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The Cracks of the Contemporary

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Abstract

In this paper, I want to think about art and philosophy in relation to time. I want to think about what art and philosophy have in common in that respect, which I consider to be something of the greatest importance (their common purpose). I do this by reading three books in which this aesthetics and this philosophy of time 'happens', namely Michel Tournier's *Friday* and Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* and *Kafka on the Shore*. It is my belief that the three books in question are able to realise many different interventions in the economic, social and political entanglements that make up the present. And that they, consequently, are able to offer us a wholly different earth to which we had been blind. An earth that we, for some reason, were unable to think before.

Keywords

New Materialism, Posthumanism, continental philosophy, time, literary studies

Las grietas de lo contemporáneo

Resumen

En este artículo me propongo meditar acerca del arte y la filosofía en relación con el tiempo. Quiero pensar en lo que une al arte y a la filosofía en este sentido, que es algo que considero de la máxima importancia (su finalidad común). Con este fin voy a leer tres libros en los que esta estética y esta filosofía del tiempo "sucede": Viernes o los limbos del Pacífico, de Michel Tournier y 1Q84 y Kafka en la orilla, ambos de Haruki Murakami. Tengo la convicción de que los tres libros que me ocupan pueden materializar numerosas intervenciones diferentes en los conflictos económicos, sociales y políticos que conforman el presente. Y que, por consiguiente, pueden ofrecernos un mundo completamente diferente ante el cual hasta ahora hemos sido ciegos. Un mundo que, por algún motivo, éramos incapaces de pensar anteriormente.

Palabras clave

Nuevo materialismo, posthumanismo, filosofía continental, tiempo, estudios literarios

An entire difference of nature subsists between what is joined together or what is narrowly extended.

Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*

In this paper, I want to think about art and philosophy in relation to time. I want to think about what art and philosophy have in common in that respect, which I consider to be something of the greatest importance (their common purpose). I do this by reading three books in which this aesthetics and this philosophy of time 'happens', namely Michel Tournier's *Friday* and Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* and *Kafka on the Shore*. But before I start with that, I should note that I don't believe in the difference between fiction and non-fiction when it comes to (re) reading books. As Michel Serres stresses over and over: the difference between novels and philosophy is a very recent invention of academia. In fact, the three, above-mentioned works *prove* to me, once again, that this difference does not exist. All three, in a way, practice the reality of the absurd and the absurdity of reality. As part of a single flow. And it is actually in that flow that they *do* art and that they do philosophy.

It is my belief that the three books in question are able to realise many different interventions in the economic, social and political entanglements that make up the present. And that they, consequently, are able to offer us a wholly different earth to which we had been blind. An earth that we, for some reason, was unthinkable before. Let us start with the most absurd moment that actually binds two of these books together.

In Tournier's *Friday* and in Murakami's *1Q84*, the dying of the great goat is the advent of something new, of the unforeseen. In both books, a goat functions as a sort of a sacrifice, becoming the medium through which another earth is invited to realise itself. This new and unknown earth bears no relation whatsoever to the earth as we know it. In *1Q84* it presents itself in the opening of the chrysalis. In *Friday* it is the opening of the beach. In both books, this is actually the grand theme: the smoothest of all surfaces is about to crack.

By the way, when I talk of 'another earth' here, I mean the earth in the most material sense of the word as well the ideas that follow from it. And when I say that the earth is unforeseen, I mean that our thinking falls short, for whatever reason, of understanding this earth. And I guess that in recent times, we have removed ourselves more and more from the earth. I completely agree here with Michel Serres when he offers us the recipe of modern western thinking:

Take away the world around the battles, keep only conflicts and debates, thick with humanity and purified of things, and you obtain stage theater, most of our narratives and philosophies, history, and all of social science: the interesting spectacle they call cultural. Does anyone ever say *where* the master and the slave fight it out? Our culture abhors the world. (1995b, p. 3)

Let us get back to our books... to the crack as it announces itself when Robinson realises that he is unable to live the life that the deserted island is offering him, and when Aomame, the main character in *1Q84*, realises that the city of Tokyo is not the city of Tokyo as she knew it before. That moment I call the crack. It's the moment that makes both books. Both books happen at this crack.

