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"Many children will be mercilessly beaten from the arms of their mothers ... and then crushed": Leonardo and the Media of Horror

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Secular fantasies of the end of times were a signature of the modern era, long before the alliance of technical and moral progress that people still believe in today in the Far West and the Far East. The catastrophes of antiquity were cyclical natural events that served to renew the world and restore order. The Christian understanding of history, on the contrary, was informed by the end of the world; even in the modern era, it followed on the heels of technological revolutions like a shadow that could not be thrown off. Since the second half of the previous century, we have been frightened by six major apocalyptic scenarios: population explosion, nuclear war, nuclear disaster ("maximum credible accident"), ecosystem collapse (ozone depletion and *Waldsterben*), and the increasingly dominant topic of climate change, while the current pandemic disturbingly recalls the older cyclical models of demise. The dark clouds of the "Robocene" are already gathering on the horizon, ready to make the "Anthropocene" the shortest of all of the geological eras (the fourth and final humiliation after Freud's three "insults to humanity"?). Panic has always been the dictate of a moment that denounces skepticism as a betrayal of the imperative for action. This phenomenon can also be observed in the discursive mechanisms of the current epidemic event.

Contrary to the ubiquitous belief in technology-induced apocalypse (this belief itself is a typically modern interweaving of guilt and fantasies of omnipotence), the theory that processes immanent to nature must themselves lead to great and possibly ultimate catastrophes can be traced back to the Late Middle Ages and the early modern era. In 1517 the Roman Curia even had to intervene against the panic raging in Central Europe and Italy that a second flood would soon occur, this time caused not by God but by the position of the planets. At that point in time, Leonardo had just left Rome in order to spend the final two years of his life at the court of the French king. The feelings of doom at that time, which – analogous to our times – were largely stoked by the relatively new mass media of book and image printing, must have fascinated him, completely independent of their plausibility. (Leonardo did not believe in astrology.) If prognostication leads to action, its power can be attributed to the singular power of imagination, that is, its power over the emotions of their audience. Without these mental images, a Roman craftsman had no compelling motive to withdraw with his family and provisions to the Alban Hills in anticipation of the coming flood (as it apparently occurred).

In fact, Leonardo himself enjoyed engaging with panic literature. His dystopian fantasies were often accompanied by explanations that reveal the mechanism of the manipulated imagination. Horror is most effective in the future tense. When "prophesying" for example, that children will be beaten from their mothers' arms, thrown on the ground, and crushed ("fieno tolti … e lacerati"); the title refers to nuts and olives (*Codex Atlanticus*, fol. 393r). Such products of psychological tension (violence) and paths for diverting it (humor) are an exemplary embodiment of Leonardo's physical psychology. Leonardo could not ignore the fact that language seems to be a particularly well-suited medium for creating strong mental images. However, as is well known, not only was he of the opinion that human culture had its origin in the invention of images and graphic symbols (a topic that is also very current today); Leonardo argued with nearly aggressive insistence that images are incomparably more impactful and therefore more effective than writing (see the first part of Leonardo's posthumously compiled "Libro di pittura" (*Book on Painting*) (Life and Legacy D •).

The power of images strikes and moves their viewers. They compel their viewers, Leonardo writes, to repeat the same "lustful actions" (*atti libidinosi*) that are depicted in the image (*Libro di pittura / Codex Urbinas*, fol. 14r). Paintings drive people to impose harsh privations upon themselves and undertake dangerous pilgrimages to visit religious images and throw themselves on the ground before them, "as if the [depicted] divinity were present and alive" (ibid. fol. 3v). Viewers flee from terrifying depictions because the images rattle their nerves via their eyes, causing their muscles to move (ibid fol. 13v–14r). The *erotic*, the *holy*, and the *horrifying* in painting moves the viewer's senses, mental images, and limbs. But the communicative power of strong themes in painting is possible only because they are based on peculiarities of media and the physiology of the senses, which allow images to affect viewers more strongly than other art forms, and even more strongly than perceived reality itself.

