

Degenerate Psychology

Manu Bazzano

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It's past midnight on a Tuesday evening in July when I get an email on my phone. I'm in a Vienna hotel, overlooking on one side the Danube and on the other a lunar landscape straight out De Chirico or J.G. Ballard– futuristic without a future, humans scuttling under tall buildings.

The sender has been at my talk that morning. Though she disagrees with what I said, she says she finds it 'necessary'. It reminded her of a contemporary, 'actionist' Austrian artist. I click on the link and am appalled by what I see: mutilated bodies, paint thrown so as to look like blood – that sort of thing. I feel hurt and angry. Then I feel sad. Was my talk that shocking? I thought it was standard stuff: the Buddha's meditation on death (certainty of its occurrence, uncertainty of the *time* of its occurrence). OK, I praised despair (drawing from Beckett) and urgency (from the neglected half of Dr. King's *I have a dream* speech). OK, I did this in the middle of a six-day person-centred conference dedicated to 'Hope'. I had also shown a clip from Devo's 'It's a beautiful world' YouTube video that went with the song.

*It's a beautiful world we live in
Beautiful people everywhere,
They way they show they care
Makes me want to say
'It's a beautiful world'*

The above sung over images of the *Ku Klux Klan*, Hiroshima, and the US police engaged in one of their favourite sports: beating up and arresting black people. OK, I also presented hope, in line with Greek mythology, as the greatest of evils, given that it prolongs humanity's torment, according to Zeus' designs, in the famous tale of Pandora's 'jar of evils'.

Still. I am offended by being compared to this Viennese actionist guy. Besides, the sender of the email could have easily come to talk to me. I'll do that tomorrow. I google her name, but there's no photo on her website. I give up and delete her email.

Weeks later, there is a lizard on the kitchen table of my parents' flat. I get close. It's much bigger than a lizard, more like an iguana, but furry – and scary. I grab a bread knife, bang it once on the wooden table and shout for effect, expecting the thing to go away. It doesn't. Instead, it turns its head and leisurely inspects me. Freaked out, I go next door and say to my

partner that we must do something. By now, various creatures are crawling around us, vainly chased by a cat. I wake up.

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The curators of Gustav Klimt's exhibition at the Leopold Museum are at pains to declare that women in his erotic drawings are 'depersonalized and depicted as objects of male desire', and that their 'essence is reduced to sexual and natural libidinal aspects'. In the next sentence, as if remembering that it is the Hierophant of Viennese art (and Major Tourist Magnet) they're attacking, they add that despite the above 'these somnambulistic depictions allow for emancipatory interpretation and the expression of female autonomy'. Whatever; these raw drawings and sketches are excruciatingly poignant in their defencelessness; they are so tender in their unabashed loveliness – at the opposite end, say, of the hyper-varnished avatars of blank beauty found in Silicon(e) Valley-of-Tears.

From the grave, across one-hundred and three years divide, comes Klimt's response, in the same room that hosts his three majestic paintings *Philosophy, Medicine, Jurisprudence*. 'The Austrian state and ministry of education – he writes – attack real art and real artists. They only protect what is weak and false'. Right on Gustav, I say. Plus, Klimt collected works from China, Africa and other distant cultures. In the heart of this imperial city, he was sincerely open to learn from non-European cultures.

Tired from lack of sleep, I shuffle upstairs to pay my respects to the arguably greater and more urgent art of draftsman, painter, and printmaker Egon Schiele. Thanks to my present somnambulism (too happy to bother with slumber) and self-imposed solitude (pining for the desert among unremitting waves of person-centred jollity), I am momentarily set free from the protective smugness of the fully-rested, from the *realaesthetik* of art consumers. I'm ready to imbibe the intensity of these paintings and drawings – the unsettling marvel that unfolds room after silent room through 40 paintings and 180 works on paper, including his poems:

*I am a man
I love death and I love life.*

I am somewhat surprised by Schiele's spiritual longings, his view of art as 'eternal', and by his faith in the artist natural and gifts and vocation.

*Artists easily feel
the great flickering light,
the heat,
the breathing of living beings,
the arrival and*

the disappearance of things

I am surprised by his desire for transcendence in his late icons and in his body and nature landscapes. Why should I be surprised? Doesn't the impermanence of every living thing inexorably hint at eternity? Perhaps I/we have been persuaded to envision the latter solely in ethereal garb, our aseptic gaze averted from the flesh.

