

Carrying the earth into the sky

The task was Friday's. "He carries the earth into the sky" in the Michel Tournier 1967 novel according to Gilles Deleuze.¹ Already early on in the novel he inadvertently blows up a powder keg when doing what he shouldn't do, smoking the forbidden tobacco. Boom. Like the car crash in Anna McCarthy's photo. And everything Robinson accumulated so far, his house and fortress, the bank and stables, his calendar, his mirror, his pots, pans, baskets, and his musket - it all goes up in smoke. Picking up the remaining wheat, Friday scatters it to the wind. He then kills a goat and this is the starting point, the beginning of Robinson's metamorphosis. For it is ultimately Robinson who is carried away to the sky by Friday, by choosing to forever remain on the island of Speranza.

The goat Friday kills is one of many that ran away during the explosion and became wild - Andoar, Friday calls him, the biggest of he-goats and their king. The battle between the two lasted many days and ended with Friday being injured and the great goat dead. When I am alone, I think about death often, my death mostly and the death of my love ones, fictional deaths and the death of the planet, dying at once and almost dying but not quite. "Carrying the earth into the sky" sounds like death already - souls of the earth seeking the heaven above. But here it is the goat. The goat is dead.² Finding its decaying body Friday swears, "I'll make him fly and sing."³

Friday cuts off the goat's head and places it in an anthill. He then cuts the skin to remove the fleece, taking it to the beach where he leaves it on the shore, waiting for the waves to impregnate it with sand and sea water. Of the flesh, he saves only the intestine, which he hangs off the branches of a tree to dry. Stretching the water-soaked fleece across some reeds, he makes a kite and together with Robinson he watches as Andoar abruptly soars up into the sky to fly. After a week, Friday retrieves the skull from the anthill, now gleaming white. He fastens two sticks between the horns, one higher, one lower, and strings the dried intestines in between to make an aeolian harp.⁴ To the side of the skull he attaches a vulture's wing to turn the strings to the wind and hangs the harp in the branches of a dead cypress tree. It takes a month before the wind is strong enough, but when it finally blows, Andoar sings "with full voice." Tournier writes,

Huddled together in the lee of a boulder, Robinson and Friday spent half the night listening to that solemn music that seemed to fall from the stars and rise from the depths of the earth.⁵

¹ Gilles Deleuze, "Michel Tournier and a world without others" in *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 301-21. Tournier's novel is a rereading of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, with now Friday given a more prominent role.

² I have long searched for an image of a dead goat but couldn't find one - the closest is perhaps the image of grandma carrying a dead rabbit in one of Valio Tchenkov's paintings.

³ Michel Tournier, *Friday and Robinson: life on Speranza Island*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Jupiter Books, 1972), 95.

⁴ The work of Max Weisthoff reminds me of such an harp, and not just because of his use of bone. An aeolian harp does not require anything living to play it.

⁵ Michel Tournier, *Friday*, 103.

The earth and the sky stand for something here, two different processes in tension with each other. Deleuze defines the earth as that which “holds and subsumes;”⁶ it contains the elements by retaining them within bodies. The earth’s tendency is towards stillness and stasis. Whereas the sky sets the same elements free. It is a tendency towards flight.⁷ To carry earthly bodies to the elemental sky is thus a primarily a gesture of liberation.

As such a gesture, the story I am re-telling may seem to be very modernist in spirit, especially in relation to art. The avant-garde has long defined itself through the break with the past and its traditions in the pursuit of the new, often utilising this metaphor of flight or sky: we may remember how Malevich after overcoming the lining of “the coloured sky” urges his fellow artists to “swim in the white free abyss.”⁸ Echoes of such a modernist sense of liberation can be found in the way the jury describes the selection process of the exhibition as the desire to see artistic production beyond fixed categories and clichés. To move from earth to sky can be understood as letting go of a set of pre-conceptions, in this case pertaining to a group of artists living and working in Munich.

The question is, to what purpose? In her well-known critique, Rosalind Krauss argues that the avant-garde’s rejection of the past serves to reclaim the concept of originality, which it defines as “a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth.”⁹ There are no undertones of death here. Marinetti is thrown from his automobile one evening in 1909 into a factory ditch filled with water and “emerges as if from amniotic fluid to be born - without ancestors - as a futurist.”¹⁰ The originality of the avant-garde is located in the reborn self of the artist, safe from the polluting influences of tradition, because possessing an innocence, a new-found naiveté. This is the mythic aspect to the avant-garde claims: to find yourself in an inner landscape untouched and unspoilt.

