

P/////AKT

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[An endlessly producing story machine]

I am a machine that endlessly produces stories, but sometimes I get tired and hope to tread in someone else's tracks. But while I follow the tracks of another, I get even more tired; I know this story, I do not want to tell this story. This story doesn't deserve to be told again. A lot of stories, let's be honest, do not create any space for us. Reading such stories is like peering at a world from behind glass. Other stories charge into life like tear gas.

What I'm still missing is setting. The story is already finished, but I don't know where to set it. Perhaps you're raising your eyebrow, wondering if it is possible to tell a story without any background. Even fairy tales take place in the woods, at sea or in a castle garden. Although it's difficult to imagine a story without any background, it is still possible. I've got two characters, one is uncertain, the other more determined.

[I'm choosing between an intergalactic society with shockingly recognizable up-to-date characteristics and a twenty first century, metropolitan setting with estranging elements. Which would you rather read?]

Imagine a story in which the distinction between foreground and background is dissolved. A world in which things behave exactly as they do now, but without our steering and examination. The trees rustle in the wind. The bicycles are unfastened and move by way of revolving pedals down the road. They stop at stoplights in order to let the driverless cars turn the corner before crossing the road. The taps open and close, as do the bridges and rail crossings. The telephones and the television sets switch on and off. The oil gets pumped out of the ground by way of leaking pipes into harbours and subsequently shipped off, intersecting all seven seas before being pumped into enormous cylindrical containers equipped with one measly ladder. Everything moves cyclically, from the break of dawn to the setting sun. The reverse of a novel. Everything exists in the same way as now and does what it is made to, except that the consciousness of the spectator is no longer the center of this world. The things exist for themselves, with great contentment.

In the morning there is blue smoke, in the evening red. Yesterday I saw a film on the internet in which blue smoke was used to drive apart a crowd of protestors. They protested against white men in ironed polo shirts who were conducting an evening march with torches from the garden center. The men were marching with these props in order to defend their place in history and direct former extras of this tasteless exhibition, by means of violence, to some place in the background. Such torches are often used at barbecues or late nights in the garden. What I often do is add citronella to the little bottles of fluid that are jammed between the split end of the bamboo stick in order to protect my guests against bugs. I stick the poles into the ground towards the edge of the lawn or between the blooming foxgloves or in the middle of an aromatic eglantine bush or next to the flinty common hazel. Then I place the bottles of liquor and soda in troughs filled with cold water, beside some metal

buckets full of ice cubes. Deep bowls contain meatballs in tomato sauce, defrosted that same morning. Sparsely trimmed slices of smoked ham lie meticulously fanned out upon a plate with pastel blue roses on its rim. *Bitterballen* share a shallow dish with fat strips of ox meat and creamy slices of liver sausage. Small bowls full of cucumber, pickles, and tiny florets of cauliflower are placed in between. This garden party will be attended by white people only, this is simply how things are.

But I digress. Blue smoke in the morning, red smoke in the evening. The smoke is full of colour additives and unfolds itself as rapidly multiplying cauliflowers. The budding bulbs produce new bulbs in order to satisfy the insatiable urge to fill the space around them, to make opaque, to appropriate.

[I'll give you the shortest version of a story: A man or woman is searching. They search for something they know, something that they have seen before and find pretty. Something old that they think they have lost or something new which they think will make them happy. A white square plate, a spear, a story. Or perhaps each other. Have you ever imagined a love song being specifically about you? Yes, of course, always. Haven't you? No, never. As you choose, reader, who you are and which version meets your fancy.]

But now you ask, who is the narrator? Isn't the I, in the meantime, also a character in this story? I think so. It is the instance that considers, filters and selects. You can't see how it happens, but perhaps much can be surmised from the result of this fantasizing and filtering and selecting. I hope you will be obliging. You should know that I write in order to entertain you and to impart something of the way in which I see the world. Not as a direct, unmediated representation of what I see (alas, if only!), but as an attempt to transmit, by way of parataxis and selection and joy in undertaking to form the ideal sentence, something of my disgust and love for this world and her numerous representations. And my embarrassment in attempting to intimate this love and disgust via clumsy sentences that are repeatedly refined, deleted and revised. A comma relocated, a paragraph rewritten and omitted, a verb construction changed from passive to active. This story is also a smoke-screen of language.

