

The Place of Nature in the Narrative Architecture of Modern Culture.

Short lecture at ACF, New York 25.2. 2013

Published on Wednesday, 27 February 2013 17:33

Wolfgang Müller-Funk

Austrian Cultural Forum, New York 25.2. 2013

The place of nature in the narrative architecture of Modern Culture – An introduction followed by ten theses.

My lecture will bridge the gap between the topic and methodology of my last book (The Architecture of Modern Culture. Towards a Narrative Cultural Theory) and the subject of the exhibition at the ACF in New York (Un-) Natural Limits. From the very beginning of modern times, “nature” in all its meanings (land, landscape, resource, physical body, biodiversity, wilderness, as a post-religious topos) has had a specific place in the narrative architecture of modernity and modernism. Especially since Rousseau “nature” has always been embedded in a central counter-narrative that stands in contrast to the core of the great narratives of Enlightenment and techno-social progress guaranteed by the domination and control of nature. Due to industrialization and later digitalization, nature seems to be a disappearing dimension of human existence, but on the other hand it is modern culture that makes nature visible and apparent in a completely new way –nature between destruction and admiration as a quasi-esthetical or a post-religious object (the sublime).

It is, to quote Freud’s famous book, a symptom of the discomfort in civilization (Unbehagen in der Kultur)[J1] . The dramatic subject of this >Romantic< narrative is alienation, alienation from nature and alienation from human >nature<. With regard to modernity, nature proves to be a counter-world that promises a new unity between (wo)man and nature; it also refers to a completely different time, the time before modernity and modern civilization (Thoreau, Emerson); it seems to be an open space, especially in the North-American narratives of settlement, and it proves to be a real but also a symbolic resource that has become rare.

Since the ecological turn, nature has existed at least in two aesthetic and journalistic versions and formats (in film, literature, photographs or websites) as niches of a natural paradise on the one hand and as a ruin itself on the other – the image of devastated nature, the wounds a modern aggressive industrial civilization has created. The first narrative format is embedded in the story that nature as paradise is lost for the human species, at least for the present. The second narrative describes the destruction of nature, nature as a ruin. Usually I refer to Georg Simmel’s short essay on the ruin; ruination refers to human artifacts, houses that are ruined by the power of nature, by the work of storms, the sun and the rain. In the narrative of destroyed nature the ruination is effected and caused by man. I will give two examples from literature, one from the early nineteenth century, and the other from the 1920s.

The first image I have analyzed in one of my first books, The Return of Images. Contributions to a Romantic Ecology (Vienna 1988). This image was created by Johan Ferdinand Koreff, a physician, travel writer and mesmerist, a friend of E.T. A. Hoffmann . In the Magazin für die gesamte Heilkunde (Magazine for the whole of Medical Science), he gave a dramatic report about the Italian region around Volterra using the term of the “ruin of nature”, a landscape that had been destroyed by destructive exploitation, overgrazing and sulfur extraction. And in a dramatic turn, Koreff claims that the earth is

exhausted by so many harvests that she will no longer feed (wo)man , it repulses his /her life, contaminating it in its sources, and returns to an earlier chaotic state.

The second image I will present originates from the work of Austrian author Joseph Roth. In a series of articles for the liberal newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Roth gave insights into the German periphery, including the region of Merseburg. In one article entitled *Der Merseburger Zauberspruch* (The magic spell of Merseburg) he sarcastically connects the town in which one of the oldest German religious texts was found (the magic spell of Merseburg, from the tenth century) with the image of a landscape that has been totally devastated by the modern chemical industry, the Leuna factory in the twentieth century. Quite often the narrative of devastated nature is linked with apocalyptic structures, an element one can find in Kereff and a century later in Roth.

With regard to the title of the exhibition and to the ecological discussion of our times, I will ask at the end of this paper to what extent nature can also be seen as a principal limit (as the ecological but also the bioethical discourse suggests) in a globalized culture that has the self-image of overcoming or displacing all sorts of limits and borders. I will present ten theses that shall deepen what I have said in this introduction.

1. My first point is a question, the question whether there is such a thing as a great narrative about nature in modernity. I dare say that there are more great narratives than Jean Francois Lyotard, the inventor of the term post-modern, suggested in his famous book of 1979, in which he discussed the grand recits of linear progress in two variations – either as a story about the progress of political freedom (the French version) or as one about cultural self-education in the sense of German idealism. This is, as I have shown in the introduction of his lecture, a general story about alienation and destruction as the consequences of technical progress.