As readers, we are not just reading, as in following the words from page to page; we actually feel the infinitesimal cracks slowly, but meticulously mapping the weakest parts of the old earth's surface. The book is happening. The earth we believed we were living on — that organised, territorialised earth — gently breaks open, as its hard surface cracks and presents us with the softness within. The chrysalis, the pop, is smooth, is infinite, and has an ideal form when it comes to resisting the pressures from both inside and outside. But the powers that have been hidden inside, powers that have been hidden from us, are now slowly, but steadily, surfacing. And of course, this is what we fear. For we all know that something is about to happen that will destroy everything as we now know it.

We know very well that the crack does not stop with the pop or with the city, the beach or the island. When we live through the book we feel that because of this crack both Robinson and Aomame will be cracked, lacerated and laid open. The entire island of Speranza as well as the city of Tokyo, as they include flora and fauna that live it, the languages that live, the organs that make up the biospheres that live it... All of its 'life' will be subjected to the crack.

Already in the first pages of these books, both Robinson and Aomame have entered another world, a world that is in no way the same as the world we once knew. The crack has always already happened long before we notice! Now Robinson and Aomame will have to find out how they are cracked, and how the deserted island and the city of Tokyo are cracked. What caused it? Robinson asks us: why is this deserted island not functioning like the inhabited world in which I previously lived? Why are its most elementary systems, religion and capitalism, not functioning here? What is this wholly 'other' life, that I am suddenly subjected to, all about? Aomame asks us: what kind of city is this, this dark and obscure non-place run by the Little People that never care to reveal themselves (except through the goats' mouth). I cannot sense this city, and only feel a fear revealing itself in this wholly other soft pulse. The new Tokyo is a city that oozes out, whose heartbeat is a wave. It is a city that exists only in and through its liquid rhythm, it seems.

We (Robinson and Aomame) have no idea what the future will bring us. Death, for sure. But in what way? As the death it brings us is ungraspable (again, nonsensical), we are dying to know what comes after. Lucretius tells us that everything will reappear but in another form, a form that bears no resemblance to those forms with which we are acquainted. New forms will be formed. New biospheres will be formed. Should we make notes, should we use little stones or breadcrumbs to ensure the minimal of continuity

possible? Should we try to hang on to some sort of linearity, some sort of cause and effect?

There is a crack in the world; Nakata, the hero of Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* had already noticed. There is a crack in the world. Aomame, in *1Q84*, cannot cope with the changing world, is overtaken by fear and searches for ways to escape this new earth. In *Kafka on the Shore*, the other main character, Kafka or the boy named crow, has a similar response, insisting on continuing with his life as much as possible. Stuck to the territories they are accustomed to, to the grammar they've always used, the signs and images with which they are familiar, Kafka and Aomame live a reality that is as real as the stars we see in the sky every evening. Stars that have already been dead for a million years.

There is a crack in the world, Nakata notices time and again.

How is it that Nakata is aware of it? And how come Robinson, too, all of a sudden, sees 'another island'? In *Kafka on the Shore*, from the start of the book, Nakata, is wholly different from Kafka. Kafka is a pretty, rational young man whose world all of a sudden seems to fall apart. Nakata is not rational at all. At least not in Kafka's sense. Nakata is a strange character. Talking the language of cats but not really of man... Moving in ways considered impossible for man too... At night... popping up in the strangest places. Nakata, in many ways, is 'not-human'. Post-human, post-organic, post-subjective, even. But perhaps because of that, he is extremely sensitive to what is going on: extremely sensitive and able to feel the earth in very remarkable ways. All the time he is experimenting with different forms of language as a means of exploring the unknown earth, of feeling what forms of life this unknown earth allows for. Kafka is the traditional hero of the story; a tragic figure who is desperately seeking ways to expand an idea of normality that might have worked before but that has nothing to do with the world in which he now lives. He is afraid that he, that his world, that *everything* will die. Which has, of course, always already happened. Long ago.

