

## **The Green Man in My Landscape (on the picture)**

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The Green Man settled himself into the treetops on the opposite hill last summer.

Made up of branches and leaves, he sat there for weeks on end, looking into my window and occasionally clapping. (For me?) He was back this summer, but I didn't see him.

Apparently, something had happened. After years of observation, I was already intimately familiar with the picture framed by my window, but perhaps just then this picture let me get a little bit closer. Something happened, and the previously invisible Green Man invited me on a journey towards the unknown, which since that moment I know exists, but which, like many other mysteries – and beyond them, even more mysteries – I apparently will not reach for now. The earlier picture had been rearranged in my mind. What had long appeared to be a second or even third layer in the background became an important actor, and the newly established background moved into the realm of the unseen.

I was a witness to (participant in?) an event.

[...] “And when I say that I see this or that picture as a picture, then it is an event: the picture has forced me to change my position; reality shows itself differently.”<sup>1</sup>

Miroslav Petříček describes the serious and complicated consequences when “every event flows into others, which then become a part of that event, just as the event itself becomes a part of the other events, each a distinct unit but always bound to others, anticipating others and pre-serving the memory of others, with this connection an inherent characteristic of the event because the relationships connecting the events are a part of every one of them.”<sup>2</sup>

I follow the event through my window. I see the Green Man. The window frame is my own shelter. It is the boundary defining the entrance into the picture that has become and that continues to be. The entrance into the picture that is happening through my frame is secured by the safety of my personal space. It is my frame, and with it and thanks to it, my picture of the landscape. But it is also the Green Man's frame. The frame of his picture, with me inside. It is clear that, in our mutual communication, the window frame belongs to the two of us. At this moment, it is a frame of mutually created safety for us both.

In a brief text published in his most recent book, Zdeněk Vašíček among other things explores the question of the picture in its more universal semantic definition.<sup>3</sup>

As to the organization of the picture space, he notices the important fact that the order in which a picture's various components are received is not unambiguously prescribed, but is aleatoric<sup>4</sup> in relation to how we perceive a larger number of depicted objects and their interrelationships. Vašíček points out that the picture's individual elements can be “read” in various orders and that the picture registers successive and causal relationships as well as reversible relationships. Here, however, we by necessity move from the area of reading, observing, and learning in the sense of the gradual exploration of a picture's various elements

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Petříček, *Myšlení obrazem*, Herrmann & synové, Praha 2009, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Zdeněk Vašíček, *Jak se dělají filosofie*, Triáda, Praha 2012, pp. 102–106.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

into the realm of perceiving them with the possibility of individual (and by extension different) interpretations not only of these elements, but of the picture as a whole. Vašíček's text contains a very interesting moment when the "background" is described as a variable pictorial element that in this context actively participates in the changing dynamic of the various layers of the pictorial space's hierarchical structure. The task of the observer/participant who enters into the picture's action is not unlike the activity of the artist – on the basis of his own experience, the observer can rearrange the hierarchical values of the pictorial space.<sup>5</sup> According to Vašíček, this can be described as the mutual interchange of accentuated and supplemental elements that may take on the role of predefining conditions for the picture's organization as a whole. In the role of observer, we form a picture of the picture that we are looking at (that we have decided to look at). The act of perceiving a picture (not just in the sense of a work of art) thus cannot involve the merely static observation of a static object or group of objects; it is a thoroughly dynamic process. Even when we make our own work of art, the picture is reorganized (reordered, re-constructed) during the process of its creation. The interaction between the work of art and the artist can result in a highly dynamic reordering of the work's hierarchical values, something that might happen multiple times over the course of a particular work's creation. This reassessment and re-structuring of the accented and supplemental elements often results in something that could not be captured by the artwork's original design. What is more, the artist may unwittingly incorporate into a group of objects conceived as a picture an element that is only revealed by the observer, who activates it for himself, reorganizes the picture, and reassesses its contents within the context of his own subjective imagination. Roland Barthes points out this fact, emphasizing the moment when the observer, in the process of perceiving a picture, gradually discovers elements that, during the initial observation, reading, or study of the work, were embedded more deeply beneath the work's visually most easily defined level. Until the end of his life, Eugène Atget fought the possibility that his photographs could be anything other than photographic documentation of the old Paris that was disappearing with the advance of Haussmann's extensive urban renewal projects. And yet in 1927 several of Atget's photographs were printed in the magazine *La Révolution Surréaliste* thanks to Man Ray, who had realized the ambiguous semantic qualities of Atget's photographs. In 1930, photographer Berenice Abbott instigated the first publication containing a selection of Atget's photographs, and soon thereafter in his historical study of photography Walter Benjamin called Atget one of the first creators of surrealist photography.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, during the process of forming a picture of a given situation, action, or event, during the act of gradually penetrating towards the very limits of what is hidden, we can "slow" our perception, stopping our thinking – perhaps also in some way "manipulate" time within the framework of our thoughts – in order to arrive at a gradual re-formulation of the semantic levels of the observed/ perceived action within the context of this involvement.

