

The Johannesburg address

WHY SHOULD THE PAST BE OUR DESTINY

Let me begin with a simple claim: that nothing is much, if anything at all, just by itself. Things gain reality, presence, life once they relate to something, somebody, and it is relationships that create the fabric we somehow find ourselves placed in, be it in time, space or the stuff that dreams are made of.

Bearing this in mind you might be less surprised by a description of our place in time – that past and future are only held together by us who experience, think and talk about what has been and what might be – it is us, nothing less, that are the nexus between not yet and nevermore.

Tremendous.

Tremendous and, perhaps, morally and aesthetically more portent than we had ever imagined.

Analogous, if slightly more complicated, is our position in the place we call our own – Nature.

If it is true that we live in, with and against Nature, Nature as the sum of what we are given, what we find around us in the widest of senses, - if it is true –

but let us look at this for a little moment:

we live in Nature as we are part of it.

Even the most daring concept of the human spirit does not let us escape the physical fact of being part of what we are born into, and even death will not release us.

Death is part of Nature's modus operandi (even though it would not make us less natural if we were sowing a little less death around us....).

We live with Nature as we take a position beyond the way things go (to quote Fischli & Weiss), wanting to understand, influence and direct the world we inhabit. We take it apart, look into it to find out how it works and try to put it together once more. Sometimes we even get it working again once we are done with it.

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And we work against Nature by foreseeing, at times, which way it would be going and take action to alter the direction of events. Examples?

We build reservoirs in case of draught and to generate energy, at times in open conflict with those who profess to be Natures' defenders. We save and store for the proverbial "rainy day".

And we use Nature to suit ourselves: fire to clear whole valleys, dykes to protect low-lying land for its fertile riches, and death, wholesale and in detail, to turn opponents into victims or to eradicate them from the earth to defend what we claim is ours or in our interest and, yes, we take choice away from those we deem unworthy of the freedom we take for ourselves. Freedom that by nature -dare I say it?- is there in equal measure, at any time, for every-one. But usually, because we tie our own hands, that freedom remains in the hands of the stronger.

Until we humanize our world sufficiently we call the law of the stronger the "law of Nature".

Maybe a little living "against Nature" would, under these circumstances, go a long way.....

But if what I try to say is true, what then?

Or, rather, so what?

Before we get into the muddle of meaning, before I propose the analogy between Nature and History, let us have a look at what the only guide I trust, ART, that wonderful "parallel nature" proposed by Schiller (in his philosophical letters), has to show us.

After all, we trust our eyes and believe what we see. But do we?

I propose to use a painting to lead us, as a kind of "seeing eye dog" for the mind, and I do so because this way to proceed has in my entire, not very short life helped me to think and to see what, otherwise, would have remained unthinkable.

What is more, while quick hand deceives the eye, there is hardly something more stable, more reliable than a well-made painting, - an observation, I think, that speaks well about an ancient art, one that keeps renewing itself, actually reinvents itself while we look.

Let me introduce my TOOL:

Pieter Breugel the Elder's "Blind Leading the Blind" from Naples' Capo di Monte Museum.

And before we even try to get in to this painting, it's place in history and in this discussion, allow me to remind you that we should avoid the false image of history as a linear development.

History is not something that flows from the tube of time once we turn on the tap, its fateful simultaneous divergences ("fatale Gleichzeitigkeiten" in the priceless language of ERNST BLOCH) allow contradictions that try the capacities of the human mind.

Neither is a work safely embedded in the factual existence around it – the greatest inventions contain the most extraordinary leaps of imagination, creating a distance between their ingenuous conception and the leaden normality of their surroundings that can neither be measured by space nor time. That normality is well described by FERNAND BRAUDEL when he points at the omni-presence of small Flemish paintings at the most important FAIRS of Europe –Rheims, Leipzig and Frankfurt/Oder.

A thriving industry of genre painting (and we can justly think in industrial terms when we recall the activity of more than 25.000 guild members in the population of Flanders - less than 3 million!), produced a stunning multitude of fine objects that had absolutely no effect on the development of fine art. But it had a devastating effect on our perception of art.