The same idea of beginning from ground zero plays a key role in the original Defoe novel. After his shipwreck,¹¹ Robinson begins with nothing - the empty land of the deserted island - on which he starts building a new life for himself. He finds shelter in a cave and starts cultivating land, domesticating the animals, harvesting and preserving food. But Tournier’s narrative strays from this clear trajectory. While Robinson still finds his cave, and cultivates the land and domesticates the animals, he also soon gets homesick and bored. He discovers a deeper part of the cave, squeezes himself inside and lies in the darkness and mud.¹² This is his ditch, his Terre-Mère, from which he eventually and reluctantly emerges, not reborn, but as someone who deviates, a deviant, or even - a pervert. The move from earth to sky is also this: a diversion from the normal order of things. It is a perversion.

⁶ Deleuze, “World without others”, 302.

⁷ And so many of the exhibition’s artists have this wish of flight: Hêlîn Alas with her trampoline, Ju Young Kim with her use of plane parts, objects flying in Anna McCarthy’s plane crash.

⁸ Kasimir Malevich, “Non-Objective Art and Suprematism” (1919) in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-1990* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell) 1999, 292.

⁹ Rosalind Krauss ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’, in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 157.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ There is a small ceramic by Veronica Hilger of such a shipwreck, on the 2nd floor.

¹² It is important to understand this feeling of being in the ditch as somehow comforting, the mud soft and warm, like one of Pierre-Yves Delannoy fleeces.

Deleuze uses the term “pervert,” in a Sadeian manner.¹³ The pervert is not someone who desires or does something perverse. Instead, perversion is defined as a deviation from aims, a matter of goals. In his short text on Tournier’s novel, Deleuze is very clear: Tournier in his reworking of the Robinson story raises the problem not of beginning but of end.¹⁴ The future, always the future - Kurs Zukunft! - it seems to call.¹⁵ If in the original Defoe novel, the island is a point zero, empty land on which Robinson reproduces an economic world and moral values that are an archetype of our own, in Tournier’s *Friday* the island is a means through which Robinson deviates from the given economic and moral order. Nevertheless, subjectivity and selfhood are still at stake. Dehumanised, Robinson becomes one with the cosmic energy of the island in a coming together of the libido and free elements,¹⁶ or better said, in Tournier’s Robinson Deleuze finds a vision of subjectivity that is a “volatile configuration of human and non-human elements,”¹⁷ expanding human life to include non-living matter. This is a very different vision of selfhood to that conceived by the avant-garde. We cannot speak of a return to a pristine new landscape here. Rather the sense of self we all so meticulously build up over time is breached, opened up and swallowed by everyone and everything else: the non-human, the non-animal, the inorganic. I think of Paul Valentin’s video here, of rocks moving across a desert landscape. Except that his are not the sailing stones of Death Valley, but fragments of the destroyed Siegestor, cultural artefacts behaving like natural phenomena, where perversely, objects that are usually inanimate mysteriously start to move.

For Deleuze, Friday and his goat are key to this process of deviation, which ends with the expansion of the concept of subjectivity. Which means at stake here are very broadly speaking, people, the question of what it means to live amongst people as a self-aware person. For Deleuze defines “earth” as a world of full of people. It is a world full of other people and it is a world structured by people. People like me make up what the earth is. Whereas equally, there are no people in the “sky.” It is a place I must be alone, so alone in fact that I do not even have an “I” for company. Carrying the earth to the sky is a lonely process. It is the story of becoming ever more solitary, a severe kind of isolation because demanding a severance. Only then can I become something “more.” I can be part of the island only if I am completely alone.

In order to describe this ascent to extreme isolation, we must begin with the earth and its people. The earth is full of people and it is constructed by people. Part of the appeal to Defoe’s original story is that it imbues us with a sense of wonder: how organised everything in our world is! How perfectly it all fits! Not just our everyday lives with their daily routine, but also our infrastructure and broader living environment, our cultural, social, political structures, the economic and moral order. The work of Hêlîn Alas holds this kind of fascination with the bourgeois longing for the good life. In his text, Deleuze argues that the presence of other people has so deeply penetrated all aspects of our human lives that this includes the very structure of

¹³ Deleuze, “World without others”, 304.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The phrase “Kurs Zukunft” is from the columns at one of the rooms at Schillerstr. 38, where Jonathan Penca is exhibiting, Penca’s work also plays with futuristic tropes, science fiction and utopias.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mc Neil Taylor, “Carrying the Earth to the Sky: Claire Denis’s Perverse Ecologies,” *French Studies*, vol 77, issue 1 (January 2023): 79–97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knac25>

our thoughts, our responses to the outside world, the psychology of perception. He very much implies that without people, without others, we cannot see, we cannot think - all of which modern science to an extent confirms.¹⁸ For Deleuze, the perception of an object always occurs against a marginal background of other objects. As we focus on our surroundings, the one object first advances and then, when we lose interest, retreats back to this marginal world. Our knowledge of such a marginal existence is possible only through other people: the part of the object I cannot see is visible to others and objects can form a marginal worlds because they are visible to others. Other people assure us that there is a world out there even if it is currently invisible to us. Because of other people, there is the potential of another view, another object, another world. Thus people and the concept of the other, are not just objects of my gaze or the subject who perceives me. They belong to the structure of the perceptual field without which the entire field would collapse. They are the field's a priori.

