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Down To Earth –
A step forward and a glance back

"When two women meet, they turn their faces, rub their hands together, then turn them over, palms up; then they lay them on the head of the other and stroke the other's hair."

Alrette and André Leroi-Gourhan, *Eine Reise zu den Ainu – Hokkaido 1938*

If you're in a hurry in the net – and that happens a lot – but still want to skim quickly over an article, you scroll down, hoping there will be plenty of photos that will explain the text in a couple of seconds. According to a study by Microsoft, our attention span has decreased from twelve seconds in the year 2000 to just eight seconds in 2013. That makes our attention span one second shorter than that of a goldfish.

That was already four years ago – the way time is calculated today, that figure is already completely out of date.

So where do we stand now? Nothing has become less: the masses of information, what you can do with social media, the ever-increasing technological abilities of our smartphones. The visual overflow and garish titles on digital tabloids, whose suggestive clickbait language lures you in, pulling you ever deeper into an infinite world of superfluous information.

Nowadays you don't go online anymore, you consciously have to go offline. It's nearly impossible to withdraw from the parallel digital world. And yet there are still attempts, or nostalgic resolutions, to do what is slowly getting lost, and frighteningly quickly: direct communication, analog face-to-face conversations, having things to touch, best if they are made of natural materials, not virtual 3D. We need less visual excess and more content. We even need more text. Fortunately, there's an opposing wind.

One example among many: The independent Swiss magazine REPORT-AGEN. Founded in 2011, the magazine does without photographs. It entertains its readers with classic literary articles. It's even printed on paper! Although it must be added that online subscriptions are also available. In times of the "print media crisis", the fact that this magazine is being published is noteworthy. Although there are no photos, at most illustrations or drawings, the number of subscriptions continues to rise. No photos, but lots of pages of text – that you have to spend time and energy to read, in fact, that require you to focus quite a while. Even though this is a niche product, it is proof that things can also go "slower".

We are getting digitally tired and are beginning to look for some balance in the analog world. Even if our curiosity about the latest innovation is always breathing down our neck, as well as the urge not to miss anything, we also want a button for slowing down. This is because a hu-

man life is much too short for so much change. As the philosopher Odo Marquard sees it:

"We simply do not have the time to re-regulate everything, or even most of the things in our lives."

In our search for the new, what is missing is reflection on the past and what is familiar. And this is probably one part of the dilemma that explains our growing dissatisfaction. As Marquard continues:

"Without the old, we cannot bear the new, especially today, with the fast-changing world we are living in." He recommends "many gods, many myths - stories that resist becoming uniform. For this, we need churches, but also good novels, museums, libraries. And philosophy."

People who are constantly changing without referring to the past are literally misguided. They lose the ties to their own values and traditions, traditions that enable them to argue, to push back or even to reconcile amicably.

"Because they have been taken in by an old myth of modernity, which seems to demand, based on the model of technological progress, the rapid transformation of everything and everyone. But there's a problem with this: the growing speed of obsolescence. The faster the newest becomes old, the sooner obsolescence itself becomes obsolete and the faster the old can become the newest again. Rapid change creates deficits of familiarity. Children, for whom reality is immeasurably new and unfamiliar, carry around a solid piece of familiarity everywhere they go - their teddy bears."

A plea for the teddy bear. It doesn't only have to be made of soft fur with button eyes. It can also be a direct conversation with someone, or even a simple moment of reflection and looking back. Best is if this is done quietly, without the restlessness of the digitally accelerated world. Just get offline.

Actually, the problem of a "change-accelerated world" is nothing new. Even in the Romantic period, people were looking for an antipole to the 19th century's beginnings of industrialization. They found it above all in retreating to nature, escaping into fantasy worlds, or even in bourgeois life - immersed in egocentric melancholy. I am reminded here of the painting by Caspar David Friedrich, "The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog" (ca. 1818). A solitary man stands at the center of the picture on a rock, his back to the viewer, and looks over a dense sea of fog in a rugged mountain landscape. It is an image of the force of nature, whose power seems stronger than anything that has ever been produced by human beings. It appears as if he has found - as Odo Marquard has recommended - his personal god, his myth.

The Korean illustrator Kim Dong-Kyu has recreated the scene: the same wanderer is seen taking a photo of the landscape in front of him with a smart phone.

This is the phenomenon of wanting to capture everything and everyone on your smartphone instantly and to post it on Instagram & Co. in the next breath. A little while ago, a photo went viral on the net: John Blanding, a Boston Globe photographer, took a picture of a crowd waiting in front of a movie theater in Brookline, Massachusetts. Everyone has a mobile phone in their hand, hoping to catch the moment of the film stars' arrival. Almost everyone is staring through their little gadgets, the frame that will capture the target directly, but will leave the actual moment and the setting outside. Everyone seems busy with their smartphones, except for one older woman. She is leaning on the barrier in happy expectation, with a smile and crossed arms, and is enjoying the moment. She is waiting without documenting the waiting. She is waiting without sharing the waiting with anyone else. She is simply waiting, without something to prove she was there.