Hidden (and thus unseen) does not mean non-existent. After years of being unseen, the Green Man comes out of hiding and calls attention to his existence at the right moment, at a moment that for some reason is important for me as well as for him.

One specific area of getting to know/ understanding (and to a certain extent also perceiving) a work of art is to study it by gradually familiarizing ourselves with it in terms of its material structure. This applies to paintings, sculptures, and architecture. Here, too, we try to form a

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *Světlá komora/ Poznámka k fotografii*, Agite/ Fra, Praha 2005, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Krase, *Archive of Visions. Inventory of Things*. Eugène Atget's Paris, in: *Atget's Paris*, Taschen, 2001.

picture, but at the same time – as with the act of perceiving a work on the visual-aesthetic level – we are trying to more comprehensively study the work and to define the more concrete facts of its material essence.

During the restoration of a historical work of art, including a study of its history and the way it was created, we can precisely define a work's basic structural elements in terms of the technique, materials, and technology applied. Laboratory research, which is performed with the aid of highly sophisticated scientific tools, can help us to precisely identify, among other things, the combination of pigments used, the binding agent, the substrate, and the composition and material character of the layers of paint. For instance, we can learn much about the very specific way in which Vermeer took advantage of the characteristics of semi-transparent layers of natural ultramarine in *The Art of Painting* (and in his other works).<sup>7</sup> By looking at cross-sectional samples of paint under optical and electron microscopes, we can see the gradual layering of paint, and its exact makeup can be identified using X-ray fluorescence spectrometry.

We might therefore say that here, too, we can form a relatively accurate picture of the specific work (picture). Art research tells us when and by whom a work was created, why it was created (who commissioned it and other facts), what it depicts, why and in what manner it does so, and any broader contexts into which the work can be placed. But we basically learn nothing about the picture, about the work of art in terms of its interpretation, its communication with the observer, and its possible perceptual relationships. Also missing is any space for not knowing, which has been ruled out as unacceptable from the outset.

I do not know is one of the subjects explored by Jindřich Chalupecký in his writings on the art of Marcel Duchamp.<sup>8</sup> Chalupecký here speaks of “the singular unknowingness of art.” In his view, it is not a question of an unknowingness / unawareness that over time should change into knowingness / awareness. He describes this I do not know as irrefutable, impenetrable, unchangeable, and sees it as something strangely familiar, expectant and embracing, something that we can trust more than anything we can know. It is neither riddle, nor problem, nor mystery; instead, it is “a secret that does nothing other than being.” Here Chalupecký quotes Jakub Deml: “Mystery prattles on, ironizes, makes stupid jokes. Secrecy remains silent.”

“Art does not create order. It does not want to, nor can it, reform life. It teaches us only its great unawareness. It is an unawareness from which and for which we live – we and the universe. It is not a wisdom that would fit into our practical world.”<sup>9</sup>

Instead of asking “what is art,” Nelson Goodman asks “when is art;” similarly, we should ask not “what is the picture,” but “when is the picture.” Asked in this way, the question clearly reflects the dynamic nature of how we perceive what a picture's function is under the particular circumstances. Goodman tries to point out the difficulties associated with defining art by using the example of Duchamp's *Fountain*, which can be seen as art in one situation

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Wald, *Die Malkunst/ Betrachtungen zum künstlerischen Ansatz und zur Technik*, in: *Vermeer – Die Malkunst*, Residenz Verlag – Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, 2010, p. 317

<sup>8</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, *Umění a transcendence*, in: *Revolver Revue* č. 45/2001. Introductory lecture at the symposium *Marcel Duchamp – Rupture de la tradition ou Tradition de la rupture (Marcel Duchamp – The Rupture of Tradition, or the Tradition of Rupture)*, held in Cerisy-La-Salle on 25 July 1977

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

and as a urinal (with all that comes with it) in another.<sup>10</sup> It is a picture when it has the possibility of becoming one. This can apparently be a few times, many times, countless times. Of course, this goes not only for the picture in the sense of a work of art, but also in the sense of our forming (making) a picture of anything in the broadest sense of the word.