In Deleuze's argument, without people we wouldn't see and we could not think, at least not the way we are used to thinking, consciously, responding to our surroundings. Without people there is no consciousness to speak of. And yet the outside world is still there, present, just waiting for us to stumble over or to catch us unawares, as if from behind. This is a harsh and black world, without potential or possibility because it is a world we neither perceive or understand. "Nothing but Elements."¹⁹ And each thing in this world, no longer thrown into relief by the potential of other things seen and known by other people, "slaps us in the face."²⁰

Deleuze argues that during Robinson's time on the island, the other structure - this idea of other people expressing a possible world - slowly disappears. Light vanishes from consciousness and darkness settles in. But it is only to consciousness that this world without others seems dark. In another way - and this is what deviation from our given order means, with its breaching, opening of our subjectivity - the island becomes closer to us. Indeed, nothing is closer than a slap in the face, a hit on the head. When no longer an object for consciousness, set against a marginal world constructed through the possibility of other people, the island and its Robinson can become close, so close as to be undistinguishable. As Deleuze writes, consciousness and the object "coincide in an eternal present"²¹ so that his consciousness of the island is the same as the island's consciousness of itself. Deleuze describes a peculiar doubling at work, which is the most difficult way of understanding Friday's task, the carrying of the earth to the sky. A thing that is an object on earth doubles as a thing no longer of the earth, because no longer belonging to others. The double of the thing is an image that is detached, standing alone against the sky's bright blue surface.

Clearly the journey I have been describing has not been easy. Robinson's first reaction is despair and as the Other-structure starts to crumble he desperately attempts to retain the Earth and repopulate his island through substitute Others: he keeps time and maintains order, produces a code of law and assigns various administrative functions to himself. And when this psychotic frenzy of accumulation gets too much,

¹⁸ See for instance, the *Guardian's* "The Big Idea: Why your brain needs other people,"

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/jul/08/the-big-idea-why-your-brain-needs-other-people>.

¹⁹ Deleuze, "World without others", 306. It is interesting to note how many artists in the exhibition refer to these "Elements," most directly by Veronika Hilger in her small ceramic work.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 311.

Robinson regresses and retreats into the inner space of his cave, to wallow in the mud and darkness. For without others, everything has lost its sense: objects and loved ones, the familiar world and his place in it. Nothing remains but a vestige, an image of his former life, paper thin and flat. To carry the earth to the sky is to learn how to live on and amongst surfaces, in breadth and not as previously, among objects shaped by depth.²² Maybe I am speaking of dying after all, except the kind that is haunted by ghosts, “phantasms” Deleuze calls them, so thin to be transparent.²³ How often in death do we see a doubling, both of what was and what is at the same time.

This is what Friday does, with the goat. He teaches Robinson how to live without people and find joy in surfaces. Strange to think that our world, the Earth, so perfectly organised, so comfortingly familiar might also limiting - that on Earth we are limited to our bodies and our objects and we might miss a closeness that only the surface touch provides. Maybe not so much a slap in the face then, but an intimacy of touch.²⁴ By making the goat fly and sing, Friday indicates to us a different world, one where the goat is no longer limited to an earthly body we domesticate and use. It is an elemental world of the island where flying and singing is done by waves and wind and sun, spikily, like the light in Lukas Hoffmann’s room. Friday’s world is a double of our world, and the flying and singing goat is a double of the goat in the pen. They are doubles of the Other but as this double they are no longer other. They are the same, or even “wholly other.”²⁵ Therefore, it is Friday who first, long before Robinson, lives in a world without others and is happy there. As Deleuze writes,

The Other pulls down (rabat): it draws the elements into the earth, the earth into bodies, and bodies into objects. But Friday innocently makes objects and bodies stand up again. He carries the earth into the sky.²⁶

²² Surfaces, images, phantasms - like Gülbin Ünlü’s sheer, gently fluttering curtains. Or in a different way the surfaces of Ayaka Terajima’s ceramic sculptures.

²³ *Ibid.*, 315.

²⁴ See the dioramas of Curtis Talwst Santiago

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁶ *Ibid.*