2. Nature plays an interesting role in the discourse on modernity because progress is especially defined by man's ability to subject and control nature in all its aspects. At least since Rousseau's claim for a return to nature it has been linked to a counter-narrative that stands in contrast to the mainstream linear story of modernity. Or in other words, it is a story of alienation and protest against the subjugation of >nature<. It is the story dealing with a lost unity. At the same time, it is part of the utopian energy in modernity and in modernism and embedded in what Octavio Paz has called the dominance and rule of the future. In this modern counter-narrative the restitution of the lost unity would theoretically mean the happy ending of history. Quite evidently this great narrative is part of modernism, which starts[J2] with Romanticism: with the German, English and American Romantics, from Novalis, Shelley or Wordsworth to Thoreau or Emerson.

3. In Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* too, the suppression of nature proves to be a central narrative element. In this version, Enlightenment, the key element of modernity went wrong because it was based on the idea of suppressing nature. But this kind of power has a perverse effect. The power on nature is reproduced by the power of society over the human being. But in contrast to Early Romanticism there is no hope in Adorno and Horkheimer with regard to a new unity between man and nature in the future. We are damned to live in a wrong and fatal world beyond nature.

4. Nature is quite clearly a polyvalent word, which means at the same time land and landscape, human nature, especially the physical body. It means the object of natural science, but especially the visible fauna and flora, and it means a social and symbolic resource for human being. Also the garden, which seems to keep in balance non-human nature and human existence, is part of connotations and denotations that are associated with “nature”. More and more it becomes clear that in various ways nature is also an economic and a trans-economic factor. It becomes an aesthetic phenomenon in modern times, especially because of the aesthetic of the sublime worked out in the eighteenth century by Shaftesbury and later by Kant. Nature also exists to a large part through the arts and media, it is symbolically formatted by modern and new media such as painting, poetry, photography, film and internet.

5. In traditional concepts of culture or civilization, “nature” works as one pole of a binary system, of which culture is the other. All that is made by human being is culture; all that is not created by man belongs to the other pole: nature. The irritating point is that to some extent “nature” is also made by man, by its aesthetics, by its perception and by its evaluation. National parks are the creation of a modernity based on the idea of protecting nature from dangerous human influences.

But it was also German Romanticism and its philosophy of nature that tried to overcome this opposition by arguing that nature is an unconscious state of culture and that culture works in the same way as nature. The rhetorical figure of thought is an analogy that has the power to make the strange familiar, as Octavio Paz, an heir of Romanticism, once formulated. This figure has a seducing charm but the other side of the coin is a neurotic longing for perfect harmony.

6. Nature can be seen a central cornerstone of all the narrative material that tries to work out an alternative to the linear industrialization of the Western and later of the global colonial and postcolonial world. As Sigmund Freud has shown in his essay *The Discomfort in Civilization* [J3] (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*) the protest against and the criticism of modern culture and civilization is an integral part of the modern way of life, because the central part of modernity is the control of nature, especially human nature, and for Freud this means especially the sex drive. Thus, culture in the sense of the great narrative of progress means a limitation of the >natural< state of freedom. Therefore the longing for a natural state of existence refers to a form of living beyond the constrictions of society and culture that is seen as the very evil of human cohabitation. The American and Canadian concept of the free settlement in an intact and original nature can also be seen, a colonial narrative, as part of the idea of creating human existence anew. The narrative hidden behind this is the displacement or subjugation of all native people in this territory.

7. Nature is not only a physical ensemble of landscape, stone, flora and fauna, but is also a state. Nature refers to a time long before civilization and a time that will finally come again. In its positive version it is a narrative that has paradise in its center; it is the goal after all the alienations, troubles and separations in modern life and culture.

Nature as a counter-world works in a very practical and prosaic sense in the everyday life of modern man and woman. As I said earlier, in modernity discomfort is part of modernity itself. To some extent, nature has become a rare and estimated item. It is on the periphery of an artificial world and at the same time it is something of a luxury.

Luxury normally does not have a fixed place in everyday life. It is the exception, to cite Foucault, a heterotopia. Holidays and weekends are the temporary compensation for the burden of modern civilization. During holidays we are all (if we like) for a strictly limited time a little bit like Thoreau, the man in the wilderness. It is the very ironic mini-narrative that replaces the dream of a new world where man and woman are in united with nature, including their own.

8. The garden is on the one hand fascinating, because it seems to be an idyllic place, a place of harmony between man and nature, a place of timelessness and safeness. Therefore it was able to represent human paradise. But on the other hand it is less radical than the natural wilderness. The garden is the result of human intervention to neutralize the strange element of nature within and without man and woman. Or to quote the Austrian artist Lois Weinberger, whose oeuvre is part of the exhibition: “The more we are able to “make” nature, the less we become part of it. The discourse about cultural concepts targets humanity’s self-conception, as opposed to the rest of the world: stones, chickens, ghosts, cars, or dragons.” (Lois Weinberger: Green Man, 40) We have given up the idea of paradise in a secular version too and we also try to live in difference to our selves. “Nature” has become a line of the horizon of our life. With regard to this dimension we are lonesome travelers.

9. Postmodernism always means the loss of pathos and the neutralization of utopia. As Octavio Paz has propounded in his essay *The Sons of the Mud*, recent cultures are based on the idea of the imperative of the past. Western modernity, a secularized form of Christianity, has broken with a narrative structure which is dominated by the idea of regulating culture by permanent reference to the past. Its addressee is a future which is prepared in present time. But after the breakdown of the utopian energies of modernity, present time becomes the very ruler of postmodern narratives. Therefore, nature too can no longer serve as a symbolic place holder for a non-alienated counter world.

There is now not only one future. As there was not only one past, there is a plurality of futures, or with other words, future is an open space. To some extent this is also a problem, because our obsession with the now implies a neglecting of our ecological responsibilities for future generations.

10. I come to my tenth and final point: Are there some natural or unnatural limits as the title of the exhibition suggests? I agree with the ambivalence and the cautiousness of the curator. Modern cultural analysis has given up the idea of essentialist settings and ideas especially with regard to human nature and moreover with nature as such that is, we have overcome sentences like ‘Nature is’, ‘man is’, ‘woman is’ etc. Modern cultural analysis no longer operates with the binary contrast between nature and culture. Nature does not speak, it is the human being that is able to speak. This global world is characterized by the idea of overcoming all sort of limits and borders, but at the same time new limits are created, because – and here the criticism of civilization is right – because it creates new ones, especially in the field of modern society and its obsession of controlling spaces.

From the very beginning, the focalization [J4] on limits was central in ecological discourse. I need only point to terms such as the limit of growth, the limits of natural resources and the limiting of dangerous emissions. But death is a limit, our own death, the collective death of fauna and flora and human beings. This story of limits clearly has apocalyptic elements – but without a positive ending in the future. It is

neither a story of linear progress nor one with a romantic plot. It does not have a taste of the avant-garde but is, as Lyotard has pointed out, an *arrière-garde* aspect. Or in other words, it is a defensive narrative. People defending their cities and the castle against enemies in traditional pre-modern wars knew exactly where the lines lay between their enemies and themselves, but we do not really know where the lines are, and there is no visible enemy either. We know we should change our life style and our economy, but we are not able to do so. We cannot follow the principle of responsibility the Jewish-German philosopher Hans Jonas proposed two decades ago.

Philosophically, nature has become a limited concept, that is it remains a horizon of human experience and its limits are less rigid than generations of man and woman have thought. But the fact that we live from the resources of nature, a very economic and not an esthetic or symbolic fact, is such a fact. What we call the ecological discourse is characterized by a specific experiment regarding how far we can go. Nature does not speak, as Richard Rorty has pointed out, nature is not a wise man or woman. But it represents a limit that we do not know exactly. And as I mentioned earlier, maybe it is not a limit for the contemporary generations, but for later ones.

In the interview with Lois Weinberger I quoted, the artist, upon being asked by Jessica Ullrich if nature proves to be only a metaphor in the end, answers: “As long as nature allows us to die, it’s impossible to simply see it as just metaphorical. I have been working in this realm – without a hedge – for the entire world to see, changing the soil, observing conditions, looking for what’s usable. Is that not political and applied beauty, the map of the world as a wasteland?”

Reference: Wolfgang Müller-Funk, *The Architecture of Modern Culture. Towards a Narrative Cultural Theory*, New York 2013.