

When Dung Beetles Dance

by Marianne Gronemeyer

"Contemporary man... attempts to create the world in his image, to build a totally man-made environment, and then discovers that he can do so only on the condition of constantly remaking himself to fit it. We now must face the fact that man himself is at stake. ...

A child on the streets of New York never touches anything that has not been scientifically developed, engineered, planned, and sold to someone. Even the trees are there because the Park Department decided to put them there. ... He (the child) can experience the poetic surprise of the unplanned only through his encounter with "dirt", blunder, or failure: the orange peel in the gutter, the puddle in the street, the breakdown of order, program, or machine are the only take-offs for creative fancy."¹

Ivan Illich wrote this a little more than 50 years ago. And we have now come together here to talk about nature, which, as Ivan convincingly explains, barely existed even fifty years ago because it had almost given way to a "totally man-made environment." How do you talk about something that no longer exists and that we therefore cannot experience? Isn't every clever statement we make about 'nature'—instead of living in and with her as is appropriate to our nature/to the human condition—already a capitulation to the 'technogenic milieu'? Willy-nilly, we are its inmates and have been dancing to its tune for a long time. 'Nature' does not have a good reputation in the technogenic environment; it is seen as

1 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, Penguin Books Ltd 1974, S.108 f.

fundamentally in need of improvement, at best suitable as raw material for the fabulous artifacts that the engineer strives to produce. Under his scrutinizing gaze, everything becomes either a means to *his* ends or trash.

Twenty-five years later, Illich's findings are even more depressing: not only the objects of our perception but also our perceptions themselves are already technogenic to a considerable extent. "Both the thing perceived and the mode of perception it calls forth are the results of artifacts that are meant by their engineers to shape their users."² Our senses no longer belong to us; they serve other masters. This means we can no longer trust the perceptions they pass on to us.

So how can we talk about 'nature' without coming to terms with her ultimate elimination? We can remember her, mourn her demise, complain about her loss, and endure the pain of our separation. Of course, this is something completely different than getting lost in rescue fantasies and in the wrangling over *Grenzwerte* (the limits) that are supposed to guide how we manage her without destroying her completely. We don't have to save nature, and we cannot. The only thing we must do is not stop nature from saving herself *and us*. Nothing can be saved by the same means that were used to blindly destroy it. Every repaired damage begets new damage, and we rush from one repair to the next, always creating new dangers.

It is true that our remembering nature does not resurrect her. What memory can bring back to us is only a 'substitute.' Our memories are just images of an almost vanished world. Yet, this memory of nature is multifariously richer than the shoddy, blinding, and deceptive replacement that the engineers' fabrication of a 'second nature.'

Memory is *dangerous*. It reminds you that things can be different from the status quo. The advocates of the tech-

2 Ivan Illich; *Philosophy...Artifacts...Friendship*, Presentation given to the American Philosophical Association, Los Angeles, March 23, 1996.

nogenic milieu are cocksure that their way of acting is the only promising one. They refer to factual constraints, are sure that they are on the right path, are confident about the lack of alternatives, and leave no doubt that saving the world can only be achieved through technical innovations. They stir up a “hatred of the past”³ and declare war on memory as soon as it dares to refuse its place in the museum.

David Schwartz, an early companion of Ivan Illich, while traveling through England, visited Manchester, the hotspot of nascent industrialization. Dejected by what he saw, he asked himself: How could people be persuaded to prefer this ugly, artificial, substitute world instead of the world of things that could once be experienced with all our senses? How could earthlings, whose world was once “wild and green” be content with this depressing Manchester-gray?

How could they make themselves more or less comfortable in this “ersatz reality?”⁴ Why do people around the world succumb to the fascination of the technogenic environment—even though it is ominous and ugly? It is because the creators of this milieu have succeeded in making them believe that man-made second nature is the only possible one, no, the only one that can exist at all, the only reality that counts. David Schwartz quotes Ivan Illich, who asked his readers to picture “a large, translucent sphere. People live in the center of the sphere. From the outside, a series of projectors throws images of reality onto the sphere, covering it. Looking from the inside, one is seduced into taking the projected scenes for the actual world. The projectors are the reality-producing institutions of the modern world.”⁵

3 Manfred Osten: *Das geraubte Gedächtnis. Digitale Systeme und die Zerstörung der Erinnerungskultur*, Frankfurt a.M./ Leipzig 2004, S. 21 ff.