Robinson, in Tournier's book *Friday*, has the stubbornness (the rationale, the fear) of Kafka, but finds out the hard way that he *has* to live the life that Speranza, the island, wants him to live. Living on the deserted island, he *has* to explore the unknown earth, he *has* to feel what forms of life the island allows. And Robinson actually succeeds in living in this world without Others, in this unterritorialised world in which thinking and the earth have once again merged. Where the earth, in all of its appearances, is once again the object of thinking while thinking is the idea of the earth. Where 'thinking' and 'earth' are actually the same thing.

Aomame, Kafka, Robinson and Nakata offer us an aesthetics, which is a philosophy of nature, and my claim is that they do that most convincingly in their practising of time. Let me introduce a few concepts in order to clarify the different notions of time at stake here...

First of all, there is the present, which fills time completely with Aomame and Kafka. Past and future for them are relative to the present, consequences of the economic, social and political reality of

the day. Aomame and Kafka are firmly woven into the present which is why they are in fear of the cracks in the earth underneath them. For them, the present absorbs everything, as they are absorbed by the present. The present territorialises the earth, the economic, social and political realities of the day; measures the earth; fixes it and intends to realise it according to its standards. Time, with Aomame and Kafka, is the gradual movement from present to present, from the slow and organised shifts in the economic, social and political reality of the day. Yet always too fast. Dangerously fast.

Robinson and Nakata, obviously, live a different time. A smoother time, unquantifiable, which actually *lacks* a present. They live a world in which the economic, social and political reality of the day does not matter anymore. Their time knows of a *virtual* past and a *virtual* future. But this past and future do not have a relation to each other, they do not desire a relation, they are in every way free, floating, unformed. Robinson and Nakata have found an immense freedom as their lives are not confined to a present and the limits that it flows into (its past, its future). Robinson and Nakata, with smiles on their faces, ward off any realisation of a present, using the virtual past and the virtual future as their tools to intervene in anything that even remotely resembles a present. They never stop playing with the economic, social and political realities that they find on their way. For them, time means to find ways to, always already, disturb the present and to reterritorialise it. Facing all sorts of difficulties (obstacles), they live a very joyful life, very much in contrast to Aomame and Kafka.

For Robinson and Nakata, the present is nothing but the permanent crisis that allows for an infinite series of interventions. It is a crisis that they understand only through its cracks. That actually desires (or forces) the cracks to break it open and to speculate upon this new past and this new future. Time, for Robinson and Nakata, does not 'exist'; rather, it has to be invented over and over again. (This also explains why both of them do not age: they were not young and they will never grow old). Their time is a pure empty form of time, the eternal truth of time that does not allow itself to be measured. Time itself is permanently changing, as it traverses, without limits, the crisis of today. Being empty these times *are*, in fact, the cracks that mark the contemporary. The cracks which are not so much 'in' time, as that happen *with* the time (the *con-temporary*) and consequently *they are the same thing*. The cracks that disturb the economic, the social and the political reality of today and that keep on disturbing it (since this form of time knows no present). The cracks keep on playing (with) the present.

In Tournier's *Friday* and in Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, Robinson and Nakata respectively personify this second form of time, this intervening qualitative force which we could generalise as 'the creative act'. It is their virtual presence (Robinson and Nakata) that smooths these books, not just from cover to cover, but by making all sorts of transversal connections to the crisis of today, thereby cracking the hegemonies of the present. Again, how different they are from Aomame and Kafka, whose lives are by all means locked up in the

book. Too attached to the 'worlds of others' (which is another way of verbalising the economic, social and political relations they find themselves in), they remind us of Pierre Dumaine and Ève Charlier, from Sartre's *The Chips Are Down*, about whom we know, from the very start of the book, that they are doomed. Their lives are already over before the stories unfold. Stories in which nothing happens as Pierre and Ève do not live but fear the cracks of the contemporary. The same goes for Aomame and Kafka.