We can observe this phenomenon with nearly clinical clarity in the reaction to the so-called "images from Bergamo" in current epidemic policy. An image taken by a young flight attendant's smartphone on the evening of March 18, 2020, is of particular significance. The photo of a convoy of seven to eight military vehicles bringing coffins of Covid-19 victims to the crematoria near Bergamo became a "medial bomb" (Lucien Scherrer, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung,* May 30, 2020). By March 16, the French president was already speaking of a war against the virus; on the evening that the photo spread via mass media, Macron's American counterpart predictably escalated this statement: "our big war." Hardly any politician or journalist in Germany missed the opportunity to justify the lockdown regulations, which were tightened immediately thereafter, by saying that we must do everything possible to avoid the "images from Bergamo." The cropped photo suggested an immeasurable number of military vehicles (in reality it was 13, hardly more than those pictured). More importantly, the snapshot—and this would have fascinated Leonardo—unintentionally recalls an iconic scene from Wolfgang Petersen's epidemic drama *Outbreak* from 1995. In the film, the military moves into the small Californian town of Cedar Creek and threatens to wipe it out. On the day that the photo was taken, *Outbreak* was number five on the list of the most-watched *Netflix* films worldwide. The virologist played by Dustin Hoffman in the film mentions the common location of physical and psychological infection, in a comment that is wonderfully ambivalent: "The common bond is the movie theater!"

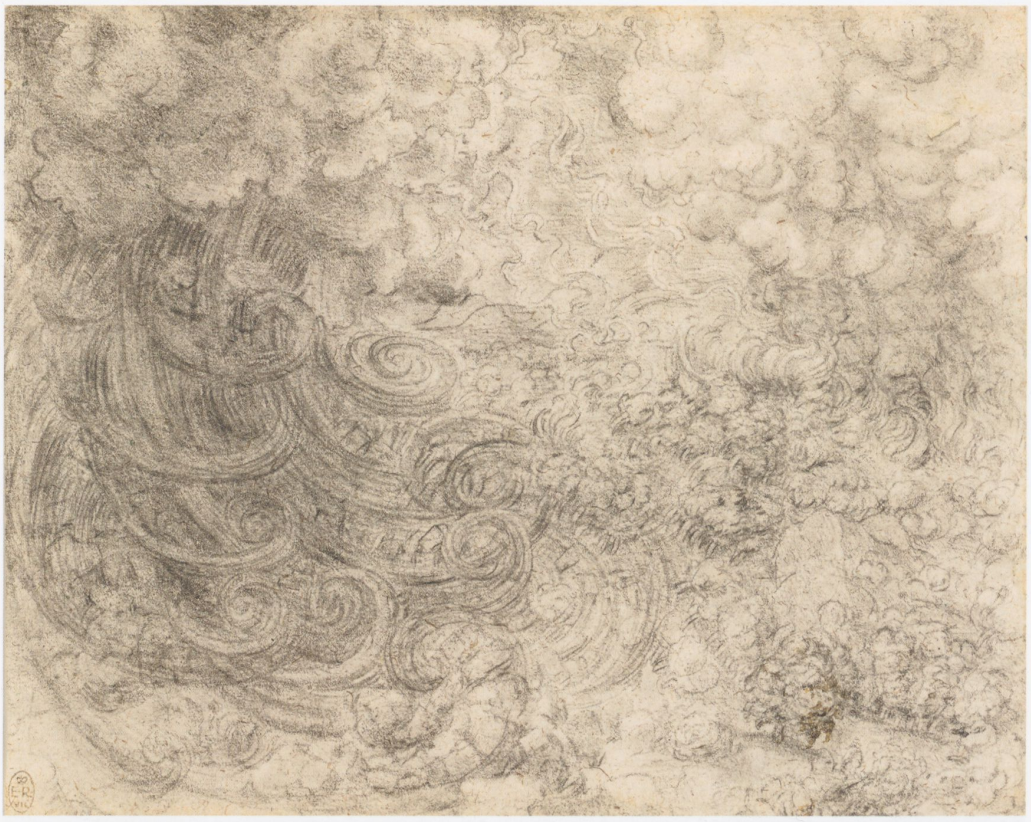

Fig. 1. Leonardo da Vinci, *A Deluge*, ca. 1517–1518. Royal Library, Windsor. Inv.: RCIN 912384.

