

## The specific weight of things

### On *Landscape with skiproads* by Pieter De Buysser

*Landscape with skiproads* is the story of a love that changes history. Driven by ardour, Zoltan attempts to find his Francesca. The young lad pursues her on his horse Abbas. His quest introduces figures from another age into the present, into the world of an average family with average problems – adolescence, unemployment, adultery, alcohol. The confrontation triggers a fundamental upheaval. In the end no one is who he thought he was. And yet nothing happens consciously or according to a plan. The boy falls off his horse more than he is in the saddle; the steed itself stubbornly and ceaselessly seeks its own path; and even Francesca is more absent than present. All the twists in the tale occur as if by chance. If anything guides them at all it is time itself, which follows its own course imperturbably. In a sense this state of affairs is characteristic of the poetics of Pieter De Buysser, who has yet again managed to compose a work that is so nimble that it seems to tell itself. As if he did not pick out the characters, but the other way around. Even though he keeps a firm hold on the reins in his capacity as author, director *and* actor, the artist's ego is nowhere dominant. Yet the stakes are high. It is an exercise in progressive negotiation. In De Buysser's work, man walks a path between myth and matter, the immeasurable and the everyday. He searches for his identity in that field of tension. In the past this sometimes occurred in a stumbling and shuffling manner (as in De Buysser's *Scar Lip*), but this time it staggers along uncontrollably.

Zoltan's favourite thing to do, he says, is to tickle Francesca behind the ear with a small meteorite. 'That always made her howl with laughter, and then they knew once more that that dragging, chronic history of ours is just something of the last 500,000 years'. A small gesture, big changes. De Buysser's mastery undoubtedly lurks in the combination of his training as a philosopher and the locus of the theatre. It is this confrontation that makes his work unique. The most abstract views on history can be settled in the very concrete space of the theatre. De Buysser maintains the tension between myth and matter in a dynamic balance: they do not coincide, but stimulate one another and thus acquire a new meaning. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno articulated this signification in the early 1930s in *Die Idee der Naturgeschichte* ('The Idea of Natural-History'): "'Signification" means that the elements of nature and history are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature'.<sup>1</sup> From this confrontation Adorno expected an awakening from the dream sleep of history. The two paths cross in a similar manner in De Buysser's landscape. It is the journey of the knight as old as nature through the history of the Flemish family next door. But in the theatre grave thoughts do not weigh heavy in the hand. They weigh as much as that small meteorite (but one that contains natural-history). But above all, the little stone serves to tickle dotingly. It brings about something. And in turn it sets in motion, it liberates. Indeed in the theatre things are not ready to be discovered. They do not wait for an audience that interprets them or learns to understand them. They happen.

The things that mark *Landscape with skiproads* are anything but innocent, however. They appear in the first instance as tangible witnesses of the ambition of great thinkers to subject history. The narrator will present sand from Plato's cave. The stone powder reminds us that our thinking is

rooted in the idea that the material world is distinct from that of the genuine 'ideas'. De Buysser will also exhibit the indentation in the dining table of Thomas Aquinas, the church father who combined his proof of God with a causal arrangement of history. Everything was given a fixed place and meaning. Resting on a pedestal in the background lies the glove of Adam Smith, the man who discerned an 'invisible hand' in the doctrine of the free market that would steer us towards harmony and equality. What appears to be a little toy later turns out to be Pavlov's bell. With it the scientist learned to 'condition', observing that dogs started salivating before he gave them food. And the meat knife with which Walt Disney irreversibly drew our experience of images will also unexpectedly come to the surface. And what to make of the Vodka bottles on stage, Boris Yeltsin's empties? All these objects initially have little to do with the poetry of coincidence. One after the other they have forced world history into a philosophical, religious, economic, psychological, cultural and political suit of armour. They constitute signposts in a history that sees itself as linear, effective and irrefutable.

There is the predetermined path, but there are then also 'skiproads'. 'To be able to awaken from our history, as from a nightmare, is an old dream of mine which I have never managed to realize', the narrator responds when Zoltan tells him about his little meteorite. This could be the credo of theatremaker Pieter De Buysser. For there the possibility does exist. Big ideas become tangible on stage. You can put them in a little see-through plastic bag, like Plato's sand. You can render Smith's 'invisible hand' perceptible in a glove and perform a subversive vaudeville with it in hospital. Or you can use it to give the theology of history a twist, so that Thomas Aquinas's table becomes a revolving door leading to an alternative experience. Theatre is the space in which the actor can literally and figuratively shift the limits of our thinking. Things are not fixed; the use to which they are put is what defines them. By removing the objects from their original context and placing them on stage in new combinations, they acquire new meaning. They are delivered up to coincidence. They are freed.

This logic appeals to the aspirations of the historical avant-garde, which deliberately broke at the time with the original and reassembled the fragments in its own story. Collage was its most important formal principle. Dadaist artists fragmented reality, mostly material from reviews and newspapers, and used the scraps to create a new picture. The past was redrawn, as it were, in the image of the new. Walter Benjamin, the chronicler of that avant-garde, recognized in that revolutionary ambition the older figure of the collector. The collector appropriates objects by stripping them of their original function. He then integrates the things in a new system. In that sense his collection updates possibilities that would otherwise remain unsuspected. Benjamin then conferred a political dimension on the collector's memorial practice: breaking with tradition and reassembling the shards in a new start. The collection of objects in De Buysser's theatre speaks a similar language. Zoltan takes them from History with a capital H and gives them a new place in the small household. Plato's sand ends up in the eyes of the inhabitants, Pavlov's bells behind their sofa cushions. That is where they do their work, where they become political. For Benjamin too politics was not the fantasy of objective, planning and control. Things happen because, according to Benjamin, 'this is the ways things are for the great collector. They strike him'.<sup>ii</sup> The revolution will not come from a politician who has things his own way. 'The revolution starts with a walk in the park', observes De Buysser in *The Incredible Transformations of*

*Mister Afzal*. The revolution will no less emerge in the framework in which a big thinker arranges things. Rather, things come to us. They seek us out; they ‘strike’ us.