4 David B. Schwartz: Ivan Illich's Concept of 'Rests': Glimpses of a World Past, in: Lee Hoinacki/Carl Mitcham (Editors), *The Challenge of Ivan Illich*, New York 2002, S. 104)

5 D. B. Schwartz a.a.O. S. 104

If there were no other world beyond this apparent one, then our capacity to perceive would cease to be a critical and reliable guide. The sentence: “But I saw it with my own eyes, heard it with my own ears” that is meant to offer evidence would then collapse powerlessly. The word ‘but’ would have been eliminated from the vocabulary if everything is as it appears. In short, we would no longer be in our senses once the world had become an image. The fictitious nature of the world that is disconnected from experience is irreversible, if it is hermetic, if those who are enclosed in it—caught up in the delusion of freedom—believe in it without any doubt, i.e., when they rule out the existence and possibility of another world so completely that it can no longer be thought of, let alone longed for.

While traveling through England, David Schwartz experiences the subway, the appropriately named “underground,” as a metaphor for the illusionary world that has no outside and does not accept anything else as itself. Ivan Illich calls this phantasmic world a ‘beyondless here and now.’ (*drübenloses Hüben*) As the traveler stands in a windowless room in the boarding queue at Heathrow Airport, he suddenly realizes that since he got on the tube in central London a while ago, he has practically only been transported ‘underground’ in a windowless enclosed world. Of course: the subway trains have windows, but if you want to look through them, you have to press your nose tightly against the windows and shield your eyes with your hands so as not to just see the reflection of the brightly lit interior. What then is revealed, on the other side of the window, is nothing but pitch darkness into which the light from the cabin casts a faint glow. But it illuminates nothing; offers nothing to see. It is an experience of oppressive confinement that claustrophobics suffer to the point of panic, but everyone else hardly seems to notice.

Schwartz remembers reading a book about the history of the subways. Its author, Benson Bobrick, describes the beginning of mining almost mythically, like a storming of the underworld, and calls the ‘underground cities’ of coal and iron ‘fiery pits of hell,’ which ultimately make life above ground like the subterranean one which, as it were, spills out into the world of daylight. Now, the underworld is everywhere, so that *faute de mieux*, people get used to their ‘infernal’ life and reconcile themselves to it.

Illich also recognized this deceptive world that has no outside and allows no escape, as the epitome of hell. However, the sphere is not yet perfect in its illusory solidity. “There’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in,” sings Leonard Cohen. And David Schwartz explains: “Although there are not many, a few people start to find that it (the illusionary sphere) is full of cracks. And once you see one, it is easy to see other cracks as well. Through these cracks you can catch brief glimpses of a real other world outside,” in which completely different things are important and commonplace than in ours, which has a completely different pace than ours, in which life takes place in completely different settings; and people interact with each other and with nature very differently from the modern world we live in, which is characterized by cities, schools, institutions to manage the lonely life of the elderly and the sick, high-speed trains, police cars, and digital networks. The remnants or “rests” of a vanishing world can change our perceptions—“They shine through like tiny bright stars in a cloudy night sky...like the sparkle of stars seen through an overcast night at sea” writes Schwartz.⁶ The very poetry with which the ‘leftovers’ are described is already a rebellion against the regime of the technically and institutionally created parallel world, which has long since subjected

6 D.B. Schwartz a.a.O. p. 105.

our senses and language to its functional laws.⁷

But what kind of world do we catch sight of, when we become aware of its remnants through the cracks? Illich called it, *faute de mieux*, ‘vernacular.’ I must admit, that doesn’t make me any wiser. I don’t know what ‘vernacular’ means. I can’t define it. My dictionaries also fail me. Yet I have an idea, a feeling for how deeply people’s attitude to life in vernacular worlds (the plural is essential) differs from my own attitude in the late modern world. This feeling has something to do with memories, with my own, which go back eighty years into the “well of the past” (Thomas Mann), and with stories that penetrate much deeper having been told and retold over the ages. “He who cannot draw on three thousand years / could remain inexperienced / living hand to mouth / in the dark” J.W. Goethe states bluntly.⁸