Like his *Small Tree in Late Autumn*, painted in 1911, this young artist – killed at twenty-eight by the Spanish influenza epidemic – sought redemption. His numerous examples of self-portraits present unsettling, inspiring visions: gaunt, deformed, unprotected, his twisting self-portraiture owing to modern dance, reworked by Bowie for the cover of the *Heroes* album. Schiele was one of the first to steadily investigate double self-portraiture, open to multiple meanings – inner/outer, worldly/spiritual, life/death. These depictions suggest something above and beyond the *Doppelgänger*, an image in any case as alien, as archaic, and as incomprehensible to most contemporary, self-assured, positivist psychology and psychotherapy – as archaic as the rumour of an unconscious. You can rest assured: the double is not sinister, Schiele seems to say; it expresses an inherent multiplicity of meanings – a threat in its own right, in an age that champions integration, affect-regulation and self-styled authenticity.

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On 19 July 1937, four years after they had come to power, the Nazis put on an art exhibition in Munich titled *Entartete Kunst*, Degenerate Art. It included the some of the best modernist art around. Bauhaus, Cubism, Dada, Expressionism, Fauvism, Impressionism, and Surrealism were all labelled *degenerate*. Hitler gave the inaugural speech, declaring ‘merciless war to an art that in his view ‘insults German feeling, or destroy or confuse natural form’. The first three rooms were organized in themes: the first featured works regarded as debasing religion; the second showed works from Jewish artists, and the third artworks deemed insulting to women, soldiers and German farmers. ‘Didactic’ slogans and ‘commentaries’ were painted on the walls, things like: ‘insolent mockery of the Divine’, ‘example of the Jewish racial soul’, ‘an insult to German womanhood’, ‘deliberate sabotage of national defense’, ‘nature as seen by sick minds’, and even ‘madness becomes method’.

The OED defines degenerate as ‘having lost the qualities proper to the race or kind, [as] having declined from a higher to a lower type’—from *de* = away and *genus* = one's kind (humankind). To fall from the human into the ‘lower’ domain of nature is to descend from our status as the ‘crown of creation’ (the religious view) or as rational beings (the secular

view). I'd like to ask: could that fall be desirable? Could it mean the beginning of the end for anthropocentrism, or human-centredness? For Nietzsche,

Humans as a species do not represent any progress compared with any other animal. The whole animal and vegetable kingdom does not evolve from the lower to the higher-but all at the same time, in utter disorder, over and against each other.

Some would say the above stance is the beginning of true ecology, for only a being that is *part of*, rather than *above* other living beings can respect nature rather than exploit its resources. True ecology begins with the demise of anthropology. Sadly, humanistic/existential psychology gave up archaeology in favour of anthropology, forgetting that after Foucault anthropology has been declared bankrupt. Why? Because it is inextricably wedded to religion, metaphysics and morality. It was easy to laugh at Sigmund Freud's positivist hope to find, through persistent digging, some final ground, a foundational explanation to our compulsion to replay ad infinitum the ancient drama of milk and shit. Dismayed, we took up anthropology instead – the study of the human. We sang the praises of the human. And got stuck with the human.

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It's time for the Gala dinner at the majestic *Rathaus* – Vienna City Hall, all chandeliers and carpets on the ascending stairs. In this very same place on 15 March 1938, following the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria to Germany, the mayor of Vienna in the name of all Viennese enthusiastically welcomed Hitler. It's hard to shake the ghastly remnant of this ignominious past and muster the desire to do what I am now cheerfully asked to do: dance the waltz to Dean Martin's *when the moon hits your eye like a big Pizza pie, it's amore*. Is that so, Dino fucking Martino? And what on earth is a 'Pizza pie'? Meanwhile, all Belgians and French colleagues are off watching France vs. Belgium semi-final on a tiny computer screen. Question: How does a modern authoritarian state operate in a seemingly non-degenerate society? Every Viennese I spoke to seems happy to live here. Work, leisure, and self development. Yoga on Sundays, Five Rhythms on Wednesdays, and therapy on Fridays. Trains are clean, punctual, and duly air-conditioned in the summer. And if the air conditioning breaks down, they'll hand you free deodorants. The city is urbane, spacious, ultra safe. What is the current government? – I ask. The answer is wobbly. Yes, well, there are problems with migrants pushing at the border to get in. Do they also want to do Yoga on Sundays, therapy on Fridays and be given free deodorant when the air conditioning breaks down? Some of them made it here; from a distant pub in the *Prater* on my last night here I

hear the loud cheers of (I later learn) Croatians shaking the English awake from their momentary hopes.