Forming a picture is vitally necessary for us to gain a more comprehensive overview and understanding, or perhaps rather for comprehending a form or situation in its entirety (though never completely), no matter whether we are dealing with (mere) understanding or (more comprehensive) perception. Within the dynamic of this process, our participation as observer/participant requires an often significant change in viewpoint, although this always involves our specific/ subjective and individual re-organization of a larger group of objects (elements) and their interrelationships within the context of our chosen interpretation.

In 1854, the 110-meter-high Latting Observatory gave inhabitants of Manhattan their first chance to see the city as a whole. In the words of Rem Koolhaas, the tower gave them the opportunity “to have a sense of the island as a whole [and] to be aware of its limitations, the irrevocability of its containment.”<sup>11</sup> It gave them a picture of the structure of the built-up and inhabited grid that was different than the one they had formed during their daily movements at ground-floor level. In this act of forming a more comprehensive picture, “something had to happen” as well. Here, too, the hierarchical values of the picture as a whole were by necessity re-organized by the addition of another picture and its association with previously stored mental images.

One example when I gradually formed a picture in my mind and subsequently created a picture (series of pictures) in the sense of a work of art was when I was moving from the landscape where I had spent the greater part of my life to a landscape that, though I found it very attractive, was unfamiliar to me and that I had to get to know and learn to perceive. I made many trips back and forth during this move – and thus encountered same objects over and over – but the pattern and rhythm of moving within the given space was essentially the same. I had sufficient time to be aware of how the act of getting to know the landscape, through which I always drove along the same route, slowly changed into the act of perceiving it. Basic points of reference began to change into “legible” objects, and their initial orientational meaning changed into a web of increasingly more clearly expanding connections. Objects / elements linked to the dynamics of motion began to be more clearly defined. Over time, I was able to more precisely perceive their colour / lack of colour, size, their initial importance and later unimportance, all the while recognizing or perhaps sensing the presence of an inviting and increasingly more intimate secret that, paradoxically, demanded less explanation the more it became a part of my thinking.

But this penetration into the landscape was not a penetration towards a visually definable subject or motif; it was more of a spiritual penetration. In the end effect, I felt a greater ability to open up the landscape’s intimacy, to more closely approach the unseen and hidden, and to calm my mind so that it might be open to receiving things that are present but unknowable. I received not snapshots, but the interconnected parts of a larger picture and a way of perceiving them.

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<sup>10</sup> Nelson Goodman, *When is Art?*, in: *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett Publishing, 1978, pp. 57–70.

<sup>11</sup> Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, Monacelli Press, New York, 1994, p. 25.

The painter is a pilgrim with not only aching feet but also an aching mind. Over time, what during our move had been a mere topographical map transformed into a dialogue that took place outside of my narrow path of movement. Despite the intimately familiar material objects I was transporting (whose task it was to reassure us, by their continued material existence, of our future physical existence in the new world), at those moments the immaterial, subtle, silent and tender signals coming from the “new” space were far more important and far more reassuring. Only then arrived the component parts of the picture that was taking shape in this place. The pictures came across the road, fleeting, with the whisper of an almost indefinable colourfulness. The road was no longer a mere line, but had become part of an abundant organism with elements/ objects, unclear again, not entirely comprehensible again, but for some reason still intimate and comforting, though no longer with the initial suffering. Perhaps this was the right moment for my pictures, in which I began to seek my truth.

[...] “There is no point in claiming that the fact of the sea is truthful, for it does not measure itself against anything else – what good is truth to the sea? Only its visual representation can be truthful, an expression of its relationships primarily to other representations – only then can a picture, a novel, or historical tradition be truthful.” [...] This is how Zdeněk Vašíček and Françoise Mayer answer the question of “Why do we strive for a picture and not a straight-out duplicate?” when discussing René Magritte’s *The Human Condition II* (1935) in their book *Past and Present, Memory and History*.<sup>12</sup>

In his consideration of Cézanne’s series of paintings *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, Jean-François Lyotard writes about the concept of the “event,” about matter and existence. He describes “something” that comes from the landscape, and the ability to receive this “something” and to open up to it through “passivity” in the opposite sense of an activity controlled by the mind.<sup>13</sup>

We encounter a similar “opening oneself up” while rejecting rational considerations and questions of why in the writings of poet and graphic artist Bohuslav Reynek. At these moments of pure and uncontrolled reception, he asks no questions. From an observation of the landscape, which he more clearly sees as a world, he moves to its perception, thus becoming a part of it and ceasing to be a mere sounding board; instead, like the landscape and all its content, he simply is.