Genre painting – sentimental realism is the undoubtedly biased description I would use to define its' depiction of life as ensnared by material things – is the unlucky marriage between false feelings and real things, the "telling detail" obfuscating the lack of aesthetic honesty, the "loving description" of homely life that leads directly to the dumbing down of what was, originally, perceived the essence of human endeavor: art as rebellion against humanity's pact with Nature, the very pact man signs with his own death, and gets shortchanged into something pleasant and nice to warm your heart on a chilly evening. Consequently this progress of prettiness ends, not at all naturally, but perversely, in what we have learned to call "Socialist Realism" - how I wish we could un-learn that oxymoron! – or in the seemingly innocent but profoundly poisonous image of an attractive Arian family, all blue eyes and flaxen hair, gathered around a black bakelite peoples radio (the "Volksempfänger", one for every German household) in the clean but simple kitchen of Paul Padua's(1903-1981)"Der Fuehrer spricht" – the leader speaks.

It is in this context that Breugel appears so shockingly original that his work might just be the stuff to wake us from our post-postmodern stupor and catapult us in to a reality useful for the individual mind and our society as a fragile whole:

- > Breugel's "Triumph of Death" (ca.1568, Madrid, Prado)
 - could teach even the most advanced mass-murderer how to organize the odd hecatomb – a more radical example of the delirium of death is hardly imaginable. What is worse, we do not need to imagine it, given our vantage point as observers of our own man-made hell called the present.

- > Breugel's "The fall of Icarus"(ca.1558 Brussels, Royal Museum of Art),
 - is the most subtle allegory of failure existing in western art.
 - The disastrous event of mythical importance – we remember the enterprising lad, inebriated by the bliss of flying, disregarded his father-inventor's warning not to fly too close to the sun - and his deadly fall is widely ignored: there is a fisherman keenly observing his rod while the early aviator plunges into the waves and drowns, not even far from him but not in the field of his attention, a shepherd dreamingly looks into the sky with not a worry in the world while a plowman diligently follows plow and horse, we do not know whether he thinks of his lunch or of the aria in Haydn's "Creation" ("he walks his furrows whistling") but we do know that he has not seen the heartbreaking accident.
 - Add to this the very present, disturbing but equally funny dimension of art-loving tourists, catalog or guide-book in hand, stopping in front of this small but famous painting, to read the caption on the accompanying label,
 - search for the promised story and leave with a shrug – they, too, will not find the body in an event so clearly described.
 - Because Icarus has already fallen. There are legs disappearing in the agitated sea – the worst is over, or is it still to come, because we are left with something we ought to know about but have not yet discovered?

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All this a powerful reminder of the genius of a painter who plotted his story of despair so well that it's most painful, it's most pertinent element, the truth, is not so much hidden but un-observed. The drama of human courage and defeat, great and moving as it might be, finds no understanding, never mind an audience with empathy.

To "read" this small (73 x 112cm) but powerful painting as nothing less than the allegory of human endeavor is not, I believe, to read something into it, it is much rather the acceptance of the radical honesty inherent in Art.

WHERE else, if not in art, could failure and grim fate be given the dignified face they deserve in life, and in death?

>in the case of the charming, if puzzling "Birdnest-thief" (1568, Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna) we do not have to search for the narrative. For this strange allegory of a man pointing

at what is happening behind him - there is a boy in the tree trying to rob a birds-nest - while he looks openly at the onlooker, slyly drawing the observer into a story that seems obscure if not absurd, there is - remember I wanted to use art as a guide? - a scene that is equally bewildering but has the boy, the tree, the nest, the whole story in the significant background of three truly strange figures - "Bee-keepers" in their traditional attire with meshed baskets as protection - and this etching carries an inscription leaving no doubt about the intentions of it's author:

"He who knows where the hive is has the knowledge. Who steals it has the Hive. Quite.

Who would have ever expected the impact of practical thinking through high art? Maybe we continue to underrate its enlightening and subversive powers.

With this excursion through the complex and multifaceted work of a painter who seems to be known and loved for his charming and evocative description of the good, if hardworking life of country-folks - the "Country-Wedding", until now intentionally not mentioned, would be the leading example - I hope to have earned your trust to follow me in an encounter with the work that persuaded me to think about the past as our, well, possible, or even desirable, but perhaps also AVOIDABLE destiny. So it is now, and in this context, brought in front of us as food for thought.