For Benjamin, however, the collector’s passion was not free from melancholy. Things retain their own life that we shall never fully (re)cognize. Objects in the collector’s collection are small memorial stones that also always recall what is irretrievably past. They retain an aura of melancholy. That insight obviously applies to the manner in which authors today deal with collections. Melancholy is often the underlying beauty of their work. With *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, Edmund De Waal wrote a biography of objects that is simultaneously a biography of his ancestors. His ‘little history of touch’ traces a family collection of 264 netsuke or small Japanese figurines 140 years back in time. The life story of the objects leads the author to Paris, Vienna and Tokyo. Through the collection he reads the story of the rise and fall of a Jewish dynasty, loss and diaspora. Orhan Pamuk recently published *The Innocence of Objects*, a richly illustrated museum catalogue of the objects that make up the red thread in a novel he published a couple of years earlier, *The Museum of Innocence*. In that book, Füsün is prone to an obsessive and unhappy love. His only solace is an apartment in which he stores tangible memories of his love, such as an earring or cigarette butts. In the meantime, readers of Pamuk’s novel can visit the museum of the objects from that book. There the visitor will find the traces of a fiction. Perhaps De Buisser’s *Book Burning* is what comes closest to the melancholy of the objects. The trunk that Hans Op de Beeck put on stage for this performance gradually opens up during the narration. It contains the world in miniature. For Benjamin the miniature was the place par excellence for a meeting between the melancholy mind and the world of objects. ‘Pieter manipulates the object that Hans made, but Pieter is also manipulated by that object’, as De Buisser and Marianne Van Kerkhoven wrote at the time in the leaflet for *Book Burning*.

Perhaps that is why what is most striking in *Landscape with skiproads* is the absence of melancholy. De Buisser seeks a new configuration of history through a radical rearrangement of the objects. But the objects retain their charm and the collection is dynamic. The objects enter with the fickle horse Abbas, which surfaces and disappears again as in a dream from history. The jack-in-the-box is André Breton. When the narrator opens a box in his room, which is said to have once belonged to Breton, for the first time he hears the horse Abbas outside in the street. History can begin. Consciously or not, De with this opening Buisser refers to a spring day in Brussels some 80 years ago. His show premiered in Brussels, the city in which De Buisser lives and works. A coincidence or not, Brussels is where Breton gave his talk on ‘Surrealism’ on 1 June 1934. In his talk Breton linked the fate of the new movement with the fate of objects. The world of everyday objects, according to Breton, weighs on us. That things are what they are is a paralyzing insight. At the same time, the object finds itself in a crisis and precisely that crisis offers prospects on what the founder of surrealism later called ‘the total revolution of the object’. The objects of his age no longer coincided with themselves. They duplicated and pollinated one another, generating unexpected combinations. ‘The very careful study of the countless recent speculations to which this *object* publicly gave rise (oneiric objects, objects with a symbolic function, real and virtual objects, mobile and mute objects, phantom objects, “objets trouvés”, etc.), this study alone makes it possible to understand the full range of the avant-garde’s ambitions’.<sup>iii</sup> Breton then also advocated the removal of pictures from circulation and their recalibration. Or conversely the placing of objects in contexts that were radically unfamiliar to them. In either case the world

would appear different and therefore new. Duchamp's urinal is the most famous example. A small gesture, but one which shattered the definition of art once and for all. Breton himself had a preference for Giacometti. He liked to emphasize that the chance finding of a primitive mask on the flea market helped Giacometti complete *Hands Holding the Void (Invisible Object)*, a sculpture from 1934. As if the mask was waiting for Giacometti to turn up in order to become part of the collection in his studio. The object helped the artist out of his impasse. 'The finding of an object', Breton claimed, 'here radically fulfils the same task as dreams, because it frees the individual from the paralyzing emotional obstacles, comforts him and makes him realize that the obstacle he deemed insurmountable has been overcome'.

We can somewhat imagine Giacometti's relief, the shiver of the avant-garde, the respite of the family that awakens from its everydayness in *Landscape with skiproads*. We can imagine all that because a lot of people left the Brussels Kaaistudio with the same feeling that night. The last image was that of a wooden rocking horse. The American car manufacturer Robert Ford had played with it as a child. The boy would later give his name to Fordism, the doctrine that introduced efficiency and management in the age of mass production. In Brussels the horse swayed gently on stage. Pieter De Buysser ultimately got on it, gazing into the distance, but with a smile. Like Don Quixote, the knight who confused his dreams with reality, showing us the way.

**Kurt Vanhoutte, 1 April 2014**

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<sup>i</sup> "Signification" means that the elements of nature and history are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature'. Theodor Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural-History', in: *Things beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 265.

<sup>ii</sup> 'But this is the way things are for the great collector. They strike him'. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 1999.

<sup>iii</sup> André Breton, *Oeuvres Complètes* vol. 11 (1992), p. 258.