[...] “But now it all comes together on its own, and not somehow indifferently, just because, but in rhythms, in blissful and enriching rhythms of colours and dimensions,” Reynek writes in 18 August 1921 – 19h – 20h 15’ in his collection *The Snake in the Snow*. [...] <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Zdeněk Vašíček, Françoise Mayer: *Minulost a současnost, paměť a dějiny*, CDK, Triáda, Brno – Praha, 2008, p. 126.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, p. 19. “The concept of the event is directly related to the question of matter and existence. What Paul Cezanne is in debt to is not the organizations of forms, nor even the landscape as a realistic subject; it is the ‘something’ that may occur under or on his eyes, if they make themselves receptive enough to it. This ‘something’ is a quality of chromatism, a color timbre. To achieve this is a matter of a ‘passivity’ without pathos, which is the opposite of either the controlled or unconscious activity of the mind. Neither aggressive autonomy nor spontaneous fantasy permits such a glance. we have to make our condition that of a suspicious, exacting receiver, with reception focused on the unmistakable, uncanny ‘fact’ that ‘there is’ something here and now, regardless of what it is. It is as if something hidden inside the *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*, say *Being*, or that entity Kant calls ‘X in general,’ was playing in a game against the painter by making ‘moves’ with chromatic material.”

<sup>14</sup> Bohuslav Reynek, *Básnické spisy*, Archa/ Petrkov 2009, p. 209.

[...] “This, perhaps, is a moment when life is genuine and elemental: things have no purpose other than to be, and indeed everything is, magnificently and simply so. All has been accomplished, the good and the bad, and all is pure, in harmony, in the presence of He who gave and took away and gave again, and who so terribly and absolutely is.” [...] <sup>15</sup>

In analysing the meaning and nature of the moment of beauty in Reynek’s writings, Ladislav Benyovszky attempts to understand the nature of poetizing as Man’s participation in his relationship to a Godhood illuminated by its relation to the world, and in this sense, to understand the nature of Man’s participation in beauty. [...] “Reynek understands this ‘moment,’ this ‘Hour’ (Hölderlin), of human involvement in God’s unity (Einigkeit) as ‘awareness ex gratia.’ ‘Not idea,’ he adds in parentheses, perhaps because ideas, as we know, are too human. As much as this relates to the ‘moment of true and essential life’ of man, Reynek, too, is interested in the moment of Man’s involvement in the Divine unity. He writes: ‘I daresay you are a participant in that moment when God, having seen the work of the day, said that it was good...’ That is why he writes ‘awareness ex gratia (not idea),’ and that is why he defines this participation as an event that we merely receive and by which we ‘are transformed’ or by which we transform our ‘way of seeing’: ‘you look out and see. It is not the usual looking – oh no, not by far. A ray of Being fell on you at the outset and transformed you.’” [...] <sup>16</sup>

“The eye selects,” writes Nelson Goodman. <sup>17</sup> “The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference. Nor is resemblance necessary for reference; almost anything may stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents – like a passage that describes – an object refers to and, more particularly, denotes it. Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance.”

I paint pictures of the horizon and pictures of shrubs. The space of my landscape, all the way to my horizon, is undoubtedly inhabited by the Green Man. I have not seen him in a long time, but I know that he is, that he simply is there. Nor have I painted him in my pictures, and yet he is present in them. Have I made a picture (in my mind)? Have I made a good picture (in my mind)? I do not know. Even in my picture and in the picture I make in my mind, there are too many uncertainties combined into one large but comforting doubt. I hope that the unseen but present something is there. Is the unuttered something an inspiration or an obstacle, an insurmountable barrier? Is my picture no good, or can I hope that it might become a gateway? I do not know, and I hope that this I do not know might just maybe be that gateway.

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Translated by Stephan von Pohl

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>16</sup> Ladislav Benyovszky, *Cesty k neskrytosti*, Togga, Praha 2012, p. 114–119.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Hacklett, Indianapolis/Cambridge 2007, pp. 7–8. (Perspective) “[it] rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make; and what it takes and makes it sees not as bare, as items without attributes, but as things, as food, as people, as enemies, as stars, as weapons. Nothing is seen nakedly or naked.” [...] “But reception and interpretation are not separable operations; they are thoroughly interdependent. The Kantian dictum echoes here: the innocent eye is blind and the virgin mind empty. Moreover, what has been received and what has been done to it cannot be distinguished within the finished product. Content cannot be extracted by peeling off layers of comment.”