This much can be said according to the dictionaries and my intuition: the ‘vernacular’ refers to being of a country and its people, it has to do with native tongue and dialect, with places of origin, with households and neighborhoods, with ‘daily toil’ and the ‘evening-celebration (*feierabend*) of the day’s abundance’ (which have nothing in common with clock-time work and the evening-entertainment of consumers). None of this has a good reputation in the modern world but rather smells of backwardness, nostalgia, hostility to progress, and above all, of glorifying the past.

To return to the ‘glimpses,’ those amazing moments in which we, suddenly, gain insight into something that was previously hidden from us, is to experience a shaft of bright sunlight on something that has been obscured for a long time. These unexpected insights are not due to the theory-forming mind but because of a concrete event, a surprising en-

7 Vgl: Uwe Pörksen: *Plastikwörter, Die Sprache einer Internationalen Diktatur*, 2.Auflage, Stuttgart 1988.

8 J.W. v. Goethe, *Wst-östlicher Divan*, cit. At M. Osten a.a.O. S.11

counter, that touches on something dormant within us. “Theories,” writes Goethe, “are usually the haste of an impatient mind that would like to be rid of the phenomena.”⁹ Glimpses have to do with the phenomena themselves. They go straight to the heart. They are not only welcome as confirmation of preconceived hypotheses or theories. There is something that concerns me directly. “Je suis touché,” ‘I am touched’, says Emmanuel Lévinas, to characterize this special moment.¹⁰ ‘Je suis touché’ is a pleasant or painful experience that flashes up—often for no apparent reason.

But the real secret of this moment is that, when it happens to me, I am completely passive and completely active at the same time. Completely passive, because I let it happen to me, and completely active because my senses are wide awake. The eyes used to seeing what is shown to them; the ears that are habituated to the omnipresent noise; the nose, which can be sprayed with the prescribed odors from a can; the tongue, which is dulled by ready-made foods; and the hands, which usually glide over polished surfaces, are all suddenly disturbed, moved, completely focused on the matter. They are confronted with a *real* counterpart (vis-a-vis). A literal change of the sense and the senses (Sinneswandel) has occurred. Let me illustrate what I want to say with a story.

For many years, we Gronemeyers have had the habit of engaging in an extended breakfast conversation when possible. The topic of conversation usually comes from what one or the other of us is currently reading or writing. One morning in Italy we were dealing with really very different issues. I was reading a book about the ‘Jewish roots of modernity’

9 “Theorien sind gewöhnlich Übereilungen eines ungeduldigen Verstandes, der die Phänomene gerne los sein möchte.” Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Maximen und Reflexionen* Bd. 9, Zürich/Stuttgart 1948ff S. 551, zit. bei M. Osten a.a.O. S.26.

10 Emmanuel Lévinas talking with Florian Rötzer, in: F. Rötzer: *Philosophen im Gespräch*, München 1987, S. 96

which was very close to my heart, and Reimer had started studying dung beetles because a colleague had brought him a bestseller from South Africa about dung beetles. We became very interested in them, and as the days went by, we learned more and more amazing things about them. We took a keen interest in their sad new destiny, which condemned them to extinction. Of course, we both knew them and had seen them in droves on our Sunday outings as children. I remembered being disgusted by these black crawlies. Their unappealing name did the rest. But now we became more attached to them every day, and we mourned their quiet, unnoticed passing away, and were reminded that we hadn't seen one in years.