I could have used the third person for this story, but that doesn't appeal to me. Because the perspective on the self can best be given in third person, namely with appropriate distance. But I didn't want to write about myself with the world as a stage setting and my friends and family as extras. Because the perspective on the other can best be given through the first person, namely with the full conviction that other people's consciousness are as complete as your own. A person is not a main character in a story in which others are extras. Even if me, you, him and her are at this moment fictional. The narrator searches for the perfect sentence and needs a story to do so. There is no essential difference between foreground and background, merely gradations of attention.

[Fill in for yourself what the characters look like. I must add that they must not be unusually tall or short. You may choose the title from the first elegy of Rilke's *The Elegies of Duino*: "Of course, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer,/ to no longer use skills one had barely

time to acquire;/ not to observe roses and other things that promised/ so much in terms of a human future;/[...]/ Strange to notice all that was related, fluttering so loosely in space.”*]

In a different story the world exists solely for you, and you always find what you are searching for; a spear that is too large for present-day man and of which the flint head has been attached to the shaft’s enormous length with a cable tie. A bag of tobacco lies buried in the hinterland between field and highway, in perfect condition, dry but tender in spite of centuries underground. Blue smoke in the morning, red smoke in the evening. A collar that moves, even without the prisoner who ought to reside inside it. A prisoner who perhaps feels lost without a collar. In the woods between highway and field everything lies ready for the trip: a sleeping bag waiting for its trim sleeper, a pair of trousers, supple from being worn-in, a box of dry matches. The tracker follows the tracks of the past. Have the objects been left behind in order for them to be found again? Or are they found now for the first time? Are we in our own or in someone else’s tracks?

Let us formulate the question differently, could I ever find anything I wasn’t looking for? I once found a black stone in the pocket of a woolen winter coat I had taken out of the hall room closet in order to check for moth holes. I hadn’t looked for the stone, I hadn’t even ever considered the stone because I had never even seen such a stone. I don’t know how the stone ended up in my coat pocket. But that is a different story, the story of the black stone and evil.

A French anthropologist went to the Brazilian Amazon wood and showed film stills to a small group of men who had lived there all their life. The first images he showed were of Maria Callas singing. The film was black and white. Callas wore a sleeveless evening gown of a stiff changeant taffeta, upon her eyelids a thick upward line of black paint had been applied, her hair was tied back painfully. “We have much admiration for people who dare to sing in public”, the men said. “We can see that she is conveying something with emotion, perhaps it is religious.” Afterward the men were shown the moving images of Neil Armstrong on the moon. “What is your reaction to see that a man could walk on the moon?”, asked the anthropologist. “It concerns us: The moon was made to be far away from the earth so that we couldn’t touch it. But why did you go there? What were you trying to find?”, was the first reaction of the group. “The moon exists in order to shine light on us at night. We never had as many lunar eclipses in the past. You have most likely disturbed her. We too have noticed changes; it is getting warmer; we have less fresh air than before. You and your technology are likely to kill the moon!”, they said at last.

Perhaps the story starts in the evening; the air is wiped clean by tropical rain, the low-hanging cloud trails are lilac in the evening sun. The searching man or woman walks past the breakers and sees an invisible creature coming from the sea. A creature like the *Horla*, from the eponymous story by Guy de Maupassant. The *Horla* is a vampire, presumably from South-America, who lives on water and souls, as far as I can remember. Naturally you’re wondering how I could see the creature if it is invisible? Let me be more precise, I saw things – a chain of shells just above my crown, a giant spear of which the flint head had been attached with a cable tie hovered horizontally at the same height as the chain of shells. It

took place at dawn on the beach. Don't fret, attentive reader, it is but a story, we need not be consistent. Seabirds don't only whistle at twilight like their fellow species deeper inland. Their husky shrieking reverberates from dawn-to-dark, but they suddenly fell silent then. I could see from the foot prints in the sand that the Horla had walked past without having slowed down, perhaps it didn't see me. Perhaps it did see me but didn't think more of me than of the waves, seagulls and dunes.

The men of the Amazonian tribe had given their consent to the interview because they knew that it would no longer be possible to keep the outside world at bay. Even though they had come to the conclusion that that was what they wanted most. However, in the interceding years more and more researchers and film crews had visited them, increasing amounts of miners and foresters came into their vicinity. They could no longer avoid this other world. They only consented to meet outsiders to prepare for what was coming, not out of a desire to see more of the world. This shift had moved them from the absolute center of their own world to the periphery of another world. Unlike the anthropologist, they did not need extras or spectators in order to tell their stories. They were content with themselves.

* Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, translated by A.E. Flemming, Routledge: 1983, p. 72

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