

The Centre of The World: Myself as the Centre of my World

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Aesthetics is about sensations, experiences and emotions – but also about the rational mind that guides them. At the centre lies the feeling, sensing and thinking individual. The world unfolds from within oneself. No matter how remote a spot one chooses, it becomes the centre of the world; everyone travels with his own centre of the world, inevitably. He is, I am, the centre-point.

The words ‘Am I or is Australia far away?’ were incorporated in a work of conceptual art displayed at the Korean National Museum of Contemporary Art in May, 2004. On a similar note, the Finnish author and cultural figure Jörn Donner recently contemplated, in an interview, whether we appear to be as distant to the Hanti people of Siberia as they appear to us.

Being an observing and experiencing centre-point distorts the scale of things: things that are near are over-emphasised. I have in mind three drawings, a theme and three variations of it: the scene from Ninth Avenue in New York, westwards to Hawaii and Siberia; the scene from the market square in Turku, Finland, over Sweden to Iceland and to North-America; and the scene from Tallinn, Estonia, over the Tatra Mountains all the way to southern Europe.

Things that are near are important in terms of experiences, but at the same time our knowledge, life experiences and memories give a sense of perspective; they adjust distortions. We know that the foreground can be remote, even non-existent, from a more general perspective, and indeed to ourselves once we move on to a different place. This building (St. Canute’s Guild Hall) – but not the city of Tallinn – was non-existent for me before this trip, but it is the centre of my world just now. The world as experienced and the world as it is known and measured are two very different things. This has been shown by the humanistic study of geography: looking at the world as it is lived in and not as the measurable world that traditional geography studies.

Our egocentrism is somewhat broken by our awareness of the fact that oth-

ers also have an equal sense of being in the centre. They are centres of their own worlds; to them their own stomachs and, unfortunately, their own pockets tend to be most important. We have to adjust our world – our understanding of it – to fit in with others, to form a common reality; and we must get along with each other.

We think of the entire globe – the Earth as seen from space – and at the same time of what is in front of us: a limited perception of the immediate reality. In terms of everyday experience, the most important things are the ones we can concretely have an effect upon, that on which our work places a mark.

It is no coincidence that the term ‘being close to someone’ refers to an emotional bond – through being related, working together or being married, for instance. What happens to people close to us governs our consciousness. Being threatened, being in danger or being in an accident places us, our own survival, in first place – and the danger of disaster must have an effect on our own person in order for it to have emotional consequences and effects on our behaviour.

It is also no coincidence that the appreciative adjective ‘touching’ used in art criticism is basically physical in meaning and, only as an expansion of that, a spiritual and emotional word. Beauty and ugliness are things that touch, caress or ravage our sense of the aesthetic, just like stroking our skin. ‘Touchingly beautiful’ is an intimate expression; touching is a form of contact reserved for people who we are close to, as groping strangers is a rude insult.

A people, a language and a nation are both uniting and dividing factors. The language of symbols divides; interpretations divide. Ljuba, a Russian immigrant woman, saw in the shape of the map of Finland an upside-down fish instead of the customary maid of Finland. The title of a collection of stories about immigration, *Same Sky, Different Country* (*Sama taivas, eri maa*, 1999), refers to things shared and separate. We live under the same sky – even cloud formations are similar across the globe.

Emphasising individual experiences and ignoring social ones and shared interpretation can eventually lead to an autistic world. The opposite of this is putting oneself in another’s place, compassion and empathy towards the earth, towards life, towards nature. A sense of closeness and participation is formed, an emotional regard for other people, animals, places, ideas, things. We speak of ‘things of the heart’, bleeding hearts, and of dialects as an intimate language of the heart.

Humankind as the centre of the Universe

Man in general, as a species, is a centre-point for us. 'Me and you' is different from 'me and it'. Similar means familiar in terms of experience. We can hold as human values compassion towards and understanding of a wider range of life, the earth and nature. We cannot know much about the consciousness of other species: their joy, sorrow, pain, pleasure, sense of beauty – not even whether or not human language and thinking can do justice to them. The further away we get from mammals, the harder it becomes to interpret behaviour and to achieve some kind of connection.

