a suitcase frantically and yet already present in the airport departure lounge. The dream makes no sense at all — why pack frantically if I am already where I need to be? In other dreams it's more about finding a shortcut to another place. I scratch a hairline crack in the wall of my apartment revealing a wormhole to a location that is miles or even hundreds of miles away. I am always quite pleased with myself in these dreams: content to know that places are connected in ways I could have never imagined and that moving between them is as easy as stepping through a rip in the plasterwork.

Then away you go to a spot I know where the cockleshells are found

Oh! I do like to be beside the seaside!

I do like to be beside the sea!

Oh I do like to stroll along the Prom, Prom, Prom!

Where the brass bands play, "Tiddely-om-pom-pom!"

So just let me be beside the seaside!

I'll be beside myself with glee

and there's lots of guys beside,

I should like to be beside, beside the seaside,

beside the sea!