

How does the language of nature sound?

Joannes Késenne, 2013

“Visit from a painter who told me how one night in the south of France he visited a blind man, whom he found alone by himself, and in pitch-darkness; the painter couldn't refrain from feeling pity for the man, and from asking him if existence is bearable when you can't see daylight. To which the blind man answered: “You do not know what you miss”- E.M.Cioran

If only nature could talk, what would humankind be able to get to hear from it? Of course this is a surreal question. However, this question presses itself on me when I am confronted with the series Suspicious Landscapes by Johan Clarysse. We know that nature is as silent as the grave. And this may be the reason why throughout its impressive history, landscape painting has continuously tried to make nature speak: from Giorgione and Titian, and then Tintoretto, Poussin, Lorrain, Turner, Constable, to Friedrich and Cézanne. But even a painted landscape remains the expression of what human eyes see and it is never pure nature. A silent art form that tries to make nature speak.: does this not sound like a paradox?

The artist must have been aware of this incongruity when he painted and compiled this series. He overwrites his sea gales, stilled waters, uninhabitable icebergs, inhospitable snow and mountain landscapes with captions that remind one of the banderoles (like those carried by angels) with which renaissance artists added moralizing messages to their images. However with Clarysse they seem to function as voice-overs. Going against the expectation that they would make the image clearer, he only seems to add to the puzzle. A special relationship between language and image is being created here .

At first sight, the proverbial purity of nature is set up against the tarnished image of culture. Obviously, in these post-modern times we have all been mentally moulded senseless by sweet-voiced memories of escaping from culture that untamed nature can offer us in survival trips, skiing adventures, mountaineering, rafting, excursions in the Himalaya, etc. We are attracted by wild and open nature in faraway places, while we have been bricking up our own Europe with roads and buildings.

If we drew aside the texts we would immediately associate the images with the warming up of the earth, with the melting of the layers of ice and the glaciers, the pollution of the oceans. We do not need a context for the images, as we have already been so pre-programmed by the prevailing image culture that, in the facts themselves the images have become text. The context and the image are so interwoven that only a different way of looking, one that makes us switch over and that can ease us away from a relationship that is familiar to us. That is what Clarysse invites us to do in his painting. Because painting is not failed speaking. Painting makes visible what until then has remained invisible and unuttered. We do not look at a painting like we look at some object. The eye travels through the canvass and not one word can stop it.

In Clarysse's landscapes I particularly sense Cézanne's spirit. In 'Le Doute de Cézanne' Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it sharply: "La peinture de Cézanne (...) révèle le fond de nature inhumaine sur laquelle l'homme s'installe". It is about the inhumanity of nature as opposed to the way in which a human being takes possession of nature, and dwells in it, and settles down in it.

When translated into Lacan terminology we can state that in Clarysse's works we are confronted with a radical absence of correspondence between the order of language and the order of reality. Language is at right angles to our being. Especially the suggestion of romantic vistas intensifies this distance between nature and culture. I remember vividly the answer the Jewish philosopher Levinas gave, after his lecture for the Alliance Française in Gent, (somewhere in the seventies) to a question from a student in philosophy. The question was: 'Can your God be reconciled with Heidegger's ontology?'. And Levinas answered: "Heidegger's Being describes a dehumanized world, empty, desolate and abandoned. This is not how my God left it behind." In other words, we have no access to the world as such, not even painting does. The linguistic statements that Clarysse spreads over his images rouse alienation. No matter how much they come over as cliché, or how they have been nicked from a historical context, they are suspended in a void. They could be voices or echoes from some evil primeval god. There is no natural basis for the symbolic. The linguistic slogans appear to be absurd or refer to contexts with which the images have no connection. Nevertheless, the words do render meaning. This is an extreme form of questioning and skepticism with relation to the contents of the statements. The meaning of the statements is being eroded. They seem to have lost their ground that they never had in the first place.

For instance, when the patria familia appears against the backdrop of a snow landscape we are being thrown back to the core values of life. What are these values? God, country or family? Or all of them simultaneously? Or none of them? And what if 'It must be love' comes into the picture? We immediately feel compelled to surf on the waves of our own love life. Does Clarysse make us see what we read or what we think we see in the clouds?

For one moment it seems as if landscape is defending itself, as for instance in 'Je suis aussi paysage'. Do we hear a voice like some psychotic people get whispered into their ear? Or is it rather what the bewildered spectator throws to nature: "Hey, I am also landscape, I am also nature, I also have a body!" In other words, it could be the sensation that we have that objects are looking at us.

In these paintings landscape often rages against the economic crisis, like in the slogan of Christopher Banks Corporation: "CBK never sleeps". Or in "Invest with confidence", "The world's local bank", "World class, worldwide". At the same time ideological statements act as one-liners against the backdrop of snow. When the American president John Kennedy visited post-war Germany, he made the famous statement "Ich bin ein Berliner". The fact that he declared to be one of them closed the chapter of World War II. In a similar way Clarysse conveys how mountain and sea also belong to the human world. Or when psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud ,

notwithstanding his unremitting research into the soul of the other sex, keeps wondering: “Was will das Weib?” What does that other being want, what does that dark continent want, what does this unconquerable mountain want, what do they want from us?

The relation between language and image in the work “dream maerd” undergoes a inversion, and not by coincidence. The sequence of the letters is obviously turned round, but doesn't the artist simultaneously suggest the inversion of language and image? Can language reflect an image? A graphic linguistic sign is after all and no less an image.

A one-off art-historical reference like ‘Icarus is lost’ can give us something to hold on to. But what prevails is the system of palimpsest. What is overwritten by language can never be what is or what was present or not in the image. Reading into the image is what language does. Without this reading into it there would never be an image. And this reading in is indicated by the artist. He takes the spectator by the hand. Clarysse confronts the spectator with the question: should we read the image starting from the statement, or should the image be the starting point for reading the statement? The point is that after reading the statement no person will be able to read the image itself and pretend that the words have never been there.

In fact the statement realizes a doubling of the ‘culturalising’ of the image. The painting is the self-portrayal of culture as landscape and the statement is the symbolizing of the cultivated landscape. This says something about the way we have come into contact with language in the course of our life. From the moment we learn to speak we have lost the connection with the real forever. We have lost the innocence of the original experience. The original has gone forever, as we are condemned forever to want to find what we have lost.

It is in this sense that Clarysse's artistic project finds its place in the broad, philosophical debate about the relation nature versus culture: one the one hand we objectively belong to nature, as we are integrally connected with it through our evolution; on the other hand we are subjectively and radically placed outside and opposite nature. And this splits is where we, human beings, find ourselves in. Nature looks at us at the same moment we look at nature. What is there to see? The blind man of Coiran lives in the realm of the imagination, while the visitor is seeing blind. That is perhaps what Clarysse's mountains and seas want to tell us: “You do not know what you miss!”

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