Technological reality shaped by physical images and visual desire was at the center of Leonardo's theory of culture—probably for the first time in the history of ideas. "Paintings," (i.e. pictures, diagrams, graphic signs etc.) prefigure the transformation of "first nature" into "second nature" through technology. This is possible because images take possession of their audience's imagination. Today, there can be no doubt that images have become a decisive engine for political decisions, particularly since the rise of the spread of photographs via mass media and particularly since the super media of the internet. The current emptying of public spaces and the immobilization of the population by lockdowns has in effect given political decision-makers new room to maneuver because the pressure of politically relevant images as a whole (not just images of the pandemic) has ebbed. The fact that these images can return with full force in the public media space could be observed after the events in Vienna on November 2, 2020, even if the executive branch imperiously demanded that the populace refrain from distributing these images.

Leonardo's spectacular group of ten drawings depicting catastrophic hurricanes and flooding was probably created during the time of the prophecies of doom in Rome (Fig. 1). Never before in the history of images had such an overwhelming power of destruction been portrayed. Giant cyclones rampage across landscapes devoid of human life, burying everything in flash floods. Lightning strikes set forests ablaze. Large cities are obliterated by landslides. The viewer finds themselves in the midst of the action. Spatial distances can now hardly be determined; ultimately concrete distinctions dissolve into this seething chaos that for Leonardo reigned at the beginning and end of the world (*Codex Atlanticus*, fol. 573 a-v).

The "Deluge Drawings" (61 ▲), which have been preserved at Windsor Castle for hundreds of years, represent the culmination of the characteristic aspect of Leonardo's landscape depictions since the 1480s: the threatened stability of solid ground, constantly gnawed at by water and wind. Particularly after 1500, Leonardo's landscapes appear to be painted and drawn prognostication, warning of a catastrophe. The viewers find the suggestive power of these crumbling, tottering, bursting, or storm-whipped formations to be irresistible because