It is Breugel's "The Blind leading the Blind" ca.1568, from the Capo di Monte Museum in Naples.

The story is sufficiently known, it appears in Matthew XV/14 ("Let them alone: they the blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch"), but equally powerfully in Sebastian Braant's "The ship of fools", maybe the most important novel of the 16th century in the German language, comparable only to "Don Quichote".(the quote is: "Eyn blyndt den andern schylted blyndt,wiewol sie beid gefallen synt".

Why blindness could be a prerogative for leadership I leave to your imagination.

Someone wants to have recognized three of the blind men struggle across the horizon on the upper right of "The blauwe Huyck", ca. 1558 (today in Berlin), making of this, maybe Breugels most complex description of a world upside down, where reason and madness continuously appear as an inseparable pair (e.g. a shepherd shearing a sheep next to a swineherd shearing a sow)a testing ground for his delight in contradiction and dialectic, but I would like us to stay with our image and it's deceptively simple message, which is: when the blind lead the blind they will fall into the ditch.

And they do.

Observing this desperate row of stragglers, their unseeing eyes directed upwards into a light they can only feel, as they traverse a sweet landscape that holds only pitfalls for them, we note a truly tragic contradiction: the dramatically awful drama of people lost in this world, following each other nolens volens by holding on by hand or stick, is described in, well, can I say it, loving detail and the most carefully calibrated colors imaginable. Charcot, yes, Dr. Freud's illustrious teacher, observed (in "Les Difformes et les Malades dans l'Art", Paris 1889, I owe this information to Robert Delevoy) that one could actually analyze the diverse diseases, the white dot on one man's cornea as glaucoma, the deep sunken-in eyeholes of the next one as an atrophy of his eyeballs, the obsessive truthfulness of the painters observation serving the same purpose as the cool, eerie beauty of the colors in this masterly example of an artist' supreme control: to force us to look, to stay with what we look at and to let what we see work on us and complete art's utopian possibilities by letting us enter into a relationship with a work that is breathtakingly present, and this for almost 450 years. It has been said that only in looking at a work of art does it become entirely itself.

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I would like to add that only in doing it's emotional and intellectual work in us does a work of art realize its most wondrous promise – to be uniquely itself, but with each and everyone, if we allow it to happen: art has, and yields, a secret for every one, individually, and is all the same a gift to humanity.

And humanity is stunningly represented in these six hap- and hope-less individuals – one has already stumbled into a stream, slowly sinking in backwards and taking his musical instrument (a reference to the one art that is not denied to the blind!) with him into certain destruction. The next man, just losing his balance while he tries not to break contact with the fallen, is already half-way down, his face a grimace of shock and dismay, pulling, we can be sure, another one with him – the stick reaching out will be neither guide nor support but a blind man's undoing.

And so it goes.

Given our foolishness, our stubborn insistence not to learn, not to trust reason, not to rely on experience (a gift of time? Or of a mind willing to learn and put two and two together?) or turn to good, so very uncommon sense, but instead depend on “tradition”, that strange construct of collective memory and forgetting, might we ever arrive at the fateful moment of recognition of what we actually see? And that it concerns us?

Or do we prefer to afford ourselves the luxury of art-induced schadenfreude?

We could, of course, simply follow an ancient painting's example, see where it gets us and console ourselves that things were always like this, that to accept the human tragedy is the first step to wisdom, in short, continue to stumble along our uncertain path, follow each other as best we can and blame bad luck for the outcome.

But, given that we are here so sweetly together, we might instead begin to dream, pay art and ourselves the ultimate respect of breaking with the past BECAUSE we know it – all great art does this and proves by its existence that it can be done – and find the courage, with the same clarity of mind that lends the painting of *The Blind Leading the Blind* such power, to look for ourselves where the voyage should go.

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The memory of the one continuous phenomenon that ties so many of Breugels' landscapes together, the ominous gallows gracing, if that is the word I want, almost every horizon, might concentrate our mind wondrously. Believe me, we can do it. We have already seen what has happened – we do not have to repeat it.

Yes, we can do it – particularly if we give each other a hand.

And, by the way, art works. We have seen that, too.

Friedrich Danielis