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ART AND THE GLOBAL MOBILIZATION AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM[1]

(Comment on Prof. Bredekamp's Paper)

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We have heard that the image of 'Mother Nature' responds to an older image: that of nature as a distanced power, who withholds her goods from humanity, yet who at the same time demonstrates, through her own example, ways to overcome deficiency. Nature is conceived technomorphically, as a craftswoman who is not always perfect in her products.

The philosophical and religious traditions behind this image are clear:

There is Plato's conception, for example, of the Demiurge who imperfectly imitates the world of Ideas, and the neo-platonic vision of a perfect world of Ideas that become contaminated in their materialization. There is the Judeo-Christian belief in a 'natura lapsa,' a perfect divine creation that was damaged in man's Fall. And there is the idea (not yet articulated in Alain de Lille's *Anticlaudian*, and, it seems to me, specifically early modern) that nature is perfected by man, that culture, as a technology, creates a second nature which gradually replaces the original. This involves a harmonistic motif, one we find depicted, for example, in the central ceiling fresco in Francesco I de Medici's studiolo in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence (Fig. 1). In Vincenzo Borghini's sketch of the program, the thought is made clear: unfinished nature voluntarily offers her products (in this case, an unpolished gem) to Prometheus, who, as an embodiment of human technology, in turn guarantees the

[1] I wish to express my gratitude to Michael Cole, Princeton/ Chapel Hill, for his translation of the German text.

Fig. 1. Francesco Morandini (Il Poppi), *Prometheus receives a gem from Natura*, Florence, Palazzo Vecchio, Studiolo of Francesco I., after 1571.

perfection of the raw material. Borghini emphasizes that, in order to achieve a perfected culture-nature, Nature and man must mutually rely on one another.[2]

Such utopian images have a consistent aim which is reached partially through the assimilation and partially through the overpowering of nature: it is the aim of achieving the perfection of the arts (as in Giorgio Vasari),[3] complete knowledge (as in Francis Bacon's Atlantis)[4] or, as we have learned, the total state (as in Hobbes). It is a utopia in which every shortcoming is overcome, in which every hope for permanence is reflected. It is a utopia that stands as the anti-type of agrarian society, a society that, as Rolf Peter Sieferle has recently shown,[5] must constantly exert itself to eliminate new injuries to its labile balance of energy.

Such parameters are no longer valid since it has been possible for humanity globally to transform a permanently negative balance of energy into prosperity and population growth. In the second half of the twentieth century, the earth's surface is more and more characterized by what Sieferle calls the 'total landscape' without nature in the traditional sense. Ours is an epoch of acceleration and transformation. My question about Bredekamp's argument would thus be the following: is the 'agrarian,' technomorphic vision of a completable, surmountable nature – and man – still meaningful for art at the turn of the millennium? In elaborating this question, I would like to begin with Leonardo da Vinci.

No allegorical representations by Leonardo of nature as a whole are known to us, but we do have a few analogous texts. In them, we find the motifs Bredekamp has mentioned: a plaintive nature, damaged by the desires of humanity, but also a vengeful, death-dealing nature of dearth[6]. Turning to the few surviving paintings with landscape backgrounds, we see that the earth's surface is represented, uniquely, as a product of transition: rivers wind their ways or dry up, mountains waver and fall, the

[2] See S. Schaefer, *The Studiolo of Francesco I de' Medici in the Palazzo Medici* (Ph.D.Diss. Bryn Mawr College) Bryn Mawr/ PA 1976; Ph. Morel, *'Le Studiolo de Francesco I de' Medici'*, in AAVV., *Symboles de la Renaissance* II (Paris, 1982), pp. 187-197. Cf. related sketches of, for example, Giovanni Battista della Porta (*Magia Naturale*) and Giambattista Gelli (*I capricci del bottaio*).

[3] Cf. H. Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?* (Munich, 1983).

[4] Cf. W. Krohn, *Francis Bacon* (Munich, 1987).

[5] R.P. Sieferle, *Rückblick auf die Natur* (Munich, 1997).