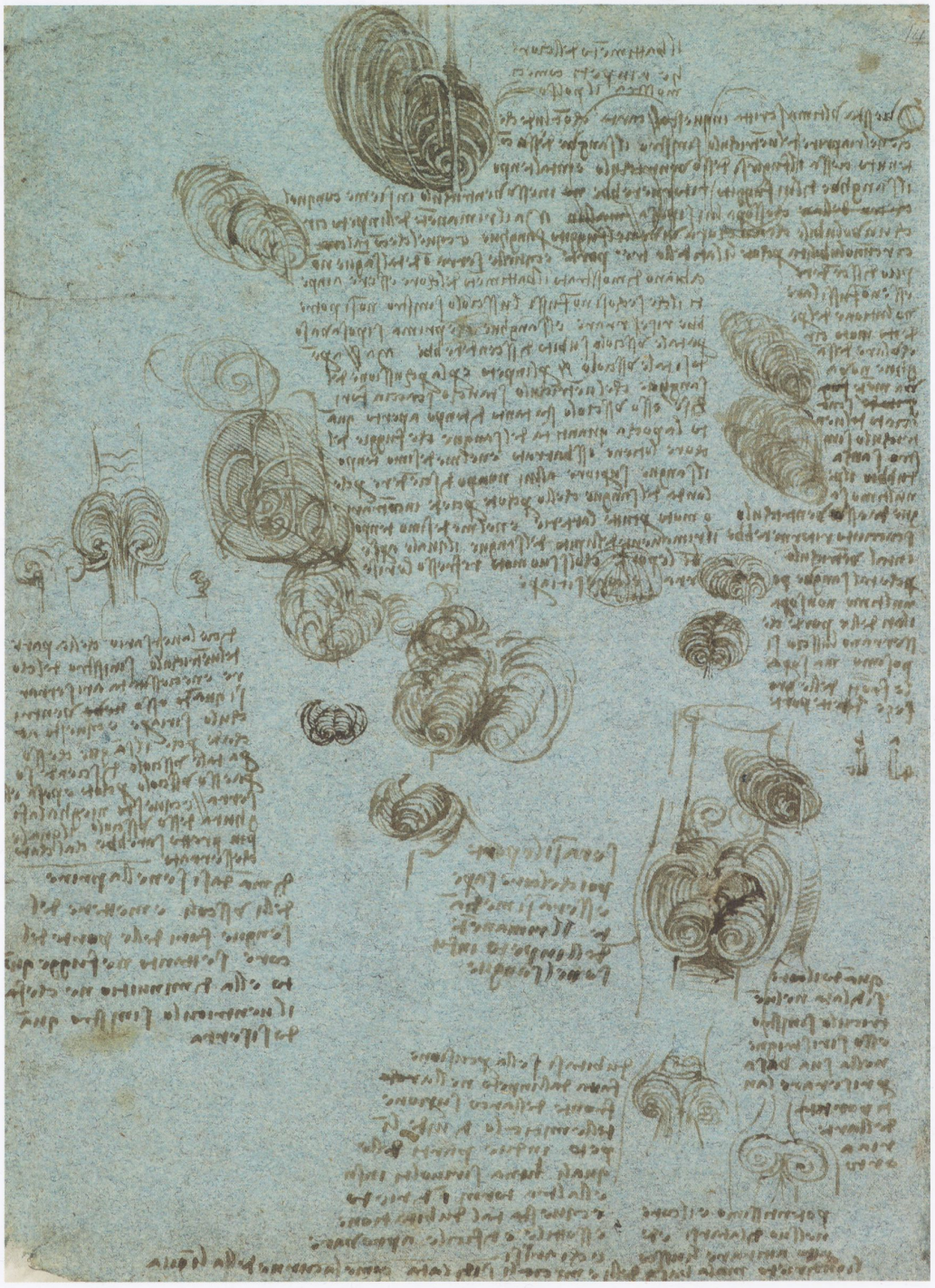

Fig. 2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Blood flow through the aortic valve*, ca. 1512–1513. Royal Library, Windsor. Inv.: RCIN 919083v.

they are pulled into the image in an almost physiological way. The flowing transitions of the *sfumato* and the bundled but flailing lines give the viewer not a moment's rest. In an early manuscript, Leonardo had noted that the eye cannot stay still when it observes moving water. The object's dynamic nature imposes itself into the process of perception. Leonardo's life-long obsession with flowing water led to unique graphic interpretations that seek to create an experience of visual immersion in these late drawings of catastrophe.

At the same time that Leonardo made his era's feelings of doom graphically productive, his anatomical investigations concentrated on the movement of blood in the human body's vascular system. Their graphic realization bears striking resemblance to the "Deluge Drawings" (Fig. 2). The swirling motion in the chambers of the heart seems like a hurricane within the body, delicately contained by the blood vessels. For Leonardo, these flowing movements within the body were also based on antagonisms. The vortex of blood, he once wrote, generates heat through friction, which would set the body on fire from within were it not for the cooling of the lungs (Windsor, Royal Library inv. RCIN 919062r). The main purpose of the movement of blood through the arteries—transporting nutrients to the body's periphery—was at the same time counteracted by the "sedimentation" of life-sustaining substances on the walls of the vessels, which ultimately leads to the death of the organism (ibid. inv. RCIN 919027v). The pulse of the living organism ceaselessly digs its proper grave. The late "Deluge Drawings" are a visualization of life processes turned inside-out, constantly working toward their own demise.

Only that which strives to survive *and* accomplishes its own downfall is *alive*, according to the paradox described by Leonardo. In Leonardo's radically immanent cosmology, there is no metaphysical actor who saves the world and its bodies from sliding out of balance or into chaos. In the current pandemic, the populations of the wealthy industrialized, Western nations experience this underlying interweaving of life and death as an outrageous shock. But only dead matter maintains a motionless equilibrium. The erosive power of wind and water, writes Leonardo late in his life, will cause mountains to soon be leveled and rising sea levels will cause the continents to be completely covered by water: "and the earth will be uninhabitable" (Institut de France, *Paris MS F*, fol. 84r). This scenario also has a certain undeniable modern-day relevance. Leonardo was familiar with it from the writings of Albert of Saxony (whom he cites) and Jean Buridan (14th century), but Leonardo inverted the argument from the realm of divine providence into geological prognostication. For Leonardo, antagonism and conflict were not merely the expression but also the price of living on Earth. He never doubted that life in its fragile beauty is worth this price.

Translated from the German by Amanda DeMarco.

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