Then, after three days of discussion, we found a dung beetle sitting on the red coconut runner on the staircase to the second floor of our Italian house. We couldn't believe it! How did he get there? It really wasn't a classic house insect, like wasps, flies, or ants. The obvious explanation that we only noticed him because of our new-found and acute awareness of his species could in no way explain the fact of his presence. We were faced with a mystery, one of those precious events that unsettles us because our hardened minds, accustomed to having a sober explanation for everything we encounter, are unable to cope with them. We had the feeling that we were involved in an extraordinary event that we should allow to remain reverently mysterious. We carefully moved the beetle into an environment that suited it better than our stair runner and wished him well.

A few days later, on a hike, we saw a shimmering gold fellow crawling on our path and then another, metallic green, another purple one, and then many. And while we were still admiring them in their magnificent colors, as if hearing a silent command, they spread their wings and began to circle around us. The dance of the dung beetles literally took our breath away. I did find an explanation for this mystery, though

not of the evidential kind, but a poetic one, which I believe in far more than I do in any so-called scientific proof. We saw them, not because we had dealt with them—‘selective perception’ is what that is called in technical jargon. Rather, because we leaned towards them, they showed themselves to us. We let them concern us and that is why they had come to us.

I don’t know if I should draw a generalized conclusion from this unique experience. Nevertheless, I do so with caution: only when I let myself be concerned by my fellow beings do the creatures, be they living or inanimate, emerge. The fact that they approach me, touch me, and deeply interest me comes from them. It’s a story about that blessed moment, when the two happenings come happily together, when their willingness to show themselves is conjoined to my receptivity to them in body, soul, and spirit. The ancient Greeks called this moment the *kairos*. It comes like a thief in the night. We can’t make it come, but we can be vigilant so that we don’t miss it. The only ability that can help us is the ability to marvel and be surprised, an ability that is as threatened with extinction as the dung beetles. We can still practice it and regain it step-by-step, though not in digitized conferences but only in convivial cooperation.

Did I feel something like satisfaction after this wondrous, meaningful encounter? No, I don’t think so. It was more akin to happiness, to gratitude, and the feeling of having been a better person for a moment. The ancient Greeks had a word that enchants me, not only for this special moment but also for the forces at work in it: *dynamis*. There’s nothing inherently mysterious about *dynamis*. It describes a completely logical and understandable fact: “Every active ability to bring about a certain change corresponds, on the part of the things in which this change can take place, to a passive ability to suffer it.”¹¹ Doesn’t it sound plausible? If I want to cause an effect on something, then I need a counterpart who can bear or suf-

11 Ottfried Höffe (Ed.) *Aristoteles-Lexikon*, Stuttgart 2005, S. 140.

fer my intention. The word *dynamis* describes both the work and the suffering as capacities. Both are equal to the other, and each conditions, complements, and limits the other. They are complementary. But more than that, to be truly adequate in this constellation of two, neither side must be only active or only passively suffer. An almost imperceptible constant switch between effectiveness and the art of suffering takes place between the two sides of this relationship. When *dynamis* is at work, each of the two sides is at home in both arts, in working and being active on the one hand and in enduring, suffering, and being passive on the other hand. Only in such dynamic interaction can *dynamis* unfold.

As Hannah Arendt has pointed out, modern man is a *Homo Faber*. The engineer's calculating mind has no use for the art of suffering. All he knows about suffering is that it is an evil that must be overcome. He bets everything on the card of effective power through technical upgrades. The dung beetles have lost their say and *homo faber* has lost his ability to stop. He must keep going.

'Aufhören' is a wonderful, insightful German verb. It has a profound double meaning: 'aufhören' means both to listen to something, to prick up one's ears, to hear intensely (Latin: *audire*, English: to listen) and to cease, to end something, to complete something (Latin: *finire*, English to finish). That is to say that I can only end something (*finire*) if I listen to someone or something that touches me (*audire*). But the reverse also applies. I can only listen to something, listen carefully, if I stop everything else and stand attentively with bated breath, just as we did when amazed by the miracle of the dung beetle on the step.

The intention to rescue or save nature from dying remains entirely committed to the desire to *produce* change. Without the other side of *dynamis*, without the readiness to stop one's activity to listen, these good intentions will not achieve anything good but will only cause further irreparable damage.