What is the government here, in the heart of Fortress Europe? I do my own little research. Austria is run by a conservative government in coalition with the far-right. Its young chancellor is one Sebastian Kurz, leader of the nationalist, anti Muslim 'Freedom Party'. Wishing to make Austria great again, he called for 10.000 border guards to be deployed by 2020 at the border of Fortress Europe. It used to be straight forward, with blatant hatred of the poor, blacks, ethnic minorities. Now the crucial thing is to be born in the right place. In the words of the current President of the United States of America:

The day I was born I had already won the greatest lottery on earth. I was born in the United States of America. With that came the amazing opportunities that every American has. The right to become the best person that you can be.

'Birthright' is very different from *universal* right, and our current crazed obsession with geography begins to makes (perverse) sense. Writing on global inequality, the economist Branko Milanović argues that the best predictor of wealth is, increasingly, less determined by race or class, and more by the place where you were born. Since the mid-20th century, he writes, 'the place where we were born or where we live' increasingly began to determine 'as much as two-thirds of our lifetime income'. There has been a fundamental shift in global inequality which has meant that *citizenship* has become more important than class. The latter in turn explains to some extent why freedom of movement is being everywhere heavily curtailed, and why a brand new, and highly dubious virtue was born, what Malcolm Bull calls 'birtherism': 'In a world where geographical location is the best predictor of economic outcomes – he writes – being indigenous counts for a lot'. Nativism and attachment to the 'soil' are back in fashion, subsisting in part on a reliable if unsavoury diet of racism – yet different from the latter, since location is more dependable than race in relation to global income distribution. You can be a xenophobe and not necessarily a racist. Condemning Heidegger's nativism, in 1974 Levinas wrote (in *Otherwise than Being*) that 'attachment to place splits humanity into natives and strangers'. Since then, nativism has become, if anything, more virulent and stubborn.

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To each ego its object, to each superego its abject (Julia Kristeva).

Now I hesitate. I begin to wonder whether I have dismissed too readily what the sender of the email was trying to convey. Wish I could remember her name and ask her directly. Is it right

for me or anyone to dismiss how our words and deeds are read by others? Am I the only legitimate interpreter of what I say, once words take leave of me? Could it be that a listener/reader hears what I may be unaware of? Perhaps I am afraid of the implications of what I say. The urgency is certainly there, but I can't really control how it is going to be perceived.

I decide to take a second look up at the 'Viennese actionist'; his name is Günter Brus. I find that, once I get passed the shock of some of his methods, I begin to sympathize with his ethos. I then remember that when mentioning to my Austrian colleagues the names of their compatriots whose work I admire – Robert Musil, Thomas Bernhard, Elfriede Jelinek, Michael Haneke – their response had been unanimous: 'oh, they are very *dark*'.

Freud left Vienna in 1938 right after the *Anschluss*, and came to live here, up the road from where I live, until his death a year later. His own mythical art was seen as degenerate by the Nazis. I wonder whether it is time to reappropriate the term 'degenerate' as a positive refusal to obey the parameters set by the humanistic tradition for our strange and overrated species. Those parameters are limiting, for they forget, among many other things, one fundamental human experience that is closely allied to a 'degenerate' state: I'm thinking of abjection, the state of being cast off, from *ab*= away, and *jacere*= to throw. In *Saint Genet*, Sartre listed abjection as one of the ways of experiencing the world – as legitimate, in his view, as the Stoics' refusal of the world, Cartesian doubt, and Husserlian *epoché*. He saw abjection as one methodical conversion lived in pain and pride, and which does not lead to the transcendental consciousness of Husserl, the abstract thinking of the Stoics or the *cogito* of Descartes, but to an existence lived at a high degree of tension and lucidity.

Scandalous at the time, his suggestion is even more so now, in a psychological landscape saturated by dreams of control, sanitization and a general pathologizing of ordinary humans by psychologists humans. Sartre's articulation of abjection (an equally powerful exploration is found in Julia Kristeva) is crucial to therapists who aspire to work beyond the cosy domain of cognitive reprogramming and *ersatz* religion and are not shy to work within areas where the suspension of judgement and cultural prejudice is paramount.

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Manu will host an affordable three-day experiential workshop in Budapest, Hungary, 16-18 November 2018, titled *Unconditional Hospitality: Zen, Therapy, and Existential Phenomenology*. Contact Dániel Ványi daniel.vanyi@gmail.com