[6] See for this duality (and its parallel in the rhetorical tradition) the author's *Licht und Wasser. Zur Dynamik naturphilosophischer Leitbilder im Werk Leonardo da Vincis* (Tübingen, 1997), pp. 229ss.

ground, empty of human life, reveals itself to be the result of erosion, a snapshot in which we seek rest and equilibrium in vain (Figs. 2-4). One could think of Aristotle's *Meteorology*, in which the constant exchange between land and water is emphasized – the epochal pendular movement that was to become of such great significance for the Roman philosophy of nature.[7] Leonardo, however, goes beyond this vision. In his writings, he formulates geological hypotheses that imply the death of terrestrial life: in the future, the world will either be fully covered with water, or without any at all.[8] One must question how playfully these prognoses are intended. What is, however, certain is that Leonardo was one of the first to think from mechanistic premises to something like global contingency – the idea of an unknown geological future that takes no heed of humanity. The emphasis is on history and contingency. Leonardo's background landscapes are in transition, they are subjected to alterations and destructions of the largest scale. These landscapes are early examples of the global transformations that *humanity* has now undertaken. Following Blumenberg, the thesis would be that the shocking historicity of a mechanized nature justifies humanity's own global manipulations.[9]

Global transformation, whose witnesses and protagonists we are, does not just rectify an earlier state of deficit, consuming the fossil energies of the earth's crust and releasing its components into the earth's atmosphere. The present global transformation does not just respond to a jealousy over a stepmother Nature. And even less is the aim of this transformation still that of nature's completion. Activity, as Jakob Burckhardt noticed, has now its aim within itself. The technological transformation consists in the mobilization of every material and social structure. Where once there was being, now there will be motion. Leonardo anticipated this, for example, with the phantasmagoria of a gigantic cannon that could shoot the earth out of its position at the center of the cosmos, and which could thereby set the earth in motion[10] – a technologically produced Copernican change, a fantasy of omnipotence in the service of global mobilization. Simultaneously, we find a

[7] Aristotle, *Meteorology*, I, 351a19 – 353a27, cf. *Physics* IV, 222a; see Seneca, *Natural Questions*, III, 30. 2-4.

[8] For these geological alternatives see especially *Codex Leicester*; furthermore *Manuscript F* in the Institut de France, Paris.

[9] See H. Blumenberg, 'Selbsterhaltung und Beharrung. Zur Konstitution der neuzeitlichen Rationalität', in H.Ebeling (ed.), *Theorie-Diskussion. Subjektivität und Selbsterhaltung. Beiträge zur Diagnose der Moderne* (Frankfurt/ M., 1976), pp. 144-207.

[10] *Codex Madrid I*, first folio recto (n.p.).

Fig. 2 – Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of a Lady ('Mona Lisa')*, Paris, Louvre. Detail (1504 – 16).

Fig. 3. Leonardo da Vinci, *Madonna with Child and St. Anne*, Paris, Louvre (c. 1510).

Fig. 4. Detail from Leonardo da Vinci, *Madonna with Child and St. Anne*, Paris, Louvre (c. 1510).

dynamization of ethics and of anthropology, as in Pico della Mirandola: He derives the dignity of humanity from its indeterminateness and potential for development, from its capacity for self-transformation.[11] Something similar can be said of Machiavelli's State. Emptied of content, the imperative transformation becomes 'theology of labor'.[12]

Nature, accordingly, is still of interest only as long as she provides material for transformation. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the question of her *telos* has been of little interest to the arts, and of still less to the sciences. The role of the stepmother has changed: She faded, and now she must allow us to plunder her pantries for a few centuries. Thereafter, we must come up with something new, if we do not want to give up, for example, the capacity for limitless reproduction we have taken over from her.

How does modern and post-modern art behave before this panorama? As it always does: both affirmatively and critically. The great transformation and acceleration were partially anticipated by the arts. They quickly abandoned the slow, concrete view of agrarian society, and they staged dynamics of speed, shock and standstill. In their most advanced forms, those of film and video, the visual arts participate in the acceleration, indeed explosion, of time in the industrial age. But in this, art also lets us experience what takes place around us. No question, art has discovered time.[13] Perhaps one can ask whether time has even become the final residue of nature, the manipulable, but also, ultimately, unavailable Other, the persistent enigma of both science and philosophy, motherly-stepmotherly, fortune and hazard within one's own lifetime. But as for what might follow the total transformation, the exhaustion of natural and psychic resources – for this, I am afraid, even the arts don't yet have pictures.

[11] Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate*, ed. by A. Buck (Hamburg, 1990), p. 6.

[12] See the classical study of M.D. Chenu, *Théologie du travail* (Paris, 1955).

[13] For a recent bibliography: *Das Phänomen Zeit in Kunst und Wissenschaft*, ed. by H. Paflik (Weinheim, 1987).