There are those who fantasise about the hidden life of plants, their ability to use humans for their own ends. Again we are in the sphere of possible, but unproven things – we cannot even imagine what a proof would look like.

We go even further into the grey area if we have magical or mythological notions of body and mind being present in mountains, ridges, rivers and lakes. But that is essentially the thinking we use when we speak of excavations as wounds or bruises, and think of roads as cuttings into the face of the landscape, or speak of the summer night smiling down on us (*à la* Ingmar Bergman¹). Mother earth, Gaia, is an anthropomorphic way of speaking about the Earth; as a symbolic speech it is clear, but taken literally, it is mystifying.

The sense of being inter-dependent

When an astronaut looks down upon the Earth, he is very distant – but for precisely this reason he can see his usual earthly circle of life as a whole; he can see its limits, which one living on Earth can never perceive in the same way.

Looking at pictures of the globe is a substitute – the reality presented in them is indeed very impressive and, dare I say, touching. The words and phrases used by people who have seen the Earth from space are so very similar that astronauts have been instructed not to voice their musings on the Earth's beauty.

From the astronaut's experiences of the beauty of the Earth, we only need to take a small step into an affection and compassion towards the Earth that crosses geographical and cultural barriers. Global threats become concrete: not so much of asteroids striking the Earth but of human-made things – such as the silent

¹ *Smiles of a Summer Night* (*Sommarnattens leende*, 1955). Directed and written by Ingmar Bergman. Runtime 108 min, Svensk Filmindustri.

polluting of nature or destruction brought about by a nuclear holocaust. Humans escaping from nuclear fallout would not be in a submarine as in Nevil Shute's fifties novel *On the Beach* (1957), but in a spacecraft or in isolation in a colony on another planet.

Concern about humanity and affection for our native planet are integral parts of the humanistic manifesto: at its centre lies the declaration of inter-dependency. Planet Earth is our global home and village, and there needs to be a global solidarity between its inhabitants. This message was visualised in the *Expo '92* world fair in Seville, Spain, when the Polish section had an exhibition that focused on finding a common symbol for humans and humanity (*Earth Flag Designs*, 1992). The starting point was the expedition to the moon, but a symbol of victory and conquering was deemed insufficient – a symbol of the bonds between all humans and their environment was needed. The Earth as seen from space delivered a global and well-defined sense of belonging together.

As J. Douglas Porteus (2002) saw his home – an idyllic coastal town in England – gradually become an industrial harbour, it seemed to him that the centre of his world had disappeared and he himself had been abandoned. Losing this centre-point led to detachment, a sense of being out of focus and emotionally homeless. To replace the natural centre-point, he had to consciously build a new one, an object of love, a landscape of the heart. But it was impossible to fully heal the old wound. As the anger of losing something passes away, a tranquil sense of nostalgia remains.

Is it the case that we should prepare – in this spirit of loss – for the ever-advancing decay of nature by developing a sense of the beauty of rubbish dumps and industrial areas? Photographic art has already made certain preparations: things such as rubbish dumps, smokestacks, quarries, sand pits and dirty river water have been depicted with emphasis on the composition of colours and forms – ‘aestheticising’ them (Horn 2002; Ina 1998).

Sense, sensibility and beauty

In contemplations such as these, insight and experience become fused. Sense and sensibility together form a powerful understanding of beauty (and ugliness), which combines with an ethical responsibility to protect the Earth – since one protects something that one appreciates. Love of nature also has its roots in knowing and understanding the object of love; a sense of nature includes a rational basis that supersedes the senses and superficial beauty.

Sacrificing oneself for something greater is, in extreme circumstances, a morally justified, admirable and beautiful course of action. *A Beautiful Mind* (2001)² is a popular film in which the central character is a genius mathematician, John Forbes Nash, Jr., who won the Nobel Prize in Economics. In real life Nash was mentally unstable and broken, terrorising those closest to him – yet he was able to find order in chaos, formulating important and surprising theorems with his supple mind.

In oriental aesthetics it is often thought that beauty requires a defect: a porcelain cup needs a small crack, a face needs a beauty spot. In this aesthetical understanding, perfection would be an insult. Let us bravely set it as our goal nevertheless.

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² *A Beautiful Mind* (2001). Directed by Ron Howard. Runtime 135 min, Imagine Entertainment.