What does it mean to live in a world where what this woman is doing is already sensational, something that astonishes us and makes us realize how we used to be? This is perhaps the salient point, a point that Roger Willemssen so aptly described:

"There were some cosmonauts who took music with them on their journey, but mostly what they listened to were cassette tapes of natural noises: thunder, rain, bird song. Others planted a vegetable bed in space, with oats, peas, turnips, radishes and cucumbers. They stroked the fresh sprouts with their fingertips and mourned deeply when the fish in an aquarium did not survive the trip. At the extreme end of this excursion to the limits of the reachable, the crowning masterpiece of technological rationality, they discovered nature, the spiritual and the moral, and returned to their origins ..."

Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote a heartbreaking farewell of the "sad tropics" as early as 1955, an appeal for the return to the essence of life, the sensuality of ordinary looking at what seems to be trivial, pausing in time and space to be entirely with oneself or with someone else. This is what Momo fought for us in the eponymous novel by Michael Ende, and what also makes it worthwhile to leave the usual www-orbit once in a while:

"...in the brief moments when the human species can afford to interrupt its hive-like activity, to grasp the essence of what it once was and continues to be, this side of thinking and that side of society: the contemplation of a mineral more beautiful than all our works; the scent, wiser than our books, of a lily; or the glance, full of patience, serenity and mutual forgiveness, that at times involuntary consent allows you to exchange with a cat."

- Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

It is the gestures between people, the social interactions in the here and now that bring us back to our origins. However, the "here", the place from which we see this, also depends on how we position ourselves in the world. If we see ourselves as the center of the world, we have a certain attitude toward the rest of the world. What lies between someone else and me is above all distance. This affects other people, but also the earth and thus nature itself.

"Humankind has not woven the web of life
We are but one thread within it
Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves
All things are bound together
All things connect"
- Ted Perry for Chief Seattle

But how would our world change, and thus our perception, if we were no longer the measure of all things? If we suddenly saw ourselves, as do the Guugu Yimithirr, an Aboriginal group in Australia, based on the stars and heavenly directions? Then we would perceive, as they do, the world as the universal measure of all things, unconnected to our body and our familiar orientation of left and right. To see a place lying behind us, we would see it through ourselves and not have to turn around. In doing this, although we would not be more important than anything else in the world, we would also not be less important. The distance that was felt would turn into a whole. That people are part of something greater and more powerful; they are part of nature.

"What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset."
- Crowfoot, Chief of the Blackfoot Indians in Canada (1890)

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Until today, almost all indigenous peoples believe that ghosts and gods inhabit their mountains, lakes and rivers, their trees and animals. Also the Ainu in Hokkaido. Their world is permeated by ancestral spirits, spirits of the spring, house ghosts, spirits of vigor and the heart.... These supernatural beings, called kami, are considered supernatural and sacred; they want to be appeased and revered with rituals and devotion.

The films of the Japanese animation studio Ghibli are imbued with such magical beings, as for example in Princess Mononoke, Spirited Away or Howl's Moving Castle. These films are influenced by Japan's most common belief system, Shintoism, which certainly has common roots with the beliefs of the Ainu. And the goals they portray are the same: honoring friendships, struggling for justice and appreciating nature. Even though Hayao Miyazaki - the creator of Ponyo, Totoro and many other fabulous Ghibli beings - has asserted that he does not believe in Shinto, he admits at least that he does respect it. "I feel that the animism origin of Shinto is rooted deep within me." (2010)

Taking care of people and nature not only seems reasonable, but also indispensable for harmony between oneself and the earth which is our home.

"We can learn about it from exceptional people of our own culture, and from other cultures less destructive than ours. I am speaking of the life of a man who knows that the world is not given by his fathers, but borrowed from his children; who has undertaken to cherish it and do it no

damage, not because he is duty-bound, but because he loves the world and loves his children..."

- Wendell Berry (1971), environmental activist

"...We must protect the forests for those who can't speak for themselves such as the birds, animals, fish and trees."

- Edward Moody, Chief of the Nuxalk Nation (1999)

By repositioning our viewpoint, we can return to humane values such as solidarity and empathy, the possibility of contemplation, and recognizing the protective beauty of nature. These can become the pillars of our world, pillars that will not only give us something to hold on to, but will also show us the direction for a better future, where the global digital network is only of secondary importance.

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