

The Dust Bowl as a Metaphor. Living with Disappearing Distances

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Traveling, you realize that differences are lost:
each city takes to resembling all cities,
places exchange their form, order, distances,
a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents
– Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972)

Billowing clouds of dust, rolling over vast, barren plains. Once the ultimate spectacle of this dark, towering wall reaches and engulfs you, nothing remains to be seen – even if we *could* keep our eyes open. We are stranded in a featureless landscape with no horizon, no distances, unable to orientate or even to breathe freely. This meme, which takes a central place in mainstream science fiction films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015) and *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014), or graphic novels like Johnston and Mitten’s *Wasteland* (2006-15), has become one of the most recognizable contemporary images of an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic world. The appeal of the meme is fascinating, indeed, and we may wonder what it is in this image that resonates so strongly with us. What I would like to suggest here, is that the imagery of the all-pervasive dust cloud begs to be read as an unusually rich and apt metaphor for our current cultural condition. Exploring the dynamics of this metaphor may help us formulate the problem, and might even be a start to imagining, visualizing an alternative – a way of dealing with the dust.

Let us first trace the image to its origins. The three examples of sand-scourged dystopias mentioned above are all implicitly or explicitly modelled on the so-called Dust Bowl – probably the worst environmental disaster ever to occur in the United States. In the latter half of the 1930s the area of the Great Plains was devastated by soil erosion and great dust storms, brought about by a combination of severe drought and aggressive farming. In the previous decade, a complex combination of socio-political, economic and technological evolutions had led to what has been called “the great plow-up”: the large-scale conversion of grasslands into farm land, mostly for wheat monoculture, motivated by the promise of quick financial gain. The rapid mechanization of farm equipment had enabled ‘suitcase-farmers’ to leave aside traditional practices and tear up the virgin soil at an unseen speed – thus eliminating the native grasses which held the soil in place and helped retain moisture. Erosion by wind and heat did the rest. The fertile soil was turned to dust and swept up in the air, sometimes forming ‘black blizzards’ as high as 7,000 feet. The dust covered everything, found its way into houses, machines and lungs, destroyed crops, and made both farming and living impossible. The extreme social hardship that followed has

notoriously been described, among others, by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

Imagination could hardly come up with a better ecological parable about excessive confidence in our own technological abilities to reshape our environment according to our wishes – so the fact that fictional narratives have eagerly assimilated this historical event (Nolan even integrates genuine testimonies about the Dust Bowl into his fictional universe) is hardly surprising. But even the rather predictable, uncomplicated narratives mentioned above seem to go further than this. In all these stories, the problems posed by these extreme climatological conditions are not merely physical but cultural and existential as well. What is really at stake is not the survival of humanity as such, but rather the question of what it can still mean to be human in a post-humanistic era. And in all three narratives, a central issue is our promethean relation to technology – as something that can either destroy our humanity or allow us to transcend its limitations. And indeed, there is not much fiction to that, either: the claim that scientific and technological evolutions will, in the next decades, redefine what it is to be human, is all but exaggerated. Genetic enhancement of human biology, the merging of biology with technology, the very real possibility of the emergence of artificial intelligence that may surpass our own intellectual capacities – all of these futuristic visions have become awkwardly close to reality.

A Habitat without Horizons

But a more subtle revolution is already taking place: digitalization and virtualisation have already radically transformed the biotope in which our lives and identities take form. And just as with the ‘great plow-up’, we can really only guess what this radical restructuring of culture will mean for the future. What is certain is that information has become something that is swirling all around us like windswept dust, constantly moving, filling the air we breathe. While obviously there are great advantages to having this abundance of information at our fingertips, the dust bowl metaphor visualizes some of its extremely negative consequences – the fallout of what Virilio called the information bomb. When information starts to overstimulate and finally numb our senses, what once supported and fed us – just like the dust bowl’s eroded fertile top soil – will eventually lose its value, and even become poisonous. The image of dust that is never allowed to settle evokes our culture’s obsession with the new and the now. Just like any other consumer goods, images and words lose their value at an ever accelerating speed. In the barren landscape of the dust bowl, nothing is allowed to ferment, to mould, to clutter together and gain weight. This image of the disappearance of roots and soil also plays on the idea of loss of tradition and sense of history. While our digital biotope is swirling with loose facts, there is a reasonable concern that for a new generation, fewer and fewer of those facts have actually been allowed to settle in

their memories and consciousness. Their reality would then be a bland, eternal now with no depth, no distances, no perspectives.

At this point, this analysis might have become suspicious, even distasteful to some readers. After all, the word ‘tradition’ has been mentioned, and the cultural pessimism inherent in the apocalyptic image of the dust bowl might just be blazing the trail for reactionary thinking. For another, more dangerous metaphor is unavoidably being smuggled in underneath the cloak of the dust bowl: the one that equates culture with soil. So let’s have a look at this underlying image of the fertile, heavy earth in which things can take root. Talking about culture, there is really no escaping it: the word itself is derived from the Latin word *colere* (*colui, cultum*), which can both mean to till the land, to cultivate, and to worship, to cherish. Needless to point out how this idea of a sacred connection between soil and culture has been used to construct rigidly fixed ideas of cultural identity – including and enclosing some and excluding and condemning others. Some suspicion is in order, indeed. However, the imagery can just as easily be reconciled with a concept of both culture and self to which the ideas of change, contamination and strangeness are vital. For the image of the soil cannot be disconnected from the ideas of dirt and death: the ground is fertile because older vegetation has been allowed to wither, rot and disappear into it, forming layers in which new organisms can fixate and feed themselves. ‘Tradition’ in this sense is not something that has to be mummified and revered, but is allowed to transform up to the point that it becomes abject, repulsive, strange – and therefore fecund.

Returning to the metaphor of contemporary culture as a dust bowl, we can now re-evaluate its presumed conservatism. For the real contrast between the two images boils down to the opposition between passive and active, stagnation and change, uniformity and difference. Far from being a landscape of ever new possibilities, the dust bowl imagery describes a world in which the subject is trapped in inactiveness and defeatism, a world in which distances – both temporally and spatially – have become obliterated. As Byung-Chul Han has argued, the inescapable acceleration of communication requires and reinforces an equalization of all discourses – for what is strange and non-transparent slows down the stream of information, and will either be by-passed or brought into line. Time and the capacity for concentration and reflection are needed to truly communicate with something that is radically different – such as a worldview of the past, or a different culture – and time and the capacity for concentration are just the things that are systematically denied to us by the acceleration (sold to us as economic rationalisation and efficiency) of contemporary culture. Therefore, the loss of a sense of history and tradition is not so much a problem because irreplaceable and valuable cultural products of the past will be forgotten – this is the typical conservative claim – but rather because only a sense of history and tradition can provide us with the syntagmatic axis on which paradigms of change become thinkable. With the sense of history the taste for revolution disappears, and with the idea of the past the imagination of the future.

We are the Dust

And as our culture changes, the forms of subjectivity that are possible change with it – and this may even be the most alarming aspect of the cultural erosion taking place. First of all, the levelling of all differences and distances and the elimination of fertile ‘otherness’ are a reason for concern here. While many may have experienced social media as an ideal new form of self-expression, it undoubtedly has had a huge normalizing effect, too, and it only remains to be seen to what extent children and adolescents who grow up in this digital panopticum will still have the freedom to give shape to what is deviant and strange in themselves, to develop a truly divergent, creative personality. In the social media, as in the blinding dust cloud, every detail is laid bare – and nothing remains to be seen, to be discovered.

Hand in hand with this collective, voluntary exposure of our lives and characters goes the development of data analysis: here, our individualities themselves become decomposed into dust particles – little preferences, predispositions, prejudices – and disappear into the collective movement of a large, amorphous cloud of ‘big data’. The exact extent to which this new instrument will allow those who use it to predict and even influence us, is still unclear. But it is disturbing, to say the least, that it offers global, powerful organisations a model to effectively interact with the masses while by-passing the notion of the individual in the etymological sense of the word – *in-dividuus*, an indivisible unity. The problem is not the narcissistic injury that big data confronts us with the fact that, as a subject, we have no real essence, soul or unity – this is old news, we can live with that. What is unacceptable is that this obliteration of the concept of individuality even denies us the right to *aspire* to a form of subjectivity – to be a creative project to ourselves, a coherent work of art in the making.

Adapting (to) the Desert

This, indeed, is the great challenge: as a society, to reclaim the active, creative role in the technological, ecological *and* cultural evolution of our global habitat. This is also the reason why the critical image of the dust bowl has little to do with cultural pessimism. On the contrary: it takes an extreme optimism and confidence in the cultural capacities of mankind to presuppose that we, with the help of the right thinking tools, are still capable of deciding in which direction our cultural habitat should evolve. To believe that we are not simply afloat on the stream of what is called technological and economic progress, breathlessly trying to keep up with, struggling to adapt our biology to its needs, instead of *vice versa*. In his famous book on cultural change, *The Barbarians* (2006), Alessandro Baricco uses a darwinistic image to point out that what seems to be a cultural catastrophe for one generation may be the beginning of a new kind of life for the younger: while the fathers are lamenting about the flood, their sons are developing gills and fins. Maybe we should indeed learn to

adapt our senses to the dust bowl by growing nostrils and eyelids that are able to keep the sand out, or become burrowers, like many desert creatures.

It is ironic, however, that Baricco's metaphor compresses a biological process of centuries into such a short narrative. The problem signalled by the imagery of the dust bowl is not oedipal, but consists of the question whether the technological evolution of our habitat has not, by excessive acceleration, decoupled itself entirely from what our bodies need and are capable of. In either case, the immobile, passive position the whirling dust seems to impose upon us is one that we can and should not accept. The task at hand now is to find out what cultural practices might be the equivalents of replacing monoculture by crop rotation, of planting trees for wind block, of digging new and better irrigation systems. Otherwise, we risk to become no more than tumble weeds on the dry desert wind.