There are many things happening with Robinson and Nakata, many accidents that do not just hit them, but that, from the very start of the two books, realise a wholly other world. The strange accident that befalls Nakata in the newflash at the start of *Kafka on the Shore*, the shipwrecking that befall Robinson at the start of *Friday*, tear us *immediately* away from the present and merely function as the starting points for the series of accidents that are about to follow. They became the men of their misfortunes but, since they did that so well, they must both have lead a very happy life, to paraphrase Goethe. They became worthy of what happened to them, their accidents, the wounds they embodied. Having dealt with their accidents so marvellously, they both discovered a new life, a new body and, consequently, a new earth.

The creative act happens with time; it is necessarily useless in the present. What happened to Robinson and Nakata, for that matter, was completely irrelevant to the present. It made no sense at all. Let us be very strict about this; the creative act *cannot* play a role in the economic, social and political realities of the day. The creative act is, however, extremely valuable for the contemporary as it keeps on fighting the illusions of the present, narratives like capitalism and organised religion, like State power and identity. The creative act will always traverse all of these fables with a single blow, breaking them open immanently. The creative act simply does not function with its strategies which aim to secure binary oppositions, secure hierarchies and secure the ongoing internalisations of these hierarchies in place. There are many people who, for that reason, do not want the creative act to happen. Who consider Nakata to be a crazy person and Robinson a savage (a villain, an outsider). There are many people who defend the strategies of the present. And it is not only the masters that do so, but also the slaves who fight for their own slavery. Aomame and Kafka, both very much hurt by the creative act, by the disturbances of the reality of the day, by the cracks in the contemporary, actively choose to fight this wholly other earth with which they are confronted. Because of the fear of the unknown, because of ignorance, because of all sorts of 'prisoners' dilemmas', they would prefer to neglect or even fix the cracks of the contemporary so as to continue their lives in a non-existent reality. Living their lives as a star that can still be seen though it died a long time ago.

So, in respect to this second form of time, how are these disturbing powers, these cracks in the contemporary, these creative acts... how are they realised? In a single stroke, of course; yet, through two means. They only *exist* in philosophy, while they only *conclude*

to the artwork. Or to express this in broader terms: *they only happen in thought while they produce the creative*.

Rephrasing 'the creative act' in these more general terms shows us how philosophy and art, the way I'd like to use these concepts, are by no means limited to the institutions in which they are today organised. To be the free spirit in the Nietzschean sense does mean that one has to be a professor at a philosophy faculty, and the creative is by no means limited to what the art world accepts as art. On the contrary, mapping the power of philosophy and art as they roam around in our everyday experiences could well be seen as a way of conceptualising so many of the forces that are not impressed by the economic social and political powers of the day *and just do things differently*, to great effect. This way we see how philosophy and art *haunt* the political present, for instance, especially in times like ours (in which we see a new fascism, a new consumerism and a new conservatism going hand in hand).

Both philosophy and art do not function in the present. Philosophy and art are, in themselves, not taken up in the economic, social and political reality of the day. Yet they have a very important role in the contemporary, since, together, philosophy and art have the power to crack it. They have the weight of the entire earth at their disposal, to put the realities of the present under pressure, cracking them where they are most vulnerable, where the surfaces that aim to keep them intact, are most fragile.

And thus, in the end, reterritorialising our thinking on the cracks of the contemporary, (per)forming the cracks that intervene in the present, is not at all limited to aesthetics and epistemology. On the contrary, as the cracks move in every possible direction, they immanently practice a philosophy of nature. They necessarily unfold an ecosophy, showing us how all the current crises are connected to one another, are all suffering from a similar present, are all dying to be broken open.

The creative act offers us a glimpse of the earth to come, as it briefly, instantly, intervenes and pushes everything out of perspective. The creative act is what matters *with* the times, it presents us with the contemporary: cracked open to welcome the new.

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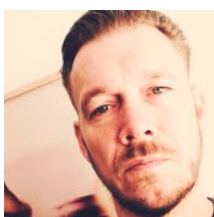
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