

WHO IS AFRAID OF THE PAINTING, THE WRITTEN IMAGE AND THE BLINDMAN?

'... and death closed the eyes that so admired their owner's beauty.'

From Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book III, the passage in which Narcissus falls in love with himself and dies.

Hans Vandekerckhove's work looks like sentences in the form of a question. And the question is, what is the question! What is it about? What question do his characters ask themselves? They are not rhetorical, nor pedagogical, but questions, rather, that stem from philosophical amazement: why are things the way they are? The world he depicts is populated by static figures that take their place anonymously in garden landscapes bathed in colour. However much like drawings the figures are rendered, they still become an almost visceral part of their surroundings. They cannot be cut out of it. But nor are they at home there.

Vandekerckhove zooms in on the human condition from a worm's-eye view. These are not flashes from a story, nor anecdotes or family snapshots. The painter gives aesthetic form to a universal way of being in which we are not pleased to recognise ourselves: alone in the world, even in company, we look at others as if at strangers. Vandekerckhove walks his familiar environment like a scientific researcher. This evokes the image of an anthropologist who in the end puts his own biotope under the microscope. It is, nevertheless, painted at a moment when the globetrotter has not yet been able to unpack his suitcase. He is on a permanent world voyage, heading for his Ithaca. But he never arrives home.

A SEEING THAT NEVER SEES

Why did Plato fear painting? In *Phaedrus* he compares painting to writing. He was prompted to make this comparison by the etymological kinship between the Greek words *zographia* (painting) and *graphein* (writing). It was his opinion that the written word can do no more than refresh the memory about something one already knows. He went on: 'After all, the products of painting stand there as if they were alive. But if you ask them anything, they maintain a solemn silence.' Like the written word, painting creates the illusion of life, of a real presence. If one wants to know the meaning of a picture, one has to ask the painter. But he cannot give you the answer. In his *Apologia*, Socrates had already argued that when one asks artists about their intentions, they express themselves incoherently. Their talent clearly produces impressive things, whose meaning they do not themselves understand. This philosophical reserve with regard to art reveals an ideology of originality: a directness of understanding, insight self-evident. This philosophical iconoclasm is prompted by the fear that the picture neutralises the truth behind the representation. A picture establishes the absence of the original. It manifests itself as a plenitude outside which everything is in danger of emptying. It is precisely here that art's melancholy lies. Art commences in an irrevocable loss. In the same way the birth of the written mark was also a moment of loss: the speaker, the listener and the world are absent from the silent manuscript.

It is precisely the philosophical dimension of painting that arouses professional jealousy among philosophers - the fact that a picture has a spirit, and can radiate as great a vitality as the actual reality itself. In this respect the philosopher can be compared to the Berlin vandal who in 1982 irreparably damaged Barnett Newman's painting *Who's afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV*. In his statement he declared that the red in the painting had put him in a state of mortal terror. It had in fact been Newman's intention that the spectators should lose themselves in the painting. There is something introspective about painting, something that refers to itself and that threatens to enclose or swallow the spectator. The spectator stands face to face with the nakedness of his own gaze. The more one wonders what it is one is seeing, the more the gaze is bared. What should, may or can I see in Vandekerckhove's painting *Wild is the wind?* A man in a white coat, standing in a desolate landscape, is watching a series of frills in the sky. It is right here that the philosophical dimension of painting is to be found: there is something that seeing overlooks, something that escapes it, but at the same time this mysterious thing is precisely what the gaze depends on. In fact, the

meaning of *theoros* was 'spectator': *horos* (from *horaoo* = see) and *thea* (spectacle). So we have the theorist as a spectator at a show. Nietzsche reminds us in his *Birth of Tragedy* that Socrates entered the agora in Athens as a 'spectator'. So there is a congeniality between theoretic contemplation and the function of looking. After all, is it not painting that teaches people to really look? It is painting that mediates between human vision and the visible world. The outside world does not appear in a painting, rather, the painting materialises a world. The painting assumes the position of a third party between the eye and the world, an intermediate, a one-way screen. The painting stares at me like a representation of the world seen from the creator's point of view. Face to face with a painting, we cast ourselves into its abyss. Goethe is one up on Newton when it comes to the subjectivity of the aesthetic experience. Light is not simply something that shines on us, but a space we enter. When the sun comes up, we enter a world of light. In this way we constantly attract attention. The mounting of cameras in public places to promote a feeling of security makes precisely this looking experience frighteningly actual: the eye of the camera suddenly gives a presence to the Other who can see us.

BETWEEN WRITING AND IMAGE

This asymmetry between seeing and being seen is not a formal game within which the history of painting might make a study. Vandekerckhove's work demonstrates precisely how the painter occupies a position within the epistemological status of the look. His works make a theme of the questioning, seeking, reflecting gaze. The nature he shows us is one of which we cannot say whether it is motif or background. Formal gardens, waste ground, rolling hills, tree plantations, marine landscapes... are all variations on a world seen as a *hortus conclusus*, an 'Enclosed Garden'. But Vandekerckhove's enclosed garden is a long way from the tiny 'Enclosed Gardens' of the lay sisters in the beguinages. There are no paradisiacal longings or mystical marriages here. Vandekerckhove's garden reminds us more of the closedness of our existence. In this way he makes every environment abstract, a sort of universal biotope, an archetype of the human condition itself. Into this ecological architecture he places a solitary figure who simultaneously does and does not belong there. A substantial element of Vandekerckhove's idiom is that he does not focus on the figure itself but on its gaze. The chance models may on occasion be himself, his daughter or a good friend. But they are passers-by who do not act as anecdotal individuals, rather as representatives of man himself. They are privileged extras in a dramatised stage production. But these figures acquire an existential dimension in the theatricality of Vandekerckhove's iconography.

At first sight they are not even looking at us. They are watched by us, almost caught in the act, while they themselves are looking at something going on in or outside the painting. But it is precisely within this plan that the whole rhetoric of seeing and being seen develops. Whereas the film camera can alternate between a subjective view of an approaching object and an objective recording of a moving subject, anyone looking at a painting is subjected to a particular tension. Face to face with a still image - and Vandekerckhove divines the essence in this snapshot of an unguarded moment - the viewer is at the mercy of a tension arising from the fact that the painting in any case stares at him and immobilises him (as a mobile character) while on the other hand it cannot prevent his escape. I am always free to turn my gaze away, to flee. But only, and precisely because, this relationship between the painting and the spectator creates a situation in which someone looks and as part of this is also looked at, is the spectator properly able to realise that someone never looks at him from the point from which he himself looks. 'I am looked at' (by a third person - in my most intimate self, a third party, an outsider, looks at me). The threatening words 'God is watching you' used to hang above living room doors. And however much I look, I cannot see the Other - a psychic body stripped of all religious connotations. Not in the light that falls on things, not in the firmament that forms the horizon of my desire to look. This issue is clearly laid out in the painting *Le silence* (1998). Vandekerckhove presents a Narcissus who is mirrored in both the surroundings and the surface of the water. His sideways glance loses itself somewhere in the natural environment. But then his bent attitude betrays his gaze into the reflecting surface of the water. In *Natuurgetrouw* (1998) (*True to nature*) the figure is almost as transparent as the water spouting from his hose. In *Unhook the stars* (1998) a man is staring at the vault of the

nocturnal heavens, while standing in a pool of water.

In this connection it is not unimportant to consider the significant part played by the titles. If, for example, one were to attach another title to the painting called *Le silence*, such as 'Henk has once again lost the meaning of his existence', or for *Unhook the stars*, 'The Director-General is this evening once more trying to walk on water', we would end up in the world of Benoit or Glen Baxter. One might dare to conclude, when interpreting the meaning of the works, that the writing supplied a determining element. But Vandekerckhove's visual world would not support any such narrative irony, because the taut composition and range of colours counteracts any humorous speech bubble. And this is because in Vandekerckhove's idiom language and image are imprisoned within a philosophical dialectic: the title enhances the image and the image enhances the title.

Vandekerckhove attaches reflective metaphors to his works which give dramatic tension to the banality of a cycle ride, as in *Op weg naar het einde*, (*On the way to the end*) or lightness to the mysterious melancholy of a girl in a marine landscape, as in *Ballerina*. Not hopeless absurdity, but rather a chastened, sprightly stoicism.

THE BLINDNESS OF SEEING

We are here seeing the painting as a projection screen, behind the image, probing the spectator's gaze without ever seeing what he desires. At the same time the painter's gaze remains absent. Just as Velasquez painted an invisible projection plane in *Las Meninas*, using optical illusion and perspective, Vandekerckhove makes the spectator join him in looking at what is not there to see. What is more, the spectator is confused by the fact that, by building in physiological references, the character is reminiscent of the painter himself. This reinforces a feeling of coincidence: that of the spectator's yearning gaze and the painter's hidden look. In other words, the painter offers an image that arouses the art-lover's cravings and allows the spectator to sacrifice his own gaze for that of the artist. In this way the painting keeps the viewer's hope alive that he will one day be able to celebrate the encounter with the hidden look. It would be an imaginary recovery of a look thought lost, the look in which every child knows itself to be secure. In this way we can understand that the painting gives mental nourishment to the desire to look. The craving is not satisfied, since masterpieces invite us over and over again to let our gaze come to rest there, to become calm there. Because the encounter never happens. The lost object of desire is evoked again and again, but is equally quickly hidden again behind the veil as one comes closer. The genius of the painter lies precisely in the ability to entice the spectator and then send him away again.

Now, as a result of focusing on the timeless dimension in a narrative subject, Vandekerckhove is able to hold onto the illusion of this coincidence of the hidden gaze and the yearning gaze. The spectator steps naively into the picture with his story and is curbed by the stylistic, slowing stratagem. It is not a slow motion image from the point of view of the camera. It is an invitation no longer to read the still image as one 'now-instant' in an infinite series, but as an eternity in depth. In *La silence* the world is reflected in the depth of the lake. This keeps up the urge to look and diverts it into the silence of a meditative moment. The loss is absorbed into a chastening. It is a process of gradual acceptance of the blindness of the gaze. There is a Yiddish quotation from Shalom Aleichem which may help us to understand: 'The longer a blindman lives